



Design Flanders
Brussels, Belgium

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Design Flanders' mission statement is "to promote design to companies, to implement design in companies and to promote designers" in order to show that design adds value to the economy and is an instrument for management. We are part of the organisation called VLAO, which translates, non-literally, as Flanders Enterprise. This is a government organisation set up by the Ministry of Economy to help companies in all areas. Flanders Enterprise transfers questions from companies on environment, social law, legal advice, export and other areas to the different organisations that can provide detailed information. There are about 80 account managers in Flanders Enterprise that work very closely with companies throughout the different regions of Flanders and they transfer questions about design to Design Flanders.

We target the whole range of design disciplines from industrial design to design-led crafts working with SMEs, design companies and the general public. We include crafts because we did a study of those contemporary crafts which are more the domain of the artistic community and found that these workshops - ceramics, jewellery, etc. - are a kind of laboratory where design starts. It isn't industrial design, but it can lead on to industrial design and the people working in those areas become very well acquainted with materials and techniques and sometimes develop new ones. So we include the crafts because they are a sort of creativity unbound by materials and techniques that you don't necessarily find in industrial design.

In order to find out who the designers in Flanders are, we invite designers twice a year, in spring and autumn, to send us images a portfolio with 10 pieces of their recent work and other information. These are presented to a jury composed of two specialists per discipline - industrial design, graphic design, textile design, the crafts area - two people with a general interest in design (a gallery director, collector or journalist, for example) and two representatives of Design Flanders. Each gives points to the entries although only the specialists give points to work in their area of specialty - the ceramics specialists give points to the ceramics files and so on. If the candidate receives 60% of the points they are accepted onto our programme of promotional activities.

We get at least 100 to 110 entries a year and not all are of a high enough standard to be included. On average, about 20% of the candidates are accepted. Being accepted by Design Flanders has become, after so many years, a label of quality and excellence. It gives designers a better point of entry into certain professional contacts. Once selected they can exhibit in the gallery, are invited for special exhibitions, and can benefit from

the whole range of tools including subsidies. We give out around 150,000 euros a year as grants, which is limited to about 4,000 euros a year per designer. The subsidies are not there to replace income but to help them with specific projects. For example, if they can afford to produce a flyer in black and white, the grant enables them to do it in colour so enhancing its impact. They are also included on our online database and in our magazine Kwintessens which comes out every three months and is produced without any advertising revenue. We have asked people about it over the years and the consensus is always that it is worth having the magazine even if it is not breaking-even financially. I think there is a need to have this kind of magazine that supports design in the region but refers internationally in order to give designers some self consciousness, some added value. We give a lot of attention to the design and each issue is done by a different graphic designer. This makes our life quite difficult sometimes because every designer wants to do better than the one before so it can be hard to keep their feet on the ground. If you have the whole collection, 56 issues over the last 14 years, you have a perfect view of what's been happening with design in Flanders.

In terms of exhibitions we will have our 5th Triennale exhibition at the end of this year. These started in 1994 with a prestigious exhibition on crafts. In 1997 Klara de Smedt –director of the design centre in Antwerp - started to work with us then and did the second one on industrial design. The third was about the creativity and design of communications. We did a survey and discovered that there were a lot of international companies (in Flanders) and the exhibition showed how their creativity worked and the kinds of products they produced. The fourth was more philosophical and looked at how industrial design can emerge from a crafts or arts area or how it can look like an unfinished object when it is actually a piece of industrial design. The fifth will be about beauty and design. This could be considered an old fashioned idea, but the terms 'beauty' and 'design' are so often linked together in historical and economic contexts that we decided to try and find out what makes design objects beautiful. We invited several philosophers to discuss beauty and a company to do a study for us. The results were quite astonishing. We showed 25 common design objects - coffee containers, watches, bicycles, radiators, vacuum cleaners and so on - to a diverse group of 150 people and asked them which they thought were the most beautiful. The group was made up of old, young, female, male, high education, no education, immigrants, Belgian born people, etc, a really good representation of the Belgian population. To our astonishment, to everybody's astonishment, they all selected the same 3 objects as the most beautiful and the least beautiful - the three very slim, anthropomorphic, coffee containers. In-between, of course, there was a complete mixture with the most complicated objects being considered the least beautiful. An elaborately shaped radiator and a heavily detailed wristwatch weren't considered beautiful, whereas the simple, clean forms were found beautiful by everybody. We're looking at chairs, bowls and so on, from simple to more complicated forms and developing the exhibition from there. It's interesting because the concept of beauty in our contemporary society is either completely abused or rejected. In the art business art no longer has to be beautiful, it is interesting or conceptual. I have the impression that design can offer a solution by bringing people and the art business into a better relationship.

We attend a number of international design fairs and hold two fairs in Belgium. We also have a documentation centre where people can get information on what we do in Flanders for design. We hold exhibitions in our gallery and also exhibit Flanders design abroad as part of an ongoing exchange programme. For example, designers from the Czech Republic exhibited here and we showed in Prague and Brno. Next year we will go to Verona with an exhibition of Flanders designers after an Italian designer exhibited here last year.

We also have a website and an online database in Dutch and English.

We also created the Henry Van der Velde awards which have been very well received by the designers and companies and are often mentioned in their promotional materials. We have four awards: Career, for a designer who has been active for more than 30 years; Young Designer, for someone who's been working 5 years but has already made an impact internationally; Company, this awards the whole company for their use of design; and the public award.

There was the Award for Best Product, but recently we created a label after finding year after year that deciding between so many different types of work was unsatisfactory. The label is given to a product that is on the market, interesting and excellent. This has also proved to be a useful promotional tool for designers and companies.

As I mentioned earlier we are part of VLAO and work with the account managers there. VLAO was created about a year ago from a fusion of regional, development organisations for the economy in Flanders with VIZO that dealt with consultancy for companies. Design Flanders is still finding out how it integrates into this organisation. One solution will be the creation of a centre of excellence for design and we are discussing how to introduce design into the front office area of VLAO.

At Design Flanders we use a variety of tools and are developing more. One example is a roadshow accompanied by a flyer in which we describe two companies working with design at a fairly basic level. Most companies in Flanders are small and medium sized family businesses who know nothing or almost nothing about design except that it's very costly and not really for them. So this project describes why and how to find designers and work with them. We will enhance the impact of this with a series of ½ day workshops throughout the five regions of Flanders in the autumn of this year where managers and designers will explain how to work with a designer. We will also give some introductory courses to the account managers of VLAO on the history and different design disciplines.

We provide all kinds of advice and mediation. Sometimes designers ask us to help them resolve a problem with a company. If it can't be resolved without a court case it's a lose/lose situation whereas if it can be resolved through negotiation then it's win/win. As an independent organisation we can help them have a dialogue instead of a fight.

We collaborate with different design regions in Flanders – Kortrijk is a design city and a partner in the DME project; Limburg has a design college; Genk, is very keen to introduce design to stimulate the economy and make new things happen; Hasselt has a centre which is creating a platform for design with the VLAO account managers and then there's Antwerp.

I have the impression lately that every village in Flanders has a design centre hidden, or not hidden, somewhere, which is a good thing. It means that design has found its way into society. The Design Center de Winkelhaak in Antwerp has also developed special contracts which our designers can buy for their projects at half the cost as we subsidise the other half.

We also have international collaborations. I am on the Board of BEDA which is hoping to move from Barcelona to Brussels in order to have easier access to the European Commission. Every two years we go to the Korean Institute for Design Promotion's exhibition and conference in Seoul. We also work with the American Design Institute.

Finally I'd like to mention Flanders Investment and Trade with whom we have a close collaboration. This is the export organisation run by the government for Flanders companies. We did a survey to discover whether export and the collaboration between FIT and Design Flanders were considered to be important to companies and which countries companies wanted to export to. The result was quite positive and we are working with FIT to create an

export strategy for the next 3 years, which doesn't exist at the moment. They have also invited me to explain what the needs of the design companies are.

Our involvement with other international projects is ongoing. SEEdesign you know about; Concreas is to do with the implementation of design in businesses and management; Composites on Tour is a touring exhibition about how to use composite materials in design products; and then there's the DME Awards (Design Management Europe Awards).

For more information on Design Flanders visit their site at:
www.designflanders.be

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