

'We are able to make something from nothing'

Work In Progress: Oskar Zieta. By Janice Blackburn

Oskar Zieta is one of the new breed of young, innovative designers from Poland fast gaining an international reputation. His range of Plopp stools and Fidu benches deceptively resembles plastic but is in reality made from thin sheets of metal formed under extreme air pressure.

London-based architect Miska Miller-Lovegrove met Zieta last year at the Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan and included his work in *Young Creative Poland*, an exhibition she curated during the recent London Design Festival.

"He was showing his furniture," she says, "and the pieces echoed ideas of Jeff Koons' inflatable objects, immaculately built in metal. I realised how interesting and unique his process really is: pure innovative engineering with potentially far-reaching and important implications."

Born in Zielona Gora, close to the German border, in 1975, Zieta

describes the neighbourhood he grew up in as his "best teacher". It was, he says: "A combination of beautifully built concrete blocks. This concrete landscape represented the reality of Poland in the 1980s and 1990s because more than 90 per cent of the population lived like that. Today things are changing and we can at last enjoy different styles of architecture."

His parents – his father is an engineer and local politician, his mother is finally realising her dream of designing woman's fashion wear after years of working

for an insurance company – were ambitious for him to excel in sport and music but he found inspiration elsewhere. It was the end of the Communist period,

there was no access to products from western Europe or the US and there were few museums or galleries in his city, which he found "rather sad". Children had to construct their own toys from other products. Lego and Barbie and other toys and games were not known so "to be crea-

tive yourself was most vital," he says.

After the local primary school, Zieta went to technical college, majoring in electronics. He reluctantly decided to study architecture after a sport's injury put an end to his dream of being a professional cyclist or skier. After graduating and working as an architect for

seven years he concluded the process of architecture was "a monumental and never-ending story – I really wanted to achieve finished projects".

It was at that point he discovered design. Until then, he says: "There was such a shortage of so many basic products in Poland that design didn't play

a role. People just bought what was available on the market. There was no choice. All products were very similar, if not identical, because there was no competition. The furniture we had in our home was identical to all our friends' – maybe in different colours – and this applied to clothes, cars and other items. But, as with everyone else in the world, Polish people wanted to distinguish themselves as well so they had to creatively develop or make products for themselves."

This was his motivation to start designing and he feels it might explain why Polish people and companies are now so creative. "We are able to make something from nothing," he says.

After travelling through Europe going to design exhibitions and fairs, meeting designers and observing new projects, he settled in Zurich and began teaching at The ETH (Swiss Federal School of Technology) as an exchange student and is presently in the final stages of a PhD.

He designed the Plopp stool in 2006 but found it impossible to find a producer. Although Zieta was confident that it would be successful, he was met with cynicism on the grounds

that no one seemed to have confidence in a metal stool that "looked twisted from every side". He and his father decided to take the initiative and in 2007 founded a small manufacturing operation and started producing the pieces themselves.

"In the beginning it was horrible," Zieta says, "not only financially but also our machines didn't work. We didn't have the right people, materials or know-how. Every time we got some good news, bad news followed. For example, we won the Red Dot Award in 2008 at exactly the same moment as our laser-cutting machine went *kaput*."

However, the first 100 pieces the father and son team produced were all bought by Stephan Dörhöfer, a German entrepreneur, and Zieta has not looked back since.

He continues to explore and push the boundaries of technology with his products and furniture. Alongside other designers such as Tomek Rygalik, Magdalena Trzcionka and Karina Marusinska, Zieta represents a bold, confident generation of creativity emerging from a Poland that values its independence. It heralds an exciting future for them all.



Innovative Oskar Zieta, left, and his Plopp stools, above

Dawin Meckel