

This year Rotor is in charge of designing and decorating the festival centre and its surroundings. The following is taken from a conversation Lars Kwakkenbos had on 10 April 2009 with Lionel Devlieger and Maarten Gielen, two driving forces behind Rotor who, with Melanie Tamm, are responsible for this project. The following excerpt deals in particular with the tables you might be sitting at while reading this, and with which we wish to illustrate their design practice.

Maarten Gielen: The specifications were as follows: make sure there are seats for a hundred people and that someone in a wheelchair can sit at a table. Which in this case meant that you definitely needed to have tables with steel frames, since if you use wood and you want them to be stable, the frame under the table top would be too thick. The next question was: should we design the steel frame ourselves, or not? Seeing that the tables would only be in Les Brigittines for three weeks, and then hopefully somewhere else, we thought it important that they should be easy to move, and easy to dismantle. Designing a steel table with removable legs and having it made would require a lot of people.

So we went looking for second-hand tables. Office desks seemed to be the cheapest: businesses are almost always looking for new ones, and so there are more than enough around. You can get them for 10 to 15 euros a piece, and they're the right height. In the end, we bought a set of old desks from Belgacom offices in a second-hand store in Brussels. Their tops – in massive, “folksy” melamine – were cream-coloured and quite hideous. So we pimped them.

Lionel Devlieger: From the start we wanted to work with recycled melamine. We wanted to come up with a system that would make it possible to reassemble pieces of melamine on an existing table frame, and with these tables this seemed possible.

MG: The undersides of the table tops all seemed to be in different colours – the underside is probably a handy spot for manufacturers to use up their second pick of colours. We sawed each top in three, mixed these pieces together and then fixed them back onto the frames, but this time upside-down. If we had just turned each table top around, the tables wouldn't really have gained in any way, whereas now they really have gained in aesthetic value, in the sense that they have been the object of careful design, and this, in my opinion, really gives these tables added value.

In other words, these tables represent a design practice. Is this important in your work?

LD: It is for me.

MG: For me too, but it's not a goal per se. If you have a look at what gets tossed out during a clearance, chances are that a beautiful cast-iron radiator with a detailed flower pattern, for instance, won't end up in the skip (dumpster). So that radiator's beauty, its aesthetic value, will serve its very existence *and* its longevity. I hope the same will now hold for these tables. By cutting up the tops and mixing the pieces together, maybe these tables will sell more easily at a second-hand market.

This aesthetics thus also serves the chances of survival afterwards.

LD: Our aesthetic reasoning mostly consists of picking out beautiful things that already exist, and of dusting them down. In this sense, one first has to overcome a certain aversion. If you dive into a skip, as we often do, there's always a moment of slight disgust. This last week we dipped into a skip three times.

MG: One of which had been used in a hospital....

LD: It was rubble, so don't worry.

The Kunstenfestivaldesarts also chose Rotor for the way in which you seek out and select your materials.

MG: Yes. We choose our materials in the same way that a curator selects artists for an exhibition. The fact that we've used shuttering materials for the terrace and melamine for the floors is something we can easily justify, and how the festival centre will be lit, for instance, too. It's seventies stuff. Aluminium profiles in which you plug spotlights with parabolic reflectors and silver crown lightbulbs.

Where did you find this lighting?

MG: On a second-hand website. We buy quite a lot second-hand. We're generally happier doing that than endlessly looking for the "right" waste material. We're always looking for what we call B-products, and such materials touch on a lot more than what you can find on a building site after a clearance. Transport, for instance, always costs quite a lot, and recyclable materials like plastic, steel and cotton also have their market value – the price is generally set per tonne – and a large part of the wood we bought for this project comes from a wood company sale of discarded loads, and for that we paid an amount per kilo.

LD: Most of the materials we work with don't cost us anything, but from the moment you take on this type of project, there will always be a lot of material you do need to buy. If you don't, then assembling a surface of 100 m² is a futile endeavour.

Is a Rotor project recognisable as such?

LD: I do think there is something recognisable about our work, but probably not in the same way as with the work of other architects or designers. Maarten, for instance, is lucky enough not to have gone through the mould of an architecture degree or some other type of design training, where you're conditioned to pose as an artist when developing forms. In these kinds of trainings, you are strongly seen as an artist, and that can lead to frivolous behaviour if a problem has to be solved. Ninety percent of those solutions can be brushed aside by saying: "Look, there is no legitimate reason for doing this." For us it's always the project as a whole that counts, and that means a lot more than just the accomplished design. That project starts with the first discussion with the commissioner and ends, so to speak, when everything has been cleared away or taken down. The project embodies everything that happens in between, *all* of which has to be interesting in fact. So, whether decent photographs come out of it or not...

MG: ...will depend on the photographer.