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The category of empathic sublime within the *Democracy-Based Design* concept

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Abstract

The Democracy-Based Design concept is discussed in the paper from the perspective of its aesthetic and theoretic considerations. The foundations of this concept are related to the line of development of historic avant-gardes whose approach is based on the negotiation of the notion of development with the forces of dominance. Under the social circumstances of the emergence of new political platforms, the avant-garde visions retain their transformative nature, but without a revolutionary dimension. A call to build a new society, whose reflection can be identified in design as well, is a result of revising the dominant ideological paradigm and change of public policies, rather than of the rise of the revolutionary class. Nevertheless, art is provided with capacity for directing, as well as initiating social change by maintaining its negotiating position. The Democracy-Based Design is recognised as one such development concept, but it is threatened by a decline to the politicisation of the revolutionary vision and the ultimate transformation of design into its negative double, due to the strengthening of utilitarian theoretic conceptual approaches in its understanding, based on the functionalistic principles. In that regard, the author emphasises the relevance of further development of this

concept based on aesthetic and art-theoretical assumptions. Following this direction, the author points to the category of *the emphatic sublime* as the central aesthetic category within the Democracy-Based Design concept. In understanding the sublime, the author starts from Kant's considerations, but by analysing this category from the perspective of a different theoretic paradigm, proposes the introduction of the specific *empathic sublime*, as the feeling developed in the process of one's own transcendence in elevating the mind to the sphere of universal humanistic being.

KEYWORDS:

Democracy-based design, empathic sublime, aesthetics, design, theory, sublime

Throughout history, social trends have been directed by new visions of interpersonal relations and development prospects. These concepts have frequently been reflected in art and, more often than not, they might even originate from it. First decades of the 20th century represent one of such historic moments, as art was marked by the development of avant-garde and emergence of progressive theoretical poetical concepts. It was the period when the central cultural trends were guided by the idea of a radical social change, aimed at breaking *the fetters of tradition*, which became too tight for further spiritual development of mankind. Despite lack of a unique concept of a new culture and a social transformation program, the vision of the *new* gained its own features, based on the plurality of searching for a better, more humane society. Even though the historic events caused by confronting the repressive ideologies of the time impeded the expansion of the vision of building a more humane

society, they did not cancel it completely. In the decades that followed, relentless social forces formed a social context by strengthening the ideals of equity, empathy, and the vision of setting foundations for a responsible social development.

Owing to the development of avant-garde movements and subsequent renewal of revolutionary strategies in artistic trends at the beginning of the second half of the century, as well as the emergence of activist tendencies in the decades that followed, art assumed one of the central fields within a wider plan of the overall cultural and social transformation. Avant-garde artists drew attention to the social role of artists in directing development trends, raised the question of a level of spiritual advancement and opportunities for progress, advocated for intertwining art and daily life, underlined the relevance of art in building visions of future and the strength of art reviewing on the change of social practices. Although we may easily recognise the origins of the listed concepts in the previous trends of human thought, their formation in the area of art seems to have entered its mature phase with the emergence of historical avant-gardes.

Even though all areas of artistic expression were influenced by the overall revolutionary trends, such perceptions were most evident in fine arts, literature, poetry and theatre. In the field of design, transformative perceptions inspired by revolutionary ideas and the vision of comprehensive social transformation gained their full form by establishing Bauhaus as a school of thought. However, the battle line set by Bauhaus assumed a significantly more pragmatic approach compared to the central trends of artistic avant-gardes, which did not *preach* radical negation of institutions and values of modern society,

but advocated for their compromising harmonisation with the avant-garde vision of the *new*. Under the conditions of weakening of the socio-political edge of the revolutionary avant-garde thought, owing to its significantly more moderate position, the avant-garde assumptions of design have continued their steady development a whole century after their historical commencement.

Historical trends, shaped by the political turmoil throughout the 20th century, opened up three development directions of the avant-garde artistic perceptions, marking the period of deteriorating social force that served as the foundation of the vision of comprehensive social transformation. *Politicisation of the revolutionary vision*, undertaken by the most radical revolutionary forces, ended in its self-destruction. Art was overpowered by politics, with the avant-garde thought modified by ideological assumptions based on political, rather than humane objectives. We find such an outcome in development trends of Russian avant-garde and futurism. *Transformation of revolution into social criticism*, which identified conditions for its development outside the framework of totalitarian social systems, or under the conditions of a historic decline of the strength of their realisation, but still not within frameworks of enabling seamless development of revolutionary perceptions. Over time, demands for a comprehensive social transformation by distancing from wider political ambitions grew into social criticism, diverting the focus to the issues of particular relevance. Occasional forms of radical guerrilla actions were not cancelled as a result, but their effect most often remained on the margins of wider cultural trends. Such a diversion still did not mean cancellation of revolutionary perceptions, but, despite a strong socially engaged vision, their positive effect was reduced to gradual and noncomprehensive overcoming of injustices and opposition to the

repression mechanisms, yet without their thorough destabilisation. We recognise developments within this trend in artistic approaches that retain a critical dimension within the modern and contemporary art, whether direct or subversive, as well as activist artistic expressions common to collectivism, street art or progressive concepts that remain without a strong social recognition. And finally, *negotiation of the social development vision* represents, as previously mentioned, the continuation of the direction set by Bauhaus as a school of thought. This development path assumes collaboration of avant-garde with the forces of domination, in the aim of defining social and cultural development objectives jointly, without threatening the principle of the *popular* (Fiske). The manifestation of this movement found the strongest acceptance in those arts in which the basic principles of industrial society met the weakest resistance - design, architecture and film.

The social context and political and historical trends in the first decades of the 20th century drew attention to the necessity of tackling specific social issues that could not exclusively be resolved by political actions. Based on the avant-garde assumptions, tackling the issues of today requires a wider-scale action, which cannot exclude the areas of culture and spiritual development. Under such circumstances, politics created room for the emergence of new visions of society, facilitating the renewal of avant-garde conceptions in art. The strongest reaction to these new perspectives in modern art is evident within the course of development of avant-garde visions that base their approach on the negotiation of the development notion with the forces of dominance. Facilitated by the new political platforms, avant-garde visions retain their transformative nature, but with no revolutionary dimension. A call to build a new society is a result of

revising the dominant ideological paradigm and change in public polices, rather than of the rise of the revolutionary class. Nevertheless, by retaining its negotiating position, art is provided with capacity for both directing and initiating social change.

Such a course of design development has created room for the emergence of separate, yet often closely related theoretic concepts, sometimes originating from the program of historical avant-garde. However, as previously mentioned, they lack a revolutionary dimension and are not necessarily initiated within design and architecture, but entered these areas via public policies.

Strengthening of the humanistic approach in the design theory and adoption of the democratic society principles has opened up new perspectives in design consideration, process of its validation and establishment of development visions. It has led to the development of the modern design theory in a theoretical interspace. Specific circumstances in the theoretical conceptualisation of design have largely created room for such an interpretative shift. Namely, design represents one of those areas in the modern art system that has received little or no attention in the traditional aesthetic and theoretic considerations. Except for the theories related to the development of the avant-garde art, design has generally not raised any major interest in thinkers, who have focused their attention to the issue of art. Contrary to this theoretical development, in ancient thought, which set the foundations for the Western art considerations, activities of applied artists (and the forms of artwork that belong to design today), were not neglected within wider considerations of *téchne* activities. As a result, applied arts and design entered the philosophical-aesthetic discourse early on and, engaged in dynamic

processes of shaping the modern system of art, they remained connected with the aesthetic and art-theoretic perceptions, but never reached the level of theoretical focus attributed to literature, music, architecture, or fine arts. Thus, the central aesthetic and theoretic perceptions included design as well, but not to a level where a solid design theory could be established. Therefore, development of stronger theoretic interest in design in the modern age, although not without a foundation in aesthetic considerations and art theory, encountered an unexplored problem area that was seemingly positioned outside the established disciplinary frameworks, representing an area that was occupied by discourses developed outside the art considerations.

Such circumstances of founding a general design theory created numerous challenges, primarily in regard to perceiving design from an economistic perspective. While literature and fine arts, for instance, were relatively protected from a decline of their theoretic considerations to the discourse of economy, owing to strong conceptual frameworks grounded in aesthetics and art theory, the area of design was largely exposed to a threat of compensating for lack of strong theoretical thought related to this segment of artistic development with an influence of considerations that belonged to a discipline that essentially was not related to design. The dominance of such an approach would eventually lead to total deterioration of the design theory, namely its transformation into a monstrous dogma that would conceal its essence and values under a veil of design discourse.

However, despite a notable influence of economic principles, modern design considerations, based on wider interdisciplinary foundations,

did not break ties with the principles of aesthetics and the art theory, thus creating frameworks for establishing a general design theory from a humanistic aspect. Such a theoretical perspective provided an opportunity for overcoming economistic argumentation, while not completely rejecting the concepts whose introduction, partially or to a significant extent, was guided by economic interests. Such concepts of modern design are also encompassed by the umbrella term of the Democracy-Based Design. But, before focusing on considerations of the concepts encompassed by this term from the humanistic aspect, namely criticism of economistic assumptions that pose a threat of transforming a humanistic vision into its industrial surrogate, below is a review of the socio-historical framework of their development.

Development of the Democracy-Based Design was facilitated by perceiving a need to provide a wider access to the opportunities offered by design by changing concepts. This refers to the expansion of the targeted functions to those groups that remained excluded due to specific restrictions within the proposed solution. Such a shift was mainly encouraged by the economic and political reasons, but, over time, with strengthening of democratic awareness and anti-discriminatory platforms, development of such a concept was also recognised as a method of transforming physical environment and social context in accordance with the altered values of society. Nevertheless, this provisional democratic-political vision (as well as economic motives), expressed in expanding availability, still did not mean uniform understanding of content covered by the term of availability. As noted by Persson et al., the term of *accessibility* is contextually applied in so many different manners that the meanings it receives may be highly heterogeneous (Persson et al. 2014:2). Thus, many authors develop special, closely related conceptions

based on this term without defining its meaning, while others avoid using this term and rely on those whose meaning largely overlaps with it, or add more significance to specific meaning potential in its use (Persson et al. 2014:2), thus directing a focus of the established theoretic concept.

In the modern design theory, the shift of attention to the accessibility issue gained its earliest form with the development of the Barrier-Free Design. It is a concept developed in the 1950s, initiated with an aim to respond to social needs perceived in the public sphere of the time with new design solutions. The change of attitude was facilitated by a large number of injured soldiers, who returned from the Vietnam War to the United States with severe body injuries. The issue of limited ability of movement and participation in daily activities of persons with disabilities became visibile to the general public due to the unfortunate war circumstances. In order to provide persons with disabilities with simpler execution of daily activities, it was necessary to change the approach to design, whose planning and evaluation required wider foundations. This shift resulted in further considerations of the functionality of design solutions and their suitability in more general terms, expanding the issue of persons with disabilities to persons with mobility problems, persons under medical care, etc., and introducing a more democratic attitude in the design valorisation process.[1]

The new approach to design considerations paved a way to the concepts that based design values on a wider democratic vision of inclusive society. These are closely related approaches that overlap or

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[1] *One of the central acts aimed at providing standards for developing the new design is ANSI A117.1 – Making Buildings Accessible to and Usable by the Physically Handicapped, publicised by the American National Standard Institute.*

accept similar theoretical assumptions in many aspects, such as the *Design for All*, *Universal Design*, *Inclusive Design*, *Accessible Design*, *Universal Access*, etc. The pivotal assumption that unifies all the listed approaches is the creation of design solutions that can meet needs of the widest circle of users, but without adopting the standpoint in such tendencies that it is possible to reach a universal solution that will equally suit everyone. The listed concepts, mainly observed at the level of design approach in the areas of product design, urban design, interior design and architecture, regardless of a more widely spread applicability in these areas, maintain the idea of design concept development that resists exclusion of any social group based on any criteria.

The core value shared by all the listed concepts is the creation of solutions that support diversity, social inclusion and equity. Not intending to negate differences between these separate concepts and specific features of each of them, we will encompass them by the proposed umbrella term of Democracy-Based Design, as they stem from democratic assumptions. Hence, we will not use this term to describe any specific direction within the above mentioned tradition, but as a complex concept that encompasses various listed approaches in all their uniqueness.

At the level of the existing schools of thought and developed concepts which can be included in such a broadly defined term due to their prominent inclusivity, aspiration towards equity and respect of diversity, the Democracy-Based Design stems from a democratic vision of comprehensive design solutions that accomplish the highest level of compliance with the widely perceived frameworks of separate individual needs. However, despite progressive political ideological

foundations of the design vision that opposes *the policy of difference*, the core of the covered concepts is based on a functional principle, inevitably leading to outcomes of estranged nature. Furthermore, the essential aspect of design defining the very type of this activity remains completely marginalised. Thus, political economic principles of design development threaten to pave the way for negative design, namely its simulative double, due to its political economic pretensions, rather than its program nature. Namely, the issue of design development never remains at the level of its functional dimension. The value of usability, although inseparable from this art, is part of its technical aspect, but it is far from representing a cornerstone of its development. The very history of design and applied arts testifies in favour of such a perception. By observing the development of creative approaches within this area, we undoubtedly recognise an aesthetic dimension as the central cornerstone of their development, despite the fact that the functional aspect might facilitate development visions. Otherwise, the history of development of applied arts and design could never have prospered in the manner it did throughout its long-standing development.

Hence, the development of concept encompassed by the term of Democracy-Based Design, purely on the functionalistic foundations, leads to the negation of design as its ultimate outcome, namely to its transformation into something we might call negative design, or in other words mirror antipode to design itself. Certainly, it still does not mean that these perceptions should be rejected or *a priori* perceived as opposite to design. As previously mentioned, functionality is part of the technical aspect of design and therefore remains inseparable from it. In fact, the technical aspect often facilitated the development of new design approaches and solutions, thus remaining a relevant

aspect of the historic development of design visions and concepts. In that respect, we may perceive the central trends of the Democracy-Based Design so far as a generator of a new development vision that, following such a dynamic line of historical development, starts from the transformation of perception at the functionalistic level. However, to attain their fullest expression, these trends have to overcome this initial impulse and raise the principles of the new concept to a higher level of thought and vision in the aesthetic sphere.

Therefore, further development of the Democracy-Based Design should be based on considerations of aesthetic categories. However, as these concepts stem from the political program vision of democratic social development, their considerations from the aesthetic perspective have to move beyond the sphere of the mere sensory senses.

The term of sublime encompasses one of the central aesthetic categories, where Kant's contribution should particularly be noted in its interpretation. Discussing the sublime, Kant underlines that the sublime, in its true sense, cannot be contained in any sensory form, but is only related to ideas of the mind (Kant 1991: 136-137). Namely, a sensory perceivable form in itself cannot be sublime, and its sensory perception may provoke various feelings. However, according to Kant, one phenomenon can motivate the soul that has already been filled with various ideas to distance itself from the senses and focus on the ideas containing more sublime purposiveness (Kant 1991: 137). Contrary to the term of beautiful, Kant does not attribute the power to the sublime in nature to anything purposive in nature, but emphasises that this term points to the purposiveness in potential use of its perceptions to feel purposiveness that is fully independent from

nature (Kant 1991: 137). Namely, as he continues, unlike the beautiful in nature, where it is necessary to search for a basis outside us, it is possible to find the basis for the sublime in ourselves only, as well as in the manner of thought that adds the sublime to the perception of nature.

Following Kant's notions, namely shifting them to a different theoretical paradigm, we can assume the existence of the specific *empathic sublime*. It is the feeling developed in the process of one's own transcendence during the mind elevation to the sphere of universally humanistic being. The feeling discussed here, as defined by the term of sublime, does not belong to a phenomenon, but to the ideas of the mind which, in an interaction with a phenomenon, force the mind the leave the realm of the senses in order to find awe in the purposiveness that transcends it. However, the awe discussed here is not what we feel in the interaction of the mind with nature or assumptions that go beyond the term of humanity. It is the pleasure developed in liberating the mind from particular identifications. We call this special feeling *empathic sublime* as it originates in sensations that do not fully belong to us in their complexity. Unlike Kant's dynamic sublimity in nature, which assumes even a certain feeling of one's own superiority over nature (comp. Kant 1991: 152), *the empathic sublime* is generated in realising that the fear from abandoning all particular identifications that the very inclination towards superiority stems from is unfounded. Only after is this fear overcome, development of pleasure in the process of enriching the mind in its transcendence to the sphere of universal humanistic being is possible.

It would be incorrect to assume that the empathic sublime is a category characteristic exclusively of the concept encompassed by the term of Democratic-Based Design, as well as to think that these concepts do not have a potential to provoke other/different feelings, namely those that do not belong to this category. However, it seems that *the empathic sublime* is the central category in the listed concepts, representing a cornerstone of all other aesthetic sensations that activities based on the Democracy-Based Design principles may provoke. Why is that the case? As stated, the Democracy-Based Design is founded on the democratic principle of availability, namely adaptability of solutions, as well as on the assumed potential of provoking aesthetic sensations in the widest terms. It is important to reiterate that we need to exclude economistic reasons here, as well as any relation of the listed concepts with mass production needs and the market expansion rules, since any inclination of the Democracy-Based Design considerations towards this direction would mean a betrayal of its essence and its transformation into something that it is not. Subduing design to economic demands would mean its distancing from the sphere of art to the ultimate transformation into an activity that we might call a capital accumulation servant. And finally, such a development direction would mean the separation of the Democracy-Based Design from the sphere of art, as well as an ultimate betrayal of the very principles that are the foundations of the listed concepts. It is possible to ensure accessibility to proposed solutions and provoke sensory pleasure with artistic visions in the presumed framework of the universal human community if such a tendency is guided by humane principles only. Harmonisation of this vision or its negotiations with the laws of market profitability would definitely lead to the exclusion of those with smaller or marginal participation

in capital accumulation, evaluated from the perspective of the global market development.

The previous standpoint is valid not only at the level of perceiving technical solutions, which remain part of complementary features, but equally (within the proposed problem framework), represents the core principle of considerations of the aesthetic dimension of the Democracy-Based Design. As the evaluation of an aesthetic experience cannot rely on mediocrity, which finds its confirmation in statistics only, and as an artistic vision cannot be guided by uniformity of the spirit, we have to search for that sensory pleasure characterising the listed concepts in higher spheres of the mind, entering the realm of general human self-awareness. Sensory pleasure in this sense is possible in the process of separating from one's own individuality only and the elevation of the mind to the spheres of its dynamic development in an endless perspective of general human totality.

A prerequisite for achieving such an experience is to abandon individuality, not for the purpose of depleting the mind in order to adapt it the proposed equity policy, but for its dialectical rise in order to exceed its own limitations and reach universal humane multifoldness. It is possible to find aesthetic pleasure that can stand outside it at lower levels of the individual mind development only by intertwining it with the totality of the mind. Reaching this universal humane feeling also means creating a path towards an overall experience of sensory sensations, which shift from individual to general. However, aesthetic pleasure is not a consequence of experiential identification with the particular one. Instead, it rises on the foundation of awareness about its multifoldness. This feeling that

we named *empathic sublime* is the only one that can represent the central aesthetic category that the value of the Democracy-Based Design is based upon. Particularity covered by the total vision can achieve its only artistic impression in provoking a feeling that, rising above the individual, finds satisfaction in realising multifoldness at the general human level. A prerequisite of sensory openness for achieving such an experience is to abandon the individual in order to intertwine with the general human. It is a pure rise of self-awareness, free from any program frameworks, but it reaches its reflection in the rise of democratic principles in the realm of political ideological reality.

Due to the relative marginalisation of design and applied arts within the aesthetic thought and art theory, these areas of artistic expression became a subject of theoretic scientific considerations, based on the disciplinary principles inadequate for understanding those dimensions of special human activities we can use to attribute to them the status of art. Such a noncritical expansion of the field of specific disciplines, conducted under the veil of expanding knowledge, led to the very opposite – the emergence of misconceptions perpetuating various ideological assumptions. The same as other concepts of modern design, the Democracy-Based Design is not spared from such discourse interpretative side tracks. Strengthening of utilitarian theoretic conceptual approaches in its understanding, based on the functionalistic principles, creates a threat of sliding into the politicisation of the revolutionary vision, whose ultimate outcome would be the transformation of design into its negative double.

Although related to the socio-economic trends at its technical level, design, as well as applied arts, cannot be reduced to their utilitarian

dimension perceived from the economic aspect only. The social role of design is not exhausted in satisfying lower-level needs, and any reduction of the interpretation of its value to this lowest level leads to the emergence of misconceptions that shift the focus to peripheral features, thus diverting attention from the essence to banalities. The same as the purpose of an art painting is not merely to make an empty space on a wall less monotonous and the same as the value of a literary work is not in a narrative where the hollow mind finds self-denial, design is not a pure means in achieving economic political programs. Degradation of its function to such defined assumptions would mean its transformation into a conceptual chimera that would fill it with negative content by annihilating the essence. A result of such a discourse transformation is what we named negative design – a mirror double which finds its place in the world of simulacrums only.

Overcoming such a perspective of the design thought lies only in renewing/expanding the theoretic opinion about design from the aesthetical and art-theoretical perspective. This is the direction that bases reflections on the perspective of understanding design at the level of its general human values, rather than on affirmation of its marginal features or presentation of the forms of misuse as its social functions. Such a thought shift assumes discourse purification of the design theory and redefining of the term apparatus that has more often than not been non-critically borrowed from the disciplines unprepared to include art into their scope.

Based on such a theoretic position, it is necessary to consider the concepts encompassed by the Democracy-Based Design from the perspective of their understanding through relying on aesthetic (and art-theoretical) categories. The central category, although not the

only one, which should serve as the foundation for building reflexions on this design approach and understanding the values that the development of such a vision stem from, can only be the one that explains the development of aesthetic experience created in the process of overcoming the individual in the dynamic elevation of the mind to the general human totality. Only in the process of identification with the dynamic elevation of the mind that overpowers the individual is it possible to achieve aesthetic pleasure protected from any decline to particularity, which would ultimately negate the Democracy-Based Design concept, and outside an eclectic experience that can only lead to short-term delight.

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