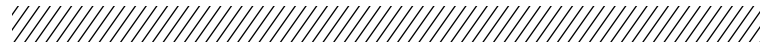


38. Alveus



Ecological Coffins for a different kind of Funeral

recentre



The universe of death always frightens. That's why visiting a company which sells coffins, even organic ones, initially does not seem something to rejoice about. However, when you arrive at Alveus, you immediately understand that Claudine De Coster has nothing in common with the common perception of an "undertaker". This entrepreneur tries to develop the company shaped by the hard and happy events in life from her cottage in Hesbaye... She explains: "On 25 March 1993 my father suffered a rupture of aneurysm and passed away 10 minutes later. I was 25 years old and my life would never be the same again. That traumatising event has defined my approach to life and death, because the latter completely is part of it. Allowing death to be part of our daily life gives us a more realist and lucid approach to life and enables us to deal with death in a more serene and composed way." While sometimes reflecting on the coffin she would like to make her last journey in, Claudine De Coster was struck by the uniformity of the offer in Belgium and the lack of proposed alternatives. Over the last years - in the freelance PA assignments she carries out - she had the opportunity to work for a company that supports human resources departments in matters of well-being at work. « That is where my desire to create a psycho-social project originated. I realised that there was a lot of suffering, of malaise, sometimes also linked to mourning, loss, death. »

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When she walks past a funerarium Claudine De Coster is hit by the "desire that something has to change". She starts some research: her idea is to propose different coffins, lighter, both symbolically and at the level of their ecological footprint. "They did not exist in Belgium. But I quickly found suppliers in the Netherlands. Death is less

of a taboo for the Dutch than for the Belgians. They talk about it more easily. That's why you can find more types of coffins in their market, with many even more daring and alternative than those I now propose in Belgium." Coffins in untreated wood, in corrugated cardboard or recycled paper, in bamboo, without lacquer and/or with biodegradable glue: like for all green roofing or photovoltaic panels, environmental innovations are also one step ahead in the North's funerary sector...

Coffins which are much more biodegradable but beautiful at the same time, and which radiate something different than the usual coldness of those objects.

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"There is environmental progression in the Belgian funerary sector: the legislation is more ecological than 10 or 20 years ago. Materials containing more than a certain threshold of glue can no longer be used. But basic products like MDF or pressed wooden panels are still allowed." Even if wood is present in the Alveus range, Claudine De Coster wishes to promote different materials like cardboard. A sustainable material that unfortunately opposes the Walloon legislation. "In Wallonia, the coffin must be wooden or made from another biodegradable material, but the decree states black on white that cardboard may not be used. Fortunately, the Walloon region analyses the situation, and it will change maybe."

Since the launch of Alveus, the range of ecological coffins proposed by the young company has been expanded with models woven in banana leaves, rotan, or water hyacinth imported from Indonesia by a Belgian company, which gives 10 euro for each item sold to a humanitarian organisation. It is that coherence that Claudine De Coster wants to offer those looking to instil some lightness in the difficult departure death represents. "In Latin Alveus means 'river bed': I liked the image of a bed, its shape where you lay down in, and the idea of the river that

evokes eternity. It corresponds to what I propose. Coffins in natural materials, for example made with banana leaves, and for which not a single tree has been felled. Coffins which are much more biodegradable but beautiful at the same time, and which radiate something different than the usual coldness of those objects.”

These original and light materials are very popular for other applications, in interior design for example. It is only a small step from there to seducing the Belgians when they choose a coffin... But that has not been taken yet! “I have been busy with this project for 13 months now... but the results are not great... My project seems to have arrived a little early: the generation who is deceasing is not necessarily interested in that type of product. But it doesn't matter: to me it is a beautiful project and I continue to believe in it.”

The price of those ecological coffins, comparable to that of an average traditional coffin is not one of the obstacles. Besides the weight of tradition and psychological restraints, Claudine De Coster became aware of the lack of information on ecological funerary alternatives available to the public. “Sometimes the subject is addressed in the press around All Saints, but they always show the Eco-pod, the coffin in a slightly futuristic sarcophagus-shape: when they address it, it is always very extreme, although there are other possibilities.”

My project seems to have arrived a little early: the generation who is deceasing is not necessarily interested in that type of product.

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As often happens, we only become aware of what is available in the market on the day we are forced to go to a funeral director, and Claudine De Coster pays attention to informing these enterprises. “The site of Alveus is our shop window, but I do not supply individuals directly, they still have to go to funeral directors. Nothing says you cannot buy a coffin directly, but the funerary sector has its



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own work method ...” A method that Claudine De Coster respects to quietly be accepted in a professional environment that is very attached to its traditions. “When I get contacted I try to direct people towards entrepreneurs I have already worked with.”

Of course, I ‘sell’ something, but my aim is to bring something to people who need it in those difficult moments.

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Fortunately, mentalities are changing, but slowly... Whereas a large trade fair of the sector for organic and ecological alternatives has declined her proposal to participate, fearing death would not look good amongst its rows of stalls, she received a warm welcome from the visitors of Ecopop, the ecological trade fair in Kortrijk, where Alveus had a stand in February 2011: “the reactions really touched me, I felt supported. It’s true they came from people of our generation, says the forty year old... “But I want to be there today for those who need it.” That social and psychological aspect of her activity is just as important to Claudine as the ecological and commercial aspects: “Of course, I ‘sell’ something, but my aim is to bring something to people who need it in those difficult moments. It is particularly important to me when faced with parents who mourn the death of a child. It is very, very sensitive to sell those small coffins or baskets for babies. That is when the human side of my projects dominates the ecological side.” Claudine De Coster today still does her PA assignments part time, and considers Alveus her “idealist hobby,” her life project: cautiously breaking taboos to build a more simple, more human approach to death, which is closer to nature.

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Isabelle Masson for REcentre
Interviewee /
Claudine De Coster, Founder

Alveus

rue de Thisnes, 24A
4280 Hannut
Belgium

www.alveus.be

Sector • Sale of ecological
coffins

Year of foundation • 2010

Number of employees • N/A

Turnover • N/A