

New Houses built with old clothes

Interview with Césare Peeren and Jan Jongert,
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Your office has had the obvious, yet unusual idea of treating buildings, facilities and even the city as a resource. Could you explain this idea?

That is the cornerstone of our idea. We believe that over the last 150 years, our society has mined enough resources to serve as material for many generations to come.

These materials have also been processed into parts, components and buildings, using a lot of energy and engineering skills.

This is where our concept of "Superuse" comes in. The materials and their inherent qualities can be used as resources if you learn to recognize the potential. It is merely a shift of perspective to see resources everywhere in our daily environment: the city. The next step is to transform the existing city into the city of the future using as few new resources as possible.

You have set yourselves the goal to reuse as much recycled material as possible in all your projects. On average, what percentage of the materials used in your buildings is recycled?

We do not have a set goal, we use as much as is possible based on the circumstances and restrictions of a project. That could even mean using new materials if it is more beneficial to the project and the environment just to focus on energy efficiency, though that hasn't happened yet... Generally we "Superuse" between 50% and 95% recycled resources.



The three heads behind 2012 Architecten (from left to right):
Jan Jongert, Césare Peeren and Jeroen Bergsma.

By using old buildings as a resource for new, you are actually following a long standing tradition. Buildings like the Acropolis in Athens and the Colosseum in Rome were used as a resource for new buildings in the past. How far would you go when you adopt a city as a resource?

We cannot really define our limitations since these are usually set by monument preservation organizations. However, I think it depends on the construction quality of the 'old building' and what you want to preserve from a cultural perspective. We always start with an analysis of the existing situation and see if we can transform it to meet new goals. We always respect existing structures in a way, but we don't think it is the best solution to preserve existing buildings just for monumental reasons. Our world is continuously changing and so will the built environment; this is nothing but the natural development of our planet.

If you use surplus materials for a house, as you did with the Villa Welpeloo, it means a completely new concept for each project. Doesn't this make the buildings expensive and more complicated than planning with standard materials?

Since most of our projects are built with materials from a new source it may seem that we always have to develop a new concept. In truth this is not the case; we work mainly with materials that are available in vast quantities worldwide. Our projects just show the potential for creating architecture from these materials. Each project should be seen as a prototype for the use of a certain material. It is a promising fact that we manage to build prototypes within the timeframe and budget of a standard project...

Each project is the starting point and learning ground for developing similar projects in the future. In the past we experimented with the potential of cable reels in smaller installations until we reached a point we were convinced they could be applied to buildings too. The next time we work with the materials we used in the Villa Welpeloo we will be able to draw on our experience. For us they have become standard building materials.

Are there materials that you would not reuse or recycle?

We wouldn't use any toxic materials or anything that has a shorter lifespan than its purpose requires. For instance for the Villa we could have used sleepers from train tracks but they are saturated with creosote-oil which has light toxic fumes. We think those materials should be properly recycled in safe environments. The wood from cable reels on the Villa would have originally had a lifespan of 5 to 10 years, but we treated the wood with the Plato-process, a heat treatment (with waste heat from an energy plant), tripling the lifetime of the wood.

Is there a vision that is behind your efforts to use existing resources and materials to create new places?

We think it is more natural to build on what is already there than to start from scratch using new things. It is the way a bird builds its nest; it is the way to keep this planet habitable. We are the only animal that does not do it and we all know what the result is... if you do not know, watch Disney's "Wall-E"...

Designing from the characteristics of existing parts also results in more imaginative architecture, more layered, open to more interpretations, carrying the history of its former functionality into the new application. This evokes humour, wonder and imagination.

"Recyclicity," under this slogan you go a step further and propose that the segregation and separation of city life be stopped and that living, working and leisure are brought back together. What other thoughts do you have in this direction?

150 years of urban development has left our cities in a state of segregation with various environments constructed to serve dedicated purposes, we believe the time has come to bring everything back together.

We simply no longer have the energy and resources to keep this inefficient machinery going.

In addition, we believe there is political gain to be made. As long as people have no interest in the industrial activity that is part of their cities, they will continue to oppose change and development. This will further enhance segregation. When industry is part of the community, development becomes an issue of mutual interest.

We find that in contributing to this development, we are participating in one of the most exciting challenges facing humanity at this time!

Which projects, either completed projects or in planning, are typical examples of your work?

Our first full scale project on a building following the superuse concept was the Villa Welpeloo in Enschede in 2009. Superuse in the wikado playground in 2008 introduces sustainability to children in a social and playful concept. Our prize-winning entry for a recycling centre in Maastricht has several layers of collective interaction: Local materials are given a secondary use, goods that people no longer need are repaired in the centre by the unemployed seeking opportunities to re-enter the workforce. In addition, rainwater from the roof is collected for use in cleaning purposes. Construction will start this year.

Do you believe that others will follow your example, and recycle and re-use materials, facilities and buildings?

We are not alone in our endeavours. We work in close relationship with organizations, experts and partner agencies. In addition, we have built up a strong brand with several followers, so it is already happening. And I believe this is an important development. There is a lot of so-called waste waiting to be recycled or re-used and we still have a lot to learn. Materials are available worldwide, waiting to be put to good use. Like bricks, building elements to be used for design and construction. With our project, Recyclicity, we show the potential and share the knowledge we gain in the process.