

The history of Poland's cult wall-unit begins a little later. In early 1961, the Furniture Industry Association in Poznań and its Union of Polish Fine Artists held a competition: "Furniture for a Small Apartment". In this case, it meant the M-4 flat: two rooms with a small kitchen and entrance hall, intended for four people. The participants' task was to design furniture for the entire flat and to fit within a budget of 15,000 zloty (the average public-sector salary was 1,784 zloty).

Bogusława Kowalska recalls how, when her husband Czesław decided they would take part in the contest, they did not have a concept. In the end, they came up with the idea of the MK, 'meble kasetonowe' ['panel furniture'] – one type of structure used to furnish the entire flat, the elements of which could fit together in any combination like building blocks. The panels were a kind of rectangular shelf mounted at different heights, onto which side panels were screwed. A panel could have open shelves, a door, or adaptors for attaching a fold-out bed, table or desk. The front would be colourful in the children's room, white in the kitchen and more serious in the living room. The shops were short of metal fittings, so Czesław used screws meant for installing toilets, which because of their wing-nuts actually made it possible to assemble the furniture without any tools.

The designers submitted their competition entry at the last minute. To their surprise, the proposal passed the first stage and in July 1961 was selected as one of 10 models to be constructed. The next step was a display at Poznań's "Spring 1962" National Fair, as part of the Second Industrial Design Fair. That was where the competition committee would pick the best entries. Each creator was given an area of the same dimensions as an M-4 apartment, which they were to furnish with their designs. Bogusława describes how Czesław was obliged to go away, leaving her by herself at the stand in Poznań. Looking at her neighbours' classically furnished mock-ups and her own messy pile of pieces, she experienced a moment of doubt. But in the end, without much help, she managed to install the wall-unit.

"Some people discretely tapped their foreheads, making it clear they thought this wasn't furniture. And that's true – it isn't furniture. They're flaps you can screw together to make what you want, not traditional furniture like the stuff that's fashionable again today – and which is, moreover, really beautiful. Of course, it's so nice to sit on chairs at a big table in the middle of the room – it brings a family together. But back then, you couldn't offer that. You had to make use of a very small area. Like in this photo: we're sitting on armchairs; the table is folded out. At night you'd put the table away, then you could lie down and rest. The bar was right under your nose – so you could also have a little tippie before then."

The Kowalskis were surprised to discover that they'd been awarded a first-place distinction (the actual prizes weren't granted because no project kept within the required production costs). The other participants were no less surprised. The exhibition of the MK system at the Poznań Fair was a turning point for the Polish furniture industry.

Bogusława recalls their presentation of the MK system at the Fair as follows: "I borrowed [...] our neighbour, [...] who played the parents' son at the trade fair; the parents were actors. The game was that they'd come into the flat, take off their coats, put the beds away, fold the sheets, open up the tables. And then he'd come in, as if returning from school, he'd take out his books, set up the desk. They showed how you could live there, all day long." A rather unorthodox method, it has to be said, but it did show off all the secrets of the new type of furniture.

"[...] His [Czesław's] idea turned out to be exceptional. It contained a kind of structural joke. It's completely by chance that we were the ones to come up with it and do something totally different to the others – it's a kind of uniform for an apartment, which you could decorate with different buttons, tack on what you wanted. But we didn't win the prize for the idea alone – we also kept within the budget. The estimate only slightly exceeded the guidelines and our design was suitable for cheap production. Incidentally, the factories then had a problem because Kowalski Furniture was actually too cheap when it came to manufacturing, which basically meant you couldn't make any money out of it. A sort of paradox of the socialist economy."

Excerpts translated by Zosia Krasodomska-Jones



© Zuzanna Szamocka

**KATARZYNA  
JASIOŁEK**

Born 1982

*Asteroid i półkotapczan. O polskim wzornictwie powojennym  
[Asteroid and Wall-Bed: Post-War Polish Design]*

**Publisher:** Marginesy, Warszawa 2020

ISBN: 978-83-66335-69-1; 416 pages

**Translation rights:** Marginesy, k.rudzka@marginesy.com.pl

Katarzyna Jasiołek's texts on design have been published in magazines and catalogues. She runs [heliotropvintage.pl](http://heliotropvintage.pl) blog and podcast, devoted to design, architecture, photography, and fashion.