



# **Booth Bloc**

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE UBIOUITOUS K67 KIOSK

When somebody takes the tram in Minsk, eats a hamburger in Bratislava, makes a couple of photocopies in Belgrade, visits a relative in the state hospital of Ljubljana, parks their car in Zagreb, buys flowers in Sarajevo, participates in the Christmas lottery in Struga, goes sailing on the Croatian coast, eats a döner kebab in Dresden ... this person is definitely travelling in Eastern Europe. But whatever people are doing, there is a good chance it is done in front of or inside a small coloured plastic booth with curved edges. The K67 klosk is one of the objects that link the urban spaces of the region.

Text by Helge Kühnel.

#### THE ORIGINAL DESIGN

The Slovenian architect and designer Sasa J. Mächtig introduced the K67 design in 1966. Its system was based on poly-fibre reinforced modules, which could be used as single units or combined to form larger configurations, and its function was inherently flexible. Reflecting a number of design projects of the period that were experimenting with mobile and modular structures - like the Futuro House (1968) by Matti Suuronen - the fact that it was mass produced sets it apart. The cubicle and modular K67 was also a manifestation of structuralist tendencies in architecture, such as Aldo van Eyck's orphanage in Amsterdam (1958-60) or Herman Hertzbergers Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn (1968-72). Although it is the metabolist Kisho Kurokawa who comes closest to Mächtig's ideas, with his Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo (1970-72) icorporating prefabricated dwelling cubes.

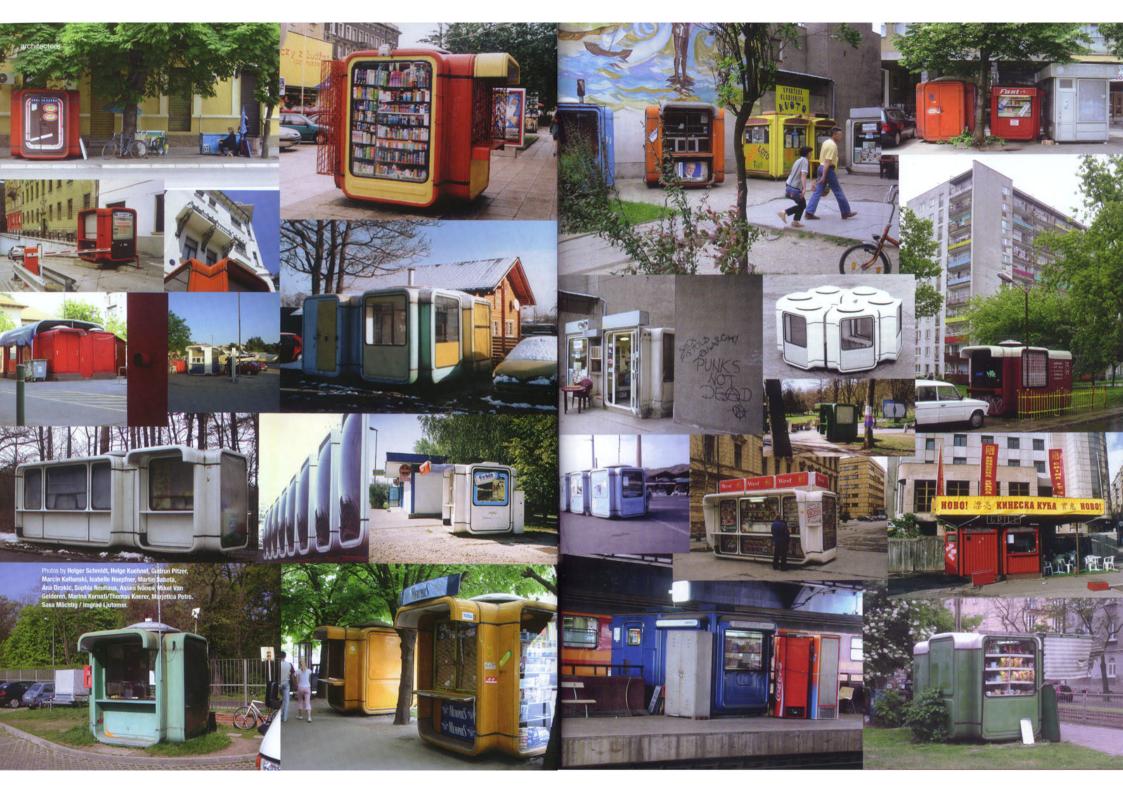
After being patented in 1967, K67 was prepared for mass production in 1968, with the first prototypes exhibited in the Slovenia provincial town of Ljutomer. In April 1970 K67 was featured in an English design magazine article 'Low Life From the Streets', and as a consequence the Museum of Modern Art in New York included it in its collection of 20th century design. Production of the K67 was only stopped in the early Nineties by Imgrad Ljutomer as a result of radical changes in the Slovenian economical system.

#### THE SPREAD

While the distribution of certain street furniture is largely limited to a local or regional scale, the K67 was widely exported abroad. Using clever marketing strategies the K67 was sold in large quantities not only to the countries of former Yugoslavia, but also to the COMECON countries and other continents (Japan and New Zealand). And due to the fact that the K67 principle has been copied several times by other companies (e.g. by Treska, Macedonia), K67 came to embody Eastern European kiosk culture.

The successful spread of a specific design was also positively influenced by the system of united socialistic planned economies that operated in the Eastern Bloc countries. Between 1949 and 1990 Europe

Facing page: Wroclaw, Poland Photo: Tim Zuemendorf.
This page: Source: Publicplan.









Top: Futuro House, 1968,

Matti Suuronen.
Middie: Centraal Beheer, Apeldoorn.
1968-1972 © Herman Hertzberger?
Above: © Nagakin Capsule Tower,
1970-1972, Tokyo.

existed as an ideological and political division, from east to west. In the Yugoslavian Republic and the COMECON nations a single, standard product was generally produced for a bigger unity (like a country), such as the allied socialist countries. In that sense a planned economy unlike the free market economy was able to promote a specific design. As a unified functional object K67 fits perfectly a system where a single solution could serve multiple needs. Therefore the K67 form - both the original design and its clones - is a significant object in the urban space of the former planned economies of Eastern Europe. It inhabits the cities as newspaper kiosks, parking-attendant booths, copy shops, market stalls, shelters, chip shops, student cafes or lottery stands, easily visible and accessible, in different colours and combinations. The unified functional design of the units enables them to fit almost any location and its context, as well as numerous, diverse functions.

## INDICATOR OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMICAL CHANGE

A kiosk provides space for activities that do not claim a permanent place in our built environment. This could be for a number of reasons, for example the activity or function cannot economically afford a fixed location, or is temporary in nature and does not demand permanent accommodation. While in other cases the built environment is not able to take over the infrastructural task due to war damage or the political and ideological situation is an obstacle to proper establishment. By using kiosk units even private initiatives could fit into the pattern of a socialistic unified society. In that sense the K67's ability to host small private businesses can be seen as a forerunner of the market economy, long before the beginning of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the late 1980s.

#### **URBAN LINKING OBJECT**

During the last decade many Eastern European countries have joined Western economic and political structures. New national states have been formed, as former borders were eradicated. Some countries converted rapidly into Western-orientated democracies while others are still governed by autocrat leaders. All this has provoked a rapid change in the (common) identity of Eastern Europe, with many witnesses of eastern design disappearing from daily life, from the shops, the built environment and public space. For many people they embodied the negative aspects of the socialist model of society, and after 45 years the new freedom of choice encouraged many clients - most understandably - to turn away from the unitary and uniform. While some products and designs survived due to the massive support of the Eastern European population (e.g. the 'Ampelmännchen' in Eastern Germany), others could only survive in the Western market system through a radical renewal. The few products that endured without being fundamentally altered were smart, timeless solutions. Within this context the K67 becomes one of the few remaining visible signs of a vanished social union and an important linking element in Eastern European public spaces.

### **REVALUATION AND NEW CONSCIOUSNESS**

However the K67 kiosks are in danger of disappearing from the public stage and talk of vanished or vandalised kiosks confirm this worry. But there is also a sense of re-evaluation evolving, with a number of recent art projects making use of the K67 units. The Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrc combined K67 units with a South American 'palafita' for her installation 'Next Stop Kiosk', which was shown in the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana and Magnus Bärtås, a Swedish artist, arranges K67's in front of a black background in his photographic series 'Satellites'. And a few years ago the The Wild City project by Ana Dzokic, Milica Topalovic, Marc Neelen and Ivan Kucina documented the important role of the kiosks in the former Yuqoslavia for the re-establishment of facilities in the war-destroyed area.

The project 'K67 - The Kiosk Shots', initiated by Publicplan Amsterdam, wants to show the individual variety and diversity this design object brings to the public spaces of Eastern Europe. By collecting as many K67 images as possible, categorising them and locating them on the map of Europe, the project intends to draw an outline of the eastern countries and to document city spaces in Eastern Europe. On a website the kiosks, which are physically spread out over the whole of Eastern Europe, are, at least virtually, brought together, making links visible between the most diverse urban spaces.

K67 is a significant component in the complex history and identity of the Eastern European countries, and with many of these countries joining the EU it also becomes part of a wider, common European history. And as travelling from one Eastern European metropolitan area to another is becoming easier and faster, the urban network of K67 units will become increasingly perceptible. #

link: www.publicplan.com/k67

