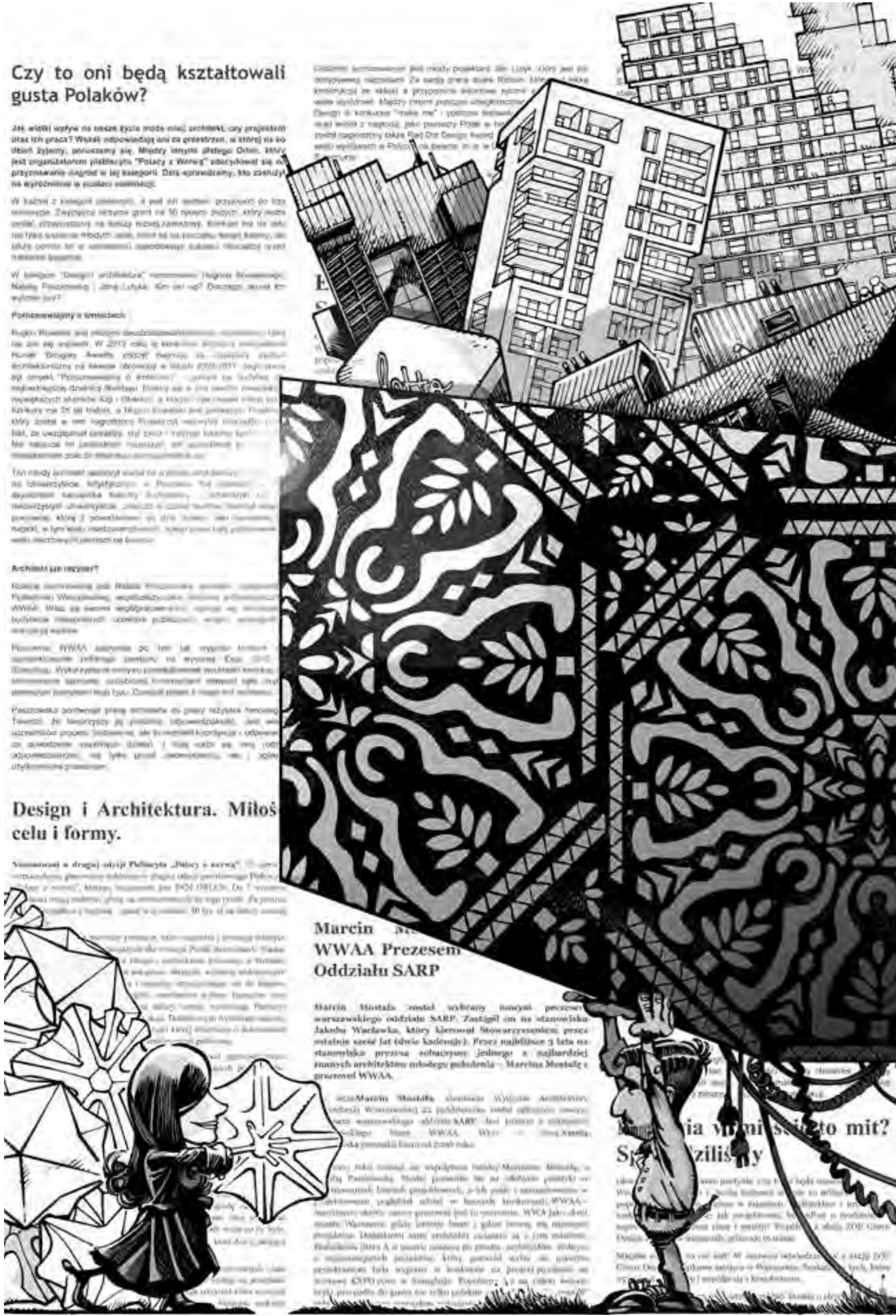


Architects in action

Natalia Paskowska (Katowice, 1981) is founding partner of WWA (Warsaw Architects). In 2007, she won first prize in the competition for the Polish Pavilion at 2010 Shanghai Expo (together with WWA co-founder Marcin Mostafa). In 2011, she won first prize in the competition for the permanent exhibition in the Museum of Polish History. Paskowska has tutored seminars for architecture students and given numerous presentations and lectures at various architecture events.



Czy to oni będą kształtowali gust Polaków?

Jak wielu wyobrazi sobie architekta? Czy projektant musi być przystojny, młody i w garniturze, a może to ktoś inny? Wzrost znaczący jest w tym czasie. Wzrost znaczący jest w tym czasie. Wzrost znaczący jest w tym czasie. Wzrost znaczący jest w tym czasie.

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W latach "Designi architektura"... W latach "Designi architektura"... W latach "Designi architektura"...

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Rzeczniczka... Rzeczniczka... Rzeczniczka... Rzeczniczka... Rzeczniczka...

Tak wielu... Tak wielu... Tak wielu... Tak wielu... Tak wielu...

Architektura... Architektura... Architektura... Architektura... Architektura...

Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost...

Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost...

Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost...

Design i Architektura. Miłość celu i formy.

Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost... Wzrost...

Marcin Mostafa WWA Prezesem Oddziału SARP

Marcin Mostafa został wybrany... Marcin Mostafa został wybrany... Marcin Mostafa został wybrany...

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WWAA stands for Warsaw Architects, but a lot of their work currently takes place in Qatar. The office itself is located in KOMIN 73 ('Factory Chimney 73'), a revitalized post-industrial complex, where activities ranging from design, graphic art, photography and fashion, to web and parametric design, 3D mapping and animation also reside. In the summer, an outdoor terrace hosts informal events. Natalia Paskowska, co-founder of WWAA, reflects upon the office's initial years and the bright future that lies ahead. 'Luckily, our first project was temporary.'

Freedom of flexibility

POLAND — TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER, ILLUSTRATION: KLAUSTOON

Architects were never much involved in Polish politics, not during the communist times, says Natalia. Architects were never very important; it was considered a social profession, much lower in status than lawyers or doctors. Urban designers were also part of the elite, being the hands and minds of politicians, with their long-term plans. Yet the role of the profession was marginalized. There were no private, independent practices. Everybody worked in anonymity, without office names. Since the 1990s, a reverse movement arose, but things didn't change much for architects for a long time. Since the last five years, however, Poland is rapidly changing.

How did your office get started?

We started dating in 2003, during studies. We did some competitions, and even managed to win one for a small pavilion in Warsaw's centre, that we built ourselves. Then we did what seemed the only logical step at the time and started working for renowned, big practices. In 2007, after hours, we did a competition for Expo 2010 and — quite unexpectedly for everyone, but mainly for us — managed to win first prize. It was December, so you could say that WWAA exists from the very beginning of 2008.

Poland started changing rapidly then. In what way?

One of the notable changes is that, when we took part in this competition, at first we had 20 or 30 other competitors; now the numbers are closer to a hundred. One reason for this is obviously the crisis. Competitions in Poland are mainly funded by city or state budgets. When private investments lagged behind, the number of competitions diminished. Also, lots of young architects started working on their own, trying to start off as we did — with a big commission that will be well recognized.

Another change — a soft one, but really crucial in my opinion — happened with the younger generation and how they transformed Warsaw with all their entrepreneurial activities. They are European citizens on so many levels, that really blends the borders somehow. For us, a trip to, let's say, London in 2004 was still like visiting another continent, in terms of city life, cultural potential, food, music, design... basically everything. Now, I don't feel I am so much ahead. These youngsters, generally speaking, are much more free — they don't think about taking mortgages as we did, they travel at lower cost and more easily, they are eager to take risks running a business alone.

Can you see that in Warsaw, for example?

Warsaw was not an easy place to go to, let alone to fall in love with. Now it's entirely different. There is this really nice place on the right bank of the Vistula. It used to be one of the biggest problem areas of Warsaw. Now, tens of thousands of people enjoy leisure there at the natural beaches, temporary facilities and on boats on the river. It has spectacular views. This was a bottom-up change, not even made by architects, but by the power of common

people, youngsters in their 20s. But the new generation of architects is the same — so much more entrepreneurial and globally connected. They are dedicated to actual projects, small but real, instead of designing grand museums that will never be built anyway. And if they need the work, they open up a restaurant and design it themselves.

What about the quality of commissions?

There is a big difference between public and private clients. State competitions offer less money and care less about quality, but provide a greater chance of actually being built, although it can take ages. The power of the architects is less. The problem is in the procurement system, which focuses on the lowest bid; thus we always work with budgets that are far too low, realistically speaking. Our cultural centre in Warsaw took two years longer to build and has dramatic material quality. We built it in wood, and the accepted bid was 2.6 million euros. The actual cost was about 4 million euros, so this difference had to be cut during the project. The Polish Pavilion in Shanghai (thank goodness a temporary project) suffers from the same. Private investors are more concerned with the quality of building materials, and not necessarily in architectural value. But they have far better 'inspectors', who control the quality of construction. The inspector for a state project is usually low in status and corrupt. The inspector looking after private projects is very well paid, very important and very experienced.

Private projects we did are Rebel One, an apartment building in Warsaw, and an office building, both in progress. Generally speaking, we see a growing consciousness of private investors (and their clients) in terms of recognizing value of good architectural and urban design, quality of materials and execution, smoothness of investment process, et cetera. The sector of public investments is learning much more slowly, but you can see some improvement happening there, too.

In what way does WWAA relate to these changes?

From 2010, we teamed up with Boris Kudlicka, a renowned stage designer. Right now we have created a practice that is a little schizophrenic; on one side, we deal with so-called real architecture, on the other, we do lots of exhibitions, some interiors, sets and temporary pavilions. We are relatively small, so for many projects we cooperate with other studios, also architectural or doing graphics, multimedia, and parametric design. This way we manage to stay independent and quite flexible, which is crucial in a changing economy. I somehow feel we are midway between the '90s model — having a large office, with specialized architects, internal hierarchy, long-term obligations and so on — and this new generation that works independently, joining forces only for specific projects. We're still trying to find optimal balance.

The Polish pavilion in Shanghai is probably your most famous and also most evocative project. How

would you describe it? How does it relate to your other work?

I went through several different phases with this project. First, it was like with your first newborn, a strange feeling of being in some movie, with a complete stranger sucking life from you. Afterwards, I was briefly in love, proud that it had grown into such big and strong being. Then, for a few years, I was a little bit ashamed of it, before finally, not long ago, being able to embrace the project fully, as a not perfect but most important achievement. I also think that it might be our big luck that this very first project was temporary and does not have to stand the test of time, in terms of functionality and durability, because the aesthetics were meant to work in this very moment.

The Expo pavilion was no doubt very defining for the profile of our practice; many investors were expecting copycats of this project. I think we managed to find a cross of what was expected of us and what felt genuine and inspiring at the moment. I would like to say that our approach to each project is completely different, but obviously that would be completely false and naïve; we do follow some well-recognized paths and use shortcuts.

What are you mostly working on now?

We're quite busy with some projects we're doing in Qatar; we won a small competition there recently. Part of our team is almost daily on site, as we're finishing two buildings in Warsaw. We're working on several really interesting exhibitions and one temporary pavilion. We're also involved in some urban scale projects; we just finished a competition entry for a public square in Warsaw, we're involved in workshops and are preparing a masterplan for a post-industrial district. These projects demand different sets of skills, which is good, because it keeps us on guard.

We're doing several projects at the moment in Qatar. TV studios, temporary facilities...

In your view, what's the biggest difference between Poland and Qatar?

Qatar widens our market. They want our ideas, they are open to suggestions, they really value our opinion. It's so refreshing! It's a different way of working. There are more professionals from all over the world with whom we are building up the country. The biggest difference, however, is the level of trust we get. The artistic and technical possibilities they offer. They don't only ask for a design, but also for the entire product. You can build it, and in a shorter production time. It offers the opportunity to connect, to widen the practice and our network.

Do you design differently there?

What they like about our work is that it is always contextual, not generic. It's site specific, so our work changes in Qatar. It's more aesthetic. We draw inspiration from different sources, and that makes our design richer and bolder in its narrative.