

25. Ro&Ad



The Seduction



They're building a sustainable world. Step by step, "you solve problems when you face them". Ro Koster and Ad Kil together architect duo RO&AD, are brimming with refreshing ideas and optimism. "We always try to get it right; we don't always succeed, so we try even harder next time."

Keeping abreast is essential in the race to a more sustainable environment.

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Yes, they too have to deal with setbacks and no, not everything they want is always feasible, but these 'futilities' don't stop Ro Koster and Ad Kil. Always on the lookout for new possibilities and convinced that the world will find 'sustainable' a self-evident criterion in 15 years time, the architects designed -among others- a much talked-of office out of cardboard, the greenest Praxis building in the Netherlands and a Cradle to Cradle model rented house in Venlo. "The cardboard office came about during a period when we were still working on 'less bad'. One MDF board contains about as much wood as a solid metre of cardboard. Moreover, the office could be fully recycled, which has happened in the meantime. You can find it among the waste paper."

Behind this light-hearted tone lies an extremely serious vision of sustainable architecture. Koster lay awake the night after he had seen the Tegenlicht documentary 'Afval is voedsel'[waste is food] about Cradle to Cradle. The programme changed how both men think: 'less bad' made way for 'leaving behind a large positive ecological footprint in your work'. On every scale, as they take on minor and major challenges. They researched biodiversity in Qatar's capitol Doha for the Qatar Airways safety training centre. "Remarkably enough, in this seemingly bone-dry sandy plain there was in fact more biodiversity than in the Netherlands. Only the volume was smaller." To enrich the biodiversity, the architect duo wanted to place a green roof full of desert plants on a double, wooden curved construction that, seen from the sky, had to look like a plane. Offices

and classrooms would be built according to a local working method with loam. Sheik Masoud el Mansoori was extremely keen until the recession threw a spanner in the works. Plans for the advanced Cradle to Cradle construction on the Arabian Peninsula were locked away and Koster and Kil claim to have lost out on over 16 million euro.

This didn't, however, deter the partners. They're not scared of failing. "We're not so much focused on an ultimate goal but more on the moment. We sometimes take risks, but we're moving ahead. Our approach? Seduction. Being seduced to do it more sustainably, which no one in fact minds." Although they claim their work isn't making them rich, their future could have been a lot less rosy. "When the recession started, regular assignments were called off in no time. We did get a lot of work from clients who found sustainability important. Since then, we have a different clientele and money is no longer an end but a means."

For Ro&Ad the fact that the world of construction has to overcome major obstacles on the way to fully ecological building, is not a legitimate reason for restraint. Several sand forts are being restored in Bergen op Zoom. One is to have a watchtower of almost 30 metres high. Plain sustainable wood wasn't strong enough: the tower had to be able to hold lots of people and last for years. Accoya turned out to be the solution: treating wood in a green way with acetic acid, making it much stronger and long-lasting. The architects happily take on these types of challenges. "Everyone will have to do it eventually. People won't realise that you can't eat money until all raw materials have been depleted and the sea and air are polluted. We have forgotten that we all live on the same surface and that everything we do has consequences."

Keeping abreast is essential in the race to a more sustainable environment, which is why Koster and Kil go to fairs, meetings, lectures – which they also give themselves – and keep in touch with other entrepreneurs who are focusing on sustainability, including 2009's most sustainable Groningen entrepreneur Roelof de Vries, Wim Fleuren of



RO&AD architecten, Cabin Crew Training Centre Qatar Airways, Doha, Qatar, for NAPT / Qatar Airways © RO&AD architecten



RO&AD architecten, Praxis, Roosendaal, for Van Pul Groep © RO&AD architecten

Fleuren Afval- en Bouwstoffen Management and creative company collective Qreamteam. Broadening their perspective at all times. Koster regularly leaps up to illustrate what he's saying. For instance, to get an oyster shell, a natural ceramic product that the industry can only make using toxins and lots of energy. "Who knows what they'll be able to make with this in the future?" To show the C2C-certified Thoma Holz100 wooden plank system of the walls in the rented house in Venlo. He's also proud to show his garden, which was recently turned into something other than just a labour-intensive field of grass. Now hundreds of flowers bloom and bees buzz around happily, while also contributing to the preservation of certain plants and animals.

They researched biodiversity in Qatar's capitol Doha for the Qatar Airways safety training centre.

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Does what we do stimulate life in the entire chain? This question is essential to RO&AD. Also in the proposal for the schedule of requirements for new houses at NCB Naturalis, which the duo helped devise. "We departed from the principle: if the answer is 'yes', then the tendered may continue, if the answer is 'no', it ends there." The second starting point concerns the budget, always a touchy subject. NCB has 60 million euro at its disposal for new houses. Koster and Kil suggested that the one who attached the most value, would get the assignment. "Value in the sense of a positive ecological footprint. This forces people to be creative, the customer doesn't have to worry about exceeding the budget and the development of knowledge is stimulated." Whether this schedule of requirements will actually be used, depends on its legal feasibility. The crux is measuring this value: how can you compare biodiversity to the use of solar energy?

At least there's no lack of ideas and optimism. The question is whether this is enough to counteract the changes the



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RO&AD architecten,
Kartonnen Kantoor, Eindhoven,
for Scherpontwerp © Anita Huisman

world could be facing in the future. But the refreshing approach of RO&AD is food for thought rather than doom and gloom. A picture of the 'green' Praxis building with FSC wood, adiabatically cooled and with vegetation roof, is displayed in the annual report of Maxeda, parent company of the chain of home improvement centres. The term green-washing is on the lurk: how sustainable are all these branches and their assortment really? Koster and Kil see it differently. "We assume the positive. The first step is so important. Who knows, this may inspire a more sustainable philosophy in other Praxis franchise owners? Take, for instance, Cradle to Cradle criteria, they are good because they aim for a better world. But the tendency then becomes to want perfection immediately, which can have a crippling effect. Our advice is: don't think too much about sustainability. Simply do it."

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Gwen Teo for REcentre

Interviewee / Ro Koster, Architect-owner & Ad Kil, Architect-owner

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2,5 FTE

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