



CHARMINGLY UNASSUMING
MULTIFACETED FRENCH DESIGNER
MATHIEU LEHANNEUR IS TAKING THE
WORLD BY STORM WITH HIS HUMANISTIC
AND SCIENCE-INSPIRED CONCEPT PIECES

MATHIEU AND THE MACHINE

Words Marjun Ziarati
Portrait Fabien Thouvenin

Philosopher come anthropologist come artist come fill-in-the blank – yes, Mathieu really does seem capable of just about anything – has quite literally revolutionised the design market.

The youngest of a large family, with six siblings, some of whom have also flirted with design, Mathieu attended the famous Paris design school ENSCI-Les Ateliers, where, rather than the usual five-year course, he spent over seven years, describing it as ‘a great place to experiment and learn’.

He quotes his family as a great inspiration: ‘A big family like mine is just like a tiny society. You can see that even if all of you have the same DNA, everyone is so different. They can be considered the target market; they are impermanent, always changing. It was a great inspiration for me when trying to make products and designs for people like them.’

His unbelievably perceptive view of humankind and our needs is apparent throughout his work. Worthy of the musings of Sartre himself, Mathieu says of humans: ‘I don’t consider them consumers but deep, complex machines. This is the reason I am in collaboration with scientists, to help me understand the human way of living, thinking, hearing, seeing and feeling. I want to connect to the reality of human beings ... this is why I don’t design chairs. I ask myself, what do humans need? Maybe they need pure air to breathe, sustainable food, or just good health.’

Although humbly admitting he’s ‘no scientist’ himself, he has worked closely with scientists from around the world on a number of projects. In the past, Mathieu would approach them with ideas, inviting and hoping for collaboration, but now he is fortunate enough

to be the one who is approached. He describes it as a somewhat daunting but proud moment when a talented neurosurgeon asks for partnership.

Mathieu is in awe of multitalented individuals: ‘I’m inspired by the 19th-century German, Ernst Haeckel. He was a biologist, naturalist, physician, philosopher and artist all in one. He was an amazing person, able to do all of these things at the same time.’

ESSENTIALLY LEHANNEUR’S INFLUENCES COME FROM OUTSIDE THE DESIGN WORLD. ‘Inspiration for my work does not come from designers. It

comes from people such as Stanley Kubrick, a film-maker able to create very different films all from the same brain. Compare *2001: A Space Odyssey* with *A Clockwork Orange*, for example; it’s amazing to see one person create such different work.’

He consciously avoids reading too many design magazines. His main advice to students is to avoid them altogether, and try to get inspiration from their surroundings. ‘If you work with a design magazine, it is so difficult to be focused on your ideas, your first and very fragile intuition. If you are inspired by other designers you are too late; the products are already out there.’

Designers have always had to consider a multitude of variables in

their quest to innovate and create new products. They must be forever conscious of the state of the market, pricing and the acquisition of suitable materials to ensure profitability. It is vital to ascertain whether an innovative idea will indeed prove fruitful and satisfy clientele. Sustainability is the essential 21st-century ingredient for

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LOCAL RIVER

Local River is a home-storage unit for fish and greens.

The Locavores appeared in San Francisco in 2005, and define themselves as 'a group of culinary adventurers who eat foods produced in a radius of 100 miles (160km) around their city'. By doing so, they aim to reduce impact on the environment inherent to the transport of foodstuffs, while ensuring their traceability.

Local River anticipates the growing influence of this group (the word 'locavore' made its first appearance in an American dictionary in 2007) by proposing a home-storage unit for live freshwater fish combined with a mini vegetable patch. This DIY fish-farm-cum-kitchen-garden is based on the principle of aquaponics coupled with the exchange and interdependence of two kinds of living organisms – plants and fish. The plants extract nutrients from the nitrate-rich dejecta of the fish. In this way they act as a natural filter that purifies the water and maintains a vital balance for the ecosystem in which the fish live. The same technique is used on large-scale pioneer aquaponics/fish-farms, which raise tilapia and lettuce planted in trays floating on the surface of ponds.

Local River responds to everyday needs for fresh food that is 100% traceable. It bets on a return to favour of farm-raised freshwater fish (trout, eel, perch, carp), given the dwindling supplies of many saltwater species due to over-fishing. It also demonstrates the capacity of fish farmers to deliver their stock live to a private consumer as a guarantee of optimum freshness.

Local River aims to replace the decorative aquarium by an equally decorative but also functional 'refrigerator-aquarium'. In this scenario, fish and greens cohabit for a short time in a home-storage unit before being consumed by their keepers, the end-players in an exchange cycle within a controlled ecosystem



ANDREA

ANDREA is a living air filter which absorbs the undesirable effects of contaminated air produced by the profusion of manufactured goods. It takes in the air from the room and absorbs its toxic compounds. ANDREA uses plants selected for their filtering ability, such as the peace lily, spider plant and aloe vera. The air which passes through ANDREA is purified by the leaves and roots of the plant



PHOTO: MARIEU LEHANNIER

'WE HAVE TO REACT AND CHANGE MANY THINGS. IN THIS CENTURY AND THE NEXT, SUSTAINABILITY WILL BECOME ALL THE MORE IMPORTANT'



AGE OF THE WORLD

Installation based at the Issey Miyake store, Paris

France, USA, Japan, Egypt, Russia. The structures graph the populations of five countries moulded in 3D. Statistics abandon charts to reincarnate in a curious set of containers, perhaps jars or urns, creating a radical representation of our human bondage in this world. Birth is the base and death the apex of these enamelled terracotta pagodas, whose contours change in phase with the age rings that translate life expectancy. From bottom to top there are 100 strata, shaped in solid or void, but the top end is always a sharp tip. A fascinating twin-scope view of the state of living, a look at our own life span in a sculptural surround view

designers to consider. 'We have to react and change many things. In this century and the next, sustainability will become all the more important. It's just one more variable,' he explains.

Mathieu does not set out with the sole intention of creating sustainable design in his projects. After all, he believes: 'The best way to be sustainable is not to produce.' He would not go as far as saying that the desire to be sustainable fuels his inspiration for new design. Nevertheless, he does rise to the challenge.

'It's like the sea. If it is just flat, it is so boring, and you have to play with the waves if you want to surf them and make it more interesting. Sustainability is one more wave in the sea.'

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN IS, IN MATHIEU'S VIEW, AN ACHIEVABLE AIM IN THE NEAR

future. The main problem is when designers aim just for the visible. Sometimes clients push for more obvious sustainable design to be incorporated. 'Usually the more invisible aspects are the most sustainable. For example, the weight of a product is very important in affecting its carbon footprint, but weight is invisible. The client wants to make visible sustainable changes to communicate the message clearly, but sustainability is not always about shape, colour or material.'

Andrea, Mathieu's air purifier, was designed in collaboration with scientist David Edwards from Harvard University to counteract the side-effects of traditional design. The air we breathe in our homes and at the workplace can be up to ten times more toxic than the air from outdoors, in large part due to the products in the room.

'You decide to buy a plastic chair because it is red, glossy and beautiful. But the chair has side-effects; it will emit toxic elements into the air. As a designer I wanted to work on these side-effects, and after researching ways of absorbing indoor pollution I found some plants that were able to do this. The main problem is that they can't do it alone; the air won't go by itself through the soil and roots, the efficient locations for eliminating toxins.'

The Andrea air purifier – initially known as *Bel Air* – is able to increase the efficiency of the plant and help eliminate the toxins.

Mathieu knew that the idea was at risk of appearing rather fanciful, and admitted underestimating the reaction from the general public. He expected that it would take a while for the public to understand his concept and assumed people would believe either it would not work, and accuse the design of being too futuristic, or deny the existence of indoor pollution altogether. Nevertheless, Lehanneur was impressed by the positive reaction the prototype received.



LaboBrain (left)

The LaboBrain is a workplace for Harvard science professor David Edwards, founder of Le Laboratoire. It also serves as a space for bringing together his creative team for meetings, vision quests and brainstorming sessions. One side is Cartesian, for storing, classifying and organising – all white, with walls shaped by boxes for papers and archives – like a clean memory bank waiting to be constituted. The other is wholly intuitive, reflecting the imaginative and creative region of the brain. There are no standard solutions, but seating and work surfaces are conducive to calculating, drawing or snoozing, with an alcove screened by a concave white sketch-board wall. The space defines the work area for a caveman/mathematician beneath whose feet, under a metal grate, green plants pump up an organic supplement of pure oxygen. The LaboBrain is open to the outside world via a plate-glass window, and as the visible part of Le Laboratoire, suggests a public experiment in space planning. David Edwards is the potential guinea pig of his experimental office



Maison de L'Ogre

This small indoor thatched house was conceived for Rá, a concept store in Antwerp. It is a shelter for the cash register area, the 'Ogre' being the money



Initially, the prototype was valued at a hefty 15,000 euro, when in reality the plant inside cost only seven. The day after the opening, Mathieu was inundated with emails from New York to Tokyo, asking him where one could purchase his product at a reasonable price. 'The general public is more reactive, open-minded and faster-moving than marketing departments. At first I thought I was being avant-garde with my design, but a day later I realised it was me that was late. The general public was ready, but I wasn't ready to meet demand.'

FOR THE LOCAL RIVER PROJECT MATHIEU WAS commissioned at the Artists Space Gallery in New York. He was offered carte blanche, and was drawn to the wave of interest in the US at that time in locavores. This is the name given to a person who only eats locally produced food, within the radius of 100 miles. This is a sustainable approach to reducing the negative impact of transportation on the environment, while supporting local communities.

Mathieu wanted to create something that was both aesthetically pleasing – an object people would want to display in the living area – but also serve a purpose and send a message about the importance of eating locally produced goods. You can't get much more local than your own living room! The design uses symbiosis – the plants clear out the waste from the tank, keeping it clean for the fish, while the plants in turn benefit from the minerals and nutrients that the fish waste provides. Together the two kinds of living organisms are able to flourish interdependently in a home environment.

Rather than go as far as revolutionise our eating habits altogether, in this project Mathieu demonstrates that it is feasible to eat fish and vegetables produced in your own home. The main aim is to generate

awareness, noting that it is unlikely owners of the installation will want to survive only on the produce created in their living room. 'It's just like a river. You can sit in front of it and see part of nature, or you can fish for yourself and then cook the fish. The plants growing on top can be salad, herbs or tomatoes ... It doesn't aim to replace the fridge, but maybe just one meal a month or even a year in order to be in contact with nature.'

The project stirred conflicting responses around the world. It was generally harder to convince those in the West, mainly France and the US, than it was people in the East.

'In China, the idea of choosing your fish live before you eat it is socially acceptable, to know if the fish are healthy and fresh. But in the West it is more challenging to convince people ... At the opening, I asked the director of the gallery if we could get a chef to make sushi from the fish in the tank, in front of the visitors. The director said that it was impossible, explaining that we were in New York City, and people were not ready to see this.'

Although at first glance it is a seemingly sustainable design, a big problem is the size and weight of the installation. Made from blown glass

in Switzerland, it is rather expensive to produce, but Mathieu is working on improving it to make it lighter and hopefully counteract the admittedly large carbon footprint it creates.

MATHIEU IS PROUD OF THE DIVERSE PRODUCTS HE HAS HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to work on, and has no particular favourite. 'I am working on industrial designs, research projects, a very old church and for cosmetic companies ... I am always happy when a client far from my approach asks me to design a product for him. He says he doesn't

'THE GENERAL PUBLIC IS MORE REACTIVE, OPEN-MINDED AND FASTER-MOVING THAN MARKETING DEPARTMENTS'



'I LIKE IT WHEN A PRODUCT IS ABLE TO MOVE FAR AWAY FROM THE DESIGN WORLD'

Flood Restaurants

Flood offers food not only on the plate but also in quality of the air. An aquarium containing over 100 litres of Spirulina platensis (micro-algae) is placed in the centre of each dining area. Through photosynthesis, these micro-algae produce pure oxygen, at a rate faster than the usual rate, which is always insufficient in big cities. The concept can be developed into a furniture-flooding principle on the chairs and tables by dip-coating the PVC



want a plant- or science-related design, but that he wants the brains that are able to make his product. This always amazes me, and I'm thankful for the client's confidence.'

He is currently working on around 30 different projects. The next one will be a mineral diffuser, a product to be displayed on the desk emitting elements and minerals that have been extracted from the sea through a process of filtration. 'French biologists have discovered hundreds of minerals and elements that are good for human health, and found only in seawater.'

Another big project is for a large electricity company, designing a small electrical product able to monitor consumption at home, helping people to reduce and optimise consumption.

Mathieu is also working on a design on a new space at the Centre Pompidou in Paris where teenagers can be in contact with artists and musicians, a space where they can sleep, rest or meet with friends. He hopes this will be an inspiring location for the younger generation, and they hope to open the area by September 2010.

Public response to Lehanneur's projects is not limited to the world of design. *Andrea* has appeared in a variety of magazines, from teen and garden magazines to technology, science and design publications.

'People are not just interested in the design itself, but in what is behind the design. One person can see it as a design, another as a small garden, someone else as a therapeutic object and others may view it as a gadget. I like it when a product is able to move far away from the design world.' ■

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