

2. Artisjok



Machinist on Cradle to Cradle Train



When they started out in 2007 the 9 students from Maastricht Academy of Visual Arts appeared regularly in the news. Artisjok is a student-run business that wants to make design furniture according to Cradle to Cradle principles. Now, 3 years later, Artisjok has produced a recyclable table, lost 6 members of the founding team and although the basic concept is still the same, the course has definitely changed.

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Artisjok, a name cleverly chosen as a mixture of the words 'art' and 'shock', proves that it is above all green, while it's associated with the good reputation of Dutch design worldwide. The office annex workshop in Maastricht is furnished with furniture made of recycled scrap wood salvaged from old garden sheds, fences and beams. "We were already environmentally aware 3 years ago", says Ghislaine Boere, the 26 year old Artisjok designer, who is now one of the companies 3 owners, "but we didn't go beyond turning unnecessary lights off and not littering the street". This changed when the students -spurred on by a lecturer- watched a documentary about Cradle to Cradle. The search for sustainable materials that met C2C principles began. "We examined just about everything, from bamboo to cow dung. The latter is very strong material, but less attractive to consumers. Who wants to have a cup of coffee at a cow dung table?" Moreover, gathering information wasn't easy. Companies reacted standoffishly, not wanting students nosing around their business. Several established companies did dare to take the step. Amongst the companies Artisjok cooperated with, Biopearls and chemical giant DSM, provided several possibilities of developing materials based on corn and other starchy products. Unfortunately this cooperation didn't lead to actual products, but it did generate tons of publicity, which the students took advantage of. "We were finally taken seriously", Boere remembers.

In the year 2010, the media storm has died down. "People sometimes ask if we still exist", laughs Boere. 6 of the original members have left the organisation for other career pursuits, or to take their ideas abroad. The 3 remaining Artisjok entrepreneurs consider it all an unmatched learning experience. "We initially spent precious time and energy on approaching major distributors and manufacturers. To no avail. It took weeks before we finally got hold of a managing director and we then didn't hear anything from these companies." More hopeful arrangements failed. A producer of popular, hip seating didn't want to work with Artisjok because its other, non eco-friendly products would 'look bad'. Artisjok eventually decided to take a different approach. The company joined forces with PRM Kunststoffen in Rijssen, which develops and produces rotational moulded plastics. Boere believes that this is a company that strongly focuses on sustainability without using it to identify itself. "They are open to new initiatives. Rotational moulding is a technique that fits with our requirements. Polyethylene, a clean and reusable type of plastic, is poured into a mould in powder form and heated while rotating. This enables it to be moulded in a variety of shapes, like our hollow, organically shaped Misfit table, which is made from one piece of plastic." Buyers can 'discard' the table after use at TNT Post. This is sustainable because 'TNT drives CO2 compensating cars and wants to drive electric cars in the future. The Misfit returns to the manufacturer, where the plastic is recycled into a new table. This can be done about six times. Twenty per cent of costs consist of materials at Artisjok, and this allows the company to eventually recover the money outlaid.

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Although their product is made from sustainable materials, packaged with sustainable materials and accompanied by eco-friendly leaflets, Artisjok's aim is to develop

materials made of natural substances that are biodegradable and can be used in rotation moulding. As far as the young designers know, so far, this doesn't exist. "It needs to be heat and scratch resistant, argues Boere, this can be achieved by adding certain additives, but these aren't eco-friendly." To overcome this situations, Artisjok has joined forces with an initiative of the ministry of Education, Science and Culture that aims to improve the interchange of knowledge between universities and SMEs in regional innovation programmes, allowing the young company to concentrate on this challenge. In the meantime the company is promoting its Misfit, recyclable table, and is finding it has many obstacles to overcome. Although adhering to the criteria of Cradle to Cradle materials, the company is unable to afford the official certification explains Boere: "This is quite annoying. We once had a stand at a fair with a lot of eco public. The fair mainly consisted of wooden and woollen stuff. Our table wasn't a success, it wasn't back-to-nature enough and it looked too polished. People loved the idea, but not the designer look. We didn't sell any".

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The owners of Artisjok hope to be paying themselves a salary this year for the first time. As yet, everyone employed by the company has a second job and all proceeds are invested in the business, however a Techstart granted from Industriebank LIOF and an innovation voucher from Syntens may help them achieve this goal. Thanks to the media attention at the time of Artisjok's start up, it is known as a pioneer in the field of sustainable design. Boere and partners regularly give workshops and lectures, lead educational projects and work on small-scale assignments. These proceeds are also invested in the company. "We know why we're doing it. Our philosophy is: pure, open-minded, young and well

thought out. With this in mind, we are aiming for cooperation agreements with liked-minded companies, such as Dureco Investments, which has developed a water-saving tap cap. We help them with texts that address the lifestyle market; they present our table to the garden furniture industry."

It will be a while before the (design) world is ready for Artisjok and Cradle to Cradle. This is mostly due to the fact that clients are not always eager to pay more for innovative products. "We've been asked to make two lamps for a specific purpose, but the budget was only 600 euro, which is of course not enough for a new design and a new production line. What we need to take into consideration is that it all starts with the basics, at home and at school. If everyone is environmentally aware, demand will change and the market will have to follow. Not today or tomorrow, but it will happen eventually. We're already on that train. Those who don't get on will miss out on opportunities ahead."

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Gwen Teo for REcentre
Interviewee / Ghislaine Boere, Designer

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www.artisjok.net

Sector • Furniture industry

Year of foundation • 2009

Number of employees • 3

Turnover (2009) •
11.000 EUR