

perspective

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INSPIRING ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

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A LIFE ALOFT

Hidden away in Cape Town's Hout Bay, South African fashion and interior designer Jenni Button's eclectic, light-filled home is a celebration of different influences and textures



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Exclusive interview —
Pinnacle Award winner
Dr Ronald Lu

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HK\$48
US\$18
€15



It started with the shoes

Alexis Holm, Swedish-born designer and founder of Hong Kong's squarestreet, relishes the opportunity that living in this city has afforded him. By fusing his Scandinavian design aesthetic with Chinese manufacturing, he creates products that speak to a generation of consumers who look beyond major labels for their shopping fix

TEXT:
Sophie Cullen
PHOTOGRAPHY:
Courtesy of Alexis Holm

It really did all start with the shoes for Swedish designer Alexis Holm. Actually, you could say that it started well before that, back when he was growing up in a provincial area close to Stockholm. Surrounded by family members who were and still are practicing artists, Holm immersed himself in drawing, discovering talents for creating and appreciating the world from an artists's

perspective. "And my dad is an engineer too, so there was that kind of technical aspect going on around me too," he recalls.

However, in high school, Holm opted not to follow his creative leanings and instead focused his studies on a different area. "Even though I was more into arts and things, I decided to do something that was completely different, some more practical subjects like chemistry and physics because I had no idea, and I wanted to go down a safe and secure kind of path. And I failed miserably."

Alexis Holm

Watches are the most popular export from squarestreet's website, with the brand offering a selection of designs unlike any other on the market



"I think the Hong Kong creative scene is moving in a positive direction," says Holm. "Also, China has changed. It's got more expensive to make things there, but the quality has got much better. And that's a good thing."

Without the grades to secure a place in a university programme, he worked part-time in a shoe store and studied clothing design in the evenings: "I had no money, but I was learning how to design."

He was soon hired as a design assistant by an acquaintance he met through his academy, but it wasn't long until he knew that he wanted to go out on his own. "I thought that shoes were a good idea at the time because nobody was really doing them. With clothing, everyone was starting labels and doing some printed tees and that was the kind of 'thing'."

His footwear label Gram was born and had relative success in his home country, but he soon realised that the feasibility of running a profitable company took more than just an excellent product. "I'm not a business man; I'm a designer. I can only make cool stuff and especially in Sweden, with taxes and everything... it was difficult."

Located on the street with same name in the artistic neighbourhood of Sheung Wan, squarestreet sells a selection of goods by Scandinavian and local designers



At XLICP, Holm carried out renovations himself to create an elegant shopfront to showcase the Swedish antiques and chain jewellery the store houses



In 2009, the budding entrepreneur moved to Hong Kong to pursue his design ambitions from a fresh location. Meanwhile, Gram was resurrected by a company in Sweden, and he still does a seasonal men's and women's collection for them which are stocked in his first Hong Kong venture, retail store squarestreet.

Holm believes that his move to Hong Kong has allowed him to grow as a designer, thanks to its geographic location and the access it has afforded to more cost-effective production. Now, squarestreet – one of the first boutiques to have opened in the lively Sheung Wan district of the city – makes watches, sunglasses, bags and shoes, and also stocks a selection of local Hong Kong and other Scandinavian designers. "The brand has a common Scandinavian vibe to it. I always think of Scandinavian design as quite... honest. Honest in the quality and also in the materials that are used."

The response to the brand and the store has been enormous, with squarestreet making a mark for itself in a city mostly known for its large-scale designer brands. The label is also stocked in around 30 stores across the globe, and Holm hopes to grow these numbers in the coming years.

"Hong Kong people are pretty curious about new stuff. We've got a pretty loyal clientele, so once everyone's got one of our designs, we know we need to renew our designs," Holm says. "Online helps with that and, funnily enough, 90 per cent of what's sold online is watches. So it's interesting to see what's viable internationally working out of Hong Kong."

“Hong Kong people are pretty curious about new stuff. We've got a pretty loyal clientele”

His most recent project is a retail store that sits down a somewhat barren alleyway, not far from the original boutique. At XLICP, he sells body jewellery crafted from chains, and a selection of Swedish antiques that he has handpicked. Interestingly, the designer undertook the renovation of the store himself, allowing himself the freedom to create the exact interior that he wanted – black, shiny-stone tiles line the floor, while metal rods are affixed to the walls in perfect symmetry, showcasing the accessories to maximum effect.

Because of his hectic schedule – freelancing for Gram, designing for and running squarestreet and working on multiple one-off projects with other firms – XLICP does not have set hours and is still in its sort of inception phase. "It's the mysterious shop," he says. "You don't know when it's going to be open, you don't know where it is, but hopefully we will be able to use it to launch products or as an event space in the future."

And if you're wondering what's next on the cards for this jack-of-all trades, he maintains his Swedish honesty by saying, "You know, I have a random idea every day, like 'This is a great idea for a café' or 'Why don't we do a restaurant like this...', but luckily, I have good people around me who tell me not to do stuff." ●



Holm designs a range of seasonal bags for squarestreet, with the Anyday bag (left) being one of the label's best-sellers

