

Liz Farrelly meets Jane Atfield, who has creative designs on Britain's unwanted plastic packaging

New horizons in the waste land

Ask Jane Atfield about recycling and she replies, as anyone might, that she "tries to do her bit". Most of her empties find their way to a bottle bank, but not all. Nor are her out-of-date colour supplements instantly pulped. But Atfield, a designer, who has recently completed a bar at Westminster University, is hardly slacking in the war against waste. Since leaving college, Atfield has scouted around for assorted leftovers to make new things.

Her studio is a storehouse of possibilities: cut and stacked cardboard cartons have been turned into shelving units and piles of riveted felt lagging converted into an armchair and a foot-stool; chair frames, usually hidden under layers of upholstery, are left naked with the addition of mottled plastic seats; bottles filled with wax have become candle-holders; and pages from glossy magazines are dye-cut and folded into full-colour envelopes, a "picture post" for the Nineties.

At a Crafts Council exhibition earlier this year, Atfield's furniture constructed from recycled plastic waste was spotted by Colin Williamson, chairman of the British Plastics Federation's Recycling Council. He recognised the furniture's photogenic potential for grabbing attention and furthering the cause. Atfield and Williamson's subsequent partnership has flourished into Made of Waste, an agency that sources, distributes and promotes recycled materials to the design and architecture professions.

Exploiting a pop sensibility, Made of Waste is working hard to blow away the rough-hewn, hair-shirt image of recycled materials. Instead of hiding the origins of recycled plastics by dyeing them a uniform dull brown, Atfield and Williamson aim to celebrate the mongrel characteristics by turning glitches and chance colourations into aesthetic, marketable virtues.

Atfield first came across

recycled plastic sheeting while studying furniture design at the Royal College of Art. A friend found an inch-square sample at a trade fair in New York. The multi-coloured fragment was made from discarded polyethylene bottles, chipped, melted and flattened into sheeting.

Atfield contacted furniture manufacturers Yemm and Hart in Missouri, who had developed and distributed the plastic, and imported a range of sample sheets in different thicknesses. Tests proved it to be as strong, flexible and as easy to work with as the most homogenous timber substitute. It could also be moulded into stacking chairs, mugs, telephones, anything that plastic is already used for. The only

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problem being that one simple moulding tool can cost about £80,000.

Realising that her straightforward forms complemented the busy surface of the plastic, Atfield made a simple chair, showing off its riveted construction unself-conscious of the head-turning appeal of its Jackson Pollock-style speckles. The surface does not need cosmetic treatment, paint, lacquer or sealant. It is cheap, practical and hard-wearing.

The next stage was to find a sympathetic local manufacturer prepared to use its presses for recycling Britain's own abundant supply of empty shampoo and bleach containers. Britain lags behind other European countries in the organisation and recycling of plastic waste, although efforts are being made. Recoup, for example, a non-profit-making organisation established four years ago with donations from firms using plastic pack-

ing, aims to educate and fund all sectors of the community in efforts to recycle plastic. Recoup lobbies manufacturers to reduce the number of components and materials in any one piece of packaging and to be more sparing with labels and adhesives.

Because of Recoup's efforts, cleaner, better sorted plastic is converted into more vivid-coloured sheeting with fewer flaws. As a result, Made of Waste's products literally outshine the original American version.

Atfield's input into Recoup's efforts is to make a new wave of creative furniture, interior design — and ultimately architecture — out of a matter-of-fact and pragmatic campaign to make more effective and ecological use of waste plastic.

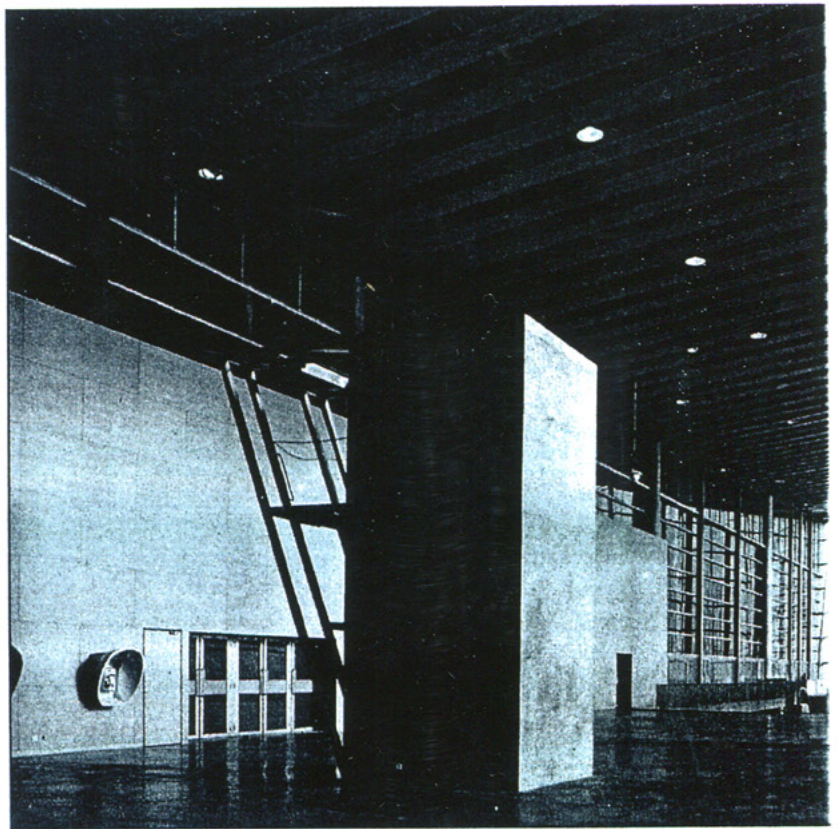
Atfield would like to see more architects and designers substituting recycled plastic sheeting for the wood, plywood, chipboard and medium density fibreboard (mdf) they normally specify. Tables, shelves, doors, counter tops and partitions could become kaleidoscopes of responsible colour. Although at present more expensive than all-purpose mdf, bulk manufacturing will eventually bring down the price of recycled plastic sheeting.

Atfield's designs have been the best advertisement for these wider possibilities. Commissions to furnish student bars at the University of Westminster and Central Saint Martin's College of Art have led to a collaboration with interior designer Ben Kelly for a children's corner at the Science Museum. Moving from furniture to interiors, Atfield contemplates recycling architecture itself. "Why not salvage whole rooms from demolished buildings and collage them back together to create buildings with new functions?"

Atfield may be a keen skip-hunter, but her designs are far from grungy. Her mix of clean lines, DIY simplicity and comic-book colours begs to be mass-produced.



Jane Atfield: her products literally outshine the American original Photograph: Brian Harris



Lille's on the fast

A French provincial centre's high-speed rail link offers a lesson to London, says Martin Spring

Even before regular service begins on the Channel tunnel railway linking London, Paris and Brussels, Lille has opened its new high-speed railway station and transport interchange. The Eurostar trains, however, are only part players on an astonishing and profitable new urban stage.

Above and alongside the Lille interchange, a sparkling complex has shot up featuring a shopping centre, offices, exhibition and conference halls, hotels, flats, a college and more. It all adds up to an instant city-within-a-city, dubbed Euralille.

Euralille's station is enclosed by a weightless structure of glass walls and delicate steel hoops that support the roof. An elegant bridge carries cars, buses and trams up and over the station concourse, while huge concrete staircases and elevators descend at crazy angles to a new underground metro station. Two high office blocks, one in the bizarre shape of a ski boot, straddle the new station, and a hotel is planned to do likewise.

Beyond a new triangular piazza stands a three-storey shopping centre in gleaming glass, polished steel and flashing neon. It is bounded by a block of flats with a mesmerising multicoloured facade and by three shorter tower blocks, also clad in steel, glass and neon. To one side, a large public park is being landscaped, while on the other side of an elevated roadway stands a giant oval convention centre combining a large exhibition hall, three conference auditoriums and a pop-concert hall.

Euralille's station interchange and surrounding complex, which cost £750m to develop, are conceived with the

panache of early Victorian railway termini. With its futuristic design and rapid development period, Euralille befits the advanced high-speed rail travel that generated it.

The contrast with the procrastination by the British government over a high-speed rail link to the Channel tunnel and the protests by Kent "nimbies" along its route could not be more marked.

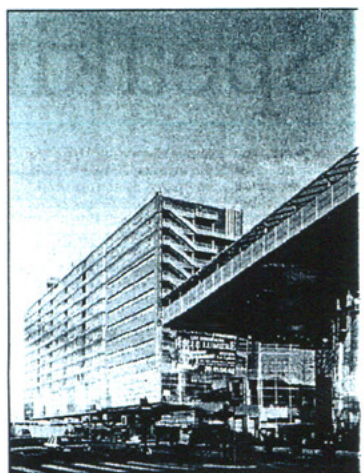
Euralille was the vision of Pierre Mauroy, the city's mayor. He saw that Lille could become "the communications centre of north-west Europe", and persuaded French railways (SNCF) to choose the city for the main junction on its new TGV line between Paris and the Channel tunnel. The city council picked up the £114m tab of rerouting the proposed line.

Conveniently, Lille had available a greenfield site almost as large as Hyde Park next to its existing station. For centuries the area had been protected by statute as a military zone (because Lille is a frontier city), but it had been made redundant by the European Union.

Mauroy realised that a "strong architectural signal" would be vital to catch the eyes of high-speed travellers and symbolise the city's revival.

The Dutch avant-garde architect Rem Koolhaas was chosen to carry out the master plan. An influential architectural panel was also set up to control standards. And a clutch of star Modernist architects with little or no experience of large commercial projects, including Jean Nouvel, Claude Vasconi, Christian de Portzamparc and Koolhaas himself, were nominated to design the individual buildings. Every star architect was teamed up with a local architect for the project.

Koolhaas has had a long love affair with imaginary cities of the future. He made his name



Architectural signal: Lille's ambitious railway development contrasts with Britain's procrastination could not



Why Britain has missed the

Euralille is a massive, Blade Runner-like urban development. Its bravura architecture might not be everyone's taste.

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