

DESIGNING PUBLIC SPACE

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE

For the first time in history the majority of the world's population lives in cities. Every week seven million new people arrive in cities worldwide. All these people are extremely different from each other in terms of cultural, social or philosophical background, language, ambition, education, gender, age, well-being, temperament... The ability of this diverse mix to live with each other will determine the future of our cities. Will we spend our lives in blissful cities or in hellholes of despair? How do designers who work in public space, like the Moroccan Hicham Lahlou, and Belgian Lucile Soufflet, deal with this new reality?

Veerle Devos



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- 1/ Lucile Soufflet, « TF6 » © bisbee
- 2/ Lucile Soufflet, « TF79 » © bisbee
- 3/ Lucile Soufflet, « Circular bench » © bisbee
- 4/ Mobilier Urbain, Abris bus Design Hicham Lahlou pour la Ville de Rabat.



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Lucile Soufflet (1975), with French roots but born in Charleroi, studied Industrial Design at La Cambre in Brussels, where she currently teaches. She lived in Brussels for 15 years but her 2 toddlers made her decide to move to a Walloon village. She still has to get used to the bucolic peace that surrounds her studio. Her work is technical and artistic at the same time. "When I started design was asleep, and there were very few women in industrial design." This all changed - over the last 10 to 15 years design became hot and there are much more women. The least you can say is that she is an active participant in this evolution. But as she points out, it's still less obvious for female designers to combine their career with family life. "Luckily I don't have the temperament to become a 'star designer' and it's not my wet dream to work in the four quarters."

Still, her ambition is obvious when it comes to her quest for aesthetic, innovative and human design in public space. Her realizations in Brussels include concrete benches along the canal, her famous circular tree-hugging benches, ceramics in social housing, a bicycle park, and a series of chairs of different heights on a square ("In some cultures they like to sit as low as possible to the ground, like in others upright in a chair. This series gives everyone the choice").

Soufflet's design is always based on the needs of the individual, but it's constructed in such a way that it invites sharing and connecting with others. She also designs tableware (for Royal Boch amongst others), smart multifunctional furniture etc., but she prefers working in public space. To her, its large accessibility and engenders a unique confrontation. "Half a year after my first circular bench had been installed, I struck up an incognito conversation with local bar hangers to find out what they thought of it. Some hadn't even noticed the new benches, others were completely indifferent to it, and there were also people who assured me they found it exceedingly ugly. Others considered the bank as an added value for the neighborhood. If you only design for the private market it's easy: those who like it buy it, the others don't and pass to what they like - and that's it."

Hicham Lahlou (1973) was born in the Moroccan capital Rabat, but now lives in Casablanca. He got his education as an interior architect and designer in Paris "Although I must confess I'm much more influenced by North-European and Anglo-Saxon design than by the rather conservative French tradition." The fact that he has a family doesn't prevent him from flying out for work to Brazil, Hong Kong and everywhere in Europe. His work covers a broad range, from watches, furniture, concepts for hotels, brands, packaging, commercial architecture and strategic design, over the famous bathtub for Aquamass and a contemporary waterpipe for the French luxury brand Airdiem, to an electric car in Japan. In the public space, he designed bus stop shelters in Casablanca and Rabat as well as the entire 1800-kilometer-long motorway network of Morocco. The latter is an

unprecedented project of enormous magnitude that suddenly confronts all motorists with design in their daily lives.

And that's exactly his mission: to popularize modern design in Morocco, the Arab world and Africa - like Philippe Starck did in the West. Lahlou is a pioneer, not the least in his own country where too many still think design equals decoration. "I defend a profession that actually didn't exist." That's why in 2009, he became the founding father of the Moroccan Federation of Design and Industrial Design (FEMADE). From that role and through his work as an international designer, he fights his way. "Design is 80% business and 20% creation", he says, but he forgets to mention the importance of communication, in which he is a master. He inspires live on various international designfora, in interviews and in interaction with his followers on Facebook.

Even though both designers emphasize they make universal design, they are of course embedded in the city where they live and work: two metropolises that are in serious transition.

Brussels, until recently the flaking and run-down Belgian capital, became a small metropolis over the past 20 years. The demographics changed so radically here that according to recent research only 32.1% of the Brussels population still has (deep) Belgian roots, amongst 170 other nationalities. All in all, with its 1.1 million inhabitants, Brussels is a 'small world city', where the birth rate of 10.06 births/1.000 inhabitants (2011) lies above the national average. It's a hopeful sign for the capital of ageing Europe. Lucile Soufflet saw Brussels changing with her own eyes. "I consider this reality, in the sense that I don't just want to drop objects in the city. I try to design universal objects every city dweller can appreciate". Over the next 10 years the city expects to receive another 150,000 extra people while the Belgo-Belgians are expected to dwindle further to only 15% by 2020. This demographic revolution makes considered interventions in the urban landscape necessary. That includes street furniture and design in public spaces. Lahlou has also witnessed the transformation of Brussels into the current melting pot - including an estimated 169,691 residents of Moroccan origin. He knows Brussels well, as he has never stopped to visit the city since his first visit as a child. "Every time I go to Brazil I'm amazed that, although this is a huge country with 200 million inhabitants and a myriad of religions, cultures etc, you always get the same answer to the question of identity: 'I'm Brazilian'. For Brussels, it's important to achieve such a shared identity too. This is only possible if you succeed in making people enthusiastic for your urban project. Through good design we can certainly contribute to that."

Not being Morocco's capital, Casablanca is with its approximately 5 million inhabitants the largest city in the country. After Johannesburg and Cairo, Casablanca is the third African megalopolis. It's an industrial, modern city with a busy >>>



Lucile Soufflet



Hicham Lahlou



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construction business and the largest port in Africa being built. It's a top location for all major international luxury brands too. The composition of the population is not as heterogeneous as in Brussels, but the city attracts people from all over the country – and those also have various roots. There is also an increasingly larger community of expats, internationals, returning migrants and free movers who feel called by the booming economy. That's why Casablanca's population is rapidly increasing while the birth rate (19,19 births/1.000 inhabitants, 2011) gradually decreases which is a sign of more wealth and development. Meanwhile the whole country, like the recent 'Arab Spring' makes clear, is trying to find its way to more democracy. Even after the terrorist attack in Marrakech last spring, Morocco is still successful in combining its Berber, Jewish and Arabic cultural heritage with external influences such as the French, Spanish and Anglo-American lifestyles. Morocco, and for sure also its megalopolis Casablanca, is strongly in transition. What are the challenges Hicham Lahlou and Lucile Soufflet, who differ in terms of personality but are each in their own way ambitious, are up against? How do they deal with the challenges inherent to their work in rapidly changing cities? Should their design in the public space reflect the identity of the city's manifold communities?

It never occurred to Hicham Lahlou to dwell on possible resistance to his design in public space. "It's especially important that we design a coherent public space where residents, who ultimately pay taxes in order to be able to live in a pleasant and people-friendly city of high quality, find ways to shelter, have nice benches at their disposal, etc. You can argue about tastes infinitely but you can't consider everyone." Which does not mean that he doesn't try to find out what residents find important. But the materialization of their desires depends firstly on the priorities of the general benefit. For the motorway network for example, his most important task was to find out how he could, through his design, encourage motorists to drive responsibly and safely. "My bus stop shelters had to work equally well for Casablanca, a modern town with many Art Deco buildings, as for the more solemn and traditional Rabat. In such cases it's impossible to consider the particular needs of private individuals. As a designer you have to come up with something that has character but yet is universal. And ultimately a bus shelter has to do what it's made for: protect against sun and rain."

His female counterpart Lucile Soufflet says that "design in public spaces manifests itself to everybody, without much introduction. This kind of direct confrontation arouses equally direct feelings. It shocks or it charms, or entices, it affects or on the contrary provokes indifference. That is very different from presenting design objects at international fairs and specialized stores for an inherently interested audience." When working in



public space, Soufflet believes you always have to take the residents into account - but not too much. "If you simply ask what people want, you often end up with very bad and ugly design. So it's important you start a dialogue and you take them along in your design, so they can finally choose to support it. As a designer you have to educate your audience." In Belgium, today's designers are often involved from the very start of a project in public space. "In the past we only joined in at the end of the whole process and were considered as the icing on the cake. Of course that didn't work; the situation is much better now. The big challenge now is not to slavishly follow the desires of the residents but to find a way to get all different communities of a city involved. This way, your design is not parachuted into the city and it will be worn by the locals."

Lahlou and Soufflet, each with their own context and temperament, will share their thinking about working in public space and their responsibility in rapidly changing cities during a talk in Villa Empain, moderated by Diane Hennebert, head of the Boghossian Foundation. This event takes place with the support of the Brussels Fashion and Design Centre, which also participates in the Morocco 2012 festival, that will highlight the vanguard of the Moroccan fashion and design scene.

Mobilier urbain
et signalétique
design Hicham
Lahlou pour la ville
d'Agadir.

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VORM IN EN ALS KUNST

Bespiegelingen over de hoog-gespannen relaties tussen kunst en design

Luk Lambrecht



Rem Koolhaas Houselife
by Ila Beka & Louise Lemoine

LIFESTYLE

Een mens voelde altijd al de behoefte om zich niet alleen te omringen met functionele objecten die het leven faciliteren maar ook met unieke dingen waarmee hij zich kan onderscheiden op socio-economisch vlak. Schone en unieke dingen worden vooral geassocieerd met kunst. Kunst brengt nobele gedachten op gang; denkbeelden die niet behoren tot "onze" functionele en op kapitalistische leest geschoeide wereld. Het begrip consumptie betekent het met alle middelen en strategieën van verleiding aanboren van steeds weer nieuwe behoeften. De drang naar het "hebben" en "bezitten" van telkens nieuwe en waardevolle dingen is een niet te stillen honger die in onze maatschappij met man en macht wordt aangewakkerd en wakker wordt gehouden. Kunst is vandaag niet alleen speculatie geworden maar ook serieuze business waarvan de vele kunstbeurzen getuige zijn alsook de toenemende verstrengeling tussen de kunstmarkt en de trendgevoelige musea en andere al dan niet met gemeenschapsgeld betoelagde instellingen die de hedendaagse kunst promoten en ontsluiten. Alles is vandaag confuus geworden zoals de wereld dat nu ook veelvuldig is in tijden van globalisering via informatisering en democratisering van vervoer en transport. Cultuur, kunst en design zijn vandaag niet meer

weg te denken uit de haast versmachtende druk zich te confirmeren aan de fonkelende lifestyle. Lifestyle is nu de norm van de cultuur geworden – in het verlengde van wat de Franse socioloog Pierre Bourdieu poneerde is de mate aan lifestyle vandaag recht evenredig met de plaats waar een persoon zich manifesteert op de maatschappelijke ladder.

DECOR

De dichotomie tussen leven en design is zeer nadrukkelijk in beeld in de film "Koolhaas Houselife" waarin de cineasten Ila Beka & Louise Lemoine in het zog van een film zoals "Mon Oncle" van Tati de coördinaten/snijpunten opvoeren van de assen sociale herkomst/ materiële organisatie. Een schoonmaakster weet bijna geen raad met de super geleide functionaliteit van het avant-garde huis van Rem Koolhaas in de buurt van het Franse Bordeaux en "hoe" ze deze woon-machine moet zien schoon te houden. Lifestyle is een manier van denken en leven geworden die meer en meer het beladen begrip "cultuur" wegdrumt. Kunst, cultuur een lifestyle zijn de niet altijd keurig definieerbare sleutelbegrippen geworden van het "hedendaagse" leven. De kunst blijft nu nog even buiten schot of wordt in de woorden van de Amerikaanse minimalist-kunstenaar Carl Andre meer en meer "cultuur". Dat betekent dat kunst niet meer wringt, ondervraagt of zicht- en tastbaar vorm geeft aan de inherente twijfels van de mens maar vernis wordt, een laagje fonkelend mysterie dat perfect past bij het "upgraden" van social events, ruime lobbies en interieurs. Vandaag zijn zelfs heel wat antiquairs aan de slag als decorateurs van huizen in formules van all in "aankleding". Het interieur uit al dan niet gerecycleerde materialen wordt via sfeerverlichting verfraaid met bijvoorbeeld kunst uit "alle" tijden zodat het interieur een microscopisch beeld weergeeft van de paradijselijke beschaving van de mens met een selectie fijne artefacten. De kunst wordt decor; alles wordt mooi naast elkaar gezet als interessante symptomen van kunst en cultuur in een waardevrije context van "dragende" lifestyle. Design had lange tijd te maken met utopie; met het zich vereenzelvigen met "andere" objecten die >>>