

STYLE

From lone believer to industry leader – Shannon Denny meets Chrystina Schmidt, one of the steely Scandinavian minds behind design emporium Skandium’s unprecedented rise to success

Though many Londoners might already have had a passing appreciation of Scandinavian Modernism before 1999, getting their hands on Georg Jensen cutlery, an Arne Jacobsen chair or Marimekko fabric in those days was a different matter. That all changed one fateful day when Chrystina Schmidt and Magnus Englund laid eyes on a set of kitchen tools lying unassumingly on a shelf in a Finnish department store. The pair – who are partners in life as well as business – took inspiration from what they glimpsed, and the result is Skandium, one of the most influential design stores in the UK.

It’s a chilly but dazzlingly sunny day, and Chrystina – true to her native Finnish form – suggests we sit outside Patisserie Valerie in Marylebone High Street so we can soak up a maximum of solar energy. Thanks perhaps to their long, dark winters, Scandinavians lead the world in coffee consumption, so in keeping with this trend we order lattes while she fills me in on the Skandium story.

“We went to Finland to see my parents in summer 98, and that was when Finland celebrated 100 years of Alvar Aalto, the architect.” Everywhere they went they saw tributes to the legendary Finn’s iconic creations, ranging from stools to glassware to buildings. The experience pushed Scandinavian design to the front of their minds. “Then that summer, Iittala came out with a series of beautiful kitchen tools from international designers. It is a very old company; they have glasses from the 20s and 30s that are still in production. By accident, we saw this in a provincial department

store, nothing fancy, just on a shelf. And we just thought they were amazing. So we said, ‘This is like the Gucci of interiors – we should really bring this to London.’”

The pair returned to their adopted city and started contemplating a way to convey “the journey of Modernism” to the British public. At this time Magnus, who is Swedish, was working for the fashion designer Paul Smith while Chrystina was in demand as a photographer in the fashion industry. “Magnus was having second thoughts about fashion,” she explains. “He said, ‘You know, I don’t really want to work in fashion the way it works now, where you have to have new all the time; it’s much better to focus on quality, tradition and craftsmanship.’”

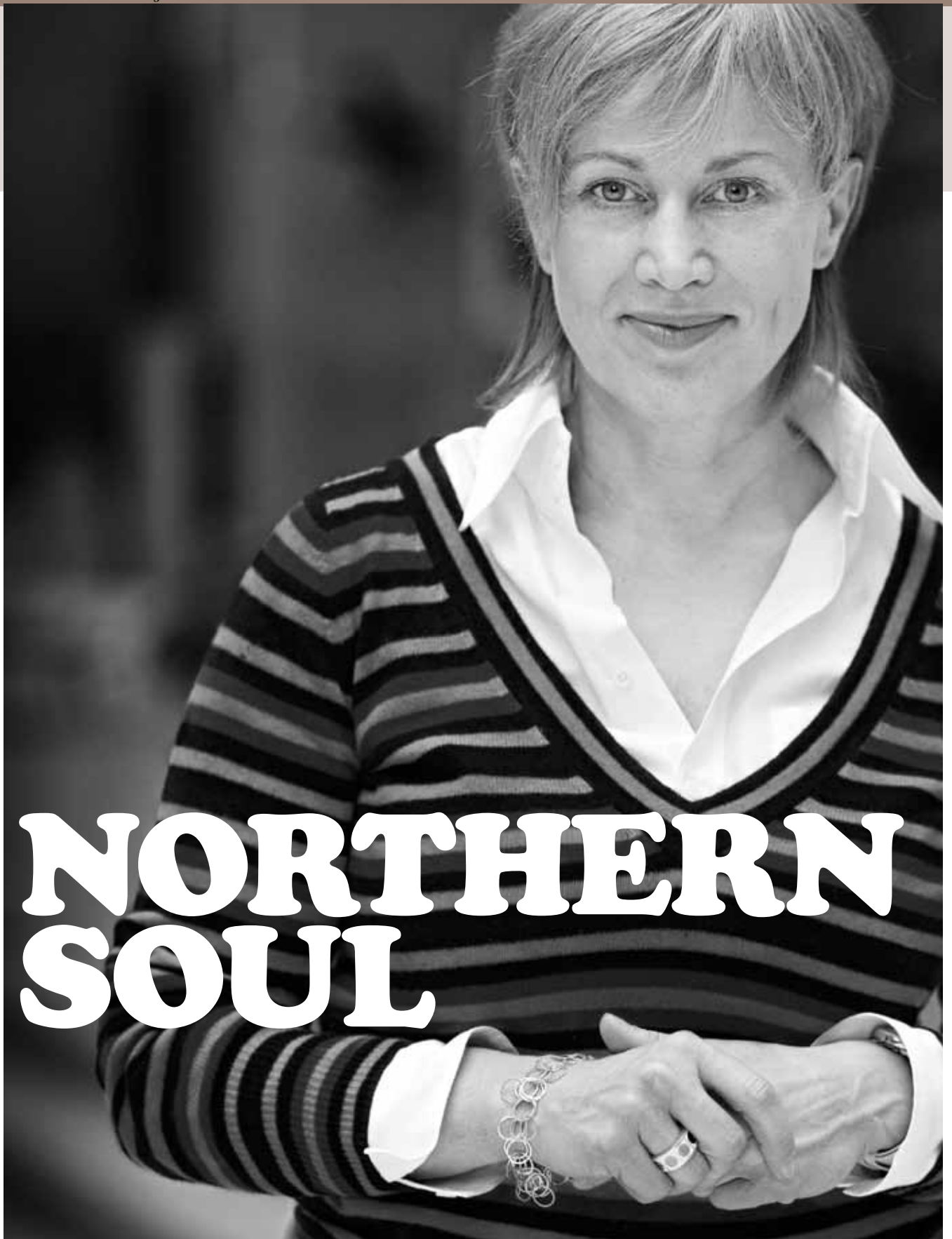
This notion went into the pitch they prepared to deliver to banks with a view to obtaining a loan. “I made a presentation with mood boards on Scandinavian design,” Chrystina remembers. “Wallpaper* had just come out with a supplement on Stockholm, so we had with us the magazine, showing it was something that was in the air and the press had picked up on it. There was no such store anywhere in the world which was a United Nations of Scandinavian design, as we called it. So we presented this to a bank. This guy was sitting behind his desk, very important in his self-righteousness. When we finished he said, ‘I don’t quite get it... What wallpaper do you want to sell?’”

Chrystina laughs endlessly about it now, but at the time it must have been crushing. “No one believed in the concept,” she says. “They didn’t even understand what we

were talking about!” Fortunately the couple met Danish investment banker Christopher Seidenfaden at a party. His mother had owned a design store in Rome in the 1960s, and his grandfather had founded the leading lighting manufacturer Louis Poulsen. “He was absolutely in awe of the concept,” she recalls. The three decided to go into business together and set out to be the best retailer of Scandinavian design in the world.

The choice of location for their venture was made with care. “The thing is, we wanted to be in central London; we did not want to go to Chelsea or Kensington or Richmond. We wanted to be an international lantern of Scandinavian design, and that meant central London.” Money was tight, so they looked to roads off and behind Oxford Street and Bond Street and, after some searching, settled on Marylebone. “Wigmore Street at the time was totally barren and empty with a few stores selling medical equipment!” she recalls incredulously. “We got the premises because no one else wanted it – it was so dilapidated. It had been empty for five years.”

Transforming the rundown location into a suitable backdrop for some of history’s most important design innovations took some doing – Chrystina describes it as a “horrendous ordeal”. “We did that shop on a shoestring,” she says. “The day before we were meant to open, the shop wasn’t ready. The floors were still wet with paint. All our crates from Finland, Sweden and Denmark were lined up Wigmore Street from the corner down to the store because we couldn’t take



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them in and we couldn't afford a warehouse. We had to have trust in the people around us to not walk off with the crates. And they didn't! And I'm eternally grateful to them."

Londoners in turn were vociferously grateful to Skandium for satisfying their yearning for modern Scandinavian furniture, glass, china, cutlery, toys, lighting and stylish household products. "When we opened, Sir Norman Foster jumped out of a cab, ran in and congratulated us." The lauded architect wasn't the only luminary to express his admiration; textile designer Lucienne Day was an early visitor too. Skandium quickly established itself as a showcase for classics from renowned designers as well as products from a new generation of Scandinavian stars. International designers working for Scandinavian companies were also represented, among them Antonio Citterio and Ross Lovegrove.

So while banks had failed to grasp their vision, the public embraced it. Chrystina says the secret is simple. "You want to give quality and long-lasting ideals. Everything that we sell has a story, an identity. I think we are living more and more in a world that gets anonymous. We are not selling items without a provenance; there is something to them. Most of them have

been designed as part of a project or at a time when nothing else around was remotely similar, so they had a very big impact on the wider development of what we today perceive as good, comfortable, modern living."

After four years in their initial location, the Wigmore Street landlords decided to redevelop. By coincidence, at exactly the same time the Howard de Walden Estate invited Skandium to move around the corner. "They said, 'We had someone do market research with a stopwatch standing outside your store, and we were just wondering – are you hiring friends to come in? Because you have the highest volume of customers of all the stores we did research on.'" Chrystina, Magnus and Christopher jumped at the chance to move, and the subsequent success of their Marylebone High Street location led to a similar invitation by South Kensington Estates to open up in their emerging Brompton Quarters.

Skandium also operates a

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concession in Selfridges, and later this year is launching in Fitzrovia together with the esteemed furniture manufacturer Fritz Hansen. One wonders what the naysayers must be thinking now. "We are doing well and we are really proud," Chrystina smiles. "We proved banks wrong who said it would fail in the first year. We are still here after 11 years and it's going better and better actually. It's good!"

In spite of their growing geographical reach across the capital, Chrystina insists her heart belongs to the district where their vision first took hold. "I love Marylebone. I'm a Marylebone girl, because when we moved to London we were lucky enough to find a place that we rented in Gloucester Place. At the time, Marylebone was not as glamorous as it is now. It was really the backwaters of the universe in a way – totally forgotten. But for us, it was home. And still every time I come from Brompton Road to Marylebone my heart beats a bit faster."

They rented their sunny flat for a decade before the landlord announced that he wanted it back, prompting a move to an Earl's Court mansion block where they have lived for two years. Still, she is able to draw upon memories of her early London years with ease. "I would sometimes walk down Marylebone High Street and be surprised because it was very quaint – but dead. There was nothing of interest, just a few charity shops. It was so central, we thought, 'At some point this must come to life!'"

It's another illustration of Chrystina's knack for forecasting where tastes will lead. She admits she does have some kind of special talent for observation. "My grandmother always used to say to me, 'Girl, if you don't get anywhere in life you always have your eagle eyes. You were born with eagle eyes. Remember to use them, because that's a gift.'" So instead of asking her about wallpaper, that bank manager would have been wise to listen to her predictions.