DESIGN AS A NEW ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE ON THE BALKANS: ISSUES ON LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

Gordana Vrenkoska

Abstract: Design as a new academic discipline in most of the countries on the Balkan peninsula, derived from the traditions of fine and applied arts, faces challenges in its development lacking a broader social recognition. The new post-communist political and economical situation, characterized by newborn countries, shaken national economies, loud arrival of global brands and birth of new private initiatives, established some new market rules to adapt to. The needs for design and application of its processes and products are dictated mostly by international companies and private sector. But the newly created or transformed countries need design to build their national identities and increase competitiveness on economical and cultural levels. Without a solid infrastructure supported by Governments, no assurance in standards and quality of design practices can be achieved. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of design infrastructures in particular Balkan countries with regional perspectives on leadership and education strategies in this new academic field on the Balkans.

Keywords: Design Infrastructures, Design Leadership, Design Education, National Design Strategy, Competitiveness.

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The history of Design as a new academic discipline in the countries of the Balkan peninsula is relatively short. Its infrastructures (higher education, associations, governmental institutions or private practices) are developing slowly, with their history and tradition predominantly grounded in fine arts and applied arts education and practice. The political and economical turbulences after 1990, especially in ex-Yugoslav countries, have contributed to slow down the process of development and have weakened the regional relationships in the field, following fragmentation of SFRJ into new states and smaller markets. But being part of the new global market economy has brought up some new market rules and an has increased the need for competitiveness. A need for higher design culture in all social spheres becomes evident. We may assume that Balkan countries need the systematic approach of design\(^2\) to organize, improve and promote their societies.

Overall, the governments are slow in recognizing design as powerful tool for social and economical growth. Thus, initiatives come mostly from abroad or from the local private sector. Apart from that, there is a need for strengthening the weakened regional relationships as design networks to share ideas and experiences are still missing. The first regional debates around national design infrastructures\(^3\) were held for the first time at the Creative Collaboration conference in Istanbul November 2007, under patronage of the British Council (group session around Issue #6 “Design scenes in different countries in the region”; group session around Issue #42 “Design Leadership, Design Education”.)

This paper outlines and reflects some of main issues on design leadership and education in the Balkan countries. The study is conducted by the author through a secondary research of the national design infrastructures and a focus group session (Issue #42 of the Conference), held by her initiative with participants from

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\(^{2}\) Design means plan, drawing, pattern, intention, project

\(^{3}\) To the best of author’s knowledge
several Balkan countries underlying the importance of regional design networks to help improve national design infrastructures.

**Design as academic discipline**

An academic discipline, or field of study, is a branch of knowledge which is taught or researched at the college or university level. The framework for such discipline is defined by elements such as community of scholars, a tradition of inquiry, a mode of inquiry, requirements for new knowledge and networks of communication. An academic level of a field of knowledge is fundamental for defining and maintaining standards of practice; reward and stratification systems and mechanisms for social control.

Design as a problem solving activity dealing with form, but also with function, communication and experience is an interdisciplinary field of practice. Traditionally, it is perceived as artistic activity for aesthetical treatment of visible parts of objects and products (applied art, commercial art). Design as we know today has evolved from a product-oriented activity of the Industrial era to a process-oriented activity in the new IT era, seeing “convergence of design and management”. The design concepts of creativity, coordination, communication are a good match for innovation, organization and information concepts of management practices. Problem solving is applied to both concepts. This powerful union of concepts becomes strategically important equally for improving businesses and changing societies.

Higher education in design followed Industrial Revolution in England and started in 1837 with the establishment of Royal College of Art in London. Other design schools of a significant historical importance are Bauhaus in Germany (1919-1933), Central School of Art & Design in England (est. 1854) and Art Institute of Chicago, USA (est. cca. 1880).

The recent years show development of Western studies in Design Leadership which explore the potential of design as a transformative force in business and society by examining the intersection of leadership practice with design strategy. Designers now need to be prepared to take on larger strategic responsibility. “Design is a process of creative thinking and innovative action. Leadership based on systems thinking and design action is thus about how people are caused to stand together through an intentional process of creativity and innovation.”

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4 As defined in Encyclopedia
6 As stated in the course description of MA Design Leadership Studies, Cornell University College of Human Ecology, Department of Design and Environmental Analysis
7 Next Design Leadership Institute
8 Harold Nelson, President of Advanced Design Institute, “Leadership by Design; Praxis of Intention”
History and Overview of design infrastructures in several Balkan countries:
Highlights of regional differences and similarities

Design infrastructure in Slovenia

Slovenia, as the most developed economy of the former Yugoslav republics, reached the European level of practicing architecture, graphic and industrial design somewhere in the Fifties. Most of the professionals were architects-turned-designers, who tried and didn’t succeed to establish design as academic minor in the sixties. The standards of producing excellent design disappeared with the rise of advertising in the Eighties. Graphic design, as in all other Balkan countries, enters a decade of increased amateurism due to the widespread use of personal computers. The discipline becomes totally overtaken by the aggressive advertising sector, which influences the rewarding system mostly through the international advertising festival Golden Drum in Portorose. A branch of postmodern graphic design develops opposite to the advertising stream: the avanguarde group NSK Collective has created one of the most exciting art/design projects in the region: the NSK state, a state in time, without territory and national borders, a sort of "spiritual, virtual state" with designed national identity and passports.

Design theory is insufficiently developed but magazines on commercial design are flourishing.

As for education, Department of Design was established only in 1984 at the Academy of Fine Art in Ljubljana. Five generations of graduates in graphic and industrial design are trying to find their place in the Slovene industry. Still there are paradoxes: Slovene young product designers export their concepts to Italy while industrial giants like Gorenje are importing Ora-ito’s or Pininfarina’s for their product designs.

Figure 1. Gorenje Mini Kitchen. Design: Tina Jerabek
Source: http://www.go-design.si/

9 Members are the art group IRWIN and the music attraction Laibach among others
BIO – Biennial of Industrial Design was founded in 1964, “taking over the task of mediating between Western European industry (and design) and the Eastern European cultural region (and market)”\(^\text{10}\).

The institution whose main task is to promote design and architecture is the Architecture Museum of Ljubljana, founded in 1972 and open to the public since 1974.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 2.**

![Image](image2.png)

**Figure 3**

1. New Collectivism

*NSK Post Office* (in centralpost office in Ljubljana), 1995

NSK Passport

2. IRWIN

In collaboration with Croatian Army

*NSK Garda Zagreb*


Photo: Igor Andjelić

Source: IRWIN Photo Archives

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**Design infrastructure in Croatia**

Croatian authorities have been somewhat ahead in recognizing design as an essential tool for developing the new country, comparing to the other governments in the region. In Croatia design is perceived as artistic activity and economical weapon for competitiveness at the same time. Domestic products are improving in quality and appearance thanks to design. There are several governmental bodies with design on their agenda: Design Center at the Croatian Chamber of Economy, Center for Product Development, State Intellectual Property Office of the Republic of Croatia, ULUPUH – Croatian Association of Artists of Applied Arts and Croatian Society of Designers (partly state-funded), which runs the National Design Strategy, a pioneering leadership project in the region.

\(^{10}\) [http://www.culturalprofiles.net/slovenia/Directories/Slovenia_Cultural_Profile/-8285.html](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/slovenia/Directories/Slovenia_Cultural_Profile/-8285.html)
Croatia’s understanding of design as a tool for leadership and social change is clearly envisioned in the mission of the Croatian Design Center (HDC). “Design in its basic definition is a project, a draft, a plan. Republic of Croatia, as a brand new state after separating from Yugoslavia is also a project, a draft, a plan. The sameness in their definition is a key for understanding the needs for design in the new state.”11 Here we can sense the orientation of Croatian design leadership towards building a strong national identity.

“You have a brand new country, a brand new market, totally unspoiled and authentic. I feel a real sense of responsibility because I know that we’re the ones creating the visual culture there; it’s us who are supposed to do something.”12

The higher education in the field has been affected by the politics of the central Yugoslav apparatus, resulting in closure of the Academy of Applied Arts in 1954. The School of Design opened in 1989 at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Architecture. Split University offers studies in Visual Communication and Interaction Design. Zagreb used to be the Yugoslav center for education of Fashion Industry professionals, offering studies in Fashion Design at the Faculty of Textile Technology. Design Theory is well developed, having its roots in the Sixties and continuing until today.

The biennial Exhibition of Croatian Design to showcase the best works in graphic, industrial and fashion design is being organized since 1999.

![Figure 4](image1.png)  ![Figure 5](image2.png)

4, 5 Croatian Packaging Design: Ronhill Cigarettes; Ex Albis Olive Oil. Design: Bruketa-Zinic
Source: Bruketa-Zinic

National campaign “Originally Croatian”. “Produce and buy quality” is the call for action
Source: http://www2.hgk.hr/kupujmo06/plan_akcije.asp

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11 Boris Ljubicic, President of the Croatian Design Society (HDD)
Design infrastructure in Serbia

Applied Arts have quite long tradition in Serbia with their roots in handcrafts. Academy of Applied Arts, as part of the University of the Arts was established in 1948, to become Faculty of Applied Arts in 1973. This school had long been “the YU’s elitist place” with its exclusive programs in Scenery and Costume Design. Similarly to the other surrounding countries, post-communism in the Nineties brought international brands to dictate the market rules in advertising and graphic design.

After years of isolation and embargo, Belgrade in 21st century attempts to bring back its glory of the Seventies’ cultural festivals and fairs. Belgrade Design Week, established in 2006 is the only international design festival on the Balkans. Conference and exhibitions bring star designers from all over the world and various design fields. One of the most interesting events at the BDW is the Ghost project. This exhibition simultaneously “celebrates the unfailing enthusiasm and ideas of domestic young creatives and criticizes the lack of symbiotic relationship between designers and industry in our country”13. In addition, organizers argue that virtually there’s no trace of industrial design in their country.


Design infrastructure in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a long tradition of the fine and applied art education. Stefan Serezliev, Bulgarian Graphic Designer, Researcher and Lecturer has identified the following historical periods: 1891-1937: World Art Influence, first Higher Institute of fine Arts, Sofia, Bulgaria, 1st and 2nd World Wars; 1945-1987: Political (socialism) influence; State economy; Political Myths; Portfolio a broad educational programs, National Academy of Arts; 1989-2007: New Europe, New Bulgarian University, New World, New Design Goals, New Design Tools, New Myths; 2007 New Marketing and Political Situation, New social and cultural needs, New Design Responsibilities, X-Cultural Design, New Horizon. Non-professional computer freelancers and aggressive advertising visual landscape are also known for this market. Still, there are exhibitions, local and international awards, two annual advertising festivals (with Graphic Design and Visual Communication sections), international biennale of stage poster.

Bulgaria is stronger in industrial and packaging design, having more developed industry and education in industrial design (National Academy of Arts).

Design infrastructure in Macedonia

Historically, traditional arts have always been the centered creative pillar in the country. Design is a relatively new “term” in the Macedonian creative vocabulary. The discipline is slowly emerging from the Traditional and Applied Arts. While hand crafts have a long tradition in the region, design in the context of mass-production still remains a developing category, with exception of fashion before 1990. After gaining independence in 1991 up till now, the state authorities haven’t clearly recognized design as a discipline itself yet, so there’s no high education in design at the state universities, nor centers or other design institutions. The newer generation of designers is mostly educated abroad (UK, Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria). The educational private sector is being faster in recognizing design as opportunity: the first Faculty of Art & Design is founded in 2006, as part of the private European University R.M (covering Graphic Design, Fashion Design and Interior Design). The Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (vehicles) in Skopje and Faculty of Architecture are the only state-owned schools touching design at some points. The Faculty of Fine Arts was established in 1980 with a strong orientation towards traditional media. They have Graphic Design, Fashion Design, Hand-Made Paper, Jewelry and Glassware only as electives in their curriculum.

The Society of Applied Arts was founded in 1950, but is no longer active since. Macedonian Design Center and Macedonian Design Council have been registered recently on a private initiative as NGO’s, but still haven’t started with

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some activities. Macedonian Fashion Formation is being there for few years without having a fruitful link with the Macedonian textile industry.

Design theory and history remains completely undertreated so far. No institution has done a systematic research and data collections for domestic design achievements neither in graphic or fashion design. Art museums and galleries are mainly concerned with traditional and contemporary art, since there are no curators specialized in design.

Industrial design and information design are underdeveloped. The Government in power heavily uses advertising for self promotion and promoting campaigns for buying Macedonian products, instead of investing in on infrastructural level: high-quality domestic products, good public services, efficient signage and information systems, education and solid links between the business sector and professional designers.

Amateurism is very much present in all areas of design in Macedonia, especially in graphic design and fashion design. It will take some time to feel the benefits of the infusion of the newly educated designers in the society.

8. Made in Macedonia Logo, national campaign for buying domestic products
   Source: McCann Erickson Skopje Archives
   Source: Aleksandar Noshpal

Figure 10: Alkaloid’s Good Nature Organic & Fruit Teas. Design: ZIP & ZAP Communications.
   Source: ZIP & ZAP Communications Photo Archives
Design infrastructure in Albania

Design infrastructure in Albanian is very poor. The school of Art, established in 1960, transforms into Faculty of Figurative Art in 1991 with only two departments: Painting and Sculpture. Having being isolated for years, Albania is opening for Western influences only recently. Design resources are mostly imported from abroad and surrounding countries: Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece. As tourism is a good economical potential for Albania, design is already needed for developing national promotional strategy and improving public services.

Figure 11: Logo of Albanian Tourism
Source: www.albaniantourism.com

In a quest for some input by the Regional Design Leaders

Summary Report from the focus group session around Issue #42
“DESIGN LEADERSHIP, DESIGN EDUCATION” Creative Collaboration Conference Istanbul 2007

Convener and mediator: Gordana Vrencoska, Artist, Designer, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Art and Design, European University, R. of Macedonia.

Participants: Ivica Mitrovic, MsC, Visual Communications Design Dept., Split University; Davor Bruketa, Graphic Designer and Co-Director, Bruketa-Zinic; Rosana Besednik, British Council Croatia; Borce Nikolovski, British Council Macedonia; Iskra Geshoska, Executive Director of Tocka Cultural Center Skopje; Biljana Tanurovska, Lokomotiva Centre for New Initiatives in Arts and Culture, R. of Macedonia; Tsveta Andreeva, EU Integration Department, Ministry of Culture Bulgaria; Beatrice Pembroke, Sorrel Hershonberg, British Council UK; Noam Toran, Royal College of Art UK; Enton Jubani, Executive Director of Mania Card Smart Albania; Andreas Angelidakis, Architect, Greece; Rudolph Greger, Board Member, Design Austria.

Held in Istanbul, November 2007
Discussion:

The discussion was initiated to tackle issues on design leadership and design education experiences across Europe. Having in mind that most of the participants are coming from the Balkan region and ex-Yugoslav countries, the discussion took more “regional” course with inputs from the Western experiences coming from the UK and Austria.

The brief agenda set up by the convener Gordana Vrencoska was around several points:
1. Strategic approach in design: national agendas & national benefits
2. Cultural influence: changing perceptions & how do we create & support a groundbreaking design?
3. Designer as artist and social critique?
4. Design education for everyone: basic design, lateral thinking, creative techniques in primary education
5. Design education for design students: should we educate designers as specialists or globalists? To what extent we apply the interdisciplinary approach as teachers?

A common starting point at the beginning of the session was that a higher level of design culture is needed in the region. There are no developed systems of infrastructure within new Southeast countries – no associations, councils, festivals, etc. Vrencoska informed on the situation in Macedonia and the fact that the first design college established in Macedonia only the last year.

Delegates from Croatia gave a picture on the Croatian design education and the national design strategy. In their opinion, the state-owned design college in Zagreb is overinfluenced by old-fashioned teachers who are trained in fine-arts and not in touch with contemporary design practices. They argue some of the best designers are coming from a non-design educational background. The college in Split where Mitrovic teaches are planning to open a course in Design for Interactions. They are struggling to make people understand what this discipline is all about. Regarding the national design strategy, HDC, HDD and other experts worked together to develop and implement it. Delegates from the other countries expressed interest to use the Croatian experiences and apply similar concepts to their own countries.

Design Austria was presented by Rudolph Greger. There are 9.000 designers in Austria but only 1.000 are members of DA. DA started the first Design Week in Vienna this year. DA runs a national prize in Product Design and Graphic Design.

Most of the participants think that international awards and star-designers are good tool for promoting design for a wider audience. Davor Bruketa is a good example - he has got a national recognition after he won a number of international awards.

There was a discussion on new forms of design practice such as experience design raised by Borce Nikolovski. Ivica and Noam gave their explanations on what this discipline can cover.
Entoni Jubani gave info on the unfavorable situation with infrastructure in Albania. There is no design department at the Academy of Arts in Tirana. He discussed private initiatives and mentioned “smart cards” advertisement, through which they offer carte blanche competition for students.

Tsveta informed that the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture does not recognize and support design as a separate discipline. There are national awards in architecture but not in design.

Andreas has defined design practice in Greece as “Design elitism”. People have to be rich in order to practice or study design. Design is classified within polytechnics and is not part of university education.

Macedonians Iskra, Biljana and Gordana agreed that designers in Macedonia should be much more self-motivated with more initiatives. Sorrel explained that undergraduate design education in the UK is going more “conceptual” rather than material, or basic skill based. For the colleges is cheaper not to run classical workshops and this changes the perceptions and knowledge students get out of design education.

Noam gave an overview on the concept of teaching at Royal College of Art in London. Teachers propose themes which they “sell” to students. If you don’t convince any student you are ruled out of the College. Under this thematic teaching students use design to address issues or use design as medium to produce conceptual or artistic work.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:**

The future development of infrastructure and regional collaboration should be focused on:

- Sharing of local practices in developing and designing national design strategies
- Private initiatives and lobbying to raise awareness at national institutions
- Quest for regional design school where the best 10 teachers from the region will gather
- Regional designers workshop (a weekly structure)
- Regional job market (using advantages of similar languages, mentality, standard)
- Regional touring exhibitions of students work
- Web based forum of knowledge and information
- Regional regular meeting of designers supported by events (once a month or twice a year) – more mobile communication
- Networking and cooperation on formal but also on informal level (i.e. visits, projects, guest lectures etc.)
- Curriculum development conference with practitioners from the region and the UK
- A possibility of defining a “Tutor market” which will take up on a leading role in connecting professionals of the surrounding countries.
Summary

Design is on the way of establishing itself as a new academic discipline on
the Balkans. Juggling between the old-fashioned traditional art practice and the
amateurism of the marketing guerilla, design should design its own design road. To
overcome the problems of social recognition and providing sufficient level of
professional practice, there is a need for solid infrastructure: higher education,
active design associations, centers and councils supported by the Governments;
museums and galleries to promote design; design conferences and awards,
specialized media and design theory. In order to achieve this, All Balkan countries
should undertake systematic approach and produce a national design strategy by all
relevant bodies as in Croatia. Private initiatives (as with the private EURM Faculty
of Art & Design in R. of Macedonia) and political lobbying are necessary to boost
awareness with national authorities. Regional network and cooperation is very
important to share experiences and information, therefore all efforts should be put
for organizing regional workshops and meetings. Education is of a crucial
importance for development of design in the Balkans, therefore regional exchange,
educational design projects and curriculum development conferences should be put
on top of the list of strategic issues to face in the following years.

The strategic potential of design as a transformative force in business and
society is important for building a competitive advantage of Balkan countries. As
soon as their Governments help establish design infrastructures for a better practice,
the results may be evident within a short period of time.

Заключок

Дизајнот како посебна академска дисциплина е на патот кон своето
етаблирање на Балканот. Растргнат помеѓу старомодните традиционални
уметнички практики и аматеризмот на маркетиншката герила, дизайнот треба
da си ја дизајнира сопствената патека. За надминување на проблемите со
општественото признание и обезбедување на завидно ниво на професионална
практика, потребна е солидно изградена инфраструктура: високо образование,
активни дизајн здруженија, центри и совети подржани од Владите; музеи и
gалерии за промовирање на дизайнот; конференции и натпревари за дизајн;
специјализирани магазини и дизайн теорија. За да се постигне сето ова, сите
балкански земји треба да заземат систематски пристап со национална
стратегија за дизайн подржана од сите релевантни фактори, како во Хрватска.
Приватните иницијативи (како приватниот Факултет за арт и дизайн при
ЕУРМ, Македонија) и политичкото лобирање се неопходни за да се зголеми
свесноста кај државните авторитети. Регионалните мрежи и соработка се
многу важни за размена на искуства и информации, па затоа треба да се
вложить напори за организирање на регионални работилници и средби.
Образованието е клучно во развојот на дизајнот на Балканот, па регионалната
размена, заедничките образовни проекти и конференции за развој на
студиските програми треба да бидат ставени на врвот на листата со стратегии за следните години.

Стратешкиот потенцијал на дизајнот како трансформаторска сила во бизнисот и општеството е значаен фактор во создавањето на конкурентската предност на Балканските земји. Кога нивните Влади ќе ги етаблираат инфраструктурите за поквалитетна практика, резултатите можат набрзо да станат видливи.

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