DIRT OF A NATION
CONSTRUCTION WASTE IN SWEDEN
REACHES BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

BJARKE INGELS ON LEGOLAND
FINLAND: FROM RAGS TO RICHES
THE SMART ENERGY EXPERIMENT
Gudrun Sjödén is the godmother of Swedish fashion. She single-handedly created an empire based on strong colours, patterns and a deep knowledge of the needs of full-grown, bohemian women. Salka Hallström Bornold took the metro to Årsta to see this entrepreneurial force in person.

The history of the sixties design movement has been written about a few times, not least in this magazine. The stars who refurbished the world of Swedish design during the red decade are carefully documented in our archives on the island of Skeppsholmen in Stockholm. Carl Johan De Geer, Mah-Jong, Inez Sveiss, Gunila Axén and all the rest.

With the exception of Gudrun Sjödén. There should be more on Gudrun Sjödén, but there isn't. It's as if her place in history has taken a backseat, for reasons unknown. Like her generation peers, she had her own vision about design, colours and production. But with one significant difference: she was not political. While others were waving signs, she stayed at her drawing table. Hard working and determined. While others filed for bankruptcy or broke through in other areas, Gudrun carried on forward. Another significant difference: she built an empire.

Today, 40 years from inception, the Gudrun Sjödén Group AB has a turnover of SEK 800 million. In Sweden, the only fashion companies that measure up to such numbers are Acne, Filippa K and J. Lindeberg.

What is also unique is that Gudrun Sjödén, who turned 76 this year, continues to run and own the company herself, in what seems a rather unbroken course since that day in 1974 when she decided to take the plunge and start her own business. Respect, for all of it. I think she has a great deal to teach the younger generation. Even if design schools nowadays place more focus on entrepreneurship, a staggering number of talents cannot seem to achieve a sustainable business. In other words, it is time for Form to meet her.

The first time I go to meet Gudrun, I get lost in a dreadful April storm, one of those storms that whips your face with snow slush and buries street signs. Her head office is in an industrial area in south Stockholm, and we struggle through the slurry go get there from different directions, me and photographer Patrik Engström. Once inside, in the warmth, Gudrun Sjödén is everywhere, on the walls and desks and people. It is a woman's world, as so often in fashion, but in a Gudrun Sjödén way: mature ladies in different versions of Gudrun Sjödén's unique look. Strong colours, print clashes, large volumes, relaxed silhouettes. The intention, as revealed in her book My Portfolio (Brombergs, 2016):

"The executives in my company are almost exclusively women... With men on the board, I have often been annoyed by their
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tendency to take over and dominate. Young men are likely to have trouble identifying with what a mature, artsy, bohemian lady wants, but she is like me, and I know exactly what I want.

As the founder and owner of Gudrun Sjödén AB I also expect people to listen to what I have to say. Women exert authority differently from men, and for me, it is always what people do that finds most favour. In my experience, women are more cautious so there’s less haste, more speed. That suits me."

That’s exactly how it is everyone is hard at work, methodically but calmly. Corporate culture, Gudrun explains later, isn’t built overnight. Less haste, more speed. And now, I hear, she’s in the house. She does her “rounds” among her employees. Even at a distance, she exudes firmness. Clout, perhaps? They speak quietly to each other, look at sketches. Then she comes to me, with that special radiance of something. Artistry, maturity – and, yes, clout. I am a watercolour artist and entrepreneur, as she writes in her book.

Let’s start from the very beginning, in northern Uppland.

Gudrun Sjödén was born in the war year of 1941 at the Harboholm farm estate, near the idyllic mill town of Skebobruk. Her father was drafted and the manor rented out, so the family had to live in a pavilion with no water or electricity. Her parents later bought the estate where Gudrun and her five siblings came to grow up, outside Ljungen in the province of Västmanland.

I came from a farming family and that has shaped me as an entrepreneur, living under such conditions during the forties and fifties. Sweden had a planned economy, agricultural prices were set by the government and during the tough years, we had support from the government. So farmers were dependent on decisions made by the government.

_Did you have to do your bit on the farm as a child?_

That’s how it was in the past, children had to work, fetch eggs, rack hay, get firewood and so on. I was totally fine with it, I didn’t have much choice as the third child.
"I’ve always drawn and crafted. My mother loved it too, and it was part of the farming home traditions in those days."

You were very young when you applied to Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm. Where did your creative interest come from?

– I’ve always drawn and crafted. My mother loved it too, and it was part of the farming home traditions in those days. The women wove, knitted and made things all the time. Crafts even dominated my time at Konstfack. It must be said that Edna Martin wasn’t too keen on industrial manufacturing.

You were part of an entire generation from Konstfack who broke through, along with the trio behind Mah-Jong, the highly political fashion brand that became all the rage at the time. But you weren’t pulled into the political movement.

– There was enormous energy, we worked very hard and some made names over time. The political wave came in the later part of the sixties, but we were never affected. We were focused on the actual profession.

What did your years at Konstfack mean to you?

– The crafts lessons had the greatest significance. We often went to the Nordic Museum in Stockholm and studied our Swedish textile history, with embroidery techniques, hand weaving and so on. There was a lot of focus on freehand drawing, painting, art history. Everything we did was solid, in a broad area. In turn, we the students were very energetic and diligent. We would never sit at a cafe and chatter, we worked.

You stayed away from the demonstrations?

– I grew up in an entrepreneurial home. I was never interested in political agitation, other than that I’ve always been on the side of companies. I know that when we were in America in the eighties, someone told me that entrepreneurs are the heroes of the future. But at the time, entrepreneurs were looked down on, it was only later that it all changed and we became heroes – from the late nineties onwards. Now even the Social Democrats want to encourage entrepreneurship.

There must have been a bit of partying too?

– Yes, there was a lot of partying but also a lot of work. We loved doing what we did.

What were your thoughts on Mah-Jong's bankruptcy in 1976, the same year you opened your own shop?

– Their death was partly due to the political label they got. When the leftist wave ebbed out, no one wanted the Mah-Jong style anymore. Those guys also had an idea of preserving the Swedish textile industry. That was never my goal. My mission was to make good design that people love.

Swinging London broke through at the same time as Gudrun graduated from Konstfack. The Beatles and Biba, Mary Quant and miniskirts. "The sixties saw the disappearance of all kinds of outmoded, ways. In the language, people were less formal; more casual," she writes in her book. "I was part of that wave." And the freshly graduated Gudrun got a job at Ivar Wahi, where Gunilla Pontén also worked.

– She is incredibly talented, but she’s never had anyone to nurture her talent, and therefore never became the global name she could have. I learnt a lot from her, from her uninhibited work approach and brilliant sense of colour. And she went her own way, that made a huge impression on me.

In 1974 Gudrun Sjödén registered her brand. In photos, her
premier collection looks surprisingly modern, with athletically inspired casual pieces. But Gudrun herself sees 1976 as the true launch year, when she and her husband Björn, a freelance photographer, together opened the shop on Regeringsgatan.

As a freelancer, I never thought the collections were done any justice in retail. The big chains would buy two blouse models and that was disappointing. I thought, damn it, I must be able to do it myself. So that’s how we came to open our own shop. Many others did the same, Mah-Jong and Gul & Blå.

I never speculated in a target group, and my idea was really to make clothes for myself in the way that I liked, in natural materials with a slight sporty feel. Using natural materials was right for the time, after the oil crisis and the dawn of environmental awareness. One of the first collections I made was of pure cotton, something that was nearly impossible to get hold of anywhere else. Everything was mixed with artificial fibres. And in hindsight, I see that natural materials were sort of a protest, against the acrylics of the fifties and sixties.

A lot of people have still tried to run fashion companies under similar conditions and failed. The company has 21 shops in seven countries and 450 employees. Online, Gudrun Sjödén sells to customers in some 50 countries. Only last year did the company take in a partner, the investment company Raftos. So why has Gudrun Sjödén been so successful? Client contact, I’m told when I pose the question to others in the company. That and a keen understanding of her target group. There are loads of “Gudrun Sjödén women” in the world who identify with the brand. The mature, bohemian, artsy lady who knows what she wants.

The fact that I had my own shop also meant that I had direct contact with my customers. Now it’s Facebook instead. But I’ve always maintained that personal communication, it’s evident in both my marketing and my catalogue, says Gudrun.

Only a few years into the shop, we began to post parcels to our clients. But it wasn’t until 1993 that we solved all the problems surrounding the mail order, when we sorted the computer system and warehouse management.

Summer arrives before we meet again. Gudrun, as I gather, has been continuously on the move. She has visited her shops in London and New York. The rest of the time, I assume she has shifted between her home in Södermalm, her studio in Old Town and the head office in Årsta.

Perhaps she’s even managed a visit to Eknöasken, her island in the Stockholm archipelago?

Gudrun still looks sprit. She is styled in white for the photo session, with a graphic printed scarf and a porcelain angel round her neck. In her book, she writes what gives her energy. The landscapes in Lapland ("Could it be my Sami roots?"), folklore, nature, roses and tulips. Eknöasken with its blooming garden and cottage, which is decorated in magical country shades and patterns ("Lots of Gudrun!")

I remember walking on the ice with the estate agent to view the place the first time. We were ill in some way, me and our son Tobias, and we were exhausted. But we said we’d take it. And it has been a huge part of our life since. It’s quite special, life on a little island. There are no cars, we have peace and quiet, we potter with the house and garden. Tobias lives there now with his family.
"A CEO can't just come in and tear everything up and start anew. They are always men, and they think they can do that, just come in and redo everything. Today, a lot ends up on my desk and it has to, as long as I'm wearing the CEO hat. Otherwise, it'll start to derail into all sorts of mayhem."

I'm trying to grasp the incredible success you've had. From the start, it's been somewhat of a family company, how has that worked?
- It's worked. My sister has run the German business as her own without me getting involved. She moved to Germany relatively young, studied at a textile school and met her husband there. It's a very tough market that not many have succeeded in. There is such competition with many companies and strong brands that aren't very well known here in Sweden.

Which difficulties did you face in Germany?
- The German fashion culture can be divided in three segments. There is the Old German and the French-Italian. Then there is the Scandinavian, which is hot in the north of Germany. When we did mail orders there, we focused a lot on that segment - because it's impossible to penetrate the entire German market. The fact that my sister lived down there was important to our understanding of what works and what doesn't.

You also had a head start when e-commerce began to take off.
- Because we were in the world of distance shopping as early as the eighties, we had the knowledge and technique in-house when online shopping finally broke through. We had loyal customers and we knew the logistics.
- During the dot-com boom in the nineties, a lot of people tried the same thing, using all the right lingo but not knowing anything. They just talked the talk.

That is very true. There were many men blaring out their visions back then, and they disappeared as fast as the came. I'm thinking of one of the last pages from your book, with a photo of you surrounded by happy women. You say there why you enjoy female leadership, that you want to praise the female entrepreneurs through the years, and that you believe in the innate power of women.

- In this company, you fit in if you are guided by values and not by a high salary or company car. You must understand your client, I believe that is very important. Our client is, after all, female and that has meant through the years that many of the employees we've recruited are women.
- If you look at entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs and Ingvar Kamprad, it wasn't money that drove them, but other things. They wanted to change the world, to give humanity something, and that permeates their entire corporate culture.

What are your thoughts about male and female with regards to leadership?
- I believe the character of a company is different when the CEO is a woman. That is something we noticed not least in the German business when my sister was CEO there. Sure, male leadership may create order in the house, but also more hierarchy when you believe you can make commands. I don't believe in that.

You've said that you believe in agile leadership?
- I commend agile leadership, where you try to get your staff to see your vision and act on it. We must also relate to the megatrends, and one of them is the accelerating speed that is driven by technology.
- Managing through directive was possible in the past, during industrial manufacturing, but now when everything happens so fast, we must manage based on a different technique. We must surround ourselves with people who hold the same values and think holistically. We mustn't think that we can micromanage, that's no longer possible. And the younger generation doesn't want to be micromanaged. As a manager, you have to cope with the slight chaos.

We haven't addressed it yet, but Gudrun Sjöden has of course been a pioneer in terms of organic production. Now that the climate issue is such a hot topic, more big companies are talking about the importance of sustainability. Like IKEA. Most recently, H&M announced that they are converting to a sustainable business strategy. What does Gudrun think about that?
- H&M used to have a policy of using around ten percent organic cotton. We must say we've set the bar a bit higher. We believe that ninety percent of our production should be environmentally friendly, and we've come a long way there. Almost all our cotton is organic and we also use lyocell and fibres of good environmental quality.
- The companies have been quicker than the authorities in terms of sustainability, the private initiatives have accounted for a more powerful approach. Of course there is always more to be done, but we've come a long way.

You're back in the CEO chair after having had a few other heads. Why did the handovers not work out?
- I tried to quit, but it hasn't worked out with the new CEOs we've taken in. They wanted to reorganise everything and caused uncertainty in the team. It was like bam, everything would change in three years. But I felt that we've built a solid corporate culture over these 40 years, and that is something that can't just be changed like that. So I went back to instil peace and quiet again.
- A CEO can't just come in and tear everything up and start anew. They are always men, and they think they can do that, just come in and redo everything.
- Today, a lot ends up on my desk and it has to, as long as I'm wearing the CEO hat. Otherwise, it'll start to derail into all sorts of mayhem. But that isn't the difficult part.

Is your mission to retire?
- I'm working now to gain stability in the company and slowly phase myself out. That will happen, as it's tiresome to design and at the same time run a company with almost a billion in turnover.

You're not only CEO and design director, but also the figurehead for Gudrun Sjöden. Isn't that tiresome as well?
- I don't like that there's so much focus on me as a person. It gets too hyped.

There are many examples of happy endings in handing over the baton.
- Yes, I've tried some three years now.