

Maarten Gielen (Ninove, 1984) is a founding member of Rotor, where he works as designer, manager, and researcher. As part of Rotor, he has collaborated on various exhibition projects, including OMA/Progress (Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2011), Usus/Usures (Belgian Pavilion, 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale), and Ex Limbo (Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2011). In 2014, he curated the Oslo Architecture Triennale with Lionel Devlieger. Gielen is the recipient of the 2015 Rotterdam-Maaskant Prize.

Rotor: Scratching the Surface

The Brussels-based collective, Rotor is a new player in the league of architectural cartons. We've asked three of the members, Tristan Boniver, Renaud Haertling and Maarten Gielen about their perspectives on the established architecture institutions, and about their own approach to exhibitions.

Rotor was established in 2005 and now consists of eight members with diverse backgrounds, such as stage design, bioengineering, history and architecture. What binds the group together is a common interest in the flux of materials in our societies. Rotor's research on building sites, waste sorting facilities, and second-hand industry influences their design, while the presentation of their findings in the form of exhibitions, publications or conferences has become for the group an activity in itself.

"We see the material footprints of society as a way to read it. There are plenty of ways to read society - you can read the newspaper, you can read only fashion books, and still have a pretty good idea of what is going on. We are interested in the capacity the material world has to have its own history, its own memory, its own way of speaking at the same time in the same way. It's not just the instance of what a society decides to do, but also the way it does it, the way it organizes it," says Maarten Gielen. In 2005, in the age of 22, Maarten Rotor was born.

Rotor, Curator of the Oslo Architecture Triennale.

The Oslo Architecture Triennale is just a few days into the title "The Future of Architecture" and how sustainability is challenging our way of thinking and what architects can give into this. We had the chance to talk with Rotor, the curators of the exhibition, who have selected over 600 objects carrying claims of sustainability across the world.

You at Rotor have selected objects that carry claims of sustainability in exhibitions "Behind the Green Door". What does that mean for you? What does it mean for Maarten Gielen? We spent over an hour looking at architecture that suits itself to the planet. For the exhibition we ended up selecting materials from over 600 projects. What does the Novartis Campus in Basel designed by Gehry have in common with the Wiesbaden Army Airfield designed by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers? Are there similarities between the co-housing project Tanglewicks of Danish group Væksthuset and a design for an incinerator with slope by BIG? Between the work of Werner Sobek and Heringer? They don't share a formal language, there is not even a common vision. And yet they're all being referred to as 'sustainable'. Liane Devlieger: A difference can be the manner in which the label sustainable is being used. For projects it is a driving force, a deliberate attempt to be 'planet'. Other projects use the notion more opportunistically, what all the authors want to work, see their name in the common is that they are 'sustainable'. Liane Devlieger: The question: "What does it mean to be sustainable? It's not just about resources, a world that is more sustainable."

Belgian design reveals traces of industrial past

The Green Door exhibition to transfer sand and stones, but also hand-painted white and exhibition.

Rotor's Adventures 'Behind the Green Door'

This is the Architecture Triennale, curated by the collective Rotor, is centered around the theme of sustainability. Rotor's installation view 'Behind the Green Door'.

These were the main questions at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale. Rotor's MA show at the Barbican in London - the first time the group exhibited in a major Triennale this year. In-depth research and themes of reuse have slowly but surely become some of the Belgian collective's main preoccupations. It will be an interesting feature in this exhibition at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale.

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The Brussels collective, who represented the Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles at the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2010 with the project "Usus / usures" has since known a constantly renewed success abroad. Evidenced by the prestigious Global Award for Sustainable Architecture at the Cité de l'Architecture in Paris and the Jonge Marktprize in 2012 in the Netherlands, awarding their research about material flows in architecture and their concrete proposals of not only poetic solutions but also practical ones, always sensitive to society issues. Liane (but not least, Rotor) has launched a competition, "Challenge Opolis" How to tell deconstruction and recycling of recovered materials? We are very curious to see the exhibition during RECIPROCTY 2015! One thing is certain: it will be at least as original as the collective itself.

ROTOR curates 2013 Oslo architecture triennale

The focus of the 2013 Oslo Architecture Triennale (from September 19th - December 1st, 2013) is "green" with the exhibition "behind the green door - architecture and the desire for sustainability" acting as the main feature of the festival's rich program of more than 70 events. Curated by Belgian collective Rotor, "behind the green door" presents more than 600 objects - all of which to some degree carry claims of sustainability that have been gathered from over 200 international studios, companies and environmental offices.

The pieces on show consist of games, models, photographic, proto-types, videos, etc., which express bio-architecture, city planning, scientific practice, business opportunities, political power are intertwined under the umbrella of "sustainability". They are not meant to represent a particular discipline, but to offer an overview of the projects and products refer to the term and show the practice of architecture over the past 100 years. Rotor is an official media partner of the Oslo Architecture Triennale. Rotor spoke to Rotor in the lead-up to the triennale about the exhibition and how they can expect from it.

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Last year, Rotor decided to take their commitment to reuse one step further. Since then, they have deconstructed about fifteen buildings, stripping them down to the base structure and reworking the matter amassed in the process into reusable materials that meet commercial demands. It has become a huge success. 'The turnover of this business already equals our regular work,' says founder Maarten Gielen as we spend the day at Rotor.

Creative deconstruction

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

Visitors to the Vilvoorde office first see the showpieces: the doors, floors, chairs by Jules Wabbes, and '90s post-modern kitsch. Their gaze is then drawn to the smart spin-offs, including upcycled old coat hooks sold per running metre and banisters offered in custom-length modules. Then there's the yard, filled with dozens of toilet bowls, cupboards, chairs, benches, and textiles. Employees process a new load of products. Maarten Gielen smokes a cigarette at the picnic table in the meantime.

How do you find a suitable building?
Most of our clients are major players in the Brussels property market, and own hundreds of thousands of square metres of office space. When new tenants lease the building, which happens every ten to fifteen years, the interiors undergo top-to-bottom refurbishment. We take stock of the old interiors, such as the ceilings and walls, which we then offer to our 200-strong network of dealers, contractors, and architects. Then we start deconstruction, and transform the building into a showroom for clients to assess the quality. Most items are sold on-site. The top-quality features are taken to our depot, restored, and sold via our website.

Do you see this as architects' work?
Of course. What we do here is similar to what an architect does on a construction site: coordinating activities, drafting demolition specifications, checking quality, and finalizing. Subcontractors take care of easy jobs, such as tiling, while our own staff takes on the more complex tasks. We must preserve the knowledge gained during demolition, so that the buyer knows its history.

Why do you focus on wholesalers, not private individuals?
While retail trade is more lucrative, given the much larger margins on materials, our goal is to professionalize wholesalers.

So you don't work with the design potential of reuse, as other architects do with reclaimed objects?
No. We offer a standardized package at a competitive price. Working with second-hand material should be no harder than working with new, but you do need someone to create that bridge. We can take care of the logistics and the technicalities, so that for an architect it becomes more or less as easy as ordering newly produced materials.

Is it possible to reuse everything?
The ideological definition of reusable is 'everything that can be dismantled'. However, this changes once translated into business logic, which dictates that a reusable material can be dismantled and resold at a lower price than the market value. All our material must contend either with cheap materials from China, or with products of new quality. Naturally, second-hand material competes better when it is of high quality, because then it can make a positive economic difference.

So it's not cheaper for companies?
On the contrary, it's never more expensive. We have different types of clients. The easiest ones are those who look for unique vintage design, whatever the cost. The second type is more pragmatic: they look for standard objects like urinals or floorboards. It would cost them €250 to buy it new, but €40 when they buy from us. If you need bucket sinks or urinals on six floors, and you can buy them from us and save €200 per item, this makes quite the difference.

What about legal bottlenecks, aside from the economic laws?
Public demolition tenders are almost always based on just one criterion: the lowest price. Our legal expert tackled the question: how can public commissioners favour practices that privilege material reuse (or, how can the material be removed from the building)? We produced a compact handbook that shows the way. Now we're working on the production side (that is to say, how to install the materials at another location?). This is still problematic. When you remove and resell a modular ceiling, does this mean you're placing a new or second-hand product on the market? What happens if you paint it? We must be aware of the risks in the sector.

Have you increased your knowledge of materials and regulations over the years?
Our projects have always had an experimental side, and we've learned that the materials hold much of a building's intelligent design. Once aware of the economic logic behind the products and their origins, one sees that the architect is at the helm of a huge construction machine, yet possesses little substantial knowledge about it.

Have modern materials retained their architectural value?
It used to take two days to install a threshold. While this process has been accelerated, thanks to modular walls, a team of engineers has had to invest ten years of work into making the technology thinner, stronger, and safer. The number of labour hours may well be the same, but they are used at different times in the construction process.

Marble is timeless, but the probability of a modular ceiling being sold to the highest bidder in 30 years is minuscule, don't you think?
That's not necessarily true. We found a radiator cover in a 1970s-era building that applied MDF as a thin layer of veneer. Back then, people saw it as an expensive and desirable material to be used sparsely. Nowadays the opposite is true, one would ensure this is invisible in the product. And who'd have thought that fitted kitchens from the 1930s would be worth so much nowadays?

Does the theory 'the higher the quality, the easier it is to reuse' hold water?

This depends on the idea of quality. Standardization is a good argument for reuse: if each door has the same dimensions, it means we only need one photo in the catalogue or on the website. This saves us a lot of money. But put a bronze doorknob on the door and the likelihood of somebody buying it increases considerably.

Is this a temporary research project, or a commercial enterprise for the next 20 years?
We want to create a brand new sector. This needs to expand beyond Belgium and into the rest of Europe.

What about 'Rotor Poland' or 'Rotor Denmark'?
Or we could form alliances. Material economics is not limited to regions; much of what is used in Belgium comes from far away. One parquet manufacturing factory in Poland can supply the whole EU, eliminating the need to establish a factory in each country. We would then need to determine the right scale of a deconstruction company by experiment.

But local and national building conditions, regulations, and techniques vary from country to country.
That's right. Right now, however, there are too few examples for us to judge the scale of that problem. While we are not the only business doing this, we are one of the first.

Is it true that manufacturers at new companies don't give enough consideration to 'reusability'?
Passive house standards are extremely popular with architects and legislators, but the more relevant question we should ask is: what are the materials' properties? Often, production is so environmentally unfriendly that a passive or even active house cannot compensate for this in any way. At the very least, so-called 'grey' energy, the energy used for the production of building materials, should be part of these calculations. Furthermore, there should be a transition from a tax on labour to a tax on materials, so that reusing materials becomes a much more attractive option. However, energy efficiency became popular because producers of building materials made good business out of it and lobbied in favour of higher norms. It is doubtful that the same can happen with the promotion of reclaimed materials, as this reduces the volume of new materials needed.

Could you name examples of reuse in your reclaimed materials?
You often can't tell the difference between old and new. Our involvement is only visible when the material's narrative heritage is handled purposefully, as Doorzon Interieur Architecten did in a project for an organic grocer's shop. This now features a spectacular modern floor from a 1930s university building, creating an interplay between two worlds that otherwise would have remained separate. But I don't want to sound too enthusiastic about it - it's also just a nice floor.

