

**Leonne Cuppen (Yksi Connect):**

**“It is precisely cross-pollination that leads to interesting innovation”**

**The well-known Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter said it a century ago: innovations arise at crossroads. “Neue combinationen” he called it in German, new combinations. “In my vision, MaterialDistrict is a beautiful, large intersection where commercial parties, researchers, start-ups and open-minded, creative, young designers can meet. It is precisely this cross-pollination that leads to interesting innovation.” So says Leonne Cuppen, previously ambassador for MaterialDistrict and co-curator this year.**

“More and more young designers are starting to work practically and pragmatically with sustainability and circularity, focusing on material research. Driven by curiosity, they throw a piece of plastic into a deep fryer to see what happens. All kinds of substances and plant extracts are crushed, boiled, mixed or dried. Or algae, bacteria and other living organisms are called in to help.” Leonne Cuppen would know. She has been looking for talented young designers for more than 30 years. After graduating from the Design Academy Eindhoven (in 1991) she co-founded Yksi, a design agency in Eindhoven with a gallery annex exhibition space where recent graduates of design schools in the Netherlands could present themselves.

### **Surprising connections**

Under the name Yksi Expo, she has put together countless exhibitions, in which many well-known names and established designers have passed by. Cuppen always turned out to have a good nose for talent. Some exhibits traveled to all corners of the world, from Beijing to San Francisco and from Moscow to Tunis. The emphasis was increasingly on sustainability and circularity. In passing, Cuppen was co-initiator of the Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven.

After moving to the former Philips site Strijp S, Cuppen turned Yksi Expo into a more (inter)active and dynamic space and a Young Talent Team was established. In exchange for substantive input and practical assistance, young graduates were given a workplace with supervision.

Cuppen also founded the agency Yksi Connect - the name says it all - to make as many unexpected and surprising connections as possible and to bridge the gap between those young designers and the business community, sometimes also (semi) governments. For example, she is currently supervising a group of artists, designers and an architect who, together with shopkeepers from Goes, Middelburg, Vlissingen, Terneuzen and Hulst, are working to make these Zeeland inner cities more lively and future-proof. She recently was also a member of the jury of the Green Product Award, this year with the theme of materials and that is precisely why this organisation is also present at MaterialDistrict.

### **Necessary transition**

After she said goodbye to the design agency, Cuppen recently put an end to the Yksi Expo foundation in order to fully focus on Yksi Connect and making connections. Partly because she sees interesting and encouraging developments in education. “Take the Academy Minerva in Groningen. What can you do with hemp, magnesium and potato starch, which products can you make from them and how? A multidisciplinary team of researchers, teachers, students and graduates conducted an exploratory study of these locally produced materials. This approach also formed the basis for a new Master's programme. Nice isn't it? And to meet the growing interest of students in sustainability and circularity, programs such as bio-design, bio-based art & design or bio-inspired design are popping up like mushrooms at just about all universities and colleges.”

At the same time, she is pleased to see that more and more companies are also seriously investing in sustainability and circularity, sometimes because they really mean it, sometimes forced by regulations or simply because they see that the market for it is growing. But they often lack new ideas and up-to-date knowledge in this area. "It is time to bring those two worlds together: on the one hand the open-minded, creative young talents and on the other hand the somewhat tightly organised, yet often profit-oriented business community. Together they can accelerate the necessary transition."

### **Combination of creativity and business acumen**

Cuppen is convinced that this change is underway. Not only in thinking, with concepts, but also in doing, with concrete projects and products. "There are plenty of beautiful and inspiring examples from practice. In 2021, Biobased Creations (by Lucas de Man, among others) presented a fully biobased house at the Dutch Design Week under the title The Exploded View Beyond Building. To show that it is possible and to inspire people. And look, now - after the municipality of Oirschot - the municipality of Zwolle has now also launched a competition for biobased and nature-inclusive construction on the Nieuwe Veemarkt in the city."

Cuppen points to another example, from Pretty Plastic. At the beginning of 2015, Reinder Bakker, Hester van Dijk (both designers at Overtreders W) and Peter van Assche (Bureau SLA architects) came up with the idea of making facade cladding from recycled plastic construction waste. The plastic tiles have been on sale for several years now, look beautiful, are safe to use, easy to apply and last forever. A new version of the product was recently launched, suitable for high-rise buildings. Cuppen: "You see that such an innovation has to go through a whole process, from idea to product on the market. That takes time and only works with the right combination of creativity, business acumen and resources to scale up."

### **Innovation Fund**

A favorite example of Cuppen is Daria Biryukova, designer and former member of the Yksi Expo Young Talent Team. "Together with Mineralz, a subsidiary of waste processor Renewi, she developed FORZ® Glaze, which consists of more than 60% ash residue from incinerated household waste. Subsequently, almost on her own with great perseverance, she established a link with the ceramics industry and tries to bring about substantial changes there. FORZ® Glaze is now used both finely and coarsely in applications such as facade materials for indoor/outdoor use and in ceramic tableware."

Back to MaterialDistrict. Cuppen was already a moderator and ambassador in previous versions, but this time she is closely involved as co-curator. "MaterialDistrict started the Innovation Fund in 2019. A wonderful initiative. Commercial parties contribute to that fund, which offers less well-off designers and start-ups some support to also participate. I actively looked for material designers with a focus on sustainability and circularity who are eligible for the Innovation Fund, mostly young talents or start-ups. For example, also a few recent graduates of Design Academy Eindhoven, whom I spotted at Dutch Design Week last October. In addition, I provide part of the lecture program and I am active as a moderator of the lectures for three full days. In this way, the fair gets an extra layer in addition to the commercial parties and an interesting mix of participants is created that reinforce each other and from which beautiful cross-fertilization can arise."