



Architecture for the (and a) future

Originally chance – and a common vision – brought the three founding partners of architecture firm Atelier D together, when they attended the same Masters in Lausanne and Toulouse. When life threw them together again in Paris they decided to share an office, then swiftly an organisation.

TEXT: MARTIN PILKINGTON | PHOTOS: ATELIER D

“We met in 2002 when we were all studying sustainable architecture,” explains Vanessa Grob: “Each of us had a fundamental commitment to sustainability in architecture, and that was the route we wanted to follow.”

Fellow founding-partner Mattias Piani defines their specific field: “Sustainable architecture is creating structures and systems that don’t imperil the environment, or the future environment we leave for those after us.” But Atelier D takes the concept further: “We don’t think about being involved as an external ele-

ment in an ecosystem. We look at ways to be the ecosystem.”

Material evidence

The two enlarge on this approach, giving examples of how it functions in practice: “A vital part of the philosophy is the need to work with sustainable and site-specific materials, materials of local provenance,” says Piani.

“That can mean things like using hempcrete – we designed the first apartment building in France that uses this extremely environmentally-friendly material,” says Grob: “And

a project for six energy-neutral houses in Épernay used straw bales as insulation and wood for the frames. We always investigate what local, natural materials can be used, so a project brings added value to its area, via economic benefits and work for local people.”

Contemporary, natural, holistic

Using natural materials doesn’t mean buildings need be backward-looking. The team is working on France’s first 10-storey wooden building in Strasbourg, for example, and created the new building for the Supreme Court of



MAIN IMAGE: Strasbourg project using biosource materials. **LEFT:** Hempcrete used in rue Bourgon, Paris 13. **TOP:** Supreme Court Building, Burundi. **MIDDLE:** The new Algerian Post and Telecoms HQ. **RIGHT:** Architecture and landscaping over a seven-hectare site in Guyana.

Burundi in the capital Bujumbura using unbaked-earth for the walls.

“Materials are a subject close to our hearts, we search them out to be relevant and local, as part of our approach,” says Mattias: “We also of course take into account the site, the people, the building’s use. It’s a holistic approach, that’s the core of what we do, and of sustainable urban planning and design. You must bring into the equation the elements of energy, architecture, the environment, community, social factors... but our profession has always been a synthesis of different elements like that.”

The international dimension

Even a cursory examination of Atelier D’s projects reveals they have an international reach. That’s not surprising given the three founders each bring different cultural heritages with them. Vanessa is of Chilean origin; Mattias Italian; and Ilhem Belhatem French-Algerian. As Mattias says: “We are multi-cultural by default.”

Along with their Parisian base, the firm has satellite offices in Algeria and Santiago. They’ve also built strong partnerships with architects in many other countries, and been very active in developing young architects passionate like themselves about sustainable development – their website

lists the names of past as well as current collaborators. Through this growing network they hope to spread their techniques and approach globally.

Another essential part of their philosophy is teamwork. “Our firm’s name indicates a team approach,” says Mattias: “Atelier means workshop in French, and D stands for durable, (sustainable). It’s a collaborative way of working, like the craft skills of a workshop organisation, so a project comes out of the workshop, not one head.”

Eco-friendly and economic

There is, clearly, an ethical stance involved in Atelier D’s environmental world-view. But it’s commercial too: “Clients, especially our international clientele, are increasingly aware that an environmentally sound approach is intelligent economically,” says Vanessa: “It’s becoming central to thinking, not just for altruistic reasons, but because an environmentally-friendly building should be far less expensive to maintain, and far less expensive to run as regards heating or cooling. And, with less reliance on complex support technologies, its lifetime should be extended.”

Atelier D’s work ranges from individual dwellings and stand-alone buildings like the Eco-museum project-managed by the

team in Vanoi, Italy, to schemes impacting on whole neighbourhoods. An example of the latter is the urban regeneration project currently underway in the Juan Antonio Rios district in Santiago, Chile, making radical but environmentally-sensitive improvements in the currently neglected public realm: “The planning and design will be changed, but also because many locals will be employed in the construction the local economy will benefit. Architecture can transform more than just buildings,” says Mattias.

“The ecological agenda is central in everything we do,” concludes Vanessa: “It’s relevant from urban regeneration projects to single houses. And what’s great about the process is that the client and the environment benefit simultaneously. We love making a difference for both.”

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