

# THE POLITICS OF DESIGN AND CAPITALISM

## FROM HISTORICAL TO CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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*PAPER ABSTRACT: The United States and the Soviet Union were political rivals in a battle between U.S. capitalism and Soviet communism known as the Cold War. While the Cold War can be understood as an armament and space race, it can also be studied as a battle of cultural conflict and contrasting ideologies. Industrial designers were commissioned by the U.S. government to depict a positive message of capitalism and granted creative freedom in choosing how to represent the U.S. abroad. Industrial designers played a pivotal role in Cold War politics; they represented U.S. culture by showing physical artifacts and consumer technologies at international exhibitions. As a research method, this paper examines three exhibitions: the Marshall Plan exhibits in Berlin, the Brussels World's Fair, and the American National Exhibition in Moscow, to argue that industrial designers influenced politics via cultural diplomacy. Cross-cultural communication is still relevant in the contemporary era, where digital information influences people's understanding of politics and other cultures. Designers still assume roles as visual communicators and have the potential to play a role in democracy. Therefore, the designer's role is open to being assessed and evaluated regarding how design can be used to communicate political ideals in the present era.*

*Keywords: Exhibition Design, Design History, Politics, Capitalism*

### 1. RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper examines U.S. participation in the Marshall Plan Exhibits of the 1950s, the Brussels World's Fair of 1958, and the American National Exhibition in Moscow of 1959, because the events held great significance to U.S. international relations during the Cold War. This study uncovers historical evidence of industrial design during the Cold War, analyzes content from primary and secondary sources, and discusses how the industrial designers conveyed a pro-capitalist message by exhibiting excellent examples of industrial design.

As a second objective, this paper aims to connect industrial design with the geopolitical conflict between U.S. capitalism and Soviet communism. Designers were highly influenced by consumer politics and additionally served as actors of influence in U.S. international relations. The designers were motivated by modern political movements in favor of capitalism, and by involving designers as curators of international exhibitions, the U.S. government allowed them to communicate their worldviews in support of capitalism. Industrial designers sought to prove that capitalism, as an alternative to communism, offered superior living conditions for populations under its economic system, and their

significant creative contributions to international exhibitions made industrial designers a force of political influence during the Cold War.

## 2. ROLE OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS DURING THE COLD WAR

The United States and the Soviet Union emerged into positions of international political prominence after the Allies declared victory in World War II. Both nations strove to push their global power and influence on countries with evolving political systems and economic policies. While the United States and the Soviet Union never entered armed conflict with each other, they formed political alliances and fought proxy wars. The struggle for the world dominance of U.S. capitalism versus Soviet communism thus began the era of geopolitical tension known as the Cold War (Orwell, 1945).

With the spread of communism accompanying the Soviet Union's pervasive influence, U.S. government officials became wary of the threat of global communism that challenged U.S. capitalist ideology. The U.S. maintained a political strategy that nations should hold the right to self-determination, free trade, and freedom through democracy, a mission that defined U.S. foreign policy in the post-World War II era. (Wilson, 1918). Conversely, communist ideology advocated for equal distribution of resources and of the consumer market via a centrally planned economy. These contrasting ideologies put the U.S. and the Soviet Union in a bitter hostility with each other and prompted them to take actions to counter each other's influence on the rest of the world.

The U.S. government faced the challenge of presenting a compelling image of the U.S. and turned to industry leaders for advice. Specifically, the challenge of representing the U.S. abroad was directed towards industrial designers, who were delegated the power to curate the messaging of the international exhibitions in support of capitalism. Harrison McClung, appointed head of the Office of International Trade Fairs, presented industrial designers with the opportunity to have a powerful voice at these exhibitions: "It was McClung's mostly unilateral decision, in the end, to hand over to the industrial design profession. Designer Beverly Payeff-Masey also stated: 'we ended up showing what the designers wanted to show, because of the urgency of the Cold War.' In other words...designers actually began to make decisions about the content" (Wulf, 2015).

In an article entitled "Design as a Political Force" published in a 1957 issue of *Industrial Design*, Jane Mitarachi highlights the contributions of industrial designers, stating: "An industrial designer is, by training and experience, a problem-solver -- whether the problems he tackles are in the area of products, manufacturing, marketing or communication. An exhibition designer, though working in a more specialized medium, is a problem solver in visual communications" (Mitarachi, 1957). The designers held valuable expertise because they were masters of visual communication, equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to present designed artifacts at exhibitions.

The industrial designers commissioned for the projects proudly assumed their role as visual communicators and curators at the international exhibitions. U.S. government official and exhibition

organizer Jack Masey elaborated on the designers' feelings towards their duties: "It was: a patriotic activity, these men and women had no doubt that they were fighting for democracy and against Communism, it was thoroughly cutting edge, the newest technologies were being used; and it was fabulously glamorous, allowing them to travel to the ends of the earth and participate in the new global market" (Masey, 1999).

The industrial designers understood that their role at the exhibitions was crucial to combating communism in the cultural battle of the Cold War. Industrial Designer George Nelson, while considering the prospect of his office taking on central duties of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, wrote in his notes that he thought of the "glamour plus realization that the exhibition could have an important effect on US-USSR relations" (Abercrombie, 1995). The designers realized their contributions towards the international fairs and exhibitions would have a significant impact on how the U.S. would be perceived by international audiences abroad and understood how they played an important role in promoting capitalism over communism.

Nelson had thought about exhibition design in the past; in his autobiography, Nelson theorized about what fascinates people visiting exhibitions and offered his thoughts on what they wish to see at fairs: "Modern man is no longer awed by mechanical ingenuity or scientific accomplishment...he is wondering what it all proves, what it means to him in the way of better living...whether social objectives--the live issues of the day--will be stressed, or whether the public will be expected to look at the same old mechanical displays painted a new color and go home dissatisfied...it would be a pity to spend \$50,000,000 to create a fair born dead" (Nelson, 1979). According to Nelson, people were no longer fascinated with technological achievements of the era; they wanted to see exhibits placed within a cultural context that would teach them about the achievements of human progress.

Industrial designers were allowed the creative freedom to display what they wished and found popular success in communicating a compelling image of U.S. culture. According to Mitarachi, the designers succeeded at their task in attracting wide audiences to attend these shows. The designers were progressive in their understanding of how to represent the U.S.: "[government entities] had begun to tap a resourceful new pool of design professionals who were years ahead...in their ability to draw people into an exhibit and make them feel as if they were participating in an authentic cultural experience, not just a propaganda event" (Mitarachi, 1957).

Modernism, a midcentury design aesthetic that featured sleek, clean forms free of decorative embellishments, became the preferred style for U.S. propaganda and a symbol for democracy and progressive idealization at the height of the Cold War. According to Robert Haddow, "modernism's so-called democratic spirit and progressive, anti-traditional aesthetic made it a favorite at international exhibitions during the Cold War" (Haddow, 1998). Industrial designers chose modernist style furnishings and goods for the international exhibitions because the style presented a new and progressive aesthetic. Modernism became associated with democratic ideals and the widespread benefits of a capitalist economic system that the U.S. wished to communicate abroad.



Figure 1. A curated model home at the Marshall Plan Exhibits.

### 3. INFLUENTIAL EXHIBITIONS

#### 3.1 THE MARSHALL PLAN EXHIBITS

In the early 1950s, Soviet communist propaganda infiltrated the politics of Western European countries with economies that had been devastated from World War II and undermined the success of the Marshall Plan. For the U.S. government, painting a persuasive image of the U.S. abroad became a political priority in the containment of communism. The Marshall Plan exhibits held in Berlin during the 1950s were intended to support Marshall Plan economic reform in Western Europe. The “We’re Building a Better Life” exhibit featured a full-scale model home and live cast of a working family, showing an optimistic image of a “better life” that Marshall Plan initiatives could help the visitors afford in their near futures. Designers furnished the home with beautiful, comfortable goods that were regionally manufactured in Europe to demonstrate that a high standard of living was achievable outside the U.S. with the help of capitalist economic reform.

#### 3.2 THE AMERICAN PAVILION AT THE BRUSSELS WORLD’S FAIR

The Brussels World’s Fair of 1958 was an opportunity for nations to show their post-war achievements in economic prosperity and progress. Much unlike the Marshall Plan exhibits in Berlin, the U.S. pavilion would be viewed in comparison with other nations’ pavilions in Brussels. In anticipation of a strong showing from the Soviet Union at the fair, the U.S. State Department commissioned industrial designers to represent the U.S. by showing examples of social progress, rich consumer lifestyles, and the arts. On the second floor, there were more than “1000 objects of daily life” each arranged under different themes ... “which revealed the delights of consumer culture and the talents of craftsmen and

industrial designers.” In a review of the U.S. pavilion, a Belgian trade journalist gave a positive review of the exhibition: “America [has shown] itself...as an essentially humane country,” giving some evidence of success in the exhibition planners’ attempt to prove to an international audience that the U.S. flourished in culture (Haddow, 1998).

### 3.3 THE AMERICAN NATIONAL EXHIBITION IN MOSCOW

The American National Exhibition in Moscow of 1959 was a major U.S. exhibition held in the Soviet Union and served as a product of diplomatic cultural exchange. The event was planned to showcase the appeal of American consumer culture to curious Soviet visitors. A model home was the site of the Kitchen Debate, a famous political discussion between then-Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. Industrial designers who fashioned the model kitchen for the American National Exhibition in Moscow set the stage for Nixon’s argument in support of capitalism.

When they arrived at the model home, Nixon pointed to the dishwasher: “This is the newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses” (Hamilton, 2014). High-quality American dishwashers were specifically designed to be mass-manufactured and suitable for direct installation into any home. Nixon then introduced the American idea of planned obsolescence: “American houses last for more than 20 years, but, even so, after twenty years, many Americans want a new house or a new kitchen...The American system is designed to take advantage of new innovations and techniques.” In a counterargument, Khrushchev claimed that a Soviet kitchen would remain ageless under the Communist system, while Nixon argued that the capitalist theory allowed for constant innovation and improvements.

Nixon also discussed how the U.S. maintained a competitive edge in its products by offering a diversity of choices to the modern consumer. “Diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different houses is the most important thing. We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official” (Hamilton, 2014). Nixon explained this difference between the U.S. and the Soviet Union: design is better in a society where designers have the liberty to produce freely, free from government restrictions.



Figure 2. “The Kitchen Debate” between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

#### **4. IMPACT**

According to historian James Wulf, cultural exhibitions held by the U.S. gradually lost influence by the late 1970s and “began to deteriorate in both quality and in creative vision, as result of mismanaged mandates and the rise of détente with the Soviet Union” (Wulf, 2015). While President Jimmy Carter’s administration supported a U.S. information program, U.S. executive officials were reluctant to engage in initiatives that placed the U.S. in direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. After years of subsequent budget cuts from Congress, U.S. government involvement in international exhibitions officially ended on October 1, 1991.

Some individuals involved in the international exhibitions understood how the events played an important role in international affairs and relations and supported their continuation in the future. Masey refutes the notion that U.S. initiatives were no longer needed in a post-Soviet world: “the need for America to communicate with the world remained just as important...the need for feedback into Washington of foreign opinion about the U.S. and its policies was no less critical” (Masey, 2008).

George Feifer, an American guide at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, gave his support of international exhibitions while noting its importance for the future: “Difficult as relationships had been between the United States and the Soviet Union, we made contact with other human beings. If the globe is ever to stop spending most of its energy fighting each other, and call each other evil, the only way is to have some contact. It’s got to go on” (Masey, 2008). Feifer supported the efforts to continue international exhibitions in the Soviet Union. During a time of geopolitical conflict between U.S. capitalism and Soviet communism, the events were crucial outlets of person-to-person cultural diplomacy during the Cold War.

A contributing factor that led to its demise was the lack of communication between the U.S. government and the industrial designers involved in the exhibitions. Wulf notes that “aside from basic thematic guidance, it is questionable how much the United States itself was truly an actor in the production of these events....it was the designers who were tasked with the burden of putting ‘America’ on display” (Wulf, 2015). The responsibility of representing the U.S. abroad fell on the industrial designers, who were also pressured by government restrictions. In an interview, Masey states, “policy wonks had no interest in meddling with design questions and exhibition people did not report to those responsible for pushing policies. The less you involve the government bureaucracy, the better off you are” (Wulf, 2015). The industrial designers involved in the exhibitions were granted creative freedoms to represent American culture, but the relationship between U.S. policymakers and the designers became problematic in their effort to continue ambitiously planned exhibitions in the 1970s.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to prove how industrial design can be used as a political force by examining post-World War II history and analyzing how designers conveyed messages in support of capitalism. The

industrial designers involved in these exhibitions were heavily influenced by Cold War consumer politics, and because of their significant role as curators and visual communicators, they demonstrated how industrial design can be utilized to support capitalist ideals and values.

According to design scholar Matthew Wizinsky, the contemporary social movement towards sustainability has challenged the traditional capitalist mindset, which attributes unlimited access to natural resources to achieve economic gains (Wizinsky, 2022). Some industrial designers have begun to challenge “planned obsolescence,” which was championed by Nixon at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. An emerging design practice called “right to repair” supports the belief that consumers should be able to repair their electronic devices when they inevitably break down (The Repair Association, 2023). “Right to repair” places a duty on industrial designers to make products that are specifically designed to be easily fixable. In addition to electronics, other physically manufactured products can be made to last for much longer periods of time, reducing the need for consumers to buy new products every time. Industrial designers can use these practices to encourage sustainable consumption while also adding a new sense of value to the objects they create.

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