

1. Alinea



The Philosophy of Slow Design



At the beginning of 2010 Leo Aerts was honoured with an Ecodesign label for his CURVA cupboard. The fact that it was a collection of cupboards made of curved bamboo plywood, certainly contributed to this ecological recognition. Although the design itself does have something to do with it. And that is precisely one of the important principles of sustainability according to the (interior) designer: “Striving for universal, timeless simplicity ensures that your design can survive trends and time, and with a bit of luck even for generations.” Slow design is his philosophy.

You have to make it seem simple, even if in reality it is complex.

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The CURVA range of cupboards by Leo Aerts, the report for the Ecodesign Label read, is noticeable due to its special ecological aspect. The remarkable and environment-friendly use of materials and the loose connection of the various elements make this cupboard a trendsetter in contemporary design. In the report, the jury was also backed up by numerous other awards for the CURVA such as a Good Design Award and a red dot design award. “Naturally I was delighted with the Ecodesign Label”, remarks Leo Aerts, “even though I do not really see CURVA as something exceptionally innovative that is suddenly more sustainable. It is completely in line with what I have always done.”

Leo Aerts is a designer who already knows how to turn a design line into a trade mark. Averse to trends, the only principle he really lets himself be carried on is whether the product is finished or not. “As a designer you always have to strive for the maximum result. It is a unique combination of function, form and execution. You have to make it seem simple, even if in reality it is complex. Good design can make do with a minimum number of visual elements, makes do with simplicity; which is not to say that the designing or construction were simple. No, flexibility is even essential to achieve a sustainable end result.” Aerts

speaks from experience, because he has been constantly trying to propagate that vision since 1983 and he does not release a new piece of furniture or object onto the market until he thinks it is finished. “Not that I strive for the aspect of eternity, but a design must be able to survive. By that I mean because of the styling, but also because of the quality and the properties of how it’s made.”

His experience is also apparent from how as an ambitious designer at the beginning of his career he announced that he wanted to make 250 things during his career. “I think the counter is currently at around 15”, he says putting himself into perspective. “I still have a lot of work to do.” This corresponds completely with how sparing he is with ideas and their execution. An object is not released onto the market until it has been perfected; something is not mass-produced until its production has been perfected so it can be done to a high level of quality.

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That is why sustainability is inherent to design as a profession. At least that’s the case for Leo Aerts because he points to designers’ overwhelming responsibility. Designs that are flexible depending on the context in which they are used likewise strengthen the premise of good design. “The Champagne cooler I made can also be used as a vase or, if turned upside down, can be used as a stand for a dish. Just like the way in which the three Ufo dishes that I created can be used complementarily”, he adds. The Zubazuba Champagne cooler in combination with Ufo leads to a raised serving dish. The designer has now made a good 7 objects that can be placed and used both individually or combined with each other. “Look at everything we have standing in our cupboards. For half of it, the only function is that it takes up space. A value connection with good designs also ensures that

products don't disappear in the back of the cupboard. Useless or useful: that's an emotional appreciation that distinguishes good design from shape.

Leo Aerts also questions the Cradle to Cradle philosophy. Not that he disagrees with it, but he rightly points out that it contains the incorrect reasoning that recycling is a sanctifying principle. As long as it can be recycled, it is sustainable. "It should be about a principle that goes that one step further: that you design with the intention of lasting for ever. That should be the ambition. Naturally it means you have to take into account the (raw) materials used, and no, it doesn't mean that you don't have to think about what happens with it if it is still thrown away." But it is certainly a fact that all too often Cradle to Cradle counts as a green indulgence for our consumer society and that is something Aerts denounces: "We consume at a speed that we already can't keep up with and still we are forced to follow because the life cycle of a product hardly has any meaning any more. It is the fundamental responsibility of all designers to design in a sustainable way and thus draw the entire production chain along in this."

The building may not have any CO2 impact, so we have planned a heat pump and our own wind energy installation will have to provide green energy.

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Nowadays, the time it takes to design a product has already shortened greatly. But the fact that immediately afterwards an entire production apparatus starts up raises questions. "Very often innovations are to be found on the production floor", says the designer who very often is checked by the limits of what is technically feasible himself. "With my studio I invest a lot of time and resources in developing new prototypes, because I believe that it has to grow. Making a prototype teaches you



Leo Aerts, Caldafreddo, for Alinea Design Objects.
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Leo Aerts, Visibile horizontal hanging, for Alinea Design Objects. © Lieven Herreman

where you can make other improvements. Or sometimes you are checked by the limits of the material or a technique. That's a hurdle you have to take as a designer, together with the professionals, the ones who know the craft of production." It is a plea for sustainable thinking between idea and production, especially to then allow time and space for making improvements because it contributes to the quality of both the design and the product.

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Every year Leo Aerts invests between 20.000 and 25.000 Euros in developing prototypes and that puts pressure on his operations. After all, those are not costs that you can skimp on without touching the foundations of your own vision and company. That is why in addition to furniture, lighting and objects he also does renovations of private homes, shops, museums and offices. "They are communicating vessels: not only in a business economic sense, but also for your creative development it is a very good combination. You learn to also formulate problems and solutions. As an independent studio you have to be able to design in complete freedom and you have to build that freedom yourself and constantly have to protect it."

The fact that in the meantime Leo Aerts is ready for the next phase in the development of his vision is also apparent from the plans to make his design studio and shop in Geel entirely CO2-neutral. Although it is all still in the permit phase, he is convinced that as an (interior) designer he has to do pioneering work. "The building may not have any CO2 impact, so we have planned a heat pump and our own wind energy installation will have to provide green energy", Leo Aerts explains his plans.



Leo Aerts, Curva, for Alinea
Design Objects. © Lieven
Herreman

For the wind energy, a system would be used that has proven its worth for some time already in urban areas in England. Aerts is convinced that this mature technology will contribute to a CO2-neutral standard that he is willing to devote himself to as a design studio. The building will put the city on the map, because it is more than socially relevant. It is the future that's beginning today.



Christophe De Schauvre for REcentre

Interviewee / Leo Aerts, Designer and CEO

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Stationsstraat 169
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Belgium

www.alinea.be

Sector • Furniture industry

Year of foundation • 1983

Number of employees • 3

Turnover • N/A