

Celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2023, the Copenhagen design festival 3daysofdesign has become a roaring success with both exhibitors and the public. And at the heart of it all stands managing director and former wild child Signe Byrdal Terenziani, whose unique vision and tireless drive has revolutionised the way Danish design is presented to the world. RUM caught up with her with the adrenaline rush of the festival buzz still in her body.

TEXT LISE ULRICH PHOTOGRAPHY LASSE DEARMAN

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

“‘BIG BALLOONS!’ My mailbox was overflowing with messages about big, yellow balloons.” Signe Byrdal Terenziani, managing director of the annual Copenhagen festival 3daysofdesign, laughs.

“I mean, they are very nice balloons...”

We are sitting in a quiet, sun-filled room in Terenziani’s central Copenhagen office space, directly overlooking the iconic Marble Church. The green copper dome seems almost close enough to touch while inside the office a variety of design objects new and old sit atop piles of books and bursting cabinets.

It is a temporary situation – today is Monday, it’s June, a mere three days after the 10th instalment of 3daysofdesign concluded, and Terenziani and her small team have not yet moved their furniture back in place after clearing out most of the office for visiting exhibitors.

And the aforementioned yellow balloons? They have become an iconic visual signifier of 3daysofdesign. Yellow bursts of colour popping up like sunflowers all over the Danish capital, alerting the public to a participating designer’s exhibition. Of which there were no less than 290 this year, spread out over 13 districts.

“People love those balloons, but this year the weather was so warm and sunny they kept exploding in the heat. We ended up spending quite a bit of time running around the city with big balloons trailing after us.”

Terenziani smiles and shakes her head, grateful that this proved to be one of the very few hiccups of the festival, despite its size and estimated 20,000 visitors. (Some reports went as high as 80,000, but with no admission fees or checkpoints, the precise number will remain unknown.)

“This was our 10th anniversary, and it may have been our smoothest year yet. Everything just worked like a well-oiled machine. Since Friday, we have been in touch with exhibitors and international visitors to evaluate while everything is still fresh in our minds, and everybody has had a wonderful





SIGNE BYRDAL TEREZIANI is the managing director of the hugely successful, open-access Copenhagen festival 3daysofdesign that celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2023. Born in Denmark, Terenziani studied at Copenhagen Business School before moving to Milan where she spent 20 years working for companies such as LEGO, Bang & Olufsen and Luceplan, as well as curating several design exhibitions for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 2013, she and her three children returned to Copenhagen and put down roots, but the family frequently travels to Milan where Terenziani's ex-husband resides.

3daysofdesign.dk

experience", she says, crediting her team: "During the year, we are no more than three employees and an intern, but as the event gets underway, the team grows to about 50 people, most of whom have now been a part of the festival for years and know the inner workings. Some are designers who enjoy helping out, others are friends, and friends of friends. It feels like a family unit, and that dynamic is very precious to me."

How is she feeling herself right now? "Happy," she smiles. "Tired and happy."

A REBEL AT HEART

Signe Byrdal Terenziani's road to becoming one of the most influential figures on the modern-day Danish design scene was a curious one. A slightly crooked stepladder (more on that visual later). Born in Copenhagen, she went on to live all over Denmark before, at 16, she returned to the capital and became part of the 1980's notorious squatter movement, even moving into the squatter headquarters, Sorte Hest – Danish for Black Horse – in what was then the fairly dodgy district of Vesterbro (today, one of the most sought-after neighbourhoods of Copenhagen).

The buildings of Sorte Hest date all the way back to the 17th century, but thanks in part to a construction dispute between the city council and the owner, from 1980 onwards they were left empty and increasingly derelict until, in '86, the squatters entered the scene and made the landmark location their makeshift home. There they stayed, much to the dismay of city officials, until the police stormed the premises and the movement crumbled in 1990.

"I was a bit rebellious back then," Terenziani concedes with a sly smile. "As well as confused about the direction I wanted my life to go in. But I have always been attracted to different ways of thinking. Sorte Hest fostered a creative environment of music, art and theatre, but above all, the people there were concerned about the rights and wrongs of society. Justice and injustice. There is a spark of that spirit in me still."

While living at Sorte Hest, Terenziani never neglected her high school studies, and scored consistently excellent marks. In the evenings, she

worked at renowned Italian restaurant Era Ora (it would earn a Michelin star in '97), and she credits this clash of worlds for broadening her outlook on life: "I would go to work and be surrounded by the stylish clientele of the restaurant, then head home for a night cap at Sorte Hest."

Spurred by a fascination of Italy that was only enforced by her time at Era Ora, Terenziani moved to Italy after high school to work on a vineyard. Then, a year later, she was on to Milan, where she fell in love with the city's unique creative worlds.

"A seed was planted in Milan," she says, and yet, when she returned to Copenhagen, she enrolled in economics and language studies at Copenhagen Business School instead of pursuing creative subjects. Perhaps an odd decision, she reflects, but the combination of high entry demands and internationally orientated career prospects appealed to her. Her instincts proved right: Terenziani thrived during her studies, discovering an appetite for public relations and the merging of different cultures, and through a scholarship she was able to do a semester in Milan. As fate and hard work would have it, she ended up staying for 20 years.

"I fell in love with an Italian man and had a child," she says. "Then, as I was writing my dissertation in 2000, I was offered a position at LEGO's newly opened division in Milan that enabled me to combine my skills in marketing with exciting, creative ventures."

In the years that followed, Terenziani and her husband had another two children, and in 2005 she went to work for Bang & Olufsen's Milan office as head of public relations and events. In a competitive market saturated with design, Terenziani discovered she had an affinity for standout storytelling that communicated the values and ideas of Bang & Olufsen beyond simply highlighting superior technical qualities.

"One time, we were working on a large product exhibit," she remembers, "but something went wrong with the delivery, and we were left with just one, beautiful stereo system. So, we rented this old estate and suspended the stereo in the middle of the courtyard. The wow effect was immediate. Today, I often tell our visiting designers at 3daysofdesign, 'Do not get hung up on showing as many products as possible. Focus on telling your brand's story in a way that people remember. Create an experience, be it

“IN THE EARLY DAYS OF 3DAYSOFDDESIGN,
WE HAD 10 EXHIBITORS AND ABOUT SEVEN
FOREIGN JOURNALISTS VISITING THAT I
DROVE AROUND IN A MINIVAN”

SIGNE BYRDAL TEREZIANI

with just one design, music or your own words. In one of the festival's first years, I brought a group of international journalists to see a designer's exhibition, and when we walked into his space, it was completely empty. I was about to panic – there I was with all these people who had come a very long way. But then the designer came out, walked to the middle of the room, and told the most beautiful story of the philosophy of his brand, and how people too often surround themselves with a surplus of things that has no real value to them. It was a genius move.”

RETURNING TO THE MOTHERLAND

After curating several design exhibitions for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Milan as well as creating the concept for the popular Danish LivingRoom exhibits together with the Danish-Italian design duo behind GamFratesi, Terenziani briefly worked as director of marketing for Italian lamp company Luceplan before changing gears and becoming an independent consultant.

Through Danish design exhibits in Italy and Asia, she solidified her knack for championing Danish brands internationally, but when her mother fell ill in 2013 Terenziani took a year's leave and moved to Copenhagen with her children. They never left.

“My children loved being in Denmark. In Milan, they could not walk home alone from school. They led a more protected existence because that was necessary. In Denmark, they experienced a whole other way of life, where they could just go to the park with their friends after school. I could tell that they would have a happier upbringing here, so we decided to stay,” Terenziani says. And while she is no longer with her husband today, the two remain the best of friends who frequently travel between their respective cities.

In the first few months of being home, Terenziani realised just how much Copenhagen had changed in the decades she had been away.

“I noticed all the showrooms that had established themselves. And I thought, perhaps it was a shame, luring all the Danish designers abroad to showcase their work outside of Denmark. Everybody in the industry talked about Danish design, but few visited Denmark. When I got a job as director of marketing at Montana, one of my responsibilities was to coordinate

an annual event that I had helped establish while still in Italy – 3daysofdesign. Originally, the event was a collaboration between just four brands, Montana, Erik Jørgensen, Kvadrat and Luceplan, but I started working on expanding the concept to include more designers and for it to become a design festival worth travelling for, for international guests. Built around a very transparent business model in which several Danish companies all contribute to the cause, and everybody knows where the money goes. A bit like a workers' union, without it being an actual union,” Terenziani explains. Fittingly, she characterises her own greatest strength as being able to motivate people to shine.

“I listen to the individual.”

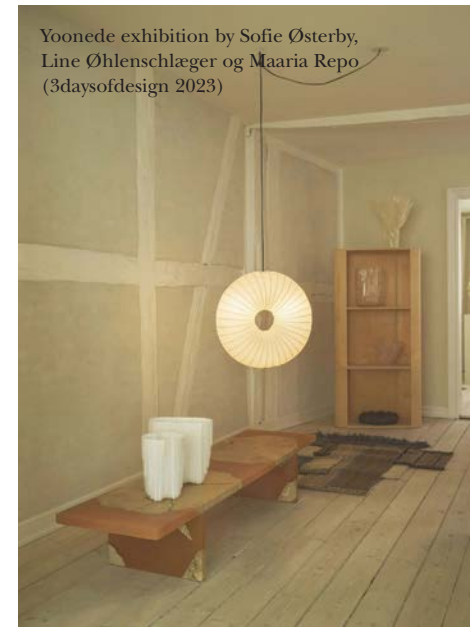
Soon, she dedicated herself to the festival full time.

CELEBRATING HERITAGE

“In the early days of 3daysofdesign, we had 10 exhibitors and about seven foreign journalists visiting that I drove around in a minivan,” Terenziani says. “The following year there were 20 exhibitors. And then it just continued growing organically until this year, as mentioned, we had 290 exhibitors and 150 international journalists flying in to stay. Some of the journalists, real superstars, have been here every year, and the support they afford the designers is quite touching to me.”

The story of Danish design told internationally rests heavily on the heritage of the golden era of the 1950s and 60s, led by furniture design icons such as Børge Mogensen and Hans Wegner. Can such a lauded past prove a distraction when presenting the designers of the future?

“Not really, no. I do not believe in distancing us from our heritage. We should be proud of the knowhow and the beautiful design created by the designers of our golden era. They should be celebrated, as they have taught us so much that we still lean on today. In fact, a number of the practises and philosophies that were established in Danish furniture design 70 years ago seem to be making a welcome comeback as several young designers become more concerned with longevity and sustainability, foregoing the trends of fast fashion. I do enjoy when designers play with bold colours and innovative ways of working with plastic, but reducing the CO2 emissions of upcycling plastic is something that still needs a lot of work.”



Yoonede exhibition by Sofie Østerby, Line Øhlenschläger og Maaria Repo (3daysofdesign 2023)



Stilleben 2 exhibition by Michael Anastassiades hosted in collaboration with Anker & Co (3daysofdesign 2023)



Ukurant exhibition (3daysofdesign 2023)



Linie Design shop opening (3daysofdesign 2023)



Launch of the Anton cabinet by Atelier Axo for Vero International (3daysofdesign 2023)



House of Nordic Design exhibition by Natalia Sánchez (3daysofdesign 2023)

PHOTOGRAPHY ANDERS HVIID, SANDIE LYKKE, PRIVATE ET AL.

“THE LAST THING I WANT IS FOR IT TO BE A VIP PARTY SOLELY FOR BIG DESIGNERS AND BUYERS”

SIGNE BYRDAL TEREZIANI

In a turbulent world marred by global environmental and political crisis, do you sometimes experience push-back from people who question the need for ‘fancy design’, or festival ‘frivolity’?

“Absolutely. It is a form of criticism I grapple with myself. Working with design is not particularly ... Sorte Hest-ish. But what I have learned is that good design can be like music, or a particularly delicious meal: it is the spice that brightens our everyday lives. Things that we surround ourselves with that someone somewhere took care in creating, whether it is your favourite cup, your sofa, a pretty vase, the colour you chose for your walls or a beautiful doorknob. Things that bring us joy and infuse us with calm, even as with time we take them for granted. That is what a designer or a production company can pass on to people, and the reason I have always wanted 3daysofdesign to be an open festival for everyone to enjoy.”

She elaborates: “The last thing I want is for it to be a VIP party solely for big designers and buyers. ‘Exclusive but inclusive’ is an expression we often use. This year, for instance, I spoke with an elderly couple I met in the street who told me that they have made a tradition of going every year. They travel from their home on the island of Funen, and spend a few days in Copenhagen, walking around visiting showrooms and talking to designers about their creative processes. Through the years, people have pointed out that we could make quite a lot of money on the event if we sold tickets, but that is not what the essence of 3daysofdesign is about. It is about passion and applauding talent. Telling stories and highlighting extraordinary skills. Not about making huge sales.”

With almost 300 exhibitors this year one must ask – can big become too big?

“Yes, it certainly can. It is wonderful that the popularity of 3daysofdesign has exploded, but if we reach, say, 2,000 exhibitors, we lose the intimacy of a festival that has been meticulously curated to make sure no two exhibits are too alike. In this aspect, 3daysofdesign still stands out in the world of design festivals. Throughout the year, we hold several meetings to ensure this distinctive feel endures, and I try to make a point of visiting as many of the exhibits as I can during the festival. This year, I did not make it out to all of them, and I was a bit sad about that – it feels like planning

a wedding that you end up not attending. Although I know, realistically, that I cannot be everywhere at once, the community feel is important for everyone involved.”

“That said,” she continues, “there are certain areas that could be expanded upon. This year, we set up a new district on Refshaleøen [island formerly used as the industrial site of Copenhagen’s harbour] with a focus on more edgy exhibits – designers who experiment with new materials and explore the future of design, and, in the case of some, push back at commercialisation to shake up the industry. A journalist described it as ‘promising design’, and I thought that encapsulated the spirit well. That is an area I would like to reinforce going forward.”

When asked to pick out highlights from the festival’s first decade, Signe Byrdal Terenziani is hesitant to play favourites:

“What I will say is this: the experiences that stay with you are those in which a designer has found a way for their exhibit to give you goosebumps. It also creates a lasting impact when a designer presents their work for the first time and their voice wobbles from the sheer emotion of sharing with the world for the first time something they have dedicated their life to. That is incredibly moving to witness.”

What are her plans once the adrenaline rush of the festival buzz subsides?

“All my children are going travelling, so I thought I might go on a sailing trip. But now I am off to a yoga retreat instead. I need to get away for a bit. I like to sit in my own bubble and brainstorm themes and visuals before, in autumn, we start planning next year’s festival.”

On one arm, Terenziani has a tattoo of a stepladder accompanied by three red dots. Around her neck hangs a pendant version of the same motif. As it turns out, her boyfriend, an artist, designed the necklace to match the tattoo. She smiles when asked about the symbolism.

“The red dots represent my three children. And the ladder is about moving on and up in life. About how we all have to overcome obstacles on our way. It is not always an easy climb, which is why the ladder is slightly crooked. But in the end,” she concludes, “there is meaning to it all.” /