

creative review

Gavin Lucas

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about creative review

Creative Review is the world's leading monthly magazine for visual communication. For 27 years, we have brought our readers the best new work, most exciting new talent and most important new trends in graphic design, advertising, new media, photography, illustration, typography and more. We are based in the UK but have subscribers in 80 countries around the world.

The Creative Review Annual is published each May. The Annual is the definitive collection of the best work in visual communication produced each year. The 2007 Annual brought together over 100 pieces of work from all over the world in a special issue of the magazine. Full details of how to enter next year's Annual will appear on this website.

the article

The Dexia Tower, located in Place Rogier at the end of Brussels' main thoroughfare, redefines the term "landmark building". Each day and night the 144 metre-high building plays host to spectacular light shows, thanks to the installation of a unique system which controls over 150,000 LEDs installed in 4200 of the building's 6000 windows. At the bottom of each window is a rail fitted with an equal number of red, green and blue LEDs, allowing any window to be lit in any colour. Thus, each window behaves like a pixel in the giant screen that is the building's façade, displaying images and graphics that can be seen from across the city.

While it has been de rigueur in recent years for banks to stick their logo triumphantly atop their skyscraper, Dexia, the bank that owns the tower, has, in its lighting system, a tool to turn the entire building into one giant branding message. Thankfully, a more subtle route has been taken. Dexia has been working with Brussels-based collective, LAB[au], the 'Laboratory for architecture and urbanism', to ensure the tower's light shows are as original and intriguing as they are vivid. Touch, LAB[au]'s first project devised specially for the tower, saw an interactive station installed at the foot of the tower, at which members of the public could interact with the tower's lights in real time, creating a composition of lines and colour using a touch-screen. At the press of a button, their composition could be commemorated in a snapshot of the tower (taken from another tower block, across the city) which could be forwarded via email to friends or printed out and taken home. LAB[au]'s Manuel Abendroth describes this interaction as a "triangulation between citizen, public space and the city – it's a new form of relationship made possible through technology – a new urban experience."

LAB[au]'s four members, Manuel Abendroth, Jérôme Decock, Alexandre Plennevaux and Els Vermang, all met while studying architecture but they show little interest in actually designing buildings. For us it was important to make a clean break from the building process, explains Abendroth. We choose instead to spend our time and energy doing more research-based projects. Essentially, LAB[au]'s main concern is the "expression of data variables through light and form". Does that make them artists rather than architects? Questions about disciplines aren't really that fruitful, suggests Abendroth. Disciplines are blurring as we move forward – so we call what we do MetaDesign. 'Design' is a reference to the Bauhaus (also hinted at in the group's name) – even painters and artists of the Bauhaus movement called themselves designers to differentiate themselves from the traditional old way. 'Meta' is coming straight from computer science. It seems for us to be a very good way to say this is our practice – it's a new word, it's interdisciplinary – though most of the time what we do is still architecture in the end.

LAB[au]'s involvement with the Dexia Tower began after they saw the lights being tested for the first time in 2006 and so called Dexia up to ask about it. Initially they told us that it was all top secret, recalls Abendroth. But, eventually, Dexia called back and asked LAB[au] to come in for a chat about the potential of the tower's lighting system. Now the group is working with the bank on an ongoing programme of events and installations. Every year there will be a big interactive event (such as Touch) and also various lighting programmes or cycles that appear on the building. One such was the Chrono Tower project from last year, which was the first LAB[au] project in a series of light cycles entitled "Who's Afraid of rgb?". The name, explains Abendroth, is a direct reference to abstract painter Barnett Newman's work. We always said that what should be used on the tower is an abstract language – not figurative, image-based or text stuff. And, of course, rgb is light in its basic colour components. So the idea is really 'who's afraid of being abstract' and using light as a code/language.

In the case of Chrono Tower, red, green and blue relate to the basic units of time: hours (red), minutes (green) and seconds (blue). Areas of colour on the tower's façades grow according to the time, thus expressing the progression of hours, minutes and seconds. The colours blend into each other over time and when all three overlap you get white (r+g+b=white).

"So no-one can really read the precise time, admits Abendroth, but this is a system that is driven by the element of time and the closer we get to midnight, as it gets darker, then the brighter the tower becomes. The new day comes at midnight, the lights blink a bit, to celebrate the new day, and then the whole process starts to invert.

"As the daylight starts to appear, the white light slowly migrates to the top of the tower and disappears. The passing of time is symbolised by a logically programmed cycle of light."

The second project in the Who's Afraid of RGB? series of installations, Weather Tower, was displayed on the tower at the end of last year. Here different colours and patterns represented the following day's weather forecast. "We will do a third variation for March," says Abendroth. "This series also acts as research for us as we try different formulas in order to find a synthesis for something that is on the tower every day. For us it's important that there's something on the tower everyday –otherwise it's not a landmark."

LAB[au]'s headquarters, a gallery named MediaRuimte, is just a hop, skip and a jump from Place Rogier and the Dexia Tower. Here they research projects, hold exhibitions, workshops and concerts and also explore different technologies, developing hardware and software to drive them. "For us it is a place where people can focus on technology-related questions in art – we wanted to create a network where like-minded people could meet and exchange ideas," Abendroth explains. "We're recognised now as an institution by the local community – as a place for experimental and electronic architecture."

The gallery has hosted several exhibitions since it opened in 2003. The EOD 02 (Electric Organ Discharge) project in 2006, saw them collaborate with artist Frederick De Wilde and set up what they call a new media installation – consisting of four tanks containing blind fish that perceive their environment and communicate by giving off low-voltage electric signals. Antennas in each tank picked up the signals which were duly converted into sound. Lightbulbs placed under each aquarium pulsed according to the rhythm and intensity of the emitted sounds. The behaviour of the fish drove the sound and lighting of the exhibition space.

Another more recent installation, entitled Framework 5x5x5 (f53), took the form of a two by two metre square framework comprising a grid of 25 squares. Each of these squares comprises a central square and a square framework around it, both of which can swivel on a central axis - the outer frame on the vertical and the central square panel on the horizontal. Sensors in the framework pick up movement, such as someone walking past, and tiny motors in the piece make the component parts move and spin, thus revealing the lighting on the edges of each moving part and the fact that one side of the piece is black and the other white. When the project is complete, there will be five of these frameworks which, together, form a ten-metre-long piece: a wall. "We want to work with motion-tracking so that as people walk past, their presence is translated by the wall in terms of light and movement," explains Abendroth.

The five by five grid enables basic type to be formed, so as well as a screen in an architectural sense, it can be a screen for displaying information or pattern. It is designed to be placed in an urban environment where people will interact with it.

Impressively LAB[au] not only designed this work, but they built it themselves in the basement of their gallery space – using, for the first framework, no less than 1350 LEDs, 50 servo motors, 140 metres of aluminium and a whopping 1021 kilometres of cable. "We try to do everything in house, so we are involved practically as well as theoretically in the way we approach architecture and its relationship with new media and electronics. So from writing code to making circuit boards and building frameworks we do it all. If you see the pavilion or interface station for the Touch project, we made it physically ourselves just as we developed the multi-touch screen within it." Just four people working on various projects, and actually realising them in their studio, isn't it overwhelming? "For the moment it's good - we like doing it," affirms Abendroth. "I'm not sure if it's always the best way, but it allows us to come to a very clear point from the first idea to the last element. It allows us to make an object which is as conceptual as the work that it facilitates."

In the pipeline (as well as ongoing projects with the Dexia Tower and the creation of the final four pieces of f53) is an installation called Binary Waves that will be sited on a stretch of canal in Paris. Light will shine onto the reflective surface of the canal as it emerges from the edges of panels as each rotates on its vertical axis in response to passers-by. "Each time somebody passes, it will create an impulse, a wave of moving light, that will ripple back and forth along the 100 metre length of the installation," explains Abendroth, "gradually slowing and fading until someone else walks by and a new impulse is triggered." Abendroth has something else he wants to talk about. He flicks a switch and moves his hand near a small glass tube sticking out of a circuit board. Strange sounds emerge from somewhere as he does so. Lab[au] are starting to experiment with similar technology to that found in one of the first ever electrical instruments, the theramin. The plan is to use similar devices in an interactive project – on an architectural scale, naturally.

To find out more about Lab[au] and to see more of their work, visit <http://www.lab-au.com/>

Framework 5x5x5 is yet to be finished but LAB[au] has already exhibited the first of the five, two by two metre frameworks that will make up the complete project. Motion sensors in the framework translate movement around it (such as someone walking past) into movement in the piece – as its component parts rotate, spin and glow, revealing patterns created out of colour and light, based, says LAB[au], on "a binary language"

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