

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2011)

Heft: 19

Artikel: Forseeing the disaster

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919306>

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FORSEEING THE DISASTER

Wiesław Seniura, the builder of
Monika Sosnowska's work '1:1',
talks to Tomasz Fudala

Tomasz Fudala (tf): Where did your interest in technology originate from?

Wiesław Seniura (ws): My professional history dates back to when I was fourteen. I was born in Grochów, that's part of Warsaw. I lived there and was supposed to study to become a pastry cook. But confectionery didn't interest me at all, I was always attracted to mechanics. I had a motorbike that I kept working on, fiddling around with. Eventually I was admitted to a school affiliated with the State Aviation Works (Państwowe Zakłady Lotnicze, PZL) and there I started working in the prototype workshop. I gradually moved from the technology centre to the construction centre. In the 1970s, I completed my studies at the Warsaw University of Technology's Faculty of Mechanics and Technology. I was a rebellious spirit. I liked innovating, but couldn't get a promotion because I wasn't a member of the Party. Even my perfect knowledge of the numbers and drawings of the 4,000 parts of the airplane didn't help.

tf: Did you experience your access to technological knowledge being restricted by the regime?

ws: Sometimes things were really tense. I felt it every day when entering the prototype workshop. Every time I had to show my pass five times, because technological knowledge was closely guarded. In the mid-1960s, for instance, we built the prototype of a large airplane, the TS-16 Grot, which, however, never went into production. It was designed by the outstanding constructor Tadeusz Sołtyk (1909-2004). Reportedly an identical aircraft was spotted two years later at an air show in Moscow. How was that possible? In the meantime they had told us to hand over all the drawings and discontinue the project... That's how things were in those days.



fig. a Monika Sosnowska, '1:1', 2007, open air production and deformation of the construction in Warsaw.

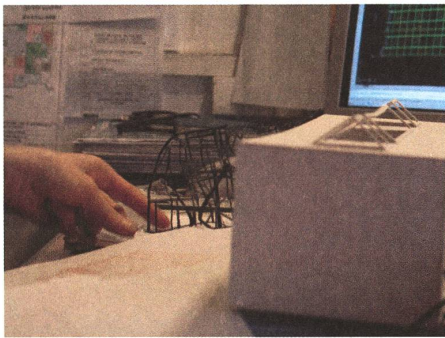
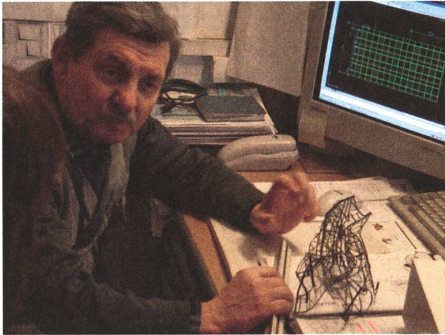


fig. b, c, d
Monika Sosnowska and Wiesław Seniura discussing
the process of production of '1:1'.

tf: How did technological innovations pass through the Iron Curtain?

ws: I became familiar with all the technologies while working at the prototype workshop. All the latest stuff reached us. In those days, in the 1960s, it was only through books. A lot of interesting stuff could be found in Russian literature. During the Cold War, Soviet authors literally copied Western books. You could buy books written in Cyrillic script cheaply and study the most recent technological developments. Such publications could be found in the university libraries, but it was not always possible to access them if you were a student from another university.

tf: Did the fact of having a university degree matter at all in a large state-owned enterprise?

ws: Because I hadn't joined the Party, I couldn't get a top management position, but I worked with technologies and constructions. Eventually, I was offered the job of running a PZL branch. During the so called 'winter of the century' (1978/79) everything froze, we had to reconstruct all the machinery, the whole plant. During the next two years I rebuilt the equipment and started up a waste treatment plant. In that plant, in a field somewhere in the middle of nowhere, we launched the production of airplane wings. I also had to build a team from scratch, devote a lot of time to those people, teach them everything, because everything they knew and had learned at home was farming. One day I got an urgent order for wings. A team from Warsaw came to help us. Suddenly, it was a competitive situation. And it turned out that my boys were faster with the job.

tf: But the system started faltering...

ws: I experienced the resulting uncertainties and convulsions firsthand. In 1978, I quit the job. Following the Solidarity strikes, I returned to Warsaw. We, my wife and I, had trouble finding a flat. The economy was in crisis. I started working for a house-building enterprise. That way I wanted to secure a flat for myself, but the crisis meant my plan didn't materialize. Even though I did everything in the construction industry, from metalwork to complete buildings, they didn't have a flat for me. The crisis was the only explanation they had.

tf: But the 1990s weren't much better, were they?

ws: During the post-1989 transformation period, my wife and I both lost our jobs. We weren't young anymore, so things got really tough for us. It was a jungle. I set up a new business at the corner of Konstruktorska and Postępu. Now it's all big banks there and office buildings. Hyperinflation was rampant but I took on a few friends and we started up our own business. We started as company that could do virtually everything. Naturally, I was attracted to everything that had to do with metalwork.

tf: Was it then that you took over the defunct house-building plant where Monika Sosnowska's work would later be created?

ws: The business was located on the site of a former house-building enterprise at Konstruktorska Street. We even restarted the gantry cranes that were originally used to transport large prefabricated elements. We did things that no one else would do. «If something is very difficult, complicated, and no one else wants to do it, call Mr Seniura», people would hear.

tf: When did you meet Monika Sosnowska?

ws: I met her when I was carrying out a very prosaic job. Then she asked me whether I wouldn't do another one for her. We made a crumpled cube that to me looked like a one-person flat. First we built the whole thing and then we crumpled it. Monika was a bit surprised when we stopped for a while, but we had to think it over and decide what to do next. We had to think the crumpling process through.

tf: What's your understanding of that work?

ws: I think it's a living space for one person, but a «traumatised» one. It resembles a unit, a module, of the kind you can encounter in various places around the world. The Japanese capsule hotels come to mind, but I also saw a car made in India for a long-distance postman. It was equipped so that if need be, he could easily convert it into a home. It had a bed, a washbasin, and yet it looked like it'd been converted from a motorbike.

tf: How was 1:1 made?

ws: At some point Monika asked us whether we wouldn't build her work for the Venice Biennale, which was 1:1. We agreed and she told us what she had in mind. She wanted the object to look more or less like the 1960s building at Górskiego St. (where the Foksal Gallery Foundation has its offices). We started by building a wire model. We built special devices for crumpling it and a wooden box that substituted for the pavilion in Venice. We had to make sure the sculpture fitted into the pavilion and was safe at the same time. People need to touch this sculpture, they immediately have to see whether it's really made of metal. Contact with the material used to be more important in the past than it is today. Building modernist houses had an aspect of artisanship to it.

We built the whole object on the site of the former house-building plant. Monika wanted the thing to look lightweight. We made holes in the metal sheets, but she didn't like it too much, said it was too delicate. We plugged the holes with strips of metal, which increased the overall weight. When we crumpled the construction, it looked as if it had been through some tragedy. As if a new building had been growing inside the pavilion, and the pavilion simply choked it. It cost us a lot of work and expertise, and some extra hydraulic servomotors.

tf: Were you happy with the result?

ws: Venice was an incredible experience. There was a lot of sweat, the boys were nervous too, because Monika wanted everything to be bent right up to the wall and the architecture put up

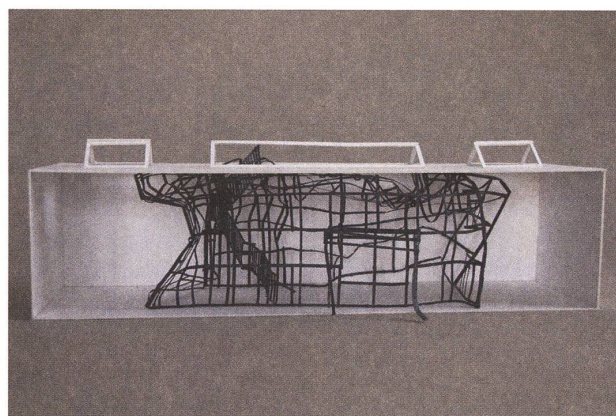
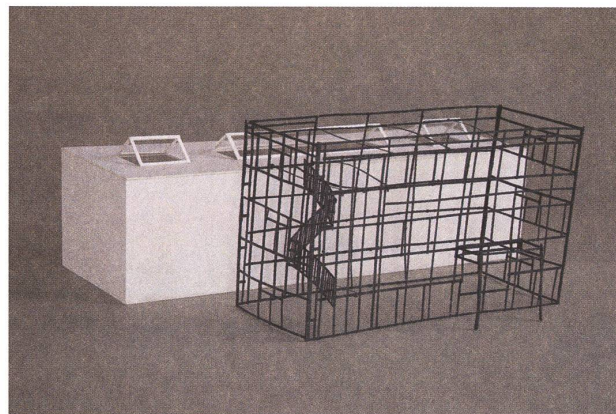


fig. e, f
Conceptual model of «1:1».

some resistance. Fortunately, I've always worked with smart teams that like doing crazy things. And the public's reactions were fantastic. The visitors would ask whether it was really metal because it looked like paper and yet the construction held. It wasn't just a drawing, but an existing physical object. And, well, one that took three trucks to transport. (laughs)

tf: You've had to do with both precise aviation constructions and with large-scale architectonic ones...

ws: I always liked watching all kinds of metal constructions and the solutions applied. How were they made? How would I have done it? Why so or why differently? How is the form related to the construction? I treated it like a riddle that needed a solution.

tf: And when does architecture fail?

ws: It seems that 1950s architecture has failed the test of time. New solutions are being introduced. Will they eventually disappear too? Fail too? That's possible because architecture is only for some time. Monika Sosnowska's 1:1 is also a reflection of a failed modernity. At some point in the past we started losing control of technology.

tf: Isn't this too catastrophic?

ws: No, but we need to remember that with computers we very easily lose touch with reality, which is then hard to regain. Soon we'll have to be kindly asking our cars to take us to this or that street. And the car will do it or will not if we don't communicate properly. It will keep asking which city we actually mean. Or which continent for that matter...

tf: Should architects try to design flexible buildings? As it was the case with the 'H frame' used in the construction of Warsaw's apartment blocks back in the 1960s?

ws: Yes, this old construction is quite creative, modifiable, you can rearrange everything inside at any time. The architect has to be aware that everyone needs space. Space is also dependent on many things: our mood, willingness, possibilities.

tf: Have you ever employed this principle of open-ended construction in practice?

ws: When I was building my empire (laughs), that is, my workshop, I built it with a certain philosophy in mind. If I was building a small cubbyhole, I wanted to build it in such a way so as to be able to expand it later. A modular solution, it was. I started inventing a system of rooms that could be converted into production space if need be. Because today I'm doing tiny things and tomorrow Monika comes to me and says, «Mr Seniura, how about converting a stadium?» «No problem», I say.

tf: You and Monika once went to the then-defunct Decennial Stadium, a ruin from the socialist era that had become a huge open-air market peopled, for instance, by Vietnamese immigrants...

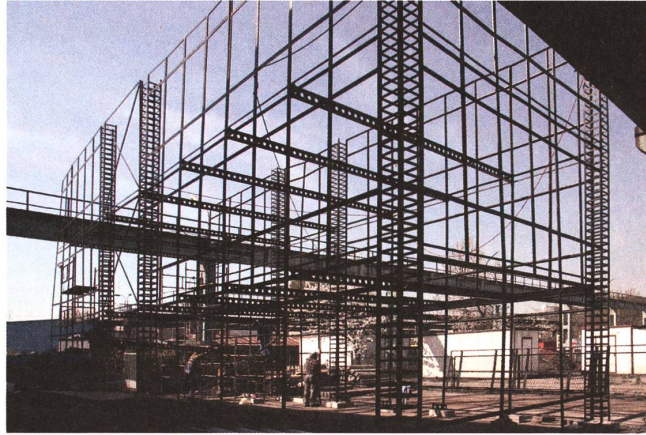


fig. 9
Upright structure of 1:1, before the crumpling process.

ws: Monika was interested in something that resembled a stall construction. We joked about what future archaeologists would discover if they were digging the Stadium up like they dig up Roman buildings.

tf: Those stalls were sometimes actually very smart. When you entered the alleys of the market that had developed there, it was like entering a forest – the tangle of those metal pipes supporting the stalls...

ws: There are many things that are patched together unprofessionally and yet they are very good and well thought-out. They are invented on the spot not by constructors or architects but by the builders themselves. The fast-made architecture of the stalls can also be ergonomic, flexible and portable. It's a business that thrives today but may be dead tomorrow. Sometimes you have to fold the stall up and move it quickly elsewhere.

tf: What did the standard set-up look like, what were those metal constructions for?

ws: They fought for every square metre of space because they paid per metre, so they had to use the available space to the maximum. Their ambition was to manufacture the most efficient systems possible for displaying their wares. That opened up a broad field for inventiveness and ingenuity.

tf: All kinds of solutions are developed in the garage. How do you view non-professional constructors?

ws: My ambition is for what I do to be realistic and respond to actual needs. For example, I often drive along a certain route. When I see 40 footbridges across the motorway and each one of them is different, I get very angry because in a country that still lacks highways and bridges, people keep designing a simple thing anew instead of adopting a systemic, standard solution. We can't afford to be starting from scratch all the time.

tf: Who's your role model?

ws: My role model was Tadeusz Sołtyk, an outstanding constructor, who was able to reach out further, look a hundred days ahead in the field of construction, which is also what Monika can do. She also thinks ahead.

tf: What irritated you the most in socialist Poland?

ws: The lack of freedom of action. Economic freedom is a must. I assume I usually do things that are useful, but I want to be the one who decides what I do.

tf: What will you be doing for the rest of this afternoon?

ws: Working on the central heating in my mother's apartment.

Warsaw, 20 July 2011



fig. h Monika Sosnowska, -1:1-, 2007, Polish Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale.

In 2007, Monika Sosnowska represented Poland at the 52nd Venice Biennale with the Installation '1:1'.

Sosnowska's non-functional, multi-floor construction does not fit inside the pavilion; it is crushed by its ceiling. What is at stake is the confrontation of a representational architecture with an aggressive element built into it. The construction – squeezed forcefully between the floor and ceiling – is deprived of its concrete tissue, limited to a skeleton ready-made construction elements.

According to the artist's intention, the construction is a three-dimensional drawing. Sosnowska describes this project as an attempt to «create a surreal, impossible situation». An essential element of the design is cooperation between the author and the builders – engineers who worked in the 1970s for the House Factory (Fabryka Domów), who used their knowledge and experience gained during their work in the construction sector.

Sosnowska refers to certain aesthetics taken from contemporary surroundings, but she uses them in a minimal way, necessary to define some type of space or object. She does not refer to particular events: «It is difficult to talk in a holistic way about the reality of that time. I find many assumptions of art and architecture which emerged at that time very impressive. It is a certain phenomenon. Especially fascinating were the large scale architectural endeavours, designing big parts of cities in detail. These ideas seem utopian today. What I am mostly interested in is a reflection of that time in a distorting mirror. The comparison of the sphere of ideas with real life, introducing a human factor into the world of concepts.»

The artist says: «I think we are a rather difficult generation. We have been learning everything in one system, whereas we entered our mature life in a different system. This abrupt transition has probably taught us a certain flexibility, but also a certain distance towards reality, and produced a conviction that everything is possible.»

Tomasz Fudala

Wiesław Seniura, born 1946
studied at Technical University in Warsaw. He is technologist, metal-worker, interested in sailing, motorization, constructions, engineering and aviation. He works and lives in Warsaw.

Tomasz Fudala, born 1980
is an art historian and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. He has worked at the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and Warszawski Aktyw Artystów. Author of texts to exhibition catalogues and published articles in: 'Domus', 'Artforum', 'Odra', 'Obieg', 'Czas Kultury', 'Autoportret'. Interested in architecture and the history of exhibiting, which was the subject to his latest project, 'The Space Between Us'.