

Romanian-born architect Ruxandra Halleröd and Swedish-born cabinetmaker Christian Halleröd in their studio in Stockholm.



Swedish design couple Ruxandra and Christian Halleröd elevate spatial design into near-gallery experiences meant to inspire and seduce – be it for fashion clients such as Acne Studios and Totême, private Stockholm villas or office buildings in downtown New York. And in the post-pandemic era, they are busier than ever creating attractive physical experiences with a strong sense of quality, originality and well-considered architectural decisions that intend to resonate with visitors on a deeper level.

TEXT LISE ULRICH PHOTOGRAPHY HENRIK LUNDELL

WATCH THIS SPACE

OVER THE PAST DECADE, the husband-and-wife duo behind Stockholm-based design studio Halleröd have become known for their striking spatial designs: from airy stores for Acne Studios and Totême displaying a minimalist aesthetic dotted with bold, playful pieces of custom-made furniture to intimate New York offices resembling a David Lynch-meets-*Mad Men* marriage.

But the story of Romanian-born architect Ruxandra Halleröd and Swedish-born cabinetmaker Christian Halleröd began in an altogether more traditional, crowded space – in a bar in Stockholm two decades ago.

“Or, several bars,” concedes Ruxandra with a sly smile as the couple sip their morning coffee in their apartment in said Swedish capital.

Established forces on the international design scene they may be, with an impressive global network of clients, but the Halleröds remain firmly grounded on their home turf, splitting their time between the 82 square metre apartment and their holiday home in the forest on the archipelago island of Blidö, a two-hour drive north of Stockholm.

During the pandemic, this was where the couple and their daughter spent most of their days, appreciating the tranquil beauty of their surroundings while simultaneously taking stock of what – for a while – appeared to be a total uprooting of the status quo in their line of work.



“Some spaces are powerful and monumental, others cosy and warm. But the shared values are there in the details – you will feel it if you experience the spaces in person. We make the materials stand out, like the products in the store spaces, preferably by playing with contrasts – like combining the rough with the glossy”

Ruxandra Halleröd

When the world all but shuts down and people forsake public spaces, where does that leave the spatial design industry?

“Every one of our clients put their projects on hold at the beginning of the pandemic. It was so hard to predict what the future held – whether we were looking at a pause of a couple of months, or a couple of years,” says Ruxandra, while Christian describes the swiftness of events as “quite a shock”. Even if both are quick to emphasise how fortunate they were to be able to ride out much of the crisis in the countryside.

As Ruxandra recounts: “Looking back, lockdown did present us with some new opportunities. We were suddenly very free with our time and when, after a while, a number of private clients approached us, it was nice to be able to do different projects from what we had been working on before the pandemic. Such as the interiors for the small Stockholm tailoring studio Atelier Saman Amel. Then, as things opened up again six months later, we became very busy as all our old clients returned, too. The year that followed was definitely a hectic one.”

FROM BUCHAREST TO PARIS, WITH LOVE

Fresh out of Carl Malmsten Furniture School, Christian Halleröd founded Halleroed in 1998. But it would be another 15 years before Ruxandra, who came from a very different background in Romania, joined him at the company.

RUXANDRA: “I studied mathematics and science in high school and making objects with my hands did not come natural to me. I did better with drawing and theory. For you, it was the other way around.”

CHRISTIAN: “Yes, completely the opposite. I love working with my hands and working with different materials. When I was growing up, my parents were always very interested in Swedish handicraft, especially from the north of the country. I did not come to appreciate that until later in life, though, as initially I was more into building furniture.”

RUXANDRA: “After high school, I moved to Paris for six months. I grew up in a small town back in Romania, and whenever my family and I went to Bucharest, I thought it was amazing. I loved big cities. Going to Paris to

live was a dream of mine, and while I was there I became very touched by the architecture. Every day, the friend I lived with and I would be out walking and discovering buildings and skate parks and museums. Much of my interest in design stems from that urban environment.”

CHRISTIAN: “In contrast, in the years after I graduated, I worked with companies that did office furniture...”

RUXANDRA: “Really boring work (laughs). No, I am sorry, you appreciated it, I know.”

CHRISTIAN: “I did. I learned a lot. I had gone to furniture school to study craftsmanship and design that was very focused on wood. Working with office furniture allowed me to learn about other materials such as plastic and metal, and about production facilities in Sweden. But I mean... yes, some of it was very boring. The first nice job I did was for Acne Studios. I created the furniture for their stores, and that was really the beginnings of what we are doing now.”

Did you have any reservations about venturing into business together as a couple?

RUXANDRA: “It was not a decision made from one day to the next. About ten years ago, I was working for a property developer and while I liked the job, I had been there for five years and felt I needed new challenges. So, I began helping Christian with some of his projects on the side – the architectural part of them. When we had our daughter, I was home for a while, and we did more projects together in that time. A year later, I quit my job and we started working together full-time. It was the right moment for it, and I do not think we could have done it earlier. It was not an arrangement we could have forced.”

WHEN CRAZY BECOMES GENERIC

Walking into a store space designed by Halleroed is oftentimes akin to an art experience, and so it is not surprising that galleries and museums are where the couple go for inspiration themselves, both at home in Stockholm (they often frequent the collections of modern art at Moderna Museet) and abroad.

Most recently for work, the Halleröds visited Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia,

where they became fascinated with the cultural scene of the city as well as the fashion sense of its youths.

“We went to a night club filled with young people, and they all looked incredibly cool,” says Ruxandra. “So many international cities start to feel increasingly similar. But Tbilisi is still very much its own place.”

However, the custom of readily travelling far and wide for work, sometimes solely to do a single presentation or meet-and-greet, has been reshaped by the pandemic.

RUXANDRA: “Before, we would sometimes fly to New York for one meeting. Looking back, it was a bit crazy. Not travelling for so long during the pandemic made us consider the possibilities of conducting more of our work from home. Once projects started up again, we did some new Acne stores in China where retail spaces are usually found inside shopping malls with no daylight affecting the architecture...”

“And essentially what that means,” Christian says, continuing the thread, “is that your space is a white box. And that is a lot easier to work with than when you have to consider the effects of natural light.”

RUXANDRA: “We were able to design those stores from afar, as the team and builders understood what we wanted.”

CHRISTIAN: “It was a good experience, cementing that it was possible to work that way. That said, obviously you do have to take in some spaces in person, both to understand the space itself and the clients, as well as to be inspired.”

Does the brand in question typically bring a vision to the table, or do you have free reins when designing a new space?

RUXANDRA: “Usually, we are quite free to implement our own ideas. But, of course, we talk with the clients a lot beforehand to get a proper feel for who they are. We try to understand what their journey is, to collect a large amount of input that we then merge in our own way through architecture and materials. We like to work with brands with strong personalities as the process can be somewhat similar to writing a book about someone else – you have to understand the essence of the person you are writing about. We very much enjoy that part of the work, as we are naturally both very curious about people.”

CHRISTIAN: “That goes for all our projects, whether for a large brand or a smaller client looking for a redesign of their private home. One of our most stimulating projects to date was designing the Calvin Klein office for Raf Simons and the other executives at the brand, located in the Garment District in Manhattan. It was challenging in the best of ways as we had to push ourselves both conceptually and technically. Raf was great to work with. He has an amazing eye, and he gave us very good feedback. We then drew every single detail of the office floor – there was not one corner that we had not specified technically. And, of course, we were lucky to work with a fine local team as well as an excellent German millworker. Once we understand the client, we always aim to collect natural materials that will age nicely, such as stone and wood. You do not want the design looking like a disaster after just one year.”

RUXANDRA: “On that note, ensuring durability both in terms of the longevity of the materials and the aesthetic is an aspect of environmental thinking. Sometimes people forget about the aesthetical part and focus solely on environmentally friendly materials. But if you do not nail the aesthetic, there is a big risk that the project will have a short life span, no matter the materials used. When you look at pictures of our projects, it may not always seem like there is a common narrative between, say, a store space and an office environment. Some spaces are powerful and monumental, others cosy and warm. But the shared values are there in the details – you will feel it if you experience the spaces in person. We make the materials stand out, like the products in the store spaces, preferably by playing with contrasts – like combining the rough with the glossy.”

RETURN OF THE WARM WELCOME

Inevitably circling back to the reality of work after the pandemic, the Halleröds describe how they did research into the consequences of consumers spending so much time online. Discussions of what effects lockdown would have on people’s readiness to return to and interact with physical retail spaces were had across the industry, but as Christian notes, just as before the pandemic there continues to be a trend of younger



Sana Labs, Stockholm



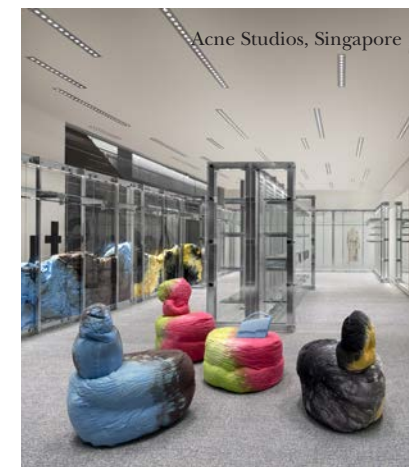
Residential project in Stockholm



Saman Amel, Stockholm



Byredo, Nanjing



Acne Studios, Singapore



Acne Studios, Stockholm



Totême at Réel, Shanghai



Archipelago Cottage, Stockholm



Office in New York



people seeking out the physical experience of store spaces – a small cultural rebellion against online shopping and screen addiction. “Unlike a lot of us slightly older people, the young do not want to be online at all hours,” he observes. “They want to get out more. When the pandemic started, it affected retail a lot, yes, but in the bigger scope of things, the brands we work with are not huge retail chains...”

“And that makes a difference,” Ruxandra says. “Some brands have 5,000 stores that all look like warehouses with so many products there is hardly any space left between the hangers. They are like physical representations of an online store, and that does not present a very interesting shopping experience.”

Thus, while the pandemic crystallised certain shifting consumer patterns, the lust for reimagining store spaces has not slowed down. Nor should it be considered new, as Ruxandra points out:

“For a long time, the physical store had been neglected. They could afford to look thoroughly uninspiring, seeing as people did not have any other options but to go there in person. With the advent of online shopping, spaces started to change. It has been a slow evolution, but in some ways, what we are seeing now is a return to the shopping of the early part of the 20th century, back when department stores first came into existence. They put a lot of effort into attracting people with beautiful service and beautiful buildings.”

Nodding, Christian describes how many a young brand today is embracing these values. But where innovation thrives, copycats follow. And the Halleröds are very aware of how “crazy” can turn downright generic if an original concept is lazily replicated enough times.

“When we started to work with spaces, we were very inspired by store designs by the likes of Helmut Lang and Comme des Garçons – as many still are. But today there is a lot of direct copying going on where spaces do not necessarily reflect the brand as much as another, more interesting store,” Ruxandra says.

Even so, the Halleröds rest easy in the belief that customers are able to spot the difference between genuine craftsmanship and storytelling versus shallow fronts. That the quality of materials and carefully thought-out architectural decisions resonate with visitors on a deeper level.

“We aim to constantly improve the design and creativity in our work – quality, details, and so forth, and to try out new concepts. We never copy-paste our own work and would like to work on fewer projects going forward so we will have more time for experimenting and making prototypes,” Ruxandra notes.

“It is about offering customers something more than the product they are buying. About inspiring them,” Christian says, adding: “This year, we continue our work with Acne Studios and Totême, and right now we are in the final stages of creating a small store for the bag brand L/Uniform in Paris – our first French project. After that, we are also doing a very nice apartment for a private client, and a villa here in Stockholm.”

For every environment, the Halleröds will go on designing spatial experiences that breathe a touch of the wondrous and the unexpected into the rooms we traverse in our everyday lives.

“And no matter the space,” Christian says, taking a final sip of his coffee, “it starts with a warm welcome.” /

The Halleröds, who met in a bar in Stockholm two decades ago, continue to explore new creative concepts in their work to bring us memorable spatial experiences.

