

A BLAST OF FRESH AIR: THE HISTORY OF O2

By Barbara Kiser

Fast, furious and excessive, the late eighties were a rollercoaster of economic boom and environmental bust. While a new wave of architecture, design and "lifestyle" choices swept into the cities, Chernobyl and the first hints of global warming were spreading alarm all over the world. For a handful of concerned young European designers, the way out was not back to the earth. Their vision embraced the cool aesthetic of modern design, but allied it with sustainability. Buoyant, lively, even a bit combustible, they called themselves O2.

For more than a decade O2 has pioneered solutions to a central problem of the made environment: how to foster sustainability while having a good quality of life. At debates, meetings and international events, the people in this unique forum have been grappling with the problems of a throw-away culture, formulating nonpolluting production methods, sourcing nontoxic, sustainably managed materials--and crucially, passing on the knowledge. These architects, designers, artists, engineers and hypermedia consultants, who hail from Silicon Valley to Egypt and beyond, have kept O2 a remarkably open and flexible entity, a place where the nonprofit and the commercial, individuals and groups, visionaries and pragmatists are all quite at home.

It's anarchic, yet cooperative. Which could describe how it all began.

MEETINGS IN MILAN

In 1986, a group of about 20 young designers living and working in Milan were becoming alarmed by some of the processes and materials they worked with. Among them was the Danish architect and designer Niels Peter Flint. "I was working for Ettore Sottsass at the time, the founder of the Memphis design group--a wild, wonderful and unorthodox concern, but not all that environmentally friendly. A product developer was using rainforest timber. I'd heard about the Indians dying in Brazil, and I began to question why we needed this--and also to realise how much power we have as designers. A gang of us, all working for different offices, started meeting and discussing how environmental ideas could be worked into design."

In 1987, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) invited Flint to Vienna for a conference, where he found crucial support for his ideas. Concepts were hammered out, useful contacts were made, and the Club of Rome wrote a letter of recommendation that opened doors. By the time Flint returned to Copenhagen in 1988, he was ready to take up the challenge and launched a nonprofit ecodesign venture he called O2 Denmark. Then, with the kindred spirits he was finding round Europe, he set up O2 International--a

forum through which representatives from the various countries could share and explore their ideas. Thierry Kazazian, a designer from Milan's Domus Academy, became a key player and formed a national O2 in France that year. Michele Barro and Gert Koster in Italy, and Jorgi Scheicher in Austria, followed suit in 1989.

Across the Channel, Karen Blincoe established O2 UK, a tiny but dynamic addition to the fold. Lawrence Dunmore created the network's logo, and in 1990 the group began producing O2 Pages, a magazine airing the O2 philosophy. In the second issue Kazazian, Scheicher and Thomas Ikrath published the group's manifesto, in which recyclability, minimal packaging and "humour, elegance and pep" figured large. O2 International meanwhile wasted little time in spreading the word, holding meetings and seminars almost from the start and even establishing a pre-Net computer link-up for email exchanges.

A high point of these times was the O2 event at Les Ateliers, the innovative design school in Paris. Here, O2 members rubbed shoulders with participants and big business concerns--such as Volvo and Danone--to work out creative and ethical solutions to a range of design challenges.

MAVERICK DAYS

It wasn't an easy time to go green: incomprehension, even fear, was industry's typical response to ecodesign over much of Europe. Nor was the public ready for radical solutions. In the wake of Chernobyl, the European psyche was gripped by a cleaning mania, and the only sustainable products that could be marketed were detergents--which soon failed because of poor performance. But rather than uselessly banging on doors, O2's designers used the network as a thinktank. Kazazian and Flint were particularly interested in moving away from the "crunchy granola" image of green design in the seventies towards a sleeker and wittier aesthetic.

A few forward-thinking concerns were ready to listen. In 1989, the Italian company Montedipe invited O2 to experiment with Neolite, a new low-grade, 100 per cent recycled plastic. The team began designing plant pots, garden furniture and floor and roofing tiles, many of the items capitalising on the material's distinctive texture and colour. These were later shown at "Metamorphosis of Plastics", an exhibition held at the Triennale Palazzo dell'Arte during the 1991 Furniture Fair in Milan. Although all were to remain prototypes, O2 had made its point--products could be fun, green and viable.

What happened next was fortuitous. The show had caught the eye of a British designer, Jeremy Quinn. By sheer chance, Quinn later met Kazazian in a restaurant with friends. As he puts it, "They spotted the exhibition

catalogue, I cracked a joke and we all hit it off." Inspired by what he was hearing, he returned to London, joined O2 UK and became British representative in the international network.

Quinn got stuck in fast, and a month after Milan began work on a big new project with Flint, Kazazian, Scheicher and Claire Brass. The Japanese, with their cultural tradition of harmony with nature, were showing interest in ecodesign, and the designer Fumikazu Masuda came forward to help the team organise an exhibition at the Seibu department store in Tokyo. Heralded by a window display of turf-topped soil and wind machines, "Sustainable Images of the Future" showcased 70 green products by 40 designers, and was opened by the Japanese minister for the environment. Says Kazazian, "We played with ideas of colour and energy, linking eco-principles such as recycling with different chakras." It was a turning point for O2, revealing the scope of green design to a new audience and clarifying its principles in the process.

More displays of humour, elegance and pep were to follow. In 1992, O2 stormed the Milan Furniture Fair with a bit of ingenious street theatre, and managed to beguile the press out of their lavish and exclusive parties. "A number of us each made a piece of superlight furniture at Jorgi Scheicher's furniture company, with minimal waste and no mixed materials," says Quinn, who helped organise the demo. "We mounted them on four-metre poles and some people carried these, while others had battery packs and bright lights, tin whistles, drums, leaflets. Our procession wound through the centre of Milan for about ten miles, gathering people as it went. At Ron Arad's venue people poured out to see us and he stood watching in despair, but amused too."

It was heady stuff; but less than a year later O2 was burning out. The recession was biting, and for most of the network the priority was simply to stay afloat. Kazazian, determined to design sustainably full time, took a deep breath and reinvented O2 France as a consultancy. But although O2 Denmark hung on until 1995, the Italian, Austrian and British groups died.

The network was down, if not quite out. Then something happened that stirred everything up again: the Dutch arrived.

GOING DUTCH

In the early nineties, Jeremy Quinn recalls, he heard of a group in the Netherlands calling themselves O2. He was startled, but pleased. "Then I met them, and they were really cool. We found that many of us were from rival companies. It was the first time I'd seen this and I thought it showed one of O2's real strengths, that people can play on the same side even though they're in apparent competition."

O2 Netherlands was a shot in the arm--and also brought a well-seasoned pragmatism to the network. The Dutch tend to be less rhapsodical about nature because they have so little of it, and husband their resources with considerable ingenuity. So unsurprisingly, their government had been attuned to green issues for some time, and as early as 1990 had launched two programmes that would become the practical and philosophic backbone of O2 Netherlands. Both highly successful, these brought ecodesigners and companies together to rethink products. Milion focused on life cycle analysis or LCA (a way of measuring a product's "cradle to grave" sustainability), while EcoDesign, which looked at a range of green design methods, involved a whopping 600 companies.

Mark Goedkoop entered the picture soon after. Inspired by Niels Peter Flint, Goedkoop--a designer and dedicated LCA consultant--rallied friends and colleagues and called a meeting in Utrecht on 3 May 1991. But it wasn't until New Year's Day 1993 that 40 designers, most from the Technical University of Delft, sat down for the first official meeting of O2 Netherlands.

Hans Schreuder, a graduate of the Art Institute at Arnhem, was chairman of the group for three years. "I was the odd one out at Arnhem, thinking about social responsibility and the environment. From my first meeting with O2 Netherlands it was immediately obvious that my knowledge of the issues, while a little limited, was different from most of the others'. They knew lots of facts about the environment, such as the effects of plastics. But instead of getting into quantitative discussions, I kept wanting to know the bigger picture--what was behind all this. Fortunately others did too. So discussions got very broad--but they were also very open. No one said, We don't want this guy because he thinks differently." Anarchic cooperation was, it seems, alive and well in the Netherlands.

The Dutch group got organised at a hectic pace, mindful that only a well-established organisation could attract the funding it needed for its projects. By 20 May 1993 they had inaugurated the first in a series of annual debates, a talk on the government's Product and Environment report. That November, O2 Magazine, an eclectic ecodesign journal, appeared. And days later, O2 Netherlands served up its pi(ce de r(sistance: the Event.

EVENT HORIZON

The Event was a watershed in O2's history, uniting and expanding the network and making it a real force for change. Again, Niels Peter Flint had offered up the idea, asking Conny Bakker of O2 Netherlands to organise an international programme. She brought Liesbeth Bonekamp on board, and Diana de Graaf, Thomas Linders,

Pamela Musch and others joined soon after. "Sustainable Lifestyles", as it came to be called, was a year in the making, and drew 118 participants from 16 countries.

The setting was apt. The halls of the Holland America Line in Rotterdam, where Dutch emigrants had once embarked for the New World, now became a place where O2's voyagers could take a collective leap into the future. They certainly had their choice of vehicle: the workshops on offer ranged from "Information Ecology", which probed the question of whether information can pollute or be recycled, to "New Business Concepts", where the Tupperware company was radically rethought.

Wendy Brawer, a New York designer, was part of the Tupperware team and like many Event participants, found the experience life-changing. "It was exhilarating, liberating, unforgettable. I learned about community-based stewardship, drawing inspiration from natural systems, zero waste, and connecting local to global." Brawer went on to start an O2 across the Atlantic (see "New World Revisited").

O2 Netherlands gained 100 new members after the Event. The group was now firmly on the map, but many of its members wanted it made even more accessible. Cyberspace seemed the obvious solution, and on 5 July 1994 Iris de Graaf and Willem Hanhart founded O2 Global Network. O2GN, as it became known, was set up as an independent organisation, a virtual network keeping everyone in O2 linked and communicating. Its first home page appeared that November, and by August 1995 the network had hosted its first Web broadcast, live from Rotterdam.

With the virtual community up and running, attention shifted to O2 International: the lack of national groups had left it dangerously tattered. O2GN eventually hit upon the idea of a liaison system. An individual could set up as an O2 liaison, receiving support from O2GN. In turn, they would act as a one-person O2 communications centre within their country, dispensing information, news and suggestions for projects to anyone interested. It was hoped that in time, some liaisons would gather enough people to form a new O2 group. With these human hubs dispersed all over the world, O2GN became a lively and effective global community, sharing ideas through webcasts, chat sessions, email and, most importantly, the O2 mailing list and home page.

BETTER BY DESIGN

Over the next two years O2 Netherlands' star rose. In April 1995 it won the Teyler prize, from the Haarlem foundation of the same name, for creating environmental awareness within and outside the design world. The

group then became European Designer of the Year in June 1996, at the first European Designers' Fair in Maastricht, in recognition of its innovation and active involvement in design and ecology.

Like a pebble dropped in water the Event, too, was still creating ripples and a follow-up, organised by Fumikazu Masuda, was held at the Honen-In Temple in Kyoto in October 1995. At Tennendesign, green thinking was redefined to reflect the Japanese emphasis on nature rather than the technocentric approach favoured in the West. Wendy Brawer, Karen Blincoe and Niels Peter Flint were there, and feel the event was vital in raising Japanese interest in ecodesign, which today is very high.

The run-up to the millennium, like all anniversaries, inspired reassessment and celebration in equal parts. Even basic concepts were being scrutinised: partly because of the global boom in population and economies, quantifying sustainability itself had become urgent. The Dutch government's verdict, after a three-year study, was that sustainability can be realised--if we become 20 times more efficient in using our resources. Factor 4 was another take on the problem, devised by Hunter and Amory Lovins and Ernst von Weizsacher for their 1998 report to the Club of Rome. Their claim--that we can halve our use of resources while doubling our wealth--was explored at O2's annual debate, in February 1998.

Two months later O2 marked its first decade with Next Step, a seminar held in Copenhagen where representatives from the various countries took 15 minutes to describe what was happening at home. Many participants found this kaleidoscopic snapshot very effective. Then, in November 1998, O2 Netherlands kicked off its fifth birthday with another big international event--the Challenge.

Held at the massive Van Nelle factory in Rotterdam, the Challenge was a gauntlet thrown down to industry, proclaiming that it wasn't really enough any more for designers alone to pay attention to the cycle of production and consumption. Industry as a whole needed to find an integrated approach--sustainable business concepts, or SBCs. Seven categories--living space, urbanisation, mobility, quality of life, communication, North and South, and organisations--were set out as areas for study. Four of the best concepts were then knocked into project plans, and tested for feasibility by the participants.

The event's "challenge" was for the 150 designers, product and R&D managers and marketers participating to formulate completely new businesses, breakthrough technologies and strategic partnerships. Twiddling with old ideas was on the way out: it was time to break with the past.

BREATHING EASIER

Niels Peter Flint has now witnessed that phenomenon of time's passing, the radical becoming the norm. "Twelve years ago, industry was utterly ignorant of sustainable design," he says. "Now we're on the verge of an explosion in it."

O2 will definitely be setting off some of the fireworks. In addition to its virtual global network of sustainable designers, its growing web of O2 liaisons give it unprecedented clout. Says current O2GN chair Ernst-Jan van Hattum, "We've seen the steady growth of O2 liaisons over the past years, and with more help at O2GN we could be seeing a real boom in the exchange of know-how in sustainable design."

O2's roster of groups is also on the up and up. With nearly 200 members, O2 Netherlands is very much a part of the Dutch landscape and an acknowledged authority on ecodesign. O2 France is now a nine-strong consultancy, developing product lines, strategies and environmental reports for big retailers such as Monoprix, and maintaining a library of sustainable materials. And, in the absence of an O2 UK, Martin Charter has held the fort since 1995 through his Centre for Sustainable Design at the Surrey Institute for Art & Design, and a frenetic schedule of talks and workshops. Transatlantically, too, things are moving fast. In the US, O2s on each coast, as well as liaisons north and south, are proving that strategically placed contacts are highly effective in wide open spaces.

South of the US border it's even speedier. In just one year the industrial designer Pedro Alan Martinez has got O2 Mexico off the ground, and the group now has a website, 250 members, a rapidly evolving structure and a list of sponsors that includes the top Mexican design magazine Matiz. Martinez first encountered O2 at Eindhoven in 1994. He stayed in touch with O2GN for advice when helping set up a Design and Innovation Centre in Morelos, then started the group off when he felt the time was ripe. O2 Mexico's swift arrival is a testament both to the bravura and commitment of Martinez and his fellow ecodesigners, and the open-handed expertise of O2 veterans in Colombia, Brazil and the Netherlands.

The future could be pretty oxygen-rich. Says Wendy Brawer: "We have seen an industrial revolution during the brief lifespan of O2 so far, and we're all ready for the next shift. I'm hopeful that the seeds we planted at the end of the 20th century become standard design and living tools in the 21st." Ernst-Jan van Hattum adds, "Sometimes we forget about the state of the Earth--mountains of waste, species going extinct at a rate of 1000 a year. It all adds up to one thing: we have a train to catch. By helping to green industry, O2 is doing its bit to get us to the station on time."

BOX: NEW WORLD REVISITED: ON THE O2 TRAIL IN NEW YORK

Everyone knows New York--a concrete jungle with a pollution habit. Right? Think again. Lurking among the toxic hot spots and skyscrapers are oases and runnels of sustainability, and Wendy Brawer has mapped most of them.

The idea came to Brawer, an artist turned ecodesigner, in 1991, just before the Earth Summit came to NYC: "I had it in a flash--a map that would help everyone discover signs of progress towards sustainability in the city." The first Green Apple map showed conservation areas and environmentally safe transport and businesses jostling with the more familiar landmarks. After Brawer published a second version, people began asking how to create green maps of their own cities. She began developing the idea of a "green map system" to identify ecosites anywhere in the world, and help cultivate awareness and action towards sustainability in the community. The system would have a shared iconography so that anyone, anywhere, could read it, although each icon could be given a local definition. But how to make the GMS feasible--and spread the word?

Enter O2. Brawer had first encountered the network in 1989, when she heard Niels Peter Flint speak in NYC. She had been struck by his celebratory, collaborative approach to ecodesign--so much so that she'd joined O2 in the early nineties. But it wasn't until 1995, at O2GN's first official meeting in Copenhagen, that she found her answer. As Jeremy Quinn began showing her the new O2 website and how the Net worked, she suddenly saw its potential for making GMS a reality. And so, with O2 stalwarts Niels Peter Flint, Sytze Kalisvaart, Conny Bakker, Fumi Masuda, Roderick Simpson, Kirsten Maxe and Martin Krafft, she set to work.

While the overall system was in production, Brawer returned to NYC and cofounded O2 New York with fellow designer Amelia Amon. From the start, a group of up to 50 people has met every month, and O2 NY has now become a communications hub for ecodesign in the region. And the GMS Green Maps? After the ECOpenhagen Map appeared in 1996--courtesy of Niels Peter Flint and colleagues--the system took off. Groups in over 100 towns and cities in 34 countries are working on maps, and more than 30 have been published in printed or virtual form. Fittingly, for an idea that came to fruition through the efforts of a multicultural, democratic alliance, it has all gone truly global.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Web and email

- O2 website: <http://www.O2.org>
- O2GN email: O2global@knoware.nl
- Green Map System website: www.greenmap.org

Books and journals

- J C Brezet and C van Hemel, *Ecodesign: A Promising Approach to Sustainable Production and Consumption*. 1997: Technical University of Delft/UNEP. In English.
- Niels Peter Flint, *Environment, Design and Materials: A Handbook for Designers*. 1993.
- O2 France, *Le cycle de l'emballage*. 1995: Editions Masson. In French.
- O2 France, *Product Design and Environment*. 1999: L'Ademe. In French and English.
- *The Journal of Sustainable Product Design*. Published quarterly by the Centre for Sustainable Design, Faculty of Design, the Surrey Institute of Art & Design, Farnham, Surrey, UK. Tel: 44(0) 1252 892772. Website: <http://www.cfsd.org.uk>. In English.
- *O2 Magazine*. Published three times a year by O2 Netherlands, PO Box 519, 3000 AM Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In Dutch.