Bulky waste wall unit

Meblościanka na odpady wielkogabarytowe.

Upon relocating to the Netherlands, my quest for a furnished flat led me to Kringloopwinkels, known for vintage furniture. Hoping for affordable designer pieces, I ended up with mostly second-hand IKEA items and '80s/'90s pieces. Instead of a simple task of furnishing, it turned into a nostalgic journey through post-communist Poland from my childhood. Growing up in Poland in the 1990s, I witnessed the transformation in domestic aesthetics, from TV shows to the upholstery of the sofa where I watched them. The furniture search morphed into a reflection on how aesthetics connects with political systems in Poland where abandoned furniture from the western border perpetuating old perceptions, like the belief that German households are cleaner and superior[1].

I started to think about the appearance of the interiors of houses in Poland during the political transformation as an image of the construction of a new identity for Poles and about shopping tourism and the fetishization of Western products - which is still taking place. “During the communist era, everything that came from the West, whether new or used, aroused desire and was an object of pride for the owner. This fascination has remained with us to this day” (Zagrodzki, 2009).

Nostalgia for communist aesthetics, combined with Western influences, continually weaves itself into the character of Polish spaces and constructs its own identity. Past and future, West and East overlap, creating a strange conglomerate of aesthetics and aspirations. Even today the often repeated phrase in Poland 'it was better under communism' illustrates the state caused by disillusionment with capitalism and an egalitarian future in a democracy.

Communism-era furniture was often repetitive and prefabricated, not of good quality and was made predominantly of shive board or industrial waste. The unavailability of ceramic tiles often replaced by oil paint finishes and vinyl floors were common and repetitive in Polish flats before the 1990s. Most popular furniture of the communist era was the segmented wall unit, which

formed a whole-wall enclosure and housed everything from bedding, a TV to a bar, and you could often even find segments with a built-in couch, the possession of which quickly became unfashionable when the Western product became available.

(Zachęta, 1974)

With the fall of communism the surface area of the flats started to change. In the 1970s, a flat of 45 m2 was in practice occupied by up to 6 people, often unrelated as a family. By the 1990s, the same surface area was occupied by a family, usually a couple with a child or two. Also number of available flats began to increase. This transformation not only reflected the changing family structures but also influenced the demand for furnishings and design elements previously unassociated with the past. People craved Western products, wallpaper, ceramic tiles – items unavailable in the country for decades.

As ELLE Decoration (2020) described:

> The first IKEA opened in Warsaw on 19 September 1990. You could touch the furniture, sit on it, make yourself comfortable and see how comfortable it was. At the time, this was not at all obvious. In furniture shops, the displays were often cordoned off from the customers with tape as if in a museum.

For many families, including me and my mother, one of the highlights of those days was a trip to the capital to buy new accessories for the house. One of my best memories is Sunday winter evening, already dark, I was eating with my mother a roast chicken from a food truck located outside Warsaw's Ikea, after which we spent hours in that store. Then the long drive back to my hometown, arranging the cheap pieces in our flat and browsing the catalogue in the evening. My mother still keeps the catalogs.

Despite the improvement, the gap in demand between supply and the issue of lack of funds for western products encouraged the growing phenomenon of trade tourism[2]. There has been a surge in the self-proclaimed import of home furnishing from across the western border. In the 1990s, the bulky 'household' waste - unwanted items from the home or accessories displayed in front of the house collected were popular amongst Polish people. There they could find everything for free needed to furnish an empty flat. For many people, it was also a way of doing business, as old objects found on the street were recirculated at Polish bazaars.

When writing about markets, one must not omit “Stadion Dziesięciolecia", located in Warsaw. Originally designed as a symbol of socialist progress, the stadium transformed during the post-communist era. In the 1990s, the once-solemn sports arena became a bustling marketplace, where Poles could buy a variety of consumer goods. Stadium became a microcosm of the changing times, offering a range of decorations, furniture, and household

items, symbolizing the shift towards a consumer-oriented society as Poland embraced the challenges and opportunities of a new economic and political era.

(Hojny, 1996)

As the communist era came to an end, a noticeable shift occurred in interior design aesthetics amid uncontrolled import of goods and trends from abroad. “With the collapse of the regime, which wanted to imprison designers in collective studios, strong individualities could finally flourish in Poland” (Piątek, 2011). The heavy, immobile wall units began to be replaced by irregular, often flamboyant forms. Domestic objects started to become more customised through colour, finishing material or pattern. Triangular forms, two-coloured furniture, waves, sharp edges and glossy lacquer gave interiors a specific dynamic celebrating individualism and unconventionality.

I vividly remember my cousin's flat from the 90'. The once muted tones living room with artificial wood wall unit was replaced by a soaring, glossy lacquered cabinet with display cases in which Kinder Surprise figurines stood arranged in rows. The faded curtains were replaced by patterned purple ones from IKEA. We could play on an Atari console brought from Germany

and behind the back, the parents were still sitting at a low coffee table covered with a tablecloth and glass eating marinated herrings and pickled cucumbers. The kitchen was dominated by red plastic accessories, plastic cups, red electric kettle and convex stickers on the fridge - everything was shiny and colourful - just like the chemically coloured Helena fizzy drinks I used to drink at my aunt's house.

“Trumnoregał”

In the 1990s, patchwork interiors blended communist-era furniture with Western accessories like LED lights, palm tree murals, colorful bathroom appliances, and chrome-plated furniture handles. This era symbolized optimism and a longing for freedom, as people sought to break free from oppressive systems and embrace mass consumption. Today, I can find these objects in Kringloopwinkels, evoking nostalgia and sentimentality for this period of transition.

Nowadays in Poland, there is unlimited access to esthetic consumption and it may seem like ancient history, but still, many mental divisions persist, as evidenced by Polish minibus drivers selling goods mostly from the Netherlands and Germany at Sunday markets. The fetishization of Western products still reigns supreme in Polish flats despite 35 years since the transition from communism to capitalism.

(Kaczor, 2021)

Nevertheless, it clearly exemplifies the delirious way a nation's hope and desires to change to create its own identity in the transition of two political systems. Changes in the interiors of Polish homes and aesthetic roads from bleak, mass produced furniture to extravagant and colorful mixtures of unwanted items brought from the west reflect the construction of a new world for their inhabitants after many years of living under a system dominated by restrictions, repetition and scarcity.

Notes:

[1]

Business Insider (2018) writes:

> "Chemistry from Germany" has become a symbol of better quality, greater effectiveness, i.e. a Western decent for which it is worth paying even more money than for a similar product made with the Polish market in mind. In the 1980s and 1990s, when products of Western concern were not widely available on the Polish market, the difference in quality and effectiveness was indeed visible.

[2]

> Trade tourism is variously defined, and there is no consensus among specialists on a strict definition of the term. In this sense, it is the arrival in a foreign country with financial means to purchase goods and the subsequent export, often illegal goods and bazaar trade carried out in Poland or other countries created after the collapse of the USSR.

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