



# All aboard the design train





**above, clockwise**

Tomek Rygalko in his studio; his sink concept for Ideal Standard; space object by Maria Jeglińska; and a seating solution for Noll by Rygalko

**opposite page**

candles made of fallen leaves by Marcin Ebert, a student at P13, the group created by Tomek Rygalko at the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy; a Corian table by the Polish group Kombiart from Young Creative Poland at the Triennale in Milan last April

Turkey did it. A couple of years ago, it started showing off its best talents in collective exhibitions all over the place, then hosting international design events in its capital, Istanbul.

China is trying to do it too. In the last few years, its efforts to convince the world that it's not just a production site but also a creative hub have included a presence in Zona Tortona during Milan's Fuori Salone and several exhibitions of home-grown talents.

With such introductions, the arrival of Poland onto the international design scene was just a question of time.

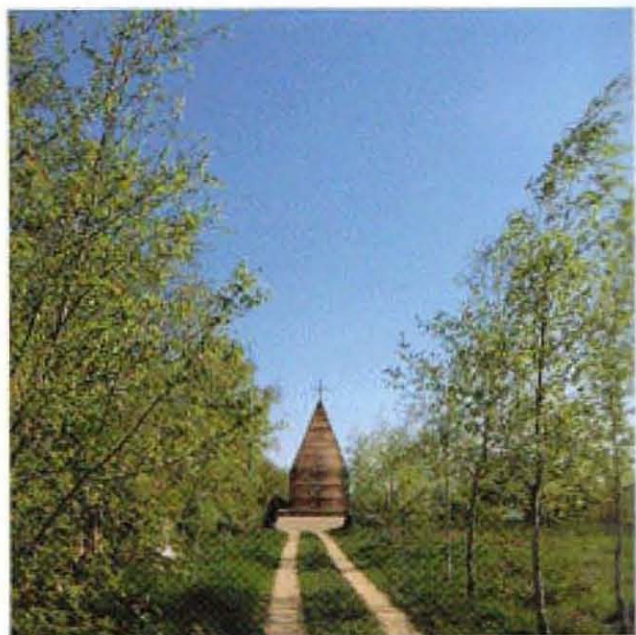
Getting closer to the Euro is all good and well, yet experience teaches that with the joint currency, things change for a country, often dramatically. The times of low-cost manufacturing, for instance, will soon be over. And so will the privilege of being the "preferred factory" of leading Western European brands. On such privilege, Poland has built its silent but impressive economic success.

Not many know that Poland is the tenth country in the world in terms of quantity of production and manufacturing of furniture. The Eastern giant has kept all of this quiet for years, yet is now set to start boasting about it: after all, its top brands make their products using Polish industrial skills and crafts. They are bound to be top notch.

This shift in communicating its role in furniture production is the first step in a manoeuvre aimed at changing the overall positioning of the country. The furniture business has such a strategic impact on the Polish economy that it needs to be rescued from the possible turnaround that might occur. In order to do so, Poland is getting ready for the "big jump": to add a creative component to its production-based foundation.

To be fair, Polish design has been on the international map for a while, thanks to talents such as Oskar Zieta. A research associate and a teaching assistant at the





ETH school in Zurich, Oskar Zieta has been writing a thesis on the role of computer-controlled machines in processing metal sheets in architecture and design, also focusing on the development of methods of enhancing the efficiency of technology for steel design, architecture and construction.

Zieta's dream was to use steel sheets as a cheap, easy-to-shape and efficient form of construction. Since the stability of the material was the challenge, Zieta solved it by developing a new production process called FIDU (FreiInnenDruckUmformung, Internal Pressure Forming). FIDU consists of inflating two steel sheets, welded at the edges, into a 3D object, very similar to blowing up a balloon. After the process, the material becomes completely solid and ultra-light, as well as 100% recyclable. FIDU received the red dot award in 2008.

The company that Zieta has created to swoop upon the innovation opportunity of the FIDU method is based half in Switzerland and half in Wrocław, Poland – where the designer relocated back to a couple of years ago.

"The fact is that Poland is a very exciting place to be for a designer right now," says Tomek Rygałk, the other well-known national talent. "The country needs to put its foot on the accelerator in order to compete in Europe and it knows it. The good thing is, it has recently realized that design can play an important role in speeding up the process."

As a matter of fact, the government has recently moved the management of the discipline from the Ministry of Culture to that of Industrial Development.

"This was a necessary step," continues Rygałk. "Design has always been considered an artistic discipline. Companies are realizing its value just now and they simply dive in. There are plenty of opportunities for those who know what they are doing."





**left, clockwise**

*Moné Light* by Maria Jeglińska for Ligne-Rose; *Genotype lights* by Tomek Rygałk at Young Creative Poland in Milan; *Table*, a concept by Gosia Lipińska of P13, consisting of a collection of tableware mounted on a metal stand

**opposite page, clockwise**

a P13 show for the design and fashion Specialists department: a Japan-inspired felt garment and a wooden church in the Polish countryside, both by Beton; the *Tennis armchair*, with backpack, by Tomek Rygałk for Moroso



And he does. Educated at the Royal College of Art, he was spotted by Patrizia Moroso a few years ago during a visit to Ron Arad's department.

"She noticed a chair whose structure was made of leather and told Ron that she was interested in it. He told her that I had designed it!" It was the start of Rygałk's international career. Apart from Moroso, he now also works for leading Polish companies such as Ikea and Comfort Living, as well as Ideal Standard and Absolut.

Beside his industrial design activities, Rygałk also teaches at the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy where he founded PG13, a working group of designers focusing on research and integration of concept work within industrial realities.

"The generation that I am teaching is a very interesting one," says Rygałk. "Their whole adult lives have occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall, so they have an international outlook and are not frightened to

compete on a global level like their predecessors. Yet they still retain a lot of the pragmatism and inventiveness that was a necessary requirement of survival in communist Poland where not many things were available and people made do with what they had: transforming things, conjuring up effective handmade and cheap solutions for everyday problems and so forth. These are very precious qualities in design when they are coupled with a proper education."

Zuzanna Skalska, a Polish-born trends researcher now working for Van Berle in Eindhoven and considered one of the most influential Polish women in design, says, "The West took 30 years to get to design thinking, that is to say, to the understanding of the strategic role of design for the industry. In order to be competitive, we need to skip phases and to start from your end point to get beyond it straight away."

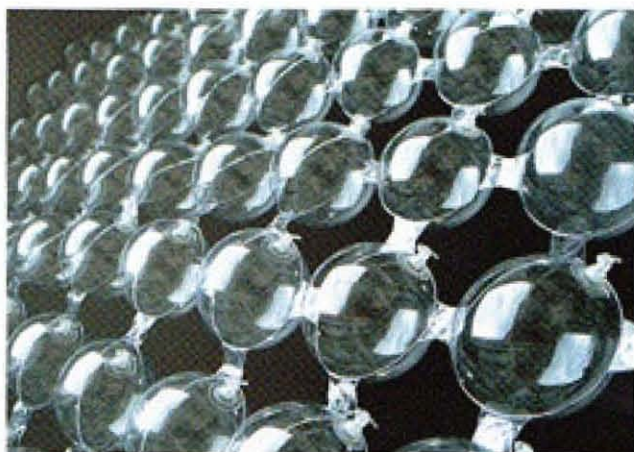
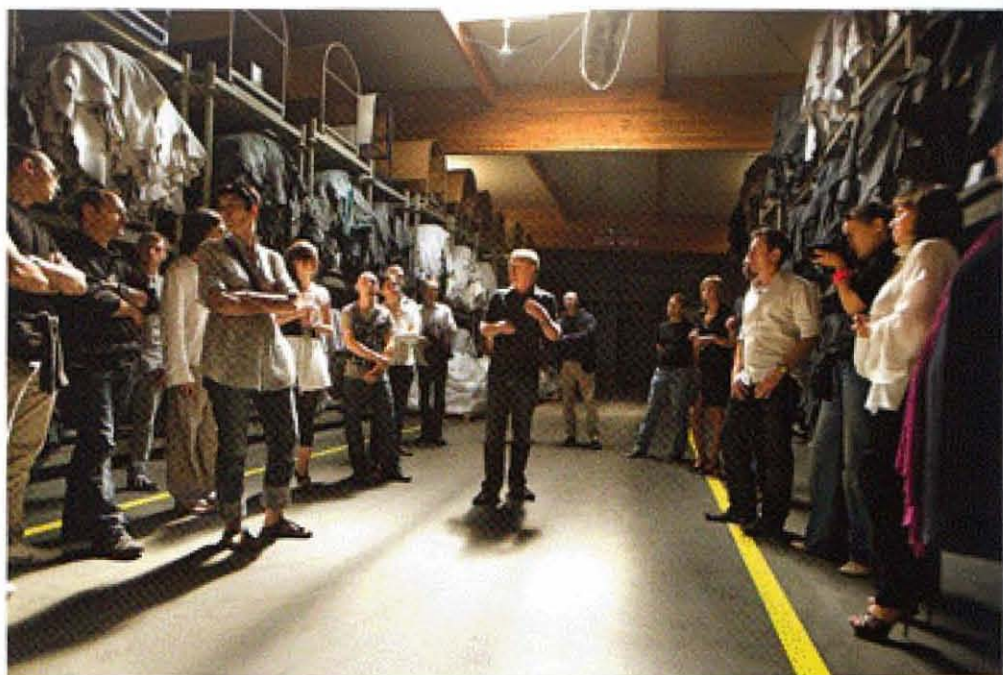
If speeding things up (and doing so in a qualitative way) is the issue, schooling obviously has a great part to play. For this reason when entrepreneur Piotr Voelkel

of the VOX Capital Group (that manages the largest private education complex in Poznan, the city at the heart of the design and furniture district in Poland) told her about his desire to open a cultural centre dedicated to design, Skalska jumped to the opportunity. "I suggested an international school instead," she says.

And this will soon be a reality. Called School of Form, it is set to open (all going well) in 2011. Each department will be headed by an internationally acclaimed professional industrial designer together with a Polish industrial designer, all under the creative direction of El Edskoort (former Chairwoman of the Design Academy in Eindhoven).

"We will teach design from a humanistic perspective and also its key role in the industry," continues Skalska. "The moment is perfect: governmental backing means funds and lots of cultural activities to stimulate the shift of design perception from the arts and crafts





to design thinking. They know up there that this is not just for fun. It's the ticket that will allow us to get on the train that the rest of Europe is travelling on."

One of the biggest furniture producers in Poland – Comforty Living – is certainly looking to board that train. In 2011, it will present, for the very first time, products designed and made in Poland at Milan's Salone del Mobile. Through a workshop, directed by Skalska, the company has asked a very large group of international designers – such as Tomek Rygałk, Philippe Nigro, Lucidi/Pevere and Ed van Vliet – to design concepts for a new, branded collection. The winning project will be put into production.

While Skalska admits it may be a bit of a contradiction asking foreign designers for such a nationally focused project, she says, however, "This is no nationalistic competition but a run to bring the country up to speed in design. What matters is to not miss the train." ■

Laura Traidi

#### above

five historical Polish chairs; before the fall of the Berlin Wall, design was considered an artistic activity and these items were never industrially produced; participants in the Comforty Living workshop last year. The result of the workshop will be one production piece that will be unveiled at the Milan Salone in 2011; the Bubbles room divider in blown plastic by Puff Bull