

“And We Had to Do Better Than Abroad”: the Local Vilnius Branch of VNIITE, All-Union Research Institute of Industrial Design, in Soviet Lithuania

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——— This article focuses on the functioning of the Vilnius branch of VNIITE, the All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics. This large Soviet establishment was founded in 1962 and was active in product design, design research, dissemination of information and other related fields. The Vilnius office was one of the most privileged amongst the ten regional institutes, as suggested by the number of renowned international design journals the local staff was able to access. The practices of the VNIITE branch in Vilnius were diverse. The products designed by local designers included technical machinery, consumer products and public interiors. The branch was active in research, which included different scientific fields. The staff of VNIITE gave lectures and translated foreign articles to disseminate design knowledge and to inform local audiences of the “Western world”. Therefore, the Vilnius VNIITE office played an important role in modernising local design culture. This explains why a study of the practices of this institute is vital for broadening the knowledge of Lithuanian design during the Soviet occupation.

Keywords: design, industrial design, design history, Lithuania, Soviet Union, socialism.



1. Artist-creator Ramutė Šapogaitė-Navasaitienė and the head of artistic machine tools Gediminas Ruzgys at the Vilnius branch of VNIITE, 1968, photo by Marius Baranauskas, Lithuanian Central State Archives

Dailininkė konstruktorė Ramutė Šapogaitė-Navasaitienė ir meninio staklių prietaisų konstravimo skyriaus viršininkas Gediminas Ruzgys Sąjunginiame techninės estetikos mokslinio tyrimo instituto (toliau – VNIITE) Vilniaus filiale, 1968, Marius Baranausko nuotrauka, Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (toliau – LCVA)

This simple phrase, “And we had to do better than abroad,” was said in 2020 by Ramutė Navasaitienė,¹ a Lithuanian designer who worked for the Vilnius branch of VNIITE. While the all-Soviet design institute behind this somewhat mysterious acronym is slowly becoming more and more internationally known amongst design professionals, the practice of

¹ “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė, filmed on the 8th of July, 2020, by Karolina Jakaitė and Šarūnas Šlektavičius, “Design Foundation archive”, <http://www.dizainofondas.lt/en/interviews>.

its Lithuanian branch office received less scholarly attention due to the loss of local archives. Yet, Ramutė Navasaitienė's words were not a hyperbole; only decades ago, her works and those of her colleagues were known and admired locally and internationally. The range of completed projects varied from a graphic design for the Vilnius bus station to cassette players. Even though the objects might have been presented as products of the Soviet Union rather than Lithuania, the work of the institute deserves a place in the local Lithuanian design history [fig. 1].

This article focuses on the functioning of Vilnius branch of VNIITE, the All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics. This large Soviet establishment was founded in 1962 and was active in product design, design research, dissemination of information and other related fields. A key aim in establishing VNIITE was to modernise the Soviet Union. For that reason, its practices were not limited to Moscow, the establishment of regional offices played a vital role. The ten regional branches were located in Leningrad (currently Saint Petersburg) in West Russia, Kiev and Kharkiv in Ukraine, Minsk in Belarus, Sverdlovsk (currently Yekaterinburg) in Siberia, Khabarovsk in Far East Russia, Tbilisi in Georgia, Yerevan in Armenia, Baku in Azerbaijan, and Vilnius in Lithuania. Each of these branches had their own focus areas, depending on local industry, culture and needs. However, apart from the Leningrad branch, the functioning and projects of any peripheral branches have not yet been studied extensively. This article aims to address this gap, introducing the Vilnius office as arguably one of the most significant branches outside Russia.

The focus of this essay is on the period in Soviet history that is often labelled “Stagnation” or Late Socialism. Compared to the “Thaw” of Nikita Khrushchev, the cultural changes and developments that took place during the reign of Brezhnev have received less scholarly attention. However, at the time the Soviet Union was opening to the global culture. Numerous international exhibitions and developing tourism and cultural exchanges shaped Soviet design and material culture. In particular, design professionals of the Baltic states, including Lithuania, were able to increasingly access the “Western” world through trips to Finland organised by the

Soviet Architects Union,² exhibitions in London and elsewhere,³ and other channels. These contacts shaped the local modern style and made Baltic design desirable throughout the Soviet Union.

This project aims to determine the position and significance of the Vilnius office in different contexts: in VNIITE as an all-Union institution, in wider Soviet design culture, and in shaping Lithuanian material culture. On one hand, as this article demonstrates, the Vilnius branch was one of the most privileged amongst the regional offices, surpassed only by the central branch in Moscow and the major regional office of Leningrad. Therefore, one should avoid applying the conclusions drawn in this article to the other branch institutes. However, this case study allows to better understand the diversity of design economies within the vast areas of the former Soviet Union as a symptom of the complex relationship of the ideas of “modernism” and “Socialism”.

Methodology

The main primary sources used for this article were the annual reports of the Vilnius branch office of VNIITE, submitted annually to the central offices in Moscow. Currently, these archives are held in Moscow, at the Russian State Archive of Scientific and Technical Documentation (RGANTD), in Fund 281/P-688.3. These annual reports contain reports on the most significant research projects undertaken, the most significant designs executed, collaborations with local institutions, a list of foreign publications, and the articles and public lectures by the staff of VNIITE Vilnius, between 1969 and 1974. Importantly, these archives have so far not been used for an analysis of VNIITE Vilnius and thus include information that has been inaccessible to researchers of Lithuanian design history so far. For that reason, this essay includes long translations of relevant documents: to facilitate access to primary documents for other researchers.

However, the primary documents described above present the functioning of the branch office as it was presented to the central institute and focus on statistics and major achievements, rather than daily work. This approach was balanced by the use of interviews with the former designers

2 Marija Drėmaitė, *Baltic Modernism: Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* (Berlin: Dom, 2018), 66.

3 Karolina Jakaitė, *Šaltojo karo kapsulė: Lietuvių dizainas Londone 1968* (Vilnius: Lapas, 2019).

of VNIITE Vilnius, Ramutė Navasaitienė and Teresė Bernotaitytė-Adomaitienė,⁴ and local Lithuanian collections in Kaunas County Library, namely the surviving publications of the local Vilnius institute of VNIITE and the magazines *Tarybinė Moteris* and *Mokslas ir Technika*. For the contextual analysis of the role of the institute in the Baltic states as a culturally connected region with close connections in art and design, the collections of the Estonian National Archives, the Latvian National Library, and the Estonian National Library were consulted.

For contextual information and comparison to the central branch, this research used various articles by Western and Russian authors, mainly written between 1990 and 2020. One of the most valuable publications was the article “VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism or Plato’s Academy of Design?”, written by a former employee of VNIITE Moscow, Dmitry Azrikan, and published in 1999 in *Design Issues*.⁵ This essay uses Azrikan as the main reference point: even though it was published over 20 years ago and is more of a description than an academic essay, it is still the most thorough overview article published by a former designer of VNIITE and thus includes certain details omitted by other authors. More recently, several researchers have focused on various areas of design that VNIITE was involved in. Margareta Tillberg has written about ElektroMera, an ambitious project for redesigning ‘electric measurement instruments’.⁶ Yulia Karpova’s research on Vtormar, the recycling system designed by VNIITE Leningrad in 1979–1984, illustrates the visionary approach of the designers working in this large institute.⁷ Additionally, some Lithuanian authors, for example Živilė Intaitė, have studied the work of the Lithuanian branch office.⁸ Presenting a different point of view, Olga Druzhnina and Alexandra

4 “Design Foundation” interview with Teresė Bernotaitytė-Adomaitienė, filmed on the 12th of December, 2017 and “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė, filmed on the 8th of July, 2020, both by Karolina Jakaitė and Šarūnas Šlektavičius, “Design Foundation archive”, <http://www.dizainofondas.lt/en/interviews>.

5 Dmitry Azrikan, “VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism or Plato’s Academy of Design?”, *Design Issues* 15 (1999): 45–77.

6 Margarita Tillberg, “Collaborative Design: The Electric Industry in Soviet Russia 1973–79”, in *“Focused”: current design research projects and methods* (Genève: Swiss Design Network (SDN), 2008), 233–253.

7 Yulia Karpova, “Visions and Visualization of Sustainability. Leningrad Designers in Search of Soviet Recycling”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures*, ed. Aga Skrodzka, Xiaoning Lu, Katarzyna Marciniak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

8 Živilė Intaitė, “Dizaino institucijos sovietmečių: Sąjunginio techninės estetikos mokslinio tyrimo instituto Vilniaus filialo veikla”, *Lietuvos dailės muziejaus metraštis*, nr. 21 (2019): 21–34.

Sankova from the Moscow Design Museum have uncovered details of various utopian projects local designers were involved in.⁹

The activities of VNIITE were often interdisciplinary and so the backgrounds and functions of the staff were often diverse, ranging from industrial designers to design researchers and scientists. For that reason, it is unclear if all the authors of products mentioned or the staff who conducted studies for research projects would have been employed as designers or whether they would have identified as such. However, as design was the main field of activity, this project has decided to adopt “designer” as a common title for the staff of both the entire institute and for the Lithuanian branch. In the absence of a more precise expression, this research utilizes “the West” as an umbrella term for non-socialist countries. As emphasised by Eleonory Gilburd, the Soviet West was not identical to the traditional First, Second and Third world power structures prevalent during the Cold War: “The West was a Soviet utopian construction, an expansive idea that included Argentina and Greece.”¹⁰ Yet, the Soviet West should not be considered a homogeneous bloc, within it there were also hierarchies. Ease of access, diversity of available information and historical, cultural, social, religious, economic and political factors influenced the impact of particular regions on Lithuania. For example, due to the excursions organised by the Soviet Architects Union from the late 1950s, many Lithuanian architects and other specialists working in similar fields were either able to visit Finland or learn about its design, art and architecture directly from their peers, which increased the importance of Finnish and Nordic style on Lithuania.¹¹ In political contexts, this research also uses “foreign”, which refers to capitalist countries in the official Soviet terminology.

Contextual framework

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union annexed the three Baltic states, including Lithuania. Meanwhile, the flaws of the Stalinist system were becoming more and more apparent. While resources were spent on starting or resuming ambitious public projects such as the metro in Moscow,

⁹ Olga Druzhinina, Alexandra Sankova, *VNIITE: Discovering Utopia – Lost Archives of Soviet Design* (London: Unit Editions, 2016).

¹⁰ Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 8.

¹¹ Drémaité, *Baltic Modernism*.

poverty amongst people was increasing. Many had lost their homes, but the decorative Neohistoricist style preferred by Stalin's central power was unsuitable for building mass housing. Light industry was secondary to heavy industry and thus there was a constant deficit of consumer products and, in addition, the objects were of low quality. The modernisation that occurred after Stalin's death was therefore inevitable. With the seeming denunciation of certain Stalinist principles, Nikita Khrushchev set out to superficially modernise the empire by improving the variety of consumer objects.¹²

An important part of this strategy was (re)establishing relations with the capitalist world. Soviet modernism was not isolationist, but willing to learn from foreign experiences. Already in the 1920s, Vladimir Lenin had suggested that capitalist technology would provide the base for socialist production¹³ – the new proletariat power would not be created from nothing, but would learn from history, where applicable. Similarly, so-called foreign information and technology from capitalist countries remained important later. During the Stalinist era, there was “foreign” scientific-technological information in the libraries, but access to it was strictly regulated and restricted.¹⁴ As the Thaw began, foreign information, albeit curated and censored, arrived in the Soviet Union through foreign journals, exhibitions, professional contacts, and other sources.

Gradually it was possible to access more and more information on “Western” technology, including engineering and industrial design. Lithuanian magazines like *Lengvoji Pramonė* [Light Industry] or *Mokslas ir Technika* [Science and Technology] disseminated information necessary for mass production. For example, the latter included a dictionary of common engineering-related Lithuanian, Russian, English, French, and German words so that readers would be able to consult international publications.¹⁵ Here, technical information enjoyed liberties unknown to most other fields: articles on engineering, mass production and the technicalities of industrial design were not censored and were relatively freely available to specialists

¹² Victor Buchli, “Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against “Petit-bourgeois” Consciousness in the Soviet Home”, *Journal of Design History* 10 (1997): 161–176.

¹³ Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism* (London, Verso, 1985), 51.

¹⁴ Kaljo-Olev Veskimägi, *Nõukogude Unelaadne Elu: Tsensuur Eesti NSV-s Ja Tema Peremehed* [the Soviet Dreamlike Life: Censorship in Soviet Estonia and Its Masters], (Tallinn: Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda, 1996), 275.

¹⁵ *Mokslas ir tehnika*, nr. 8 (1958): 43.

of related fields.¹⁶ Although obtaining Western information was crucial for the development of Soviet industrial design as a discipline, this research agrees with David Cunningham in his claim that Soviet modernism should, in spite of occasional aesthetic similarities to Western design, be considered an “alternative modernity” with a distinctive nature.¹⁷ Nevertheless, exposure to modern ideas from the other side of the “Iron Curtain” was crucial in the development of Soviet and Lithuanian modernism.

As this research focuses on the Lithuanian office of VNIITE, one must not forget the importance of local traditions. Karolina Jakaitė has emphasised that in Lithuanian design, “at the juncture of the 1950s and 1960s”, a certain “breakthrough” occurred, which she links to the ideas of modernisation and the opening of new institutions related with design.¹⁸ VNIITE Vilnius employed many of the young graduates of the Department of Artistic Construction of Industrial Products of the Vilnius Art Institute. Its founder, Feliksas Daukantas, was a leading figure in the movement ‘Art into Everyday Life’, declared after the 21st Communist Party Congress in 1959.¹⁹ According to Karolina Jakaitė, the main design principles asserted by Daukantas were the following: “The form was inseparable from the purpose of an object, it had to correspond to the nature of the material and its processing technique.”²⁰ This idea was central in the teachings of the Department of Artistic Construction of Industrial Products.

A report written in 1973 states that since the establishment of the department in 1961, 78 young designers had graduated. Of them, 37 were working in factories and 23 in VNIITE Vilnius.²¹ This fact shows that the work of VNIITE Vilnius was indirectly shaped by the Vilnius Art Institute and Feliksas Daukantas himself. The same report also illustrates how fast the field had developed in Lithuania: together with the graduates of

¹⁶ Triin Jerlei, “Developing Design Discourse in Soviet Print Media: A Case Study Comparing Estonia and Lithuania, 1959–1968”, *Design and Culture* 12 (2020): 203–226.

¹⁷ David Cunningham, “Afterword: Communism, Modernity and Memories of the Everyday”, in *The Everyday of Memory: Between Communism and Post-Communism*, ed. Marta Rabikowska (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 301.

¹⁸ Jakaitė, *Šaltojo karo kapsulė*, 55.

¹⁹ Karolina Jakaitė, “Why Were The 1960s So Important for The History Of Lithuanian Design?” in: MO Museum, [online], [cited 2020-12-29], <http://www.mmcentras.lt/cultural-history/cultural-history/design/19541979-was-there-such-a-thing-as-soviet-lithuanian-design/why-were-the-1960s-so-important-for-the-history-of-lithuanian-design/79089>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 5.

Kaunas and Telšiai Polytechnic Institutes, there were already 231 specialists of technical aesthetics “whose work in industry undeniably contributes to the improvement of product quality”.²² Therefore, it is important not to see VNIITE Vilnius as a separate phenomenon, but as a product of the local industrial design scene.

As a local branch of an all-Soviet institution, the VNIITE Vilnius office may raise questions: should it be seen as a “little Moscow” in the Lithuanian territory? Or a sign of brave resistance to the cultural hegemony through local traditions? This paper suggests that peripheral design of the Soviet Union should not be limited to binary judgment. The designers who worked at a local VNIITE were simultaneously bound by the rules and priorities of VNIITE as a central design institute and shaped by their Lithuanian heritage and education. Alexei Yurchak has argued that within the Soviet system, “fulfilling some ‘formality’ was a necessary prerequisite for being able to perform ‘work with meaning.’”²³ Successfully surviving and functioning within the system required compromising between different ideas, systems, and orders.

VNIITE in the international context

Given the relative international outlook of industrial design, it is hardly surprising that VNIITE, the new design institute, was well informed of western trends from its establishment in 1962. Dmitry Azrikan called VNIITE “probably the most globally open Soviet institution behind the Iron Curtain, except for the Bolshoi Ballet.”²⁴ Katarina Serulus has studied the relations between the Brussels Design Centre and VNIITE, focusing on an exchange of exhibitions in 1973 and 1974. She writes: “the reeling in of a Soviet exhibition by the Brussels Design Centre was considered an exceptional success,” emphasising its significance to the Brussels design centre: after all, it was the first exhibition of VNIITE outside the socialist bloc and hosting it was a significant victory for the Brussels Design Centre over its British rival.²⁵ This case illustrates well that there was reciprocity in the East-West

22 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 5.

23 Alexei Yurchak, “Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003): 480–510.

24 Azrikan, “VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism”, 63.

25 Katarina Serulus, “‘Well-Designed Relations’: Cold War Design Exchanges between Brussels and Moscow in the Early 1970s”, *Design and Culture* 9 (2017): 154.

duality: not only was VNIITE keeping a close eye on the capitalist industrial design, but the other side of the “Iron Curtain” was almost equally curious about the work of the Soviet institute. The exhibition was divided into three sections: heavy machinery, small consumer products, and traditional craft objects.²⁶ This fact shows that the outside image of VNIITE, as projected to “the West”, was not only a modern establishment, but one that amalgamated modernity with traditions. However, it appears that here the branch institutes differed in their focus: where Serulus mentions “a silver wine set, linen carpets, and *matryoshkas*”,²⁷ this research identified no mentions of significant vernacular objects in the archives of the Vilnius office.

Hence, VNIITE was well informed of international design. Karpova emphasises that the director of VNIITE, Yuri Soloviev, was familiar with the Council of Industrial Design, established in 1945 in Great Britain.²⁸ [fig. 2, 3] Tillberg suggests: “Further the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm (HfG) with its scientific, rational outlook and module furniture functioned as a model for its Soviet counterparts (HfG-director Tomas Maldonado had visited Russia, and his articles were published in Soviet design journals)”.²⁹ Munipov, Munipov and Zinchenko refer to the importance of Sir Frederic Charles Bartlett:

The renaissance of ergonomics within VNIITE began from the assimilation of foreign experience and the study of the scientific heritage of ergologists and vocational psychologists of 1920s–1930s in the USSR. Therefore, researchers from VNIITE, and after a time the staff of its ten branches in different cities, had been familiar with the content of Bartlett’s paper, ‘The Future of Ergonomics’. Moreover, this article had been a standard for the development of ergonomics in the above-mentioned institute.³⁰

It is worth mentioning that ergonomics has been identified as one of the strengths of VNIITE, thus one may assume it was one of the more liberal and open research directions due to its priority within the institute.

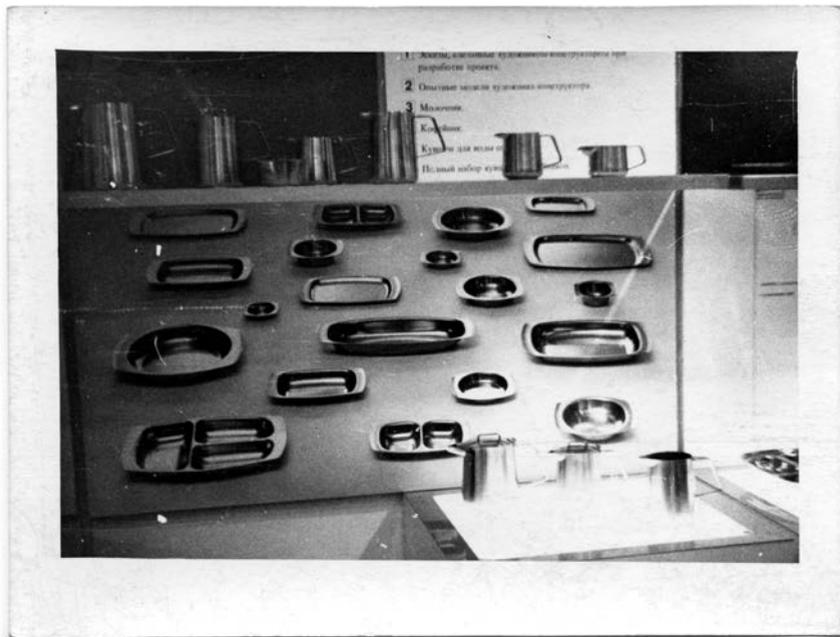
26 Ibid., 156.

27 Ibid.

28 Yulia Karpova, *Comradely Objects: Design and Material Culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s–80s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 13.

29 Margarita Tillberg, “Collaborative Design”, 237.

30 V. Munipov, V. Zinchenko, M. Munipov, “The Influence of Bartlett’s Work on Soviet and Russian Ergonomics”, *Ergonomics* 51 (2008): 35.



2-3.
 British Design Exhibition in Moscow visited by the future designers from the Department of Artistic Construction of Industrial Products of the Vilnius Art Institute, late 1960s, photo from the personal archive of Ramutė Navasaitienė

Lankantis britų dizaino parodoje Maskvoje kartu su kitais būsimais dizaineriais iš tuometinio LSSR valstybinio dailės instituto Pramonės gaminių meninio konstravimo katedros, apie 1966–1968, nuotraukos iš asmeninio R. Navasaitienės archyvo

Its importance is highlighted, for example, in Serulus's description of the exhibition in Brussels.³¹

Although VNIITE was by far not the only establishment responsible for creating and developing Soviet design, its membership in ICSID made it more famous abroad than other institutions. Additionally, the international focus of VNIITE should be recognised as a part of the wider Cold War power struggle. Gordon Johnston refers to the styles of different agents of the Cold War as "overlapping brands of modernity", promoted by their respective countries of origin.³² Although the Soviet Union was determined to learn from the West and use international modernism as a basis for the modernisation of the empire, this established local modernity, promoted via VNIITE, was part of a wider propaganda intended to increase the soft power of the Soviet Union. Even though the designers working for VNIITE were not necessarily interested in the wider Cold War power debates, the international acclaim brought by the institution could be seen as one of the reasons why VNIITE was functioning in relatively privileged conditions such as (controlled) contact with the Western world.

One other possible reason for the occasional overemphasis on VNIITE, compared to the other Soviet establishments active in design fields, might be the work of Raymond Hutchings, arguably the first Western author who conducted thorough research into Soviet design systems.³³ In his publications he emphasised VNIITE as a major Soviet design institute, often disregarding other fields apart from industrial design. As a contemporaneous critic of Hutchings, Kendall E. Bailes, writes in their commentary published in 1978:

Hutchings leaves the impression that VNIITE was set up as the central design headquarters for the Soviet Union – a coordinating body for all types of Soviet design – whereas Soviet materials as well as his own book make it clear that VNIITE is a coordinating body for only one type of design: industrial design.³⁴

³¹ Serulus, "Well-Designed Relations", 156.

³² Gordon Johnston, "Revisiting the Cultural Cold War", *Social History* 35 (2010): 305.

³³ Raymond Hutchings, *Soviet Science, Technology, Design: Interaction and Convergence* (Oxford: University Press, London), 1976.

³⁴ Kendall E. Bailes, "Soviet Design: A Comment and an Alternative View", *Slavic Review* 37 (1978): 596.

While Hutchings's publications have not become canonical in the study of Soviet design, it is difficult to assess the extent of misconception over 40 years later. Nevertheless, one can assume that there must have been some effect on the subsequent generations of researchers working on Soviet industry and design.

Yet, in spite of VNIITE's position as the best known Soviet design establishment, the scholarly debates on the international connections of VNIITE and the practices of design and research staff working within the institute have mainly concentrated either on Moscow as the centre or on Leningrad as the other major branch office located in Western Russia. The diversity of the regional institute has received less attention for several reasons. Firstly, as is also the case with this research, local archives have often perished and it is not always possible to track down former designers who would still have personal archives. Secondly, while there is a strong local school of design history research in Western Russia and the Baltic countries, the discipline has not yet been established in most other post-Soviet countries and the relevant archives are often difficult to access. Thirdly, as the collapse of the Soviet Union occurred only a bit more than one generation ago, traumas are still present within local communities and in some instances the tensions are also transmitted onto attitudes towards material culture. For those reasons research into the regional practices of VNIITE and other all-Soviet design institutions is only beginning to emerge.

The regional branch office in Vilnius

In Lithuanian, two separate names are used to refer to VNIITE: *Sajunginio techninės estetikos mokslinio tyrimo institutas* (STEMTI) and *Visasajunginio techninės estetikos mokslinio tyrimo institutas* (VTEMTI). In her article, Živilė Intaitė has used STEMTI, which also seems to be preferred in scientific publications of the institute.³⁵ But, for example an article by Danguolė Nesterenkaitė, "Formos ir turinio ryšys", published in *Mokslas ir technika* in 1972,³⁶ and "Vaizdinė informacija imonėje" by Vytautas Vaitkus, published in the same magazine in 1969,³⁷ both use the abbreviation VTEMTI. This essay, however, employs the internationally

³⁵ Živilė Intaitė, "Dizaino institucijos sovietmečiu".

³⁶ *Mokslas ir technika*, nr. 1 (1972): 24–25.

³⁷ *Mokslas ir technika*, nr. 2 (1969): 23–25.

recognised acronym, VNIITE. To differentiate between the central institute and the local branch office, within this essay the central establishment is referred to as VNIITE and the local Vilnius tributary as VNIITE Vilnius or the Vilnius branch of VNIITE.

Azrikan has the following to say about VNIITE Vilnius:

Vilnius (Lithuania) was a VNIITE fortress in the Baltic Republics, which ignored this state design empire and correctly assumed that they could survive without Moscow's supervision. The Lithuanian branch was advanced in many areas: industrial environment, city environment (which blurred boundaries between design and architecture), urban furniture, precision mechanical products, and electronics. The architect and designer, Kostas Yakovlevas-Mateckis, played 'first violin' of environmental design. Kostas actually opened this new direction in Soviet design, and he had a lot of successors all over the country. His books and recommendations were best-sellers in the design field and beyond.³⁸

The significance of the branch has been emphasised by several other researchers as well: as suggested by Cubbin, the branch in Vilnius was particularly focused on precision engineering, electronics, and the urban environment.³⁹ Margareta Tillberg highlights the importance of the Vilnius branch and the above-mentioned leading designer, Kostas Jakovlevas-Mateckis, in one of the most ambitious projects of VNIITE, ElektroMera.⁴⁰

Although VNIITE had been established already in 1962, the local institutes were a few years younger and the Vilnius branch institute was founded in June 1966.⁴¹ The establishment of all operations took a few years more: for example, the research activities of the branch were expanded in 1969:

According to the Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR on February 20, 1969 No. 78 'On improving the use of the achievements of technical aesthetics in the national economy of the Lithuanian SSR', which recommended the local institute to expand the methodological assistance to ministries and

38 Dmitry Azrikan, "VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism", 61.

39 Tom Cubbin, "The Domestic Information Machine", *Home Cultures* 11 (2014): 8.

40 Tillberg, "Collaborative Design", 237.

41 Jakaitė, "Why Were The 1960s".

institutions for implementing the requirements of technical aesthetics to products and enterprises, the Vilnius branch began to carry out a number of methodological research works last year.⁴²

In an article published in 1976, Danguolė Nesterenkaitė identified two separate periods in the early history of the branch. According to her, 1966–1971 was a time of formation for the branch, establishing expertise and connections to enterprises and other organisations. The following era, 1971–1975, concentrated on the deepening of scientific research, determining the focus areas and strengthening creative connections to the enterprises of promising industries.⁴³ This essay mainly focuses on the activities and functioning of the Vilnius institute in the 1970s.

As written in a report dating from 1971, the tasks of the Vilnius office were the following:

- The development of cultural products for the purpose of improving the quality of industrial products;
- Creation of optimal nomenclatures of cultural products;
- Aesthetic development of machines, machine tools and devices;
- Assessment of consumer properties of industrial products submitted for certification on the ‘Quality Mark’;
- Development of artistic design methods;
- Development of scientific and methodological foundations for the design of visual communications;
- Ergonomic studies focusing on posture and movements of workers;
- Research work with the aim of creating teaching materials on the aesthetisation of the external and internal environment of industrial enterprises and rural areas;
- Experimental design;
- Methodical guidelines;

⁴² RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.155, 1970, 32.

⁴³ Danguolė Nesterenkaitė, “Развитие Вильнюсского филиала ВНИИТЭ в 1966–1975 г.г.” [Development of the Vilnius branch of VNIITE in 1966–1975], *Художественное конструирование в Литовской ССР [Artistic Design in Lithuanian SSR]*, (Vilnius: VNIITE, 1976), 8–9.

- Organisation of scientific and technical information and propaganda.⁴⁴

In 1973, the Vilnius institute employed a total of 114 people.⁴⁵ The work of the institute was divided under four different themes, broadly identified as “complex research“, “artistic construction in industry”, “industrial interiors” and “scientific-technological information and propaganda”.⁴⁶ [fig. 4] The number of researchers two years earlier, in 1971, had been 27: 14 of them were working on issues related to machinery and 13 specialised on “kulturno-bytovovo” or cultural and domestic topics.⁴⁷ As explained by Ramutė Navasaitienė:

We had to deliver every finished work with explanatory notes, which included ergonomics, psychology and a wide range of topics. <...> We had to prepare the papers both for the institute and for our customers, i.e. Moscow. Then all the material would be bound together, there was some kind of binding place where they took it. Besides, there were multilingual specialists who translated information from magazines, the information department collected material from Moscow and from elsewhere; Moscow would send what they had, and then we would analyze the material.⁴⁸

Throughout the existence of VNIITE Vilnius, the offices were always located exclusively in Vilnius. Originally, the premises of the branch, a total of 941 m², were located in three buildings in the Vilnius old town: Gorkio gatvė 36 (currently Didžioji 36) with 515 m², Muziejaus gatvė 12 (currently Vokiečių gatvė) with 368 m², and neighbouring Muziejaus gatvė 14 with 59 m².⁴⁹ An archival document lists the use of space in these buildings, which allows us to see the way different functions were organised in 1973. In Gorkio 36, the institute had a total of 515 m² of space, of which 446 m² was listed together under administration, laboratory and production and the remaining 69 m² was utility space, which included a basement. The use of space at the address Muziejaus 12 is more detailed. Out of the 368 m², almost half,

44 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 29.

45 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 129.

46 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.215, 1972, 48.

47 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 90.

48 “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė.

49 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 74.



4. Designers at the Vilnius branch of VNIITE (from the left): Vytis Laskauskas, Jūratė Misiūnaitė, Dalia Mikutytė-Makaraitienė, Ramutė Navasaitienė, Alfonsas Lukšys, Povilas Šimkus, 1970s, photo from the personal archive of Ramutė Navasaitienė

VNIITE Vilniaus filialo dizaineriai (iš kairės): Vytis Laskauskas, Jūratė Misiūnaitė, Dalia Mikutytė-Makaraitienė, Ramutė Navasaitienė, Alfonsas Lukšys, Povilas Šimkus, 8 dešimtmetis, nuotrauka iš asmeninio R. Navasaitienės archyvo

152 m² was used for the production of prototypes. The remaining space was similarly used for laboratories and other experimental space: the photographic laboratory occupied 44 m², the chemical laboratory – 28 m², 35 m² was used for a “multiplication laboratory” or *Множительная лаб*, a space for copying various materials. The size of the drafting “laboratory” was 27 m², warehouse premises occupied 59 m², and the remaining 23 m² were used as utility rooms. In the neighbouring building, Muziejaus 14, the institute only had a total of 59 m², which were used for storing materials.⁵⁰

As stated by Ramutė Navasaitienė, the institute was later relocated to a new building further from the city centre, located at A. Juozapa- vičiaus 11 in Vilnius.⁵¹ Unfortunately, there were no detailed descriptions of the use of space in the new building in the archives in Moscow nor will this research dwell further on other organisations located nearby or in the same building. Yet, the architecture of the new building reflects the growing

50 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 74.

51 “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė.

importance of the institute. The old premises had been scattered around empty buildings in the Old Town and one may assume that they were far from perfect for their use as production and laboratory spaces. The new building on the other side of the river reflected the style of international modernism and was designed for that purpose.

According to the archives in Moscow, although the headquarters were located in Vilnius, there were also smaller subdivisions outside Vilnius. In 1971, for example, the local branch had 25 subdivisions in the state of Lithuania, of which 14 were in Vilnius, 5 in Kaunas, 2 in Šiauliai, 2 in Panevėžys, 1 in Rokiškis, 1 in Plunge, and 1 in Šilutė.⁵² Two years later, the number of subdivisions had remained the same, but there were 18 in Vilnius, 2 in Kaunas, 2 in Šiauliai, 2 in Panevėžys, 1 in Alytus, and 1 in Kapuskas.⁵³ VNIITE Vilnius had close contacts with a large number of different institutions within Lithuania, for example the Research Institute of Sanitary Engineering, the Research Institute of Epidemiology and Hygiene, and several universities in Kaunas and Vilnius.⁵⁴ Additionally, the branch was also involved in a few collaborative projects with other offices of VNIITE. A project led by the Leningrad branch in early 1970s involved offices in Vilnius, Kiev, Yerevan, Leningrad, and Urals.⁵⁵

As Ramutė Navasaitienė remembers it, one of the central reasons for the existence of VNIITE and its regional branches was the dissemination of information. Compared to his detailed descriptions of other departments, Dmitry Azrikan introduced ‘Department number 6: Information’ only briefly. In his words:

The mission of this department, with more than 30 people, was to provide VNIITE and all 10 of its subsidiaries with comprehensive and brand-new professional sources: books, magazines, journals, catalogues, slides, videos, patents, etc. from all over the world.

The department was reinforced by the interpreters from the major languages of the world to give designers fast and easy access to any sources needed.⁵⁶

⁵² RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 71.

⁵³ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 4.

⁵⁴ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 33–34.

⁵⁵ Central State Archive of Scientific-Technical Documentation of St. Petersburg, P-146.21.89, 1975, 33.

⁵⁶ Azrikan, “VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism”, 55.

Availability of information demonstrates the privileged situation of VNIITE offices in Vilnius compared to other branch institutes. For example, in 1968, 13 different foreign design journals were accessible to designers of the local branch,⁵⁷ while the branch located in the significantly larger city of Kiev was only subscribed to 6 journals.⁵⁸ The only regional branch in a more favourable position than Vilnius was Leningrad with subscriptions to 16 different journals (RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.64, 1968, 154). The journals available in the Vilnius institute were *Design* (UK), the Danish journal *Mobilia*, *Bonytt* from Norway, *Industrial Design* (USA), *Interior Design* (UK), *Design Industrie* (France), *Couleurs*, *Usines d'Aujourd'hui* (France), *Form* (from Sweden), *Gebrauchsgraphik* (Germany), *Moebel Interior Design* (Germany), *Ulm* (Germany), *Form* (Switzerland).⁵⁹ The selection of available international publications changed over time: in 1971, the report also mentioned *Interiors*, *Arts decoration*, *Mobilier et décoration*, *Bau und möbelschreiner* (Germany), *Möbel*, *Interior, Design : MD* (Germany), *Usines d'aujourd'hui* (France), *Equipe-ment et architecture intérieur*, but it is remarked that the magazines *Design* and *Industrial Design* were not available in the branch, except for issues published between 1967 and 1969.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the countries of provenance of the magazines mentioned were not specified in the archives and this research was not able to identify them all due to ambiguous titles.

VNIITE Vilnius was also responsible for disseminating design information obtained from international publications. As explained by Nesterenkaitė, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, questions related to technical aesthetics were entrusted to employees without specialist training in the field, who therefore needed introduction to the main theories and methods.⁶¹ This activity was not limited solely to writing original articles on design, but also involved translating foreign research from the magazines of both capitalist and socialist countries. The languages from which articles were translated demonstrate the foreign influences of the Vilnius office beyond the Soviet Union. For example, in 1969, the Vilnius branch translated 13 articles: 4 were originally written in Polish, the rest in English.⁶² Three years later,

57 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.64, 1968, 153.

58 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.64, 1968, 149.

59 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.64, 1968, 153.

60 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 96–98.

61 Nesterenkaitė, “Развитие Вильнюсского филиала ВНИИТЭ”, 9.

62 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.121, 1969, 57.

in 1972, this number had already grown to 36: 11 articles translated from English, 4 from Polish, and 25 from German. Most articles were oriented at technical design information, for example “The economics of colour”, originally published in *Industrial Design* 18/2 in 1971.⁶³ The importance of Poland and East Germany was hardly surprising: both countries were renowned for their modern design⁶⁴ and geographically close to Lithuania. According to Hutchings, they had established local industrial design institutions considerably earlier than the Soviet Union – as early as the beginning of the 1950s.⁶⁵ Additionally, some information was disseminated through lectures to diverse audiences. For example, in 1972, the staff of VNIITE Vilnius gave 45 lectures. “History of design” was given by V. Karaliūnas to a group of teachers on the occasion of Teacher’s Day on 27 January. Gediminas Ruzgys read “Aesthetics as science”, on 7 September; and “Commercial advertising”, on 28 December, to students of the Economics Faculty of Vilnius University.⁶⁶

Importantly, VNIITE Vilnius, like all the branch offices of VNIITE, designed industrial products and interiors. It appears that the focuses of various offices varied largely, as can be deduced from the earlier descriptions of folk art objects exhibited in Brussels.⁶⁷ Evidence suggests that many products designed at VNIITE Vilnius were technical equipment intended for specialist use. Examples of this field are a universal gear milling machine VE-62 by Alfonsas Lukšys and manual flat knitting machine by D. Petkevičienė, both designed in 1971.⁶⁸ Although the reports include few details of specific products or the design process itself, certain details reveal the importance of international information as a key factor in the modernisation that VNIITE and its branch offices were instrumental in. For example, certain improvements made to a high precision universal gear hobbing machine BE-62, designed by A. Lukšys, were inspired by Model 82, produced by Swiss manufacturer Lambert.⁶⁹ However, some of the products

63 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.215, 1972, 66–73.

64 i.e. David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-state: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the International Style* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Jeremy Aynsley, *Designing Modern Germany* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

65 Hutchings, *Soviet Science, Technology, Design*, 150–151.

66 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.215, 1972, 74–78.

67 Serulus, “Well-Designed Relations”, 156.

68 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.280, 1974, 55.

69 RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.280, 1974, 56.



5.
Artist-creator Teresė Bernotaitytė-Adomaitienė
at the Vilnius branch of VNIITE, 1969, photo by
Marius Baranauskas, Lithuanian Central State
Archives

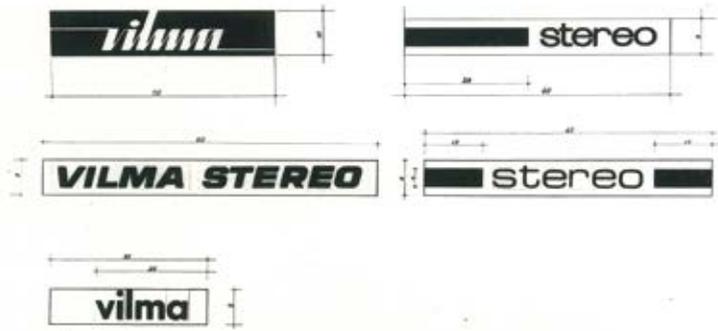
Dailininkė konstruktorė Teresė Bernotaitytė-
Adomaitienė VNIITE Vilniaus filiale, 1969, Marius
Baranausko nuotrauka, LCVA

were intended for wider consumer use and became popular in Lithuania and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. In particular, Teresė Bernotaitytė-Adomaitienė [fig. 5] designed smaller electric household products, such as an electric coffee maker in 1971.⁷⁰ One of her best-known objects is the Vilma cassette player, which became popular with Soviet consumers.⁷¹ [fig. 6, 7]

A defining characteristic of Soviet design culture was the hierarchy between different markets. As told by Ramutė Navasaitienė:

⁷⁰ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 86.

⁷¹ “Design Foundation” interview with Teresė Bernotaitytė-Adomaitienė.



II



6-7.
Teresė Adomaitienė, Tape recorder "Vilma",
1970, photos from the personal archive of Teresė
Adomaitienė

Teresė Adomaitienė, Kasetinis magnetofonas „Vilma“,
1970, nuotraukos iš asmeninio T. Adomaitienės
archyvo

And we had to do better than abroad, there were products, we wrote in Russian ‘zarubeznij’ (for foreigners or export) and ‘atecestveny’, these were examples for the whole Soviet Union, what was done similarly and in order to patent, we had to prove that we were better.⁷²

This approach was not exclusive to VNIITE: factories everywhere in the Soviet Union had separate objects for export and the home market. For example, Pilvi Ojamaa, a glass designer who worked for Estonian factory Tarbeklaas, said in an interview that a certain glass that she designed in 1972, “Juta”, had been produced only for export and could be bought in Helsinki, but not in Tallinn.⁷³ This practice was arguably led by both economic and propaganda considerations: presenting a slightly embellished picture of Soviet design abroad served both to boost the greatly needed international trade and the image of the Soviet Union itself.

As authors like Victor Buchli,⁷⁴ Susan E. Reid⁷⁵ and Alexey Golubev⁷⁶ have emphasised, consumption was an important ideological weapon in the Cold War. Ramutė Navasaitienė was similarly interested in a certain object becoming an export product: a knife sharpener she had designed for factory Elfa.⁷⁷ [fig. 8, 9] However, once the sharpener was finished, it turned out that the plastic material had been too soft for its intended purpose and thus the sharpener could not be industrially produced. Certain objects, for example some drills, were produced exclusively for export markets and could not be found in Lithuania. These memories well illustrate one of the main problems of Soviet industrial design: while the local industrial design had strong theoretical foundations, the actual conditions in factories were often outdated.

Karpova has emphasised: “VNIITE designers tended to see environments, and not objects, as the ideal end products of their work.”⁷⁸

72 “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė.

73 Interview with Pilvi Ojamaa, 01.08.2017 (recording by Eili Soon, Triin Jerlei).

74 Victor Buchli, “Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against ‘Petit-bourgeois’ Consciousness in the Soviet Home”, *Journal of Design History* 10 (1997): 161–176.

75 Susan E. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev”, *Slavic Review* 61 (2002): 211–252.

76 Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

77 “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė.

78 Karpova, *Comradely Objects*, 17.

Similarly, the designers working at VNIITE Vilnius often completed projects that focused on environments. Many of these were directed towards industry, for example the project for a butter factory in Širvintai, submitted in 1971 by V. Kučinskienė and M. Paravinskienė.⁷⁹ There were only a few larger projects that reached the general public, especially in the field of visual communication for public spaces: in 1970, the office designed visual communication for the Vilnius bus station, in 1971, for Kaunas transit system and in 1973, for local pharmacies.⁸⁰ Therefore, the modernisation of environments was a key topic for VNIITE, especially through a redesigning of visual communication. Unfortunately, in some cases the reports to the central branch have omitted the name(s) of the designer(s), which is the reason this article occasionally fails to mention the authors.

Design as an activity was not the only task of branch institutes and this essay has already mentioned the importance of design research in VNIITE. Naturally, the reality of design research is much more varied than the descriptions in the archives, while this research mainly relies on reports presented to the central institute. As evident in Tillberg's research, the research within the institute was not focused solely on products and objects, but embraced the structures of production and society.⁸¹ However, the methods used by designers and researchers and the topics the institute focused on allow us to better understand the activities and functions of VNIITE Vilnius. As an example, one research project covered all three Baltic states: project P-1G-4, "Study of household products in rural dwellings of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia", led by Maja Požėlaitė. The study lasted from 1973–1975 and consisted of three smaller phases: "Food storage for shorter and longer periods", "Preparation of forages and their storage for shorter and longer periods" and "Cleaning, hygiene and plumbing". According to the surviving archives:

The purpose of this study is to develop proposals for improving the nomenclature and optimal range of household products of mass demand for rural conditions in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. In the process, it is necessary to identify the trends in the development of consumer properties of household products, specifications of

⁷⁹ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 86.

⁸⁰ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 64-65; RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 47.

⁸¹ Tillberg, "Collaborative Design".



8-9.

Ramutė Navasaitienė,
Knife sharpener for
ELFA, 1978, photos from
the personal archive of
Ramutė Navasaitienė

Ramutė Navasaitienė,
Peilių galąstuvai Kėdainių
gamyklai „ELFA“, 1978,
nuotraukos iš asmeninio
R. Navasaitienės archyvo

the environment, and to determine the range of household goods in the everyday life of the villagers.

The work is carried out in several main directions, based on the main functional processes and the organisation of the subject environment:

- Storage of cooked food for a long and short time.
- Preparation of feed and its storage for a long and short time.
- Room cleaning, hygiene and plumbing.⁸²

The described project is an example of the research directions in VNIITE Vilnius and illustrates the role of modernisation as the reason behind VNIITE and its branch offices, including Vilnius. According to Karpova: “The structure of VNIITE directly manifested the state’s will to control, through a network of experts, the totality of things and their influence on consumers.”⁸³ The image of modernisation is interlinked with mechanisation and mass production. The focus of the project on subsidiary farms points to a discourse to modernise not only public, but private sphere as well. This project shows the holistic and ambitious approach prevalent in VNIITE and its local branches: instead of designing single products, the institute challenged the entire systems through multidisciplinary methods.

Lastly, a key factor in the modernisation of Soviet design culture was ensuring the development and quality of regional design, a task in which VNIITE was similarly instrumental and for which there was a separate body established within the institute, the Artistic and Technical Council. As stated in the archives:

The Artistic and Technical Council has the authority to discuss scientific research and artistic design developments and give an opinion on their quality. At the meetings of the Council, scientific and methodological materials and expert opinions on the Quality Mark of industrial products are considered. When discussing the work of the branch, the presence of representatives from the customer and the manufacturing plant is mandatory.⁸⁴

⁸² RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.247, 1973, 18-19.

⁸³ Karpova, *Comradely Objects*, 67.

⁸⁴ RGANTD 281/P-688.3-6.187, 1971, 123.

In 1973, the Artistic and Technical Council was reorganised and renamed as the Scientific and Technical Council. Its tasks diversified and its structure became more nuanced. The semantic differences set VTEM TI apart from other similar organisations that designed consumer goods, for example *Dailė*, which had an *Art Council*. However, the main task, an evaluation of products, appears to have been similar throughout the different institutions within Soviet Lithuania.

The main tasks of the Scientific and Technical Council are to review and assess the level of research and artistic design works, both completed and in the development stage, and to issue recommendations for their use. It also considers expert opinions on the assessment of the aesthetic quality indicators of industrial products submitted for certification in the highest quality category; along with this, the Council gives opinions on the methodological materials developed by the branch. NTS approves annual and long-term plans for the development of the branch and its technical base, plans for the publishing of scientific and methodological publications of the employees of the branch. The structure and composition of the NTS were approved by the director of VNIITE at the end of 1973. The council consists of two sections: the first evaluates the artistic design of industrial products, the second – the complex equipment of industrial and public premises and the improvement of industrial areas. In addition to the management of the branch, highly qualified specialists in design, architecture, psychology, hygiene, etc. are involved in the work of the Council, including one doctor and three candidates of architecture, 1 candidate of art history, 2 candidates of technical sciences. Council meetings were held in accordance with the annual plan and the quarterly schedule.⁸⁵

Unfortunately, I was unable to locate any reports or other kinds of materials that would have detailed the work of the NTS and how often the designs would have been rejected or criticised. Nevertheless, its existence and structure illustrate the multifaceted approach to industrial design prevalent in VNIITE Vilnius: the specialists involved represented a number of different disciplines, thus imposing a versatile quality control over the work of the branch.

VNIITE in the Lithuanian and Baltic context

When the Soviet Union collapsed, VNIITE had developed into the largest institute for design research in the entire world.⁸⁶ However, much like the end of the vast communist empire itself, the death of VNIITE was abrupt – this research was even unable to find the precise time that this branch office ceased to exist. This fact well illustrates the changes that occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union: often, there are no archival documents that would explain or date the end of many institutions. According to Ramutė Navasaitienė, all the members of the staff were fired during a single month, the building was sold and the staff tried to sell the office equipment, in order to earn some money. In the immediate post-Soviet period, the attitudes towards design and other cultural heritage from the Soviet era were understandably complex. Branches of VNIITE, like all-Union institutes were often misunderstood and vilified and thus, at the time of their closing, their legacy was often treated carelessly or even deliberately destroyed. As told by Ramutė Navasaitienė: “Later I found out that the housekeeper said with great satisfaction: ‘Oh, we sent two truckloads of papers [the books, magazines from the library and other archival documents of VNIITE Vilnius – T.J.] for recycling.’ It’s such a pity.”⁸⁷ [fig. 10]

This research poses a problem: how to analyse and contextualise the legacy of VNIITE and especially the Vilnius office? Did it have an identifiable effect on the design culture of the 21st century, whether locally or globally? The legacy of Soviet design is a complex topic, due to the cultural, political and social rupture that happened with the collapse of the vast empire. However, even if the Soviet political system collapsed, certain aspects of the Lithuanian design system continued regardless of the economic and political conditions. The designers who worked in VNIITE continued to be active in the newly independent state and a large part of the material culture they had helped to shape still existed. For example, today, in 2021, the visual communication in the Vilnius bus station, which most Lithuanians have actively used at least once in their lives, is still more or less similar to the one designed by the staff of VNIITE.

⁸⁶ Tillberg, “Collaborative Design”, 236.

⁸⁷ “Design Foundation” interview with Ramutė Navasaitienė.



10.

The last day at the Design Institute (the former Vilnius branch of VNIITE), 19 06 2006, the staff (from the left): Rimas Jagminas, designer Ramutė Navasaitienė, designer Kristina Pumputytė, Irena Šimkienė, Saulius Vitkauskas, designer Stasys Makaraitis, Juozas Matekonis, Pranas Maračinskas, Jonas Bičiūnas, standing on top: unknown person, Juozas Jasinskis, photo by Romas Krupauskas, personal archive of Ramutė Navasaitienė

Paskutinė darbo diena Dizaino institute (buvęs VNIITE Vilniaus filialas), 2006 06 19, darbuotojai (iš kairės): Rimas Jagminas, dizainerė Ramutė Navasaitienė, dizainerė Kristina Pumputytė, Irena Šimkienė, Saulius Vitkauskas, dizaineris Stasys Makaraitis, Juozas Matekonis, Pranas Maračinskas, Jonas Bičiūnas, stovintys viršuje: neatpažintas asmuo, Juozas Jasinskis, Romo Krupausko nuotrauka, asmeninis R. Navasaitienės archyvas

The fact that the only VNIITE institute in the Baltic states was located in Vilnius raises a few questions. Was VNIITE Vilnius originally supposed to cover all three Baltic states? Or were Tallinn and Riga overlooked by the central establishments? Interestingly, Azrikan even hints that Riga might have been a serious competitor to Western Russia in terms of design:

The relatively good basis for industrial design was located in the Baltic Republics. Good traditions allowed Latvia to become a leader of post-war industrial design in the country. It was considered very prestigious to have furniture, kitchenware, and a radio designed and produced in Riga (the Latvian capital). Adolf Irbite, Chief Designer at the Riga Radio Company, made a remarkable contribution to Latvian design. However, there was no way to establish a Soviet centre of industrial design anywhere beyond Moscow.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Azrikan, "VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism".

In particular, VEF, Valsts Elektrotehnisk Fabrika [State Electro-technical Factory] in Riga, which manufactured cameras, radios, phones and, later, even computers, was renowned for its products. However, the descriptions of projects mentioned in the archives of VNIITE Vilnius show that the role of branch institutes was not to design for the larger companies, but to act as design consultants for different establishments. Most major factories would have hired their own design department, for example another major Baltic exporter, the Standard furniture factory in Tallinn, even executed designs for other furniture factories in Estonia.⁸⁹ Similarly, the only documented project that this research identified was the abovementioned project P-1G-4, “Study of household products in rural dwellings of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia”, led by M. Požėlaitė.

However, the absence of directed specific projects is not an indication of VNIITE’s insignificance outside Lithuania. On 19 October 1984, Estonian architect G. Ruuben wrote that Estonian designers came to the Vilnius offices of VNIITE in order to study ergonomics and other issues in industrial design of which there was little local expertise. Other specialists often visited VNIITE Vilnius to ask for expert evaluation in the field of ergonomics.⁹⁰ Although information on Western design was accessible to Baltic designers and general audiences in the media,⁹¹ it was often selective. As demonstrated by VNIITE and several other innovative design institutes in the Soviet Union, Soviet design culture was more multifaceted than has often been realised.⁹² However, the design economy as a whole was fragmented and subjected to bureaucratic considerations. Additionally, censorship and Cold War competition further obstructed finding information on industrial design. For that reason, VNIITE’s work in mediating information was vital for local designers and the local office indirectly shaped the design culture through dissemination of design information both within and outside Lithuania.

Similarly, through dissemination of design information, education and work in shaping the local material culture, VNIITE had a profound effect on both contemporaneous and following generations of Lithuanian

⁸⁹ *Tallinna Teaduslik Mööblitootmiskoondis Standard [Tallinn Scientific Furniture Factory Standard]* (Tallinn: Valgus, 1984).

⁹⁰ Estonian National Archive, ERA.R-1.17.2707, 8.

⁹¹ Jerlei, “Developing Design Discourse”.

⁹² Cubbin, “The Domestic Information Machine”; Karpova, *Comradely Objects*.

designers. Therefore, the heritage of VNIITE offices in Vilnius, as well as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, continues to shape our contemporary design through material traces, history of ideas, and the work of their former staff. It is only in recent years that designers who worked for VNIITE and its branches are beginning to be recognised for their forward-thinking and humanist approach in industrial design. In spite of the economic, cultural and ideological difficulties of working under Soviet occupation, they managed to create functional objects that improved the environment.

Conclusion

In the West, VNIITE was the best known design institution in the former Soviet Union. Yet, little is known about the regional practices of this vast establishment that was involved in various fields, from industrial design to design dissemination and research. This essay introduced one of the most Western branches of VNIITE, which was located in Vilnius. As archives demonstrate, the Vilnius office was one of the most privileged amongst the ten regional institutes, as suggested by the number of renowned international design journals the local staff was able to access. Overall, the success of Vilnius institute of VNIITE reflects the innovative approach of the Lithuanian and Baltic design scene at the time.

As this paper demonstrated, the practices of VNIITE branch in Vilnius were diverse. The products designed by local designers included technical machinery, consumer products and public interiors. The branch was active in research, in which different scientific fields were included. The staff of VNIITE gave lectures and translated foreign articles to disseminate design knowledge and to inform local audiences of the “Western world”. Unfortunately, many archival documents that would shed light on the practices and heritage of VNIITE Vilnius have perished. The staff of VNIITE was unable to compete with Western products due to poor production quality. However, this major design institute deserves credit in local design history for their innovation and humanist approach which modernised Lithuanian material culture.

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Santrauka

„Mes turėjome padaryti geriau negu užsienyje“: Sąjunginio techninės estetikos mokslinių tyrimų instituto (VNIITE) Sovietų Lietuvos Vilniaus filialas

Triin Jerlei

Reikšminiai žodžiai: dizainas, pramoninis dizainas, dizaino istorija, Lietuva, Sovietų Sąjunga, socializmas.

Šią paprastą frazę „Mes turėjome padaryti geriau negu užsienyje“ 2020 m. filmuojant „Dizaino fondo interviu“ ištare Ramutė Navasaitienė, VNIITE Vilniaus filiale dirbusi lietuvių dizainerė⁹³. Tai nebuvo pagražinimas: prieš kelis dešimtmečius jos ir kolegų darbus žinojo ir vertino tiek šalyje, tiek užsienyje. Įgyvendintų projektų skalė buvo plati: nuo Vilniaus autobusų stoties grafinio dizaino iki kasetinių grotuvų. Nors pristatant šiuos objektus, buvo pažymima, kad jie sukurti Sovietų Sąjungoje, o ne Lietuvoje, instituto veikla užima svarbią vietą lietuvių dizaino istorijoje.

Sąjunginis techninės estetikos mokslinių tyrimų institutas [straipsnyje vartojamas rusų kalbos trumpinys VNIITE, lietuviškai žinomi du pavadinimai ir jų trumpiniai: Sąjunginis, arba Visasąjunginis, techninės estetikos mokslinio tyrimo institutas (STEMTI, arba VTEMTI)] buvo įsteigtas 1962 m., o jo veikla apėmė produktų dizainą, dizaino mokslinius tyrimus, informacijos sklaidą ir kitas susijusias sritis. Pagrindinis VNIITE įkūrimo tikslas buvo Sovietų Sąjungos modernizavimas. Dėl šios priežasties institutas veikė ne tik Maskvoje, svarbų vaidmenį vaidino regioniniai filialai. 1966 m. buvo įkurta dešimt regioninių filialų: Leningrade (dab. Sankt Peterburgas, Vakarų Rusija), Kijeve ir Charkove (Ukraina), Minske (Baltarusija), Sverdlovske (dab. Jekaterinburgas, Sibiras), Chabarovske (Rusijos Tolimieji Rytai), Tbilisyje (Gruzija), Jerevane (Armėnija), Baku

⁹³ Labai dėkojame Ramutei Navasaitienei ir Teresei Adomaitienei už nuotraukas iš asmeninių archyvų, kuriomis iliustruotas šis tyrimas.

(Azerbaidžanas) ir Vilniuje (Lietuva). Kiekvieno iš jų veikla buvo orientuota į skirtingas sritis, priklausomai nuo vietinės pramonės, kultūros ir poreikių.

1973 m. instituto Vilniaus filiale iš viso dirbo 114 žmonių. Jo veikla aprėpė keturias skirtingas sritis, plačiai apibrėžtas kaip „kompleksiniai tyrimai“, „meninės konstrukcijos pramonėje“, „pramoniniai interjerai“ ir „mokslinė-techninė informacija ir propaganda“. Dvejais metais anksčiau, 1971 m., institute darbavosi 27 tyrėjai: keturiolika iš jų dirbo technikos ir įrengimų srityje, o trylika specializavosi sprendžiant *kulturno-bytovovo* (kultūrinio ir buitinio) sektoriaus klausimus. Pasak Ramutės Navasaitienės:

Mes kiekvieną darbą turėjome pristatyti su aiškinamaisiais raštais, kur įėjo ir ergonomika, ir psichologija, ir visos temos. <...> Turėdavome paruošti institutui, savo užsakovams, t. y. Maskvai. Tą visą tyrimo medžiagą įrišdavo, buvo kažkokia rišykla. Be to, buvo įvairių kalbų specialistės, kurios vertė iš žurnalų, informacijos filialas surinkdavo medžiagą iš Maskvos, iš visur ją rinkdavo, bet atsiųsdavo ir Maskva ką turi, ir tada mes analizuodavome.

VNIITE veikla neretai būdavo tarpdisciplininė, o darbuotojų išsilavinimas ir atliekamos funkcijos taip pat skyrėsi – dirbo įvairūs specialistai, pradedant pramoniniais dizaineriais ir baigiant dizaino tyrinėtojais bei mokslininkais. Vilniaus filiale ypatingas dėmesys buvo skiriamas tiksliajai inžinerijai, elektronikai ir urbanistinei aplinkai. Nors instituto pagrindinė būstinė buvo įsikūrusi Vilniuje, veikė ir mažesni padaliniai už Vilniaus ribų. Kaip matome iš turimos informacijos, VNIITE Vilniaus filialas užėmė privilegijuotą padėtį, palyginti su kitais instituto filialais. Pavyzdžiui, 1968 m. Vilniaus filialo dizaineriai galėjo skaityti 13 pavadinimų užsienietišų dizaino žurnalų, tuo tarpu gerokai didesnio Kijevo miesto filialas prenumeravo tik 6 pavadinimų žurnalus. Vienintelis labiau privilegijuotas filialas, prenumeravęs 16 pavadinimų užsienietišų žurnalų, buvo Leningrade.

Byrant Sovietų Sąjungai, VNIITE buvo tapęs didžiausiu pasaulyje dizaino mokslinių tyrimų institutu. Kaip ir visos didžiulės komunistinės imperijos, VNIITE instituto griūtis buvo staigi – šiame tyrime nepavyko nustatyti tikslaus laiko, kada jis liovėsi egzistavęs. Šiaip ar taip, dizaino

informacijos sklaidos, edukacijos ir vietinės materialiosios kultūros formavimo srityje VNIITE padarė didžiulį poveikį tuometinei ir ateinančioms lietuvių dizainerių kartoms. Todėl VNIITE Vilniaus filialo, kaip ir kitų buvusios Sovietų Sąjungos miestų filialų, įtaka šiuolaikiniam dizainui tęsiasi per instituto veiklos materialius pėdsakus, idėjų istoriją ir buvusių darbuotojų tolesnę veiklą. Nepaisant ekonominių, kultūrinių ir ideologinių sunkumų sovietų okupacijos metais, šio instituto dizaineriams pavyko sukurti funkcinių objektų, kurie prisidėjo prie gyvenamosios aplinkos gerinimo. Vilniaus VNIITE, kaip sąjunginės institucijos vietinio filialo, veikla gali kelti klausimų: ar jį derėtų laikyti „mažąja Maskva“ Lietuvos teritorijoje, ar drąsaus pasipriešinimo kultūrinei hegemonijai per vietines tradicijas išraiška? Šis straipsnis parodo, kad Sovietų Sąjungos periferijų dizainas nepaklūsta binariniam vertinimui. Vietiniame filiale dirbę dizaineriai turėjo paklusti VNIITE, kaip centrinės dizaino institucijos, taisyklėms ir prioritetams, tačiau tuo pat metu jie rėmėsi savo lietuviškomis tradicijomis bei išsilavinimu.

Pagrindiniai archyviniai šaltiniai, panaudoti rašant šį straipsnį, – tai VNIITE Vilniaus filialo metinės ataskaitos, kurios būdavo siunčiamos į centrinę būstinę Maskvoje. Jos yra saugomos Maskvoje, Rusijos valstybinio ekonomikos archyvo (RGAE) 281/P-688.3 fonde. Šiose metinėse ataskaitose galima rasti informacijos apie svarbiausius vykdytus tyrimų projektus, svarbiausius atliktus dizaino darbus, bendradarbiavimą su vietinėmis institucijomis ir VNIITE Vilniaus filialo darbuotojų užsienio publikacijų, straipsnių ir viešų paskaitų sąrašą nuo 1969 iki 1974 metų. Šią prieigą papildė „Dizaino fondo“ interviu su buvusiomis VNIITE Vilniaus filialo dizainerėmis Ramute Navasaitiene bei Terese Bernotaityte-Adomaitiene ir medžiaga, saugoma Kauno apskrities bibliotekos lietuviškuose rinkiniuose, konkrečiau – išlikusios VNIITE Vilniaus filialo publikacijos ir žurnalai *Tarybinė moteris* bei *Mokslas ir technika*. Siekiant išsiaiškinti platesniame kontekste, kokį vaidmenį šis institutas vaidino Baltijos šalyse kaip kultūriškai vientisame regione, glaudžiai bendradarbiausiam meno ir dizaino srityje, naudotasi Estijos nacionalinio archyvo, Latvijos nacionalinės bibliotekos ir Estijos nacionalinės bibliotekos medžiaga. Be to, norėdama pateikti kontekstinės informacijos ir palyginti su instituto centrine būstine, šio

tyrimo autorė rėmėsi įvairiais Vakarų ir rusų autorių straipsniais, daugiausia parašytais 1990–2020 m.

Iš archyvinės medžiagos matyti, kad Vilniaus filialas buvo vienas labiausiai privilegijuotų tarp dešimties regioninių instituto filialų. Jis vystė plačią veiklą – tarp vietinių dizainerių sukurtų produktų buvo techninė įranga, plataus vartojimo produktai ir vieši interjerai; vietinio filialo darbuotojai aktyviai vykdė tyrimus ir dizaino informacijos sklaidą. Deja, nemažai archyvinių dokumentų, kurie būtų galėję padėti plačiau atskleisti VNIITE Vilniaus filialo veiklą ir paveldą, neišliko. VNIITE dizaineriai nebuvo pajėgūs konkuruoti su vakarietiškais produktais dėl prastos produkcijos kokybės. Vis dėlto šis svarbus dizaino institutas nusipelno įvertinimo vietinėje dizaino istorijoje dėl savo novatoriško ir humanistinio požiūrio, kuris prisidėjo prie Lietuvos materialiosios kultūros modernizavimo.