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## DESIGN – DECIDE THE SIGN

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### ABSTRACT

The evolution of human needs gives design not only the opportunity, but also the difficult responsibility to solve the puzzle as well as possible. God is in the detail. That's why Design in architecture is the step towards perfection. The design industry presented by fashion, furniture, products is a next level in a design sense. Design in tech world is contemporary and evolving. But we must possess design thinking to create something new, valuable, useful. After years "Searching for The Self" and despite the technical evolution, we must not forget, that all of this is human made. Almost everything was invented so far. The individuality, that has been crowned, reaches to the identity, waiting to be revealed despite the globalization. Strange but true, we explore history to create future. That's why we must learn from the past and evolve, not just to swim downstream, but rather to create the stream.

### 1. Design culture of languages

A language gives us individual units and the possibility to combine them in various ways. As a result, we create different meaning, express different things, give different signs. The headline is inspired by the similar pronunciation of different words. Let us see the transcriptions:

**Design** [dɪ'zɑːm]      **Decide** [dɪ'saɪd]      The *sign* [ʃə] [sɑːm]

In this example we are using just one language, but it is remarkable that similar connections could be seen also between languages. The meaning stays even written with

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different letters. This is the design truth – creations could be similar, but they affect everybody in a specific way. Yes, it’s all about creation and humans are responsible for it.

Another word for creation is design.

Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest to explain. The different tracks presented in this conference are an indisputable proof. Design is not only thinking, it’s a revolution, resilience, proximity, multiplicity, making, life, a language, it’s artificial.

I am researching design as an answer. An answer for different and important questions.

Why should we design?

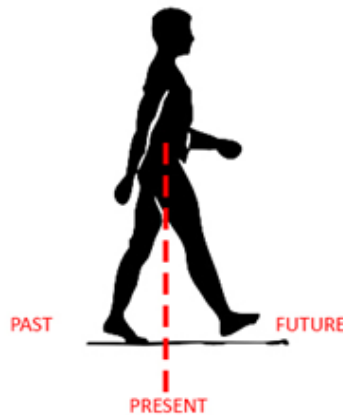
How to design?

What’s the goal?

Is design a rational product by our irrational desires?

What’s the most important – function, technology, empathy, embodiment, inspiration?

Which **sign** are we going to **decide** to give to **Design**?



**Figure 1. Life is not a dot “.”, it’s a line ”\_\_\_“.** Every step consists of 2 foot positions – the first foot is going to the Future, the second is staying in the Past. The body is embodying the Present.

Source: Author's graphics



**Figure 2. And then the dot becomes a line. With a direction.** Source: Author's graphics

So many years people are searching for the truth. And they have found only their truth. But the desire is half the battle. That’s why science exists. That’s why we’re trying to do better design, to know more.

From design, as the core of architecture, we expect to combine the aspiration and inspiration of art with an utilitarian function. Design as a noun (a product) or a verb (creating) is an individual unit of interior design, which is the intimacy of architecture, living in the world of urban design. That’s why the truth about design applies to the other “family members”. But they all exist in the world of dynamic ever-changing societies.

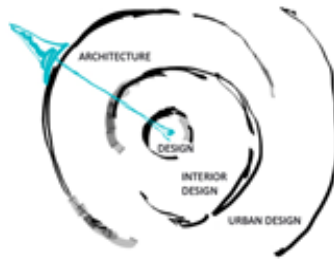


Figure 3. Design as a core. Source: Author's graphics

The world needed all kinds of languages through time: alphabets, movements, symbols. To become understood. Design is an alphabet with increasing number of letters – it's not just about creating, let it be meaningful.



Figure 4. From left to right: a compilation of The Glagolitic script, The Bauhaus logo, suprematist composition (the Blue Rectangle Over the Red Beam) from Kazimir Malevich, The Shukhov Radio Tower (Russian Constructivism), Greek Mythology symbols. Source: Internet (Creative Commons license) www.flickr.com ; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

The language is a way somehow to send and receive information, to express and to impress, to exist. An individual could be supremely understood if he's able to find language with others. And as was noticed and announced: "Individuality is the link; cooperation is the chain. You can strengthen the chain only as you strengthen the link" [1].

The signs that we create through design will be key points of tomorrow. Their meaning will be different for distinct people. But we are part of a society and we could create directions for the future.

## 2. Society shapes design or design shapes society?

The birth of the idea of a consumer society is well explained by Paul Mazur, a leading Wall Street banker working for Lehman Brothers in 1927:

*"We must shift America from a needs- to a desires-culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. [...] Man's desires must overshadow his needs" (Mazur, 1927, Harvard Business Review) [2].*

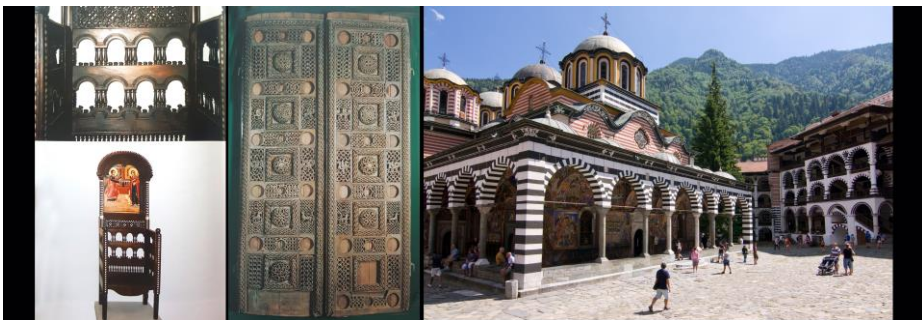
Of course the corporations welcomed the following mass production. The greatest contribution comes from Edward Bernays as a central adviser, known also as "the father of public relations" and Sigmund Freud's nephew, with his idea for the dome "Democracy" at

the World's Fair in New York in 1939 – showing the link between Democracy and American business. The General Motor Corporation was responsible for the construction and the public admired it. After searching and exploring “The Secret Self”, one of the leaders of the Human Potential Movement, the psychologist Abraham Maslow, was given a special task from SRI International [2]. As a result he published the “Hierarchy of needs” – the well known pyramid constructed on a base of physiological needs, and proceeding upwards through safety and security, love and belonging, and self-esteem, before topping out with self-actualization. The next paragraph will discuss the evolution of the pyramid towards modern people. The differentiation of the individual from the society leads to the need of variety of products. The goal is to meet the specific needs of different people. We are still witnessing this today.

*“It was in a sense the triumph of the Self. It was a triumph of a certain Self Indulgence. A view that everything in the world and all moral judgment was appropriately viewed through the lens of personal satisfaction. Indeed the ultimate ending point of that logic is that there is no society. There's only a bunch of individual people making individual choices to promote their own individual well-being” (Robert Reich for Curtis, 2002, Docu-series 3) [2].*

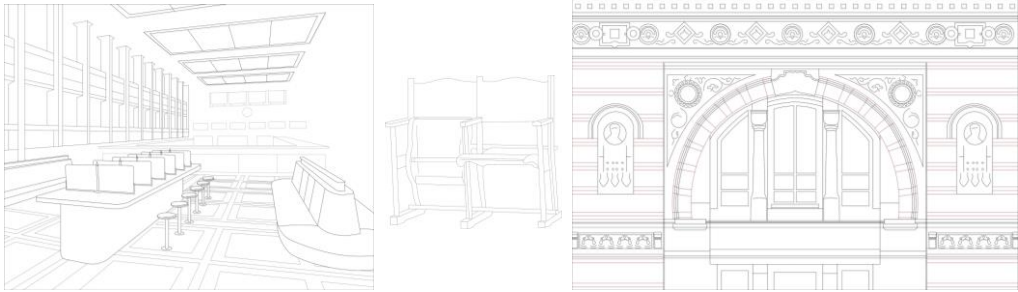
History guides and restricts design. We're still part of this consumer society. But this historical trend started differently in other countries.

My PhD research is focused on the path of Bulgarian design. That's why after the historical facts about Design as a driving force for satisfying and controlling the society in the United States, in a short retrospection I am going to present what society needed and how design helped in the XX century in the specific historical context. Five hundred years (1396 – 1878) Bulgaria was under Turkish slavery. The religion with the architectural symbols – churches and monasteries conserved the Bulgarian culture and the faith for liberation. The crafts are empowered at most with woodcarving – iconostasis, iconography, interior elements, and furniture. Nowadays only few monuments of woodcarving from the Second Bulgarian State (1185 – 1396) are preserved. Two of them are in the Monastery of Saint Ivan of Rila (known also as The Rila Monastery; on the World Heritage list of UNESCO) – an entrance door with exquisite wood-carving and wood-carving throne. What is interesting to mention about the throne is that the design repeats the arches from the monastery building and shows impressive details for handwork. On the other hand, the interior of a Bulgarian house then was so minimalistic, that it won't be strange to compare it with the Japanese conciseness. Later, The Bulgarian National Revival (sometimes called the Bulgarian Renaissance) is a scene for many crafts. Some of them and their present interpretations will be described later in the paper.



**Figure 5. From left to right – the throne, the entrance door, view from the Rila monastery. Common characteristics in different design elements – chair, door, building complex. Source: Parvanov, K. Bulgarian furniture. Bismar, 2006, ISBN: 954-91648-3-7; Internet (Creative Commons license) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>**

The beginning of the XX century was like a new blank page – the birth of The Kingdom of Bulgaria. Major public buildings from famous Bulgarian and foreign architects were built – the Bulgarian National Bank by arch. Ivan Vasilyov and arch. Dimitar Tsolov, “Bulgaria” complex by arch. Stancho Belkovski and arch. Ivan Danchov, The Sofia Bath by arch. Petko Momchilov with façade ceramic elements, produced in one of the first factories “Izida” 1908 – 1913 [3].



**Figure 6. From left to right – interior of the Bulgarian National Bank (produced in Jordan Hristov – Iordaneto’s workshop), theatrical chair – concert hall “Bulgaria” (cooperation Thonet and Velichko Todorov’s factory), The Sofia Bath (ceramic elements by Haralampi Tachev and Stefan Dimitrov, produced in Izida). Source: Author’s graphics**

As you see, design existed as an individual unit for interior architecture and as a product from the first workshops and factories – founded by Czechs, Hungarian, Armenian and Bulgarian people, who recognized Bulgaria as their place to live and develop [4].

After the change of the political system – the birth of The People's Republic of Bulgaria (1946 – 1990), the production capacity increased. The state founded new factories, the education was targeted to professional skills, new design centers were also founded [5]:

- Central Institute of Industrial Aesthetics (1963).
- Center for new goods, packaging and information (1971), before named Assortment cabinet (1964).
- Center for New Products and Fashion.
- Institute of Furniture and Furnishing (1971), before named Center for Research and Development (1966).
- Center for Research and Experimental Packaging (1967).

After the democratic changes in 1989 the Republic of Bulgaria again flips the page to start over. The contemporary environment for design development is characterized with private companies and their interests. The state structures step back, many of them no longer exist. In the last decade Bulgarian specialists are actively involved in the world market. As designers they want to answer questions of the modern society. That’s why the impact is no longer local and the awareness has almost no boundaries in this technological world.

Thanks to Ezio Manzini’s definition (2015), influenced by Anthony Giddens (“The Consequences of Modernity”, 1990), this timeline looks comprehensible:

*“...today, in many western (traditionally rich) countries, the present economic crisis has been compelling more and more people to learn how to live, and if possible to live well, while reducing their consumption and redefining their ideas about well-being (and work). At the same time, the majority of people in fast-growing economies are driven to shift quickly*

*from their traditional socioeconomic contexts to new ones, which we will refer to as “modern”: they have to radically redefine the way they live and their ideas of well-being” [6].*

Even though Bulgaria is not an example for a top fastest-growing economy, it is one of the 16 countries with emerging and developing economies [7]. Supported also from my research data – this quotation enlightens why the current success search has so many diverse faces.

### **3. “Be part of...”**

After searching and exploring different selves, in conclusion I am heading the present design trend “Be part of...”.

This trend applies not only for Bulgarian designers, I am sure you can find the signs in your national industries, too. Strange or not, the individuals want no longer to think only about themselves. They want to give their own individual contribution by solving a problem or filling the missing. This can be successfully correlated to the social innovation as a main driver of change [8].

#### **3.1. Human as a part of the Globe**

The opportunity is just around the corner. I am going to mention just three examples for Italian products, designed by Bulgarians. The first one is the chair “Lastika” by Velichko Velikov for Lago, as a result from a workshop in 2010. The second is the wall mounted washbasin “Tatoo” in Corian® with stainless steel towel rail by Elia Nedkov for Rapsel. The third is the slimline vertical radiator “Flaps” by Victor Vasilev for Antrax. Boundaries are blurred. Nationality is not a stamp, but what could it bring to a new product? This will be discussed later.

#### **3.2. Human as part of the Earth**

We are existing not just for ourselves, but as part of a bigger plan. The already Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been actualized to the modern thinking of human place on the Earth.

*“The most important takeaway from this quick pass through the collection of hierarchies is the fact that they are all related. Each level of biology requires a healthy and stable lower level to provide the ingredients for its existence. Each level also needs a healthy and stable level above it to provide a durable habitat for its existence. And the top-most level of evolutionary biology can only kick off (as far as we know from the history of Earth) after the formation of biochemistry in the lowest level. In other words, no matter how much you focus on one seemingly individual tree, it is actually part of an interwoven forest of life“ [9].*

The realized responsibility after the active discussions about the climate change, about all kind of pollution (air, water, light, etc.) affects design. A description of “eco”. A great response to that are the products of Playground Energy, awarded with Red Dot Design Award in 2017. The generating energy playground products are already installed in many countries. The leading designer Ilian Milinov, who won many design awards, is also recognizable by Seatable – comfortable seat and table in one piece of furniture. The latter surprises with its

simplicity and double function. And when we research materials, not products, the Bulgarian startup company BioMyc offers a local produced alternative to Styrofoam for packaging. A great addition is LAM'ON – a 100% biodegradable laminating film for print. It is toxic free, optimised, competitive. It offers the same results, it is used on the same machines, and is offered at the same price range as the currently used laminating films. It is time to pre-order your sample.

### **3.3. Human as part of the technological society**

After destroying the real society, now we are creating a false new – our web avatars can travel around the world, shop online worldwide, disrupt the distance. Our new homes are profiles with determined shared information. Everything is one button away. We could benefit the new ideas – through crowdfunding – an interesting distributed financial opportunity. For example, the Bulgarian product Halfbike was funded at Kickstarter. The promise to “Bridge the gap between man, machine and dance” suited well – this is their third successful Kickstarter campaign. Using new technologies is also a modern choice for the Bulgarian designers. The 3D printed origami bottle Hyperfold is already on the market. In 2015 a contest called “LampION” was held, the collection “Hex shade” by Voodoo won the first place – parametric modified 3D printed pendant lamps. A great contribution to the methodological explanation of these modern examples, categorized as distributed fabrication could be found here:

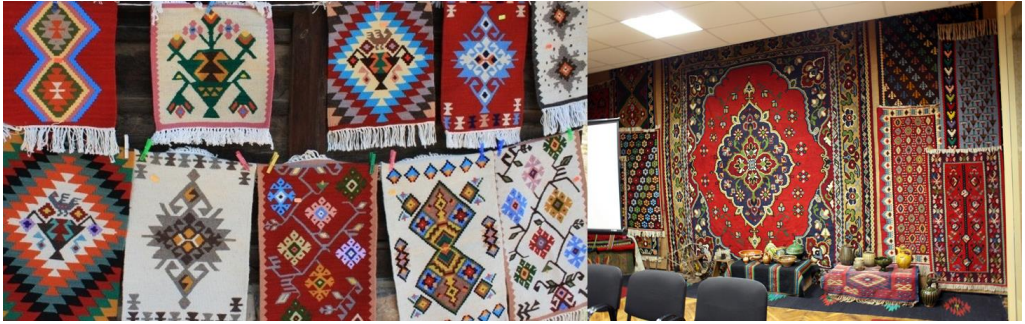
*“The result is worldwide experimentation in small-scale, high-tech design and fabrication system capable of supporting new forms of open design and networked microfactories (such as the ones proposed by FabLabs and by maker movement). We can add that the distributed production idea is migrating from the area of high-tech fabrication to traditional craftsmanship and small and medium-scale enterprises, revitalizing them and giving them a new perspective” [10].*

A wonderful prelude to the next category, which is closer to craft in the historical understanding.

### **3.4. Human as part of History and Culture**

“The most fascinating product solutions are those which reveal a cultural reinterpretation of the Arts and Crafts movement, where digital production tools continue to focus on the way things are made and not the formal outcome as such” [11].

“Carpets Making – The tradition of Chiprovtsi” was listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage from UNESCO. This ancient Bulgarian handicraft of carpet making is searching for its Revival. In 2016 during One Design Week in Plovdiv the project CHERGODEIKI was presented – *“as part of the Baba Residence – an initiative against depopulation of villages and for sharing of traditional knowledge, which old people there still preserve. This is the knowledge about working with natural materials, and the knowledge of hands and their movements” [12].* Three years later, again in Plovdiv, which was European Capital of Culture in 2019, and again in Kapana Creative District the “Open carpet atelier” was performed. This time the target group were children. These workshops don't give an opportunity for mass production, but they aim to attract attention to the historical and cultural features, which we are going to forget.



**Figure 7. Examples for carpet making in Chiprovtsi, traditional forms and colours. Source: Internet (Creative Commons license) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>**

Interesting analogy is the tribute to the Romanian shepherd stools by Romanian designer Dragoş Motica for the 5th edition of the Romanian Design Week [13]. These stools were popular in Bulgaria too, but the society does not appreciate them as a typical design heritage.

A step forward is the “living minimalism” of Faina Design, the brand founded by Victoria Yakusha reinterprets techniques and symbologies of Ukrainian material culture [14].

#### **4. What’s next?**

The coin always has two sides. “Be part of...” is a vision with certain proof of evolving. However, the present generation is a challenge for psychologists, too.

*“They are not only the biggest generation we’ve ever known but maybe the last large birth grouping that will be easy to generalize about. [...] Those rising microgenerations are all horrifying the ones right above them, who are their siblings. And the group after millennials is likely to be even more empowered”* [15].

Where is the mystery? These approaches are not wrong. But we are not completely able to predict the future of design. Because society is changing and what a product embodies is a personal experience.

An interesting example is given here:

*“For example, the meaning of a cup is not just some abstract concept specifying a defining set of features that constitute it as a cup. Rather, the meaning of a cup is all of the experiences, both actual and simulated, it can afford us. [...] However, the meaning of the cup is not just what it affords us by way of physical perception and motor interaction, because it also includes the social functions of cups, given our cultural values and practices surrounding the use and significance of various types of cup. Finally, in addition to this public and shared meaning, there will be each individual’s own personal past experiences with cups, and perhaps with this very same cup which now sits before him or her”* [16].

A similar hypothesis towards designers is also valid – they include a special “truth” about the function or the form of the product. The individuality of thinking results in specific characteristics and point of view. The sympathy for style also meets this individual choice:

*“Some will prefer Mies van der Rohe, others Art Moderne lines, others Gaudi’s organic ecologies, and still others Gehry’s playful postmodernism, because of the way each of these*

*markedly different qualitative unities affords us dramatically different imaginative experiences for how we can engage and interact with those structures” [17].*

Same is with the observing of a design product. Same truth. Different scale.

Only with the right answers we would be able to create something innovative and unique. Stop doing without asking questions, without solving problems, without design as thinking and of course creating than just producing as a result: *“Will it pay? Is it popular? Is it successful? [...] Is it right? Is it true? Is it helpful?” [18].*

The history has its powerful statements. One of them is made by Walter Landor “Products are made in the factory, but brands are created in the mind”. But how to connect minds? Through the language of ideas and through design thinking.

The science is not so distant from design and architecture. The new goal is not only to innovate construction, but using the scientific methods of neuroscience and psychology to understand better the idea of creating. After we could visit every part of the world – in internet or in person, be whoever we want, possess almost everything, what could be the next step? It is already happening.

Go back to the roots and make the Utopia “Rebirth the crafts and cultures through design in a technological world” come true. The technology could help us, but in fact we are a link between Nature and Technology. Our individualities, in the pure and specific sense that William George Jordan described in “The Crown of Individuality”, are the key point.

This is my truth.

*“Optimism is the sunshine of the soul radiated in action” [19].*

So, it couldn't be so difficult to turn the flaws into strengths.  
It's just one 45 degree rotation.



In conclusion, Ezio Manzini inspires me to share with you this quote:

*“...since culture is bound to context, as it should be, we can say that it is an Italian contribution to an international conversation. That is, a contribution that starts in a well-defined cultural context” [20].*

In this line of thinking, my shared thoughts and study work may be a Bulgarian contribution to this international design conversation. I hope it could be.

Today the language barrier is no more available.  
Why should a design barrier exist?

## **Acknowledgements**

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## ДИЗАЙН – ИЗБЕРЕТЕ ЗНАКА

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*Ключови думи:* история, индивидуалност, човешки нужди, идентичност, общество

### РЕЗЮМЕ

Еволюцията на човешките нужди определя за дизайна не просто възможност, а отговорност да представи най-правилните решения. Бог е в детайла. Затова дизайнът за архитектурата е стъпка към съвършенството. Дизайн индустрията, представена чрез мода, обзавеждане, продукти, е следващо ниво в посоката. Дизайнът в технологичния свят е модерен и непрекъснато в развитие. Но трябва да притежаваме дизайн мислене (design thinking), за да създадем нещо ново, ценно, полезно. След години в „Търсене на Аз-а“ и въпреки технологичната (р)еволюция, не бива да забравяме, че всичко това е създадено от хора. Почти всичко е изобретено до днес. Индивидуалността, която е на пиадестал, достига идентичността, очаквайки да бъде разкрита въпреки глобализацията. Странно, но вярно – ние изследваме историята, за да създаваме бъдеще. Точно затова трябва да се учим от миналото и да се развиваме. Не е достатъчно да се водим по течението, а да създадем такава.

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