

The arrival of Montreal-based Sid Lee in Amsterdam should have been enough to warn the Dutch of a creative invasion.

WORDS *Alexandra Onderwater*
PHOTOS *Jeroen Musch*



The outpost





All things considered, in retrospect it was the invitation – tucked inside a black paper bag featuring felt-tipped calligraphy – that really got me flipping. Those times I had sneaked a peek inside the building on my way home from the Albert Cuyp market, weighed down by Ethiopian mangos and Spanish strawberries, and caught a glimpse of guys making chalk drawings on black walls had merely roused my curiosity. And that day I'd noticed five hard-to-miss Canadians on ladders a few doors away from my cheesemonger, covering the rough façade of Sid Lee's soon-to-open office with cartoonish drawings and streetwise lettering, I'd been elated at the sight of this brash intervention shaking up staid tradition. Just to make things clear: I live in De Pijp, a venerable working-class district in Amsterdam. The neighbourhood is a patchwork of immigrants, artists, writers, agitators, folk singers and a mini red-light district. Recently, even yuppies have discovered the charm of the Dutch Latin Quarter, but what no gatecrasher can take away is the cosy, *gezellige* atmosphere. Visitors to this multicultural part of town find shoemakers, cheese shops, fishmongers, furniture makers – but none of the big-time commercial players. That the Canadian creatives from Montreal picked this spot, of all places, for their European office, gallery, shop and canteen gave reason for high expectations.

It was the invitation – the graffiti-style bag – that reminded me of my personal theory that an exponential link exists between the level of anticipation preceding an opening and the disillusionment that follows. There you are, with your glass of bubbly, trying to make sense of a plain wooden cabinet overlaid with crystals. Or a pen drawing that your six-year-old nephew might have scribbled last weekend in his sloppy six-year-old way. No, my current watchword is 'wait and see'. I'm enthusiastic only after actually setting eyes on that 'fantastically innovative concept' – and felt a tingle stir in the region of my spine. Or at least had to smile. So when I find myself rather unexpectedly atop a table at the party celebrating Sid Lee's Amsterdam opening, it's like a weight is being lifted from my shoulders. This is fun.

Allow me to explain my tabletop appearance. No, I hadn't had a half dozen 'clonitos' at that point (a clonito is Sid Lee's version of the mojito, only it comes in a glass jam pot that you shake yourself). The culprit was the treacherous oak floor, which branches off and rises on one side, like a catwalk, to become a table. The advantage of standing at that height is the view. The exceedingly long building, which continues all the way to the marketplace, is separated into three areas, which you enter one after another: design shop, gallery and intimate café – 'canteen' in Sid Lee terms – the last of which looks out on the street market. It's only from the tabletop that I spot, behind me and to the right, bold black bags of waxed cotton and leather designed by members of the Sid Lee Collective, the office playground, or should I say incubator? What Sid Lee produces is applied creativity, whereas the Collective is nothing but pure creativity. And all employees are encouraged to swim in the hatchery of ideas, forms and products that ignore the hot pursuit of commercialism. Funnily enough, it's this sense of unrestricted freedom that produces most of the terrific designs, many of which grab the attention of both manufacturer and consumer. Take the Sid Loves Your Ass couch collection, which began purely as the result of creative development but soon caught the eye of buyers for department stores in North America.

Besides bags, the collection includes clothes, several pieces of jewellery and quite a bit of product design. At the front of the shop, a thirty-something guy in a business jacket is slumped in a chair, while the woman next to him balances rather unflatteringly on a similar model. Not a very charming sight, especially in a public place, but their unbecoming appearance can be overlooked in this case. After all, the form of this remarkable seating – aptly

named SUCC (Slightly Uncomfortable Chair Collection) and included in designs by the Collective – forces the user to assume an abnormal position.

The fear of a fiasco was irrational. Fear is never irrational, I hear you thinking, but in the case of Sid Lee I might have known that the customized bag was not only an invitation but also a harbinger. For the simple reason that Sid Lee (nope, nobody's ever seen the guy, but insiders who know that prior to 2005 Sid Lee was Diesel can test their own creativity) is heavy on the total approach. The outfit likes nothing better than to be involved in every phase of brand development. 'What we do is to apply creativity to communication,' says Harm Sas, creative strategy partner and, from the outset, a key figure in the ocean-hop from Montreal to Amsterdam. 'And we want a story to accompany everything we do.' Is Sid Lee actually an ad agency? 'That, too. But we also have architects, designers, web-builders, artists, marketing people, et cetera. We can't be cubbyholed. Building a spa on a tugboat, developing a digital campaign for Red Bull, making an interior design for adidas SLVR in New York [see *Frame* 69, page 34] – it's all based on the same thing.' Brand experience and brand communication are the magic words – and the magic is revealed in a book featuring Sid Lee: *Conversational Capital*.

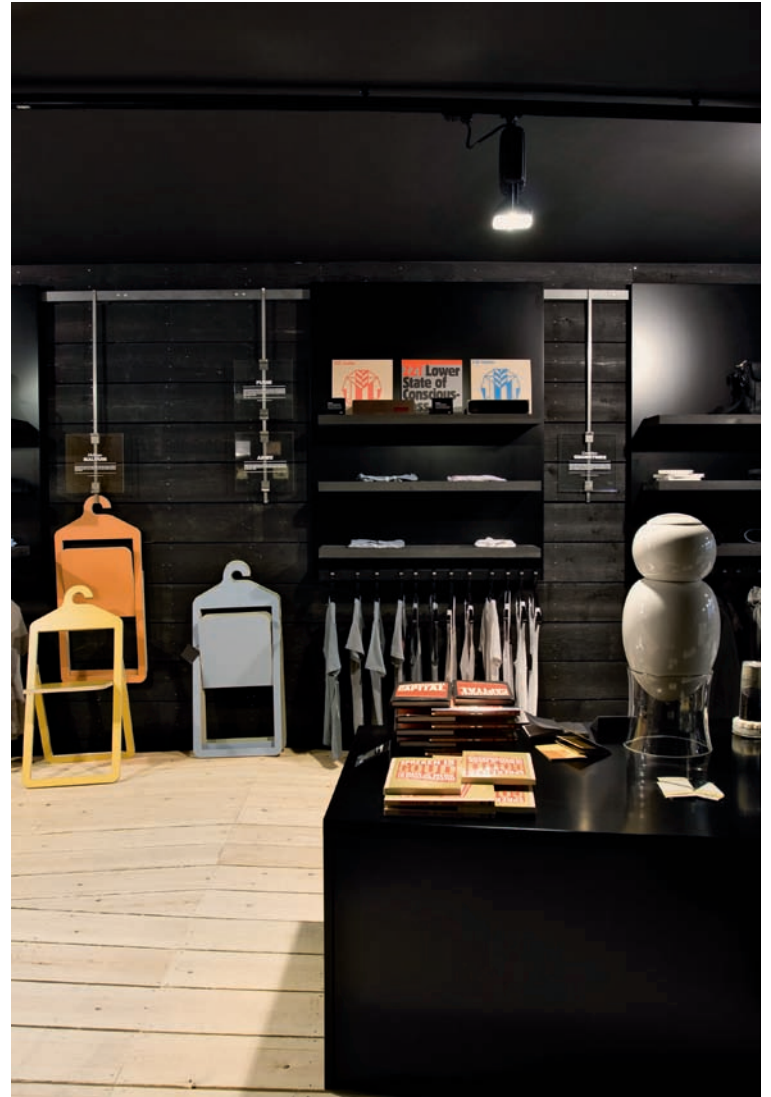
Every six weeks the Sid Lee gallery presents the work of a different artist or collective, curated in each instance by the Sid Lee Collective, of course. Colourful collage-style illustrations by Canadian art collective Team Macho adorn the walls at the time of writing; everything is for sale. Visitors browsing in the gallery can take a cursory look at the agency's meeting area, a box clad in transparent yellow foil that allows prying eyes to see inside. The Swedish Hyper Island School of Graphic Design and Multimedia has already used it for a brainstorming session. At the time of the opening it contains an oversized doll's house made especially for the occasion, a huge project created by Team Macho, whose members flew to the Netherlands to build the structure – and ended up painting the façade of the elongated building in the bargain. On the table is a selection of books on product design, graphics, illustrations and architecture, as well as a couple of monographs. The cool sounds of electro emanate from the speakers; the CD, a collaboration of Sid Lee and Turbo Recordings, goes home with me at the end of the evening. And the bimonthly podcast goes directly into my iTunes.

The interior ends in a blackboard-clad canteen, a cosy yet austere space where visitors work wireless, have a sandwich or simply enjoy the bustling market scene. Every three or four weeks a 'young artist from the street' gets to come in and enliven the walls with his or her work. And morph the name, it seems – or am I simply imagining that Flexies Cantina has been added to the menu? On Fridays, you can drop in and join Sid's Cinq a Sept, an informal after-work get-together. I'm starting to feel those clonitos, by the way. With a glass of water from the round-bellied Ovopur, an eco-friendly porcelain water filter – another offspring of the Collective – I sink into the long, black sofa. Under a glass tabletop nearby is a clutch of funky publications, or fanzines, as they're called here: Sid's definition of 'fanzine' is 'a DIY artisanal publication created by a person passionate about a certain subject'. Before I realize what's happening, I'm deep into articles explaining the five-dimensional universe of Team Macho, the story behind the Furni watch and the raw-and-refined Pearls Before Swine necklaces, the coming-of-age of the SUCC collection, Montreal as creative hotbed – even a piece entitled 'Sid Loves De Pijp'.

'This melting pot of people and cultures is in sync with our multicultural identity,' says Sas. 'High culture and low rub elbows in De Pijp district. We belong here.'

THE FLOOR OF THE STORE IN DE PIJP, A WORKING-CLASS NEIGHBOURHOOD IN AMSTERDAM, RISES TO FORM A TABLE.





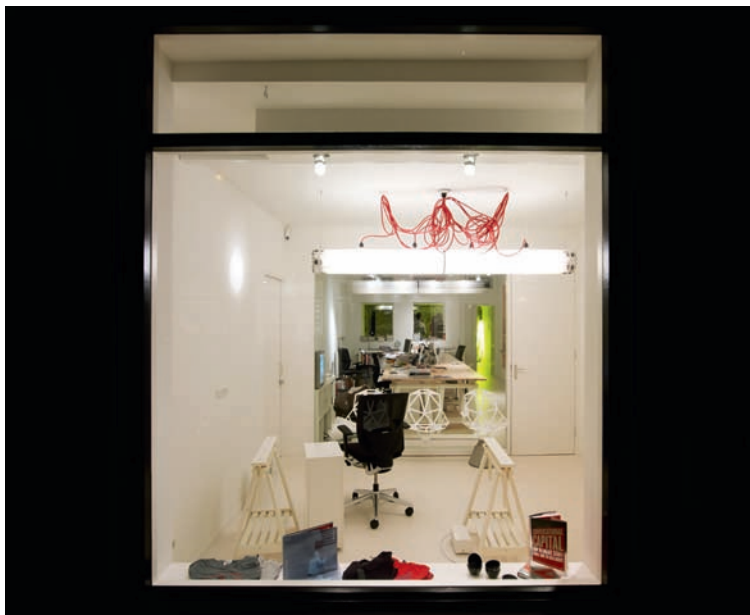
THE STORE THAT MONTREAL-BASED SID LEE RECENTLY OPENED IN AMSTERDAM CARRIES ONLY WORK BY CANADIAN DESIGNERS.



**FINDING MYSELF ATOP A TABLE AT THE PARTY
CELEBRATING SID LEE'S OPENING, I FEEL A
WEIGHT LIFT FROM MY SHOULDERS**



THE CANTEEN CAN BE ACCESSED FROM THE GALLERY AND FROM A REAR ENTRANCE THAT IS LINKED TO THE ALBERT CUYP STREET MARKET.



SID LEE AMSTERDAM

Gerard Doustraat 72
1072 VV Amsterdam
the Netherlands
sidlee.com

DESIGNER Sid Lee (sidlee.com)

FLOOR AREA 600 m²

FURNITURE Horstermeer (horstermeer.nl)

LIGHTING Castor Design (castordesign.ca) and Maretti
International Lighting (maretti.com)

FLOORING The Contractors (thecontractors.nl)

WALLS The Contractors (thecontractors.nl)

MATERIALS American pine finished in black Sansin (sansin.com), blackboard paint (epoxy matte black), folded sheet-metal panels and black powder-coated steel

SID LEE'S AMSTERDAM OFFICE FEATURES STEELWOOD CHAIRS BY RONAN AND ERWAN BOUROULLEC.



'WE WANT A STORY TO ACCOMPANY EVERYTHING WE DO'
HARM SAS



AFTER WALKING THROUGH THE GALLERY, THE VISITOR ENTERS
A CAFÉ OR, AS IT'S CALLED AT SID LEE, 'THE CANTEEN'.