



# An innovative consultancy

Belgium-based ERM Project is a leader in professional kitchen design. Victoria Brownlee learns about its history and future plans >





Top left and right: R hotel, Remouchamps, Belgium  
 Bottom right: AXA canteen, Brussels  
 Bottom left: Banque Degroof Petercam, Brussels

ERM Project specialises in the design and conception of professional kitchens. It helps clients create kitchens – whether in company canteens, hospitals, nursing homes, catering businesses or snack bars – that not only comply with current standards, but are also ergonomic and efficient. Skilled in research and engineering, with a strong customer focus,

the team at ERM Project has over 45 years of combined experience in industrial kitchens and large cooling systems too.

Since starting the organisation in

2008, founders Olivier Engels FCSI, Jean-Michel Marbehant, a senior associate of FCSI, and Dene Rachid FCSI have grown from looking after an initial client base of two, to 25-30 clients per year. They're active across

Europe, and with an impressive portfolio of projects already are planning to keep innovating and improving the client experience into the future.

Before launching ERM Project, Rachid acknowledges that kitchen consultancies didn't exist in Belgium. Engels, Marbehant and Rachid all worked for a kitchen installation company and recognised a growing need for a consultancy. "We decided to create a consultancy that was as well versed in kitchen equipment as in the technical sides surrounding it. People were constantly asking about the technical elements in a kitchen and, for us, it was logical that we'd look after both aspects," says Rachid.

#### A palatial start

In the beginning, ERM Project started out with a large project at the Palais des Congrès in Brussels. They found themselves designing kitchens from the get go, despite their initial belief that kitchens would only represent a small portion of what they would specialise in. As the consultancy grew, the

team became more structured and now, with seven employees, each employee is able to play a more specific role.

Along with a growing team, ERM Project's scope of work has evolved and changed since the consultancy launched. Rachid outlines that in the early days, their main focus was on the kitchen itself, but now they are also

increasingly looking after the service set up, the design, the dining room and the decor.

According to Marbehant, The consultancy's work is constantly evolving and changing. "Evolution happens with each project, case by case, because no two projects are alike and each client has different needs. We always try to be relevant to clients, and to be increasingly innovative," says Marbehant, adding that clients are becoming more interested in the dining experience, and that this is playing a more important role in their work. "People need to have lived an experience; whether it's olfactory, gustative or visual with the design, it needs to be an experience," he explains.

#### Three-pronged approach

ERM Project manages to remain competitive in a number of ways. First, they're able to offer clients a master budget up front. Second, their clients are offered one point of contact for the overall management of their project, therefore skipping the need to have a separate architect, installation team or technical consultant. And third, project timelines are more reliable thanks to the team size at ERM Project. Their main competitors – kitchen installers – often work solo, meaning work can be delayed if that person is unwell or injured.

In addition to a strong client focus, Marbehant believes that technical expertise helps to set the consultancy apart from its competitors. "The technical aspects are at the forefront of what we

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#### Milestone projects

AXA, Brussels, Belgium

The AXA canteen project (pictured below) provided ERM Project with the scope to be innovative, while testing its technical capabilities. According to Rachid, its ability to find practical technical solutions to accommodate the proposed design elements was a particular point of pride, as was its ability to adhere to a set timeframe and budget on this large project.

"The first challenge on the AXA project was to develop a dining solution that allowed the company to promote its food offerings to staff, since this had become an important element in recruitment. The dining options were based on consultations with various catering companies," he says. "The second challenge was to create, in all the dining zones, not only relaxation areas for staff, but also workspaces. At AXA, employees select a workstation daily, and the restaurant areas therefore also need to be able to transform into working and meeting spaces. The third challenge was to find technical solutions to create self-service spaces and to honour the spirit of the designer and the original design."



RTL, Luxembourg City, Luxembourg

The RTL kitchen and self-service space project offered ERM Project a different set of challenges. Having been given the menu by the caterer, it had to adapt the project to fit these specifications.

Rachid says the first challenge was to work creatively given the small surface area dedicated to the kitchen and self-service space, made harder by the fact that windows took up the majority of the allocated space, and materials couldn't be placed alongside these.

Within this scope, they had to respect a very tight budget given the dining options on offer, and adapt to the architect's demands from a design point of view. "What makes us proud with this project is that we found compact implantation solutions in order to guarantee production and distribution in a small but still functional space," says Rachid.

do. Ventilation and refrigeration are areas in which we aim to develop innovative products and designs, and we're becoming well known in these fields."

Another key area of focus for ERM Project is in energy savings, although often because of clients' budgetary constraints, its importance is

overlooked. "We try to find solutions so clients will understand the benefits of these techniques and the potential savings, but we run into problems," says Marbehan.

In Belgium,

Marbehan has found that there have been two main evolutions in the kitchen design and conception sector. The first is a result of the financial crisis, meaning ERM Project is restricted to working with smaller budgets; and the second is its increased involvement in the development of menu design. "Belgium has the chance to be really innovative in this area," he says. "The ways in

which we consume meals – whether it's street food, finger food, a more traditional main meal or show cooking – offer a lot of opportunity for development."

Menu design is something that the team at ERM Project now factors into its work so it is able to more easily demonstrate a project's potential success. Where it would previously design a kitchen based on a client's desired menu, it now offers to develop a range of food offerings to suit a kitchen or restaurant. "Our objective is to show clients that we're invested in their project and also to reassure them of the project's profitability," says Marbehan.

### Looking further afield

In the future, ERM Project aims to continue developing its international business and has put in place a strong team to support increasingly innovative projects in high-development zones including Dubai and Morocco, and on international hotel projects.

"We're interested in building relationships with the maximum number of people so we're not working only on 'one shot' projects, but on multiple projects over many years. We have a long-term commercial approach, and for this we need to create a network. When we want to develop new solutions and be representative in the evolution of our sector, we need to find partners who are willing to work with us, and who will give us the chance to develop products and designs," explains Marbehan.

And developing a wide network is where its involvement with FCSI is key. For ERM Project, FCSI represents an exchange of ideas, issues and conception ideologies. Regular contact with the organisation allows it to access information and learn from real-life experiences. Marbehan believes that visualising kitchens and restaurants helps the team to see its sector from a different angle, and that attending FCSI meetings allows it to keep up with innovation, exchange information and build its contact list. "We see what is new, which allows us to create innovative designs," says Marbehan. ■

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