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Interview with architect and interior designer Przemysław Stopa about his passions, travels, daily challenges and plans for the future.



Why are you not a teacher, journalist or sportsman, but a designer?

My upbringing has a lot to do with it. I grew up in a home full of art books, designs and sketches observing the world of culture, art and theater. My mother worked as a stage designer for theater and television. I used to go with her to carpenters, tailors and painters studios. I saw how work in a theater looked "from the inside," how a project is created and then implemented. As a child I also drew a lot. For fun, I learned about perspective and free-hand drawing. It was a very important study of perceiving and understanding objects that surrounded me.

Besides, there are several architects in my family and this occupation seemed especially interesting to me. At an early age I developed an interest in architecture, observing its achievements and uniqueness. I received books about architecture at various family celebrations and holidays. A significant moment was when I received a present for my primary school graduation: a book entitled "Nowa Architektura Polska" [New Polish Architecture] by Professor Przemyslaw Szafer. I read the book repeatedly cover to cover – it was really fascinating to me.

What were the beginnings of Przemyslaw Stopa the designer?

My career path was very dynamic. Maybe I was also a bit lucky as a week after I defended my master's degree project, I was already in New York, where I found in *The Village Voice*, a well-known weekly magazine, a job advertisement placed by The Custom Shop company, which was looking for a designer. This company owned a network of exclusive male fashion boutiques with a long tradition with very prestigious store locations throughout the USA. I applied for the position and was invited for an interview, during which my hand drawings were really appreciated. I was successful – I got the job! For two years, I prepared interior design drawings of custom-made furniture, finishes and lighting as well as prepared space plans. This experience was new and very interesting to me.

Was it thanks to luck, talent or determination?

I think it was a bit of each. Besides, it was and still is important to me to be up-to-date, to follow what is happening on the materials and new technologies scene.

How did you find your way to Warsaw – was New York the only stop?

Actually, yes. When my wife got a job in Warsaw, we decided that it was a very interesting moment to be in Poland and to be a part of this new geopolitical situation. It was a period of great change in Poland and in Europe.

Was this a good move?

For sure. It was the perfect moment for us. We were at the right place at the right time.

Is the capital a convenient place to run a design studio nowadays?

It is a very good place, especially for those who know the specifics of the local market. Among Polish cities, Warsaw has the most interesting corporate projects. The headquarters of Polish firms and main representative offices of international corporations are located here. Designing, especially corporate interiors, is a very dynamic process. Lease agreements are signed for short periods of time. As a result, periodically there is the need for re-designing or building totally new office space. The consumer market still has lots of catching up to do in Poland compared to Western Europe. This provides opportunities in Poland to gain new experience and to work simultaneously on multiple projects. Of course, in Poland construction budgets are certainly smaller than in other well-known European cities. However, this is not the most important thing.

Have you ever thought of changing your profession?

Absolutely not. I am doing exactly what I have always dreamed of! The only other field that has fascinated me apart from architecture is music. However, these two fields go hand in hand. Both architecture and music involve creating. A lot of fantastic musicians and architects have been interested in both of these professions, but eventually they had to focus on one of them. Musicians from the rock band Pink Floyd met during their studies at the school of architecture and the first name of their band was Architecture Abdabs. The famous architect Daniel Liebeskind is a pianist. A couple of years ago, he designed a very interesting, futuristic-looking grand piano.

Do you ever regret that you did not pursue a career as a musician?

It is hard to say how my career as a musician would have developed. I think that I had great potential to play guitar professionally and form a band. Today, I treat it as a wonderful adventure thanks to which I met a lot of interesting musicians and other people in the music business. I recorded guitar sections on the first official album of The Pudels, featuring Kora and Maciek Malenczuk, entitled "Bella Puppa." My close friend Pawel Maciwoda, also known as "Baby," has been playing in the band Scorpions for a couple of years now and I have been observing his career achievements with great interest.

When comes the time for making music?

Music is no longer my work. I don't have time to attend rehearsals or recording sessions. At home, however, I have my own corner with my equipment, guitars and keyboards. If I only have time and inspiration, then I compose something.

What kind of sounds are you especially fond of?

I grew up on various kinds of music. During my studies in Cracow, I took part in recording sessions and played almost everything – from heavy metal through punk and jazz rock to reggae. I am not attached to one musical style. I am constantly searching for and discovering new interesting sounds. I like to listen to the music of well-known musicians, but I also listen to completely unknown performers.

Does Przemyslaw Stopa ever have spare time?

Of course! Although I work a lot, I need to have time for my hobbies.

What do you do then?

Maybe this sounds funny, but a great deal of my spare time is consumed by designing. However, this designing is more experimental, based on creating new forms using new materials and technology. Of course, I also play the guitar. I still have one more passion – fishing.

Does your everyday work influence your lifestyle, food, clothes and how you spend your free time?

Definitely. Designing for international companies, I travel a lot. While travelling, I have the opportunity to observe different lifestyles, try new cuisine and inevitably some selected elements I adopt for use "in my own backyard."

Let's get back to architecture. Massive Design specializes in corporate interior design. Why exactly this specialization?

Offices are extremely interesting and they really give a lot of design possibilities. I like to work on fast-paced projects with a short term of realization where we can see the outcome of our work relatively quickly. Apart from that, our clients are usually professional. They know what they want. They ask specific questions to which I can give an answer.

Why do most of the office buildings and offices that are developed in our country go for standard and conventional solutions?

A large number of office buildings are developed mainly for speculative purposes, that is for an unknown tenant, and then – regardless in which country they are developed – use typical standard solutions. The priority is the effective use of space, short construction period and cost effectiveness. Office buildings in Poland, especially the older ones, certainly differ from the ones that are developed in the West. In my opinion, however, things have been getting better for a couple of years now. Every year more and more buildings are being designed and built in the European standard. Any unfavorable differences that we find in the Polish market certainly result from local commercial conditions, lack of budgets and the short length of tenancy contracts. The most interesting design opportunities, of course, are designing the corporate offices for companies who own their own buildings or for whom new buildings are being constructed for long-term tenancy. If the project is for a company with a long-term tenancy agreement, the investors and architects can allow for the use of less conventional solutions.

What has been the greatest challenge for you?

At Massive Design we have worked on many different kinds of projects. It is difficult to say which was the most challenging. For sure we used interesting solutions in the design of the offices of Wyborowa, GlaxoSmithKline, Deloitte, Play, Netia, Google, Ernst & Young, Credit Suisse, Unilever and Kraft, to name a few. The MTV Networks project that we are currently working on is also proving to be an interesting project.

How do you take criticism? Can negative reviews have a stimulating effect?

Constructive criticism is needed, because it forces one to make more of an effort and do some extra thinking. Critical voices usually appear in projects in which I try to introduce solutions that are unconventional. The more innovative the design, the more criticism there will be. On the other hand, there will also be a lot of positive opinions appreciating the innovation in a project. Sometimes, in response to criticism, I will make changes to the project and as a result new interesting ideas come into being. The most stressful element in such cases is not the criticism itself, but the approaching deadline.

Michael Angelo is said to have destroyed most of his sketches just before he died. These sketches were the only witnesses to the challenges and enormous obstacles he had to overcome in order to become a great artist. And do you admit to your imperfections?

I try to keep and carefully archive my sketches and projects. Designing is often partly based on experimenting and it is natural that not all experiments come out a success. I also keep the less successful projects and those that were left unfinished so that I can come back to them every now and then and get new inspiration.

An interesting area in your life is furniture design. How did your adventure with this “small” architecture begin?

As I mentioned, my first job after my studies involved, among other things, designing built-in furniture for The Custom Shop's network of boutique stores located throughout the USA. Of course, when I came to Poland, I made the most of the experience I gained in New York. As an integral part of the interior design process I began designing custom reception desks, conference room tables and cabinets. A significant step forward in the direction of furniture design was getting to know the process and technology of mass production. I visited several factories in Europe and the USA, where I had the opportunity to observe enormous differences in the way furniture is produced in the case of one-offs versus furniture that is mass produced. I observed how materials are joined together and the technology used. Each visit was an inspiration for me to create an interesting design. A couple of years ago, I began designing for the Spanish-American company Kron. I designed the QIU collection that consists of an armchair, sofa and series of tables. This was a very interesting experience, which led to contacts with other furniture manufacturers. For the Italian manufacturer Diwar, I designed the Luna chair that was recently introduced to the market.

Have your greatest dreams already been realized?

Certainly not. Each new design I make frequently leads to new design ideas. The belief that the most interesting projects are still to come gives me inspiration and the need to design.

Your team certainly plays a significant role in the realization of your design dreams. What criteria does one have to meet in order to become a Massive Design team member?

The main tasks of the project team are everyday contact with the client, project supervision and correspondence, overseeing the budget and project schedule. There are really many of these duties and they have to be performed with extraordinary accuracy and precision. We try to determine at the first job interview whether a

given person has potential and whether he or she will be able to meet our demands. We have special tests that we use during the recruitment process.

What does such a “test” consist of? Can you reveal at least a part of it?

Testing is modified on an ongoing basis and tailored to our needs and the type of position that we are recruiting for.

What is ideal architecture?

This is a very broad question. Quality of architecture is influenced by several factors: type of structure, form, environment and local cultural conditions. In addition, there are plenty of parallel ideals of architecture, which are difficult to compare, and which result from their function. We can talk of ideal residential architecture, public institutions, sacred and industrial architecture or engineered structures. In the classic sense, ideal architecture should be rooted in the place of its origins, but it does not always have to be “polite.” Apart from that, the criteria of assessing ideal architecture are constantly changing. In the world today, we observe cultures merging with one another. Architecture is becoming more and more universal. It's losing its roots, its connection to a given site or culture. This is a natural phenomenon, which is related to the globalization of nearly all areas of life. New materials and technologies are spreading throughout the world giving new possibilities of creating forms that were unachievable only a couple of years ago. We observe many experiments, sometimes very interesting ones, where high quality architecture with an interesting form is being created – sometimes it becomes an inspiration not only for the design of other buildings, but also for industrial design. Often architecture has nothing in common with a site, but reflects the characteristic style of a designer. To sum up, the ideal architecture of today is that which will stand the test of time and appreciated in the future.

Have you found a place in the world that demonstrates such architecture?

There are many such places that have held the test of time and they still amaze us today. In most cases, they are commonly known icons of architecture or architecture specific to a certain region. Very interesting are the residences designed by Paul Rudolph that were built in Florida from the 1940s through 1960s. The residences are integrated into their environment, surrounded by palm trees, bushes and water. The layout gives a light and airy feel to the space with extensive use of floor to ceiling glass, movable blinds and awnings. In many of them, there is no air conditioning. The building layout, awnings, natural openings and blinds creates natural ventilation and shadows, which is very important in the tropical, humid climate of Florida. From an



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ecological point of view, I think the design of these buildings was ahead of its time.

Professor Konrad Kucza-Kuczynski, in his book “Zawod architekt” [Profession – Architect] writes about a “continuum of a place,” that is adding modern elements to existing buildings in such a way that they do not clash. What do you think of that?

I totally agree with him, especially if we are talking about adding modern elements to buildings that are part of a national heritage. The biggest problem, however, is determining which of the existing elements of architecture are valuable and should be preserved and which ones should be eliminated or replaced by a new, better quality. Over interpreting that “old” is “good” and “new” is “controversial” frequently leads to a dangerous compromise. As a result, we get vague new architecture “respecting” mediocrity from the previous years. I think that adding modern elements to existing architecture does not require looking through the spectrum of antiquity. The most interesting examples of architecture in each generation are related to the development of science and technology, frequently resulting from experimentation. This is often accompanied by the ambitions of architects and developers, who want to leave their mark on something unforgettable. Conflicts of “old” versus “new” are unavoidable. What Professor Konrad Kuczynski writes about is important, but in practice it is hard to achieve and requires probably the constant education of administrators, developers and architects.

You mentioned your frequent travels and observing architecture in other parts of the globe. When you analyze buildings and interiors, are you focusing solely on the achievements of modern architecture or is the past also important for you?

I try to observe the achievements of modern times not only in the area of architecture, but also in science and technology. I am a technocrat and analyze the newest scientific and technological achievements and try to incorporate them into my designs. However, I think that a lot can be learned through observing verified solutions from the past and achievements from even very distant times. I wonder how hundreds of years ago it was possible to build certain structural elements, details and ornaments – it's amazing. The history of architecture plays a very significant role in our lives. It is a guidebook that needs to be read and understood so that further development is possible.

Why interiors and not architecture? After all, architects are the co-authors of our world and create long lasting “monuments” for them to be remembered by?

During my studies I was still convinced that I will be designing buildings, sports complexes or cultural centers. Probably the majority of architecture students think like this. The reality, especially just after studies, is usually a bit different. I do not look at my work in terms of “building monuments.” What is important is fulfilling project criteria, continuity of design and constantly developing ways of designing, although building architecture is also in the area of my interests.

Most of our time is spent indoors. People are in closer contact with the interiors than the exteriors of a building or the “monuments of architecture” that you mentioned. The market always has greater demand for new interior design than for new building design. In addition, the construction time is shorter and interiors provide certain freedom in designing new forms without the need to go through a complicated administrative process.

If you could design a house of your dreams, what would it look like?

Certainly it would not be a typical detached house with a red tile roof. Rather it would be minimalistic in form and light in structure. The interiors and exteriors would complement each other and create a coherent wholeness, although the final style and shape would be determined by its surroundings.