

## CURRENTS

# Q&A

## How the French Get Connected

Unlike many in his profession, Mathieu Lehanneur, 38, is not driven by the desire to create the next great chair, but he would like to improve the world around him.

The Paris-based designer first came to wide public notice in 2008 with a Lucite box filled with plants that metabolize microtoxins in the air. (It was displayed at the Museum of Modern Art's "Design and the Elastic Mind" show.) Next he produced "Local River," an aquaponic system for raising fish and vegetation together in a tank that's small enough to fit into an average kitchen.

But Mr. Lehanneur doesn't scorn commercial clients: He designed the interiors for JWT's Paris office, which include a hen house, a "plant jukebox" that produces music from swaying greenery and a bar resembling a meteorite. He has also created displays for Cartier's centennial celebration and designed packaging for Issey Miyake perfume.

His latest project, *Escale Numérique* (Digital Break), which he developed with the outdoor advertising company J C Decaux, is a free high-speed Wi-Fi station in Paris. Installed last month at the Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées, a few blocks from the Grand Palais, it features concrete swivel chairs with attached tables for laptops and electrical outlets in their bases. This furniture is set under a blossoming green roof supported by a cluster of wooden legs meant to resemble tree trunks. A large multimedia touch screen offers easy access to city information, news and maps. Mr. Lehanneur described it all in a phone conversation from his native Corsica.

### How did the project come about?

The City of Paris had a competition, "Intelligent Furniture," a very broad topic. J C Decaux, a famous French company, contacted me and asked me to work with them. We did two different projects. The first was to help people be connected by creating free Wi-Fi stations.

**How was that possible? Does the technology for Wi-Fi already exist throughout the city?**



### BIT STOP

Mathieu Lehanneur's Wi-Fi station in Paris.

Yes. All the fiber optics are there. We just made it visible. In Paris, in some gardens, there is free Wi-Fi but there's no way to tell where it's available. What I also like about this project is that it is connected to French history.

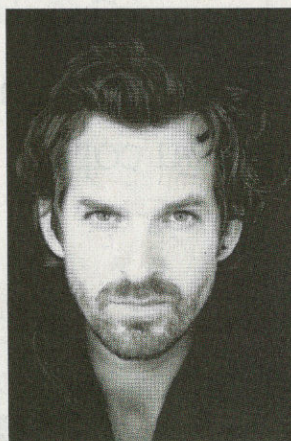
### How so?

It's like the Wallace fountains, which since the end of the 19th century have brought free drinking water to Parisians, water that was already circulating beneath their feet. *Escale Numérique* allows everyone to benefit from a high-speed Wi-Fi connection by raising it from beneath the ground.

### Will more of these stations be installed?

The city will do more according to the success of this one on the Champs-Élysées and will decide after one year. It's not easy to insert one more object in the city, which already has so many things on the street. But it seems to be very natural. Five minutes after it was set up, people were using the map, sitting and making calls.

**Decaux developed a shared public bicycle program in Paris, which it has since brought to many other cities. Do you think it will take these Wi-Fi stations around the world?**



JEAN-LUC LUYSSSEN/MADAME FIGARO

I'd love it.

### You mentioned a second project with Decaux.

There are chess tables in many gardens throughout Paris, like the ones in Luxembourg Gardens. The new design is a chess table that lets you play not only with someone, but by yourself or with two or three players. And it can do other things besides chess. You can play computer and video games.

### When will it be introduced?

In September or October. We're still waiting for the city to tell us where.

### Is there anything else you hope to add to the streets and parks of Paris?

I would like to work on a way to make furniture you can skate on. Cities avoid skateboarding and fight against it. I'd like to find a way to design it and make it work. Cities try to keep things separate: people, cars, bikes. I want to find a way to bring them together.

### Your entire career seems to be a lesson in not keeping things separate. What's in your current mix?

I'm working on devices for palliative care for a hospital and designing a nightclub in Paris. This year I also designed the first flagship store for Maison Cailler, a chocolate manufacturer in Broc, Switzerland. They had asked me to design some furniture but I transformed the assignment into an architectural brief. So many designers are only interested in furniture, but there are no limits for me. This is our job: to use the industrial world.

ARLENE HIRST

### ONLINE: MORE ANSWERS

Ask Mathieu Lehanneur more about his project: [nytimes.com/home](http://nytimes.com/home)