Julien De Smedt
(1975) is the
founder and
director of
JDS Architects,
based in
Brussels,
Copenhagen
and Shanghai.
Julien's commitment to the
exploration of
contemporary
architecture
has helped to
re-energize the
discussion of
the practice
with diverse
projects. Prior to
founding JDS
Architects,
Julien worked
with OMA/Rem
Koolhaas in
Rotterdam and
co-founded and
directed with
Bjarke Ingels
the architecture
firm PLOT



Within two weeks after Lehmann Brothers smashed all financial certainties the world thought would endure forever, Julien De Smedt had decided upon two things. Firstly, he would record the year to come on a daily basis in *Agenda:* Can We Sustain our Ability to Crisis? Secondly, he would accept an invitation from a rich industrial magnate to design a city with 99 other architects in Ordos, Mongolia. Last year, he launched Makers with Agendas, a design label with a mission. What links these three things is the will to solve problems on any scale.

# On a scale of hybrid

BELGIUM — TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER, ILLUSTRATION: KLAUSTOON

When Julien De Smedt founded Makers with Agendas (MWA) with William Rayn, the aim was to reach a larger audience than architecture can achieve. Not necessarily with regard to the number of projects (architecture might win there, at least until now), but morally. The campaign 'Design is...' drew attention to global issues like abuse, pollution, lack of education, transport, obesity and overpopulation. If the mobile phone industry has caused millions of deaths through coltan mining, one can switch to Fairphone, or stop using phones at all. When transport is polluting the Earth, one can invent production schemes that don't require it. If Southern Europe is hardest hit by the economic crisis, one can set up production lines to help local economies. MWA opens up all of these potentialities, fully aware that it cannot solve global problems with design only, but can do everything in its power to not make them bigger. Not many architects get the chance to implement the results of research in real life, both within and outside Europe, which is why A10 has a few questions.

#### In your view, how do design and architecture relate?

It starts with architecture; that's what I have been involved in the longest. MWA is an extension of that, but in some ways it goes further. It is easier distributed and available for more people. A building is a single event and is eventually only used by a few. It has a given set of users. MWA has extended our reach and our ideas to a larger population.

### Ideas like obesity, education, areas of conflict... huge and complicated stuff.

If the issues are bigger, the products are smaller and more pervasive. We're not trying to be freaks, but the reverse creation process we're setting up is like an anomaly, if compared to the big brands. As we develop and extend our resources, we can make more complex products that need more research and thus more money, but are also more influential. The issues at stake sometimes lead to the conclusion that a real resolution would be a change in the law, but as far as our capacity goes now, it's though the ingenuity of our designs that we aim to make life better.

### Since then, you've created things like 'Life House' and 'Mike the bike'. What's the status quo?

Life House is a survival kit for people that are displaced by catastrophes and wars. By making an aid kit that also contains a raft or a tent, design can be part of bringing back some basic needs of human beings in distress, such as immediate survival, but also the lack of intimacy. To do this right, we're talking to specialists and humanitarian

organizations. That topic is very dear to us. Same goes with the mobility issue with Mike, a bike that is designed to, among other things, take your luggage to the airport or nearest transportation hub, so that you don't need a car. We have a prototype, and we are developing it further. I am not saying we will end up having our own factory, but we try to avoid the big makers for now.

#### How much of your time goes into MWA?

Fifty per cent would be my aim. It's my intention to make it a substantial part of my work. It liberates me from a lot of constraints that the world of architecture has. We corner issues, we research them, identify the problems, then generate an actual answer—a product. MWA derives from an urge to understand other forces that drive the world. My architecture goes in the same direction, but to really address societal issues one needs to utilize other tools and cover other topics.

### Have you implemented ideas from MWA back into your architecture?

We have a project, a new mobile home. William Ravn asked me to design his summer house. So we discussed it as a general issue first. Consumption of land is becoming problematic. Small retreats are a big burden on the planet, and they are hardly used, they pollute the land-scape and eventually contribute to the financial stress of a country. I wanted to challenge that typology and the mobile home typology.

# With MWA you're involved in education as well. You had discussions with the Belgian Minister of Education, for example. You may have the opportunity to implement your ideas.

I am an opportunist in the best of ways. I would definitely apply MWA knowledge back into architecture when it makes sense. Before MWA, in 2005, we did the GANG School in Copenhagen, where we implemented a few ideas. It was a school for expelled kids, to keep them off the streets. It was a complete hybrid in that sense.

## So what's the problem with education: access or quality? How can you deal with that as a designer, and where?

Both. And we still have to find out what we can add to that as designers. These things take time, and therefore aren't easy to address. We basically look at the world and discover things that are not necessarily obvious at first glance. Some things don't work well, but we don't know why: education, for example.

Would it also work on a bigger scale, like in your projects in China?

I'd say yes, there is a constant flow of ideas back and forth

## The role of the architect may not be ideal, but it is real. You build a lot in China. Is it easier to implement your ideas there or in Europe?

In Europe. China is unstable, albeit a necessary destination if you want to do large scale. The K2 project is a high-density residential complex designed to allow for a maximum amount of outdoor parks to proliferate locally. Then the Chinese housing economy bubble burst, and now they are redoing the project in colonial style thinking that the potential clientele is more keen on buying conservative solutions in times of crisis! Our plan, our volume, with a colonial facade. Can you imagine?

In Europe, we control things better than in China and we have a deeper understanding of all aspects. We're also more protected legally. This is also what we are going to discuss in my next *Agenda*, the follow-up to the first book. That said, the Hanghzou Tower is totally going the way we designed it. But another project in Qingdao – my biggest building to date (180,000 m²) – is a challenge to maintain as we designed it. We know it won't be exactly what we intended. In the new *Agenda* the drama that is happening in Qingdao will be analysed.

### How does your urban/nature hybridity go down there?

Europe is still way ahead in understanding the problematics and trying to implement them. More creative, also. When we did the Birkegade Penthouses in Copenhagen, the courtyard was very small, so we added accessible rooftops. Now they're co-owned by the community, who fund the project themselves. This would be unthinkable in China. But the Hangzhou project has terraces that look like rice fields and will function as water collectors for use in the building.

### What innovation in architecture is most needed at the moment?

We need to increase urbanity and natural settings at the same time. The city needs to improve in its environment. In China, I never see the sun. It's really spooky, because of the smog. If we could live and work in a city rethought as an ecosystem where biodiversity and density would cohabit, we would, for instance, massively reduce transportation while maintaining quality of living, which would make a huge difference.

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