

(KCRW)**DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE****L.A. Designer: A “Collective” Creates “Competing Utopias”**

By Frances Anderton

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“The Cold War was fought not just with guns, but also with art, design, and culture. Who would formulate the vision for the future of humanity?”

That’s the question being asked by six LA curators and filmmakers attached to the Culver City-based Wende Museum and Archive of the Cold War and the Neutra VDL House in Silver Lake who have created an exhibit that explores Modernity in the Cold War-era East and West and asks, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, how were they different and how were they similar?

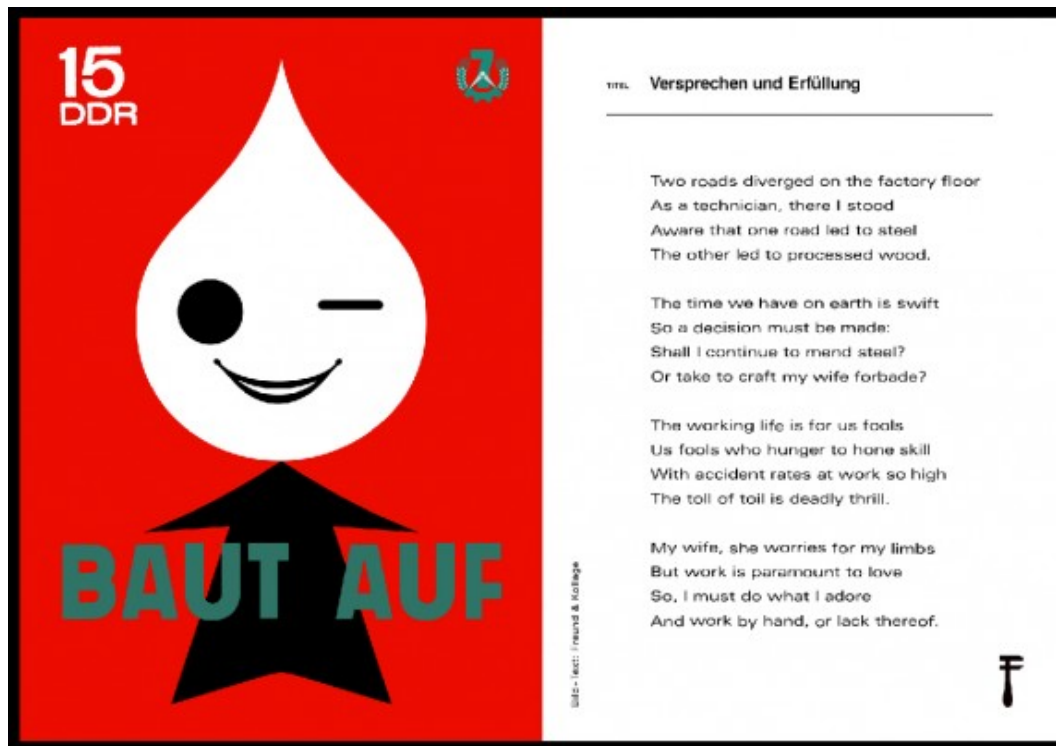
The team includes Justinian Jampol, Executive Director and Founder of the fascinating Wende Museum, the Wende’s Patrick Mansfield and Donna Stein, filmmaker Bill Ferehawk, multimedia designer David Hartwell and Sarah Lorenzen, architecture professor and director of the Neutra VDL House (all except Stein are shown, from left to right, in the above photo by David Hartwell).

Taking “a cue from the Eastern collective model,” together they furnished the Neutra house, a prime example of Western modernism, with “optimistic” objects — appliances, furniture, toys — from Eastern

Bloc countries provided by the Wende Museum. These were placed in settings overlaid with fictional narratives about the users of those objects, for instance a “bureaucrat” and an East German family.

They describe their installation, opening this weekend, as a “mash-up” in the “most provocative sense of that word” that they hope will tell a different, perhaps more cheerful, story about East German society, even as the exhibit acknowledges the presence of the Stasi.

DnA spoke with the comrades about how the exhibit came about, how communist East Germany and the capitalist U.S. tried to create a new way of life through Modern designs that were often strikingly similar, and how they were united by their belief in. . . plastic.



One of six postcards by artists Alexei and Katya Tylevich. The cards will be given to visitors.

DnA: How did this show come about?

Sarah – Bill was the connection between VDL and the Wende. He was also largely responsible for the Graham Foundation grant, which made it possible to do the exhibit. When we finally all met to discuss how to approach the collaboration it was immediately clear that we would be able to work together. There was a good dose of irreverence towards the subject, which gave us a lot of freedom. The concept fell into place rather quickly. First thing we decided was that this should be an experimental art installation and not a didactic exhibit. Once we determined that there would be a narrative component to the exhibit we decided to involve an artist in writing short stories to accompany the installation. Katya and Alexei Tylevich were the perfect choice given that the subject matter and approach to their artwork is completely in line with what we were planning.

DnA: Is the “competing Utopia” specifically East German or an amalgam of Eastern block design?

Patrick – The installation mirrors the Wende’s larger collection in that a majority of the objects come from East Germany with a few pieces coming from other East Bloc countries, such as Hungary, Romania and the USSR.

DnA: What designers or designs produced in the Cold War in Eastern Germany did you especially like?

Patrick – Plastics. The availability of plastic as a design material in the 1960s gave way to many exceptional designs. Used as a multifunctional material, plastics in the GDR were crafted for durability and seen as examples of the technologically progressive society. Featured in this installation are a variety of chairs, namely the Garden Egg chair (designed by Peter Ghyczy in West Germany but mass produced in East Germany) which excites the eye and entices you to take a seat.

Sarah – The installation is called *Competing Utopias* to underscore that both East and West were driven by the desire for a new way of life. And that to some extent utopia could be manufactured by means of new forms and materials. Had Benjamin Braddock (*The Graduate*) lived in East Berlin instead of Los Angeles he would have still been told “One Word: Plastics.”



DnA: A Cal Poly Pomona article writes that “countless objects and products created under communist regimes during the Cold War could be described as optimistic, poppy and even amusing. They also had many similarities to those produced in the United States.” Is that true and if so, what produced this optimism in view of the hardships in communist countries?

David – Communism was officially optimistic. Citizens were told, in both the official narrative and in the objects produced, that life would be better under communism. That is the reason I used the boy cosmonaut from the Wende collection in the design of the poster for the exhibit. The pieces used in the

installation, objects that were mass-produced in state-owned factories, were authorized by the state and needed to represent the ideal. In much of what we have on display we can see that the ideal was modernity. Of course there was a dark side. The East backed up this idealism with the threat of real violence. The exhibit points to this threat by inserting surveillance equipment alongside these poppy artifacts. It is also the case that the West followed a similar trajectory in designing surveillance technology. Walking through the exhibit visitors may wonder if the consumers of this optimism gain as much pleasure from these objects as their image suggests.

Sarah – East versus West was a game of one-upmanship. Spy versus Spy published by MAD magazine in the 1960's perfectly captured this competition.

DnA: Did East Germany have counterparts to Eames, Neutra, etc. in terms of designers forging an aesthetic for the Cold War period, and did the US and Eastern bloc countries share influences, despite the freeze on communications between the countries?

Patrick – On both sides of the Iron Curtain there was the influence of political and ideological agendas on interior design. East and West both strived to prove that their model for living was the most ideal for the individual, and therefore society. From Bauhaus style to the boom of plastics in every-day life, the constant focus was on melding form with function and using the domestic space and the objects that inhabited it as a weapon in the Cold War.

DnA: Tell us about the thinking behind the installation and who did what in terms of the design? Or, if you literally co-created it, how did you arrive at the choices you made?

Sarah – The exhibit was literally co-designed. In some cases we were all sitting together collectively making decisions. In other cases we would individually come up with a story or setting and another member of the team would generate a response to the situation that was created. There is an exquisite corpse approach to the entire exhibit. This is certainly true of the accompanying postcards created by Katya and Alexei – their response is based on one sentence scenarios that we gave them, which they were told to riff on as they saw fit.



DnA: Bill Ferehawk says you all “took a cue from the eastern collective model in designing this installation.” Can you elaborate on that? Clearly it’s very different to be cooperating on a shared passion-art project than working for the glory of the state in a collectivist factory.

Bill - Right from the start this was meant to be a collaborative project, because each time we met, instead of getting further apart we became more aligned. And the project just kept getting stronger. As Sarah mentioned, there was an exquisite corpse element to the process. We just began to riff off of each other’s ideas. If I were to side one way or the other, I would say that our process was more Eastern-collective than Western-celebrity.

DnA: You say your “family” includes pilot dad, housewife mom and children. I was under the impression that East German mothers worked and left children with state-provided childcare, unlike Cold War-era moms in the US or West Germany. Is your fictional family a privileged one?

Justin – Communist East Germany officially supported progressive notions of gender roles and opportunities. And while East German mothers represented a greater segment of the work force than did mothers in West Germany, there was a significant gap between policy and the reality. The traditional family model was prevalent in both the East and the West. Despite outward proclamations and the very real threat of repression in the East, cultural behavior in East and West was more similar than it was different.

DnA: Did you try to create a “model” interior or one that might have typically existed?

Sarah – The fictional narratives represented in each area of the house are not meant to be cohesive; they represent snippets of a larger multivalent story. There are at least six scenes represented: a

bureaucrats waiting room (I described this as the East German version of the DWP), an office, a well-appointed house, an urban rooftop garden, a bohemian lounge, and a surveillance room. The installation implies connections between these settings (and stories), but there is no singular reading for the whole.



DnA: Did everybody in the GDR have access to the art and artifacts you are displaying? Or were most homes much more basic?

Justin – Certainly not, though most Americans also not did not have access to a Neutra-designed home. The materials from both East and West were for the privileged, some more than others. Fundamentally, every society, including communist societies, ironically, has materials that are more inaccessible than others. And yet, in both cases, both American and East Bloc, the design objective was to produce consumer objects that were accessible, affordable, and well-made, even if the systems did not always achieve that lofty goal.

DnA: To what extent were emigre Modernists like Neutra intrigued by the social ideals of socialism? (Chavez Ravine?)

Sarah – I cannot say if Neutra subscribed to Socialism, but he certainly was interested in improving ordinary people's lives and getting them to embrace change. That said this experimental installation is not about Neutra per se. The VDL House is a stand in for western utopian ideals, and serves as the counterpoint to the every day household objects from the east

DnA: Is there a misplaced nostalgia for the Cold War period now one can one enjoy its artifacts separate from its dark side?

Bill – Everyone will bring their baggage of the Cold War with them to the installation, be from it East, from the West, or both. By presenting architecture and design outside of their conventional contexts, the installation aims to disarm expectations. Stark black and white realities get blurred. I was stunned when the installation went up. I kept asking myself, “How can all of these objects from the East be so visually aligned with a high design architecture from the West?”

DnA: Conversely, given the extreme social inequality we are living through, can we learn from some of the upsides of the East German social model (to the extent these are expressed in the objects of daily life)?

David – The work shown here was possible because the state sanctioned its production, but that does not diminish the creative genius of the designers that made these objects. I do not condone the East German social model, but I believe that constraints in a system will motivate designers. It is pleasurable to undermine authority. Both sides benefited from the competition. It pushed them to be creative. American space designers outdid themselves because of the pressure from Soyuz and Sputnik. It may be that comparing ourselves to our neighbors is what allows us to be certain that we are happy.

DnA: Do you think Angelenos have a particular fascination for life beyond the Berlin wall given how much the Southland was a producer of Cold War era culture (from aerospace to freeways to Modern living to films demonizing communism)?

Justin – Americans have a tendency to ‘other’ the parts of the world that do not share our same perspective and belief system. And certainly, while the objectives and politics between the communist and capitalist worlds were fundamentally different, the creation of a black and white reality was a construct of the Cold War. Cultures on both sides of the Iron Curtain were filled with color, texture, and contradictions. Angelenos who have been condemned as history-less and superficial should understand this more than others.

DnA: What do you hope Angelenos will take away from this installation?

Sarah – As the director of VDL, a so called “house museum”, I was interested in the idea of creating “period rooms” that are clearly false, as a way of questioning the static nature of these types of institutions. The history and use of VDL did not stop after Neutra died; it has a function outside of its role as a vehicle for telling the story of Neutra and his work. The Neutra VDL House is a classroom for architecture students from Cal Poly Pomona, an exhibition space, a cultural center, and of course a house (David and I live here). 44 years after Neutra’s death new stories, real and imagined, are still being created.

David- What is interesting to see in this installation are the similarities in designs from East and West given the different political environment in which they were created. Wonderful pieces of design are at risk of being lost because of their association with state communism. This installation offers access to the design pieces Justin has collected in a new idealized western setting where they can be reevaluated. And in doing so call into question many of our assumption of East versus West.



Bill – Visitors will travel in hyperreality. *Competing Utopias* uses Los Angeles – a culture of global diversity and fantasy – to reframe the Cold War histories that have landed here. The installation takes this one step further: it is not a look back but an attempt to render who we are today.

Justin – As the world becomes more global, history also needs to be less provincial. The installation contributes to the concept of a common past and a shared modernity and future. The installation is the culmination of the peaceful conclusion to the Cold War. Both histories are now living under one roof. It is the ultimate expression of the ‘swords to ploughshares’ mantra.

Patrick – Assembling the objects for the installation unintentionally lead me to creating narratives for the individuals of the family that inhabit the house. I think it is a natural occurrence for humans to devise stories when viewing groupings of objects that are placed in a particular setting. I’m most excited for Angelenos to step into the house and let their imaginations lead them through the installation as they piece together their own understanding of who is occupying the space.



Competing Utopias was supported by the Graham Foundation. It opens to the public Sunday, July 13 to September 13; the opening party is Saturday night.

Images: Top, Group photo of the design team; From left to right: Justinian Jampol (Executive Director and Founder, Wende Museum), Patrick Mansfield (Collections Manager, Wende Museum), Bill Ferehawk (Filmmaker, Radiant Features), David Hartwell (Multimedia Designer, Plasmatic Concepts), Sarah Lorenzen (Chair of Architecture and Director Neutra VDL House, Cal Poly Pomona); all photographs of the installation by David Hartwell.

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<http://blogs.kcrw.com/dna/l-a-designer-a-collective-creates-competing-utopias>