



# Design the future

## For 15 years, WBDM has been enabling local designers to make it on the world stage

By Sarah Schug



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**W**allonie-Bruxelles Design Mode (WBDM), a public agency whose mission is to support the international ambitions of Walloon and Brussels designers, is celebrating its 15th anniversary at a very challenging time. The creative industries as a whole and the fashion and design world in particular have been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis.

With all major design fairs and events either cancelled or moved to the digital

realm, celebratory festivities are currently inconceivable. However, WBDM's tight-knit four-person team, uniting expertise in cultural management, curating, business and art history, has been quick to adapt to the novel circumstances. On the occasion of its birthday, it will publish a book featuring 30 interviews with major players in the Wallonia and Brussels design scene that were assembled over the past 15 years, and 2021 will also see the relaunch of the agency's branding and website.

WBDM's agility and flexibility in the face of the global pandemic has been welcomed by local designers. Pierre-Emmanuel Vandeputte, who runs his Design Studio in the Zaventem Ateliers, a 6,000sqm former paper mill on the outskirts of Brussels, says: "They immediately looked for alternative ways to support us throughout this crisis. Personally, I got the chance to receive a coaching grant that enabled me to build an e-commerce platform, something extremely valuable to have now that everything is happening online."

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• Belgium is Design: Milan Design Week 2019



• PaulinePlusLuis X Hartô

Laure Capitani, WBDM coordinator since 2007: “With so many events that we usually attend cancelled, we quickly reallocated our budget. We wanted to adapt instead of despair. Over the years, we’ve put more and more of an emphasis on advice and training. We want to prepare our designers well – especially during this strange year.”

As someone with their finger on the pulse when it comes to the constitution of the Belgian design scene, how does she assess the impact of the pandemic? “It depends on the job,” she says. “For scenographers or exhibition stand designers, the situation is of course rather bad. Generally, small structures are able to adapt more easily. Of course, we see some decreases in turnovers, but overall it doesn’t look that terrible.

What’s for sure: the current developments are accelerating digitalisation even more.”

Interestingly, she can’t detect a drop when it comes to the launch of new businesses. “I would have thought people might be more prudent nowadays,” she says, “but even with Covid, we’re receiving tons of emails every week from designers who are working on launching new projects. Belgian designers seem to have quite entrepreneurial minds.”

Over these past 15 years, WBDM has launched numerous programmes and initiatives to the benefit of independent designers, fashion companies and businesses with an integrated design process, the mission being to promote design made in Brussels and Wallonia and showcase what is

happening in the local design scene, as well as provide individual support.

A lot has changed in the industry since the agency was founded in 2006, following models such as Wallonie-Bruxelles Images and Wallonie-Bruxelles Music, both created in 1984. Reflecting on the most significant changes during the past 15 years, Capitani says: “When we started out, you could still do without online sales, which is not the case anymore. Plus, communication plays a much bigger role, and social media has created the need to exist online. Digitalisation in general has had a big impact on the sector.”

Although advantageous, especially during recent periods of lockdown, not everything

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is better over the internet. “Online fairs can’t replace the formal and informal human connections you make during a days-long event,” she says, “and being able to see and touch a prototype or design piece in person makes a big difference.”

Among the design sector’s major industry fairs, Salone Del Mobile in Milan was cancelled, while Fuorisalone, which also takes place during the city’s high-profile annual Design Week, as well as interior design specialist Maison & Objet in Paris, moved their activities online in recent months.

In “normal” times, the prestigious fairs hold a prime spot in WBDM’s calendar. Milan Design Week, the largest event of its kind in the world, can potentially serve as an excellent springboard for a designer’s career. Exorbitant stand fees and organisational challenges make it difficult for individual designers to participate. But thanks to WBDM, each year a carefully selected number of designers get the chance to exhibit – a gigantic opportunity and one of the agency’s flagship programmes.

For many years, WBDM has been joining

forces with fellow design institutions Flanders DC and MAD - Home of Creators under the name Belgium is Design. “We firmly believe that we’re stronger together. To present ourselves as a united front at these fairs is better for both image and impact. Plus, we’re able to afford larger and more prestigious spaces if we work together,” Capitani says.

Vandeputte, who exhibited three times in a row at Milan’s SaloneSatellite, a discovery fair dedicated to the under-35s buzzing with talent scouts, remembers: “WBDM took care of all logistical and financial aspects, from renting and building the booth to transport, communication and press. This left me with time to concentrate on my prototypes and my strategy. There was a small fee, but it was symbolic. It was a huge opportunity.”

It’s an opportunity that often brings about concrete results, such as the collaboration of Brussels design duo PaulinePlusLuis with French brand Hartô. After the presentation of their prototype at SaloneSatellite, the design house decided to publish the two-some’s Carmen lamp, a ceiling light made of a pleated fabric corolla that surrounds a luminous disc.



## 15 YEARS OF WBDM IN NUMBERS

- 142** support actions (69 abroad) from fairs and exhibitions to press events
- 46** invitations of international companies to meet local designers since 2008
- 950** project participants from designers to independent companies
- An average of **90** meetings a year with designers presenting their projects
- 28** foreign journalists on average invited to Belgium a year





• Scissor Sister by Pierre-Emmanuel Vandeputte

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Besides these yearly calendar fixtures, WBDM has taken Walloon and Brussels designers all over the world, from Japan to New York. “My personal highlight was the Hong Kong Business of Design Week, where, in 2013, we were the official partner country,” says Capitani. “It was such an adventure. We went with a delegation of 300 people, staged exhibitions and fashion shows and got so much exposure. It opened a lot of doors, and some professional partnerships have survived until today.”

But the fairs and events abroad are not the only way to forge these kinds of success. Throughout the year, WBDM organises meetings where Belgian designers and foreign companies can get to know each other. One of these resulted in the collaboration

between Thien Vo and Dutch furniture brand Kluskens, for instance, for a table and a tray.

While Belgium is not the home of mainstream fairs or giant fashion groups, Capitani sees it as a good starting point for designers. “You definitely need to be mobile, but you also get less lost in the crowd,” she says. “Plus, there’s lots of support from the public sector. Everything is possible here. Just take fashion brand Filles a Papa, whom we’ve supported from the beginning: they now have 10 employees.”

The pandemic brought the entire fashion world to a halt and has been labelled a decisive turning point by industry insiders. But an increasing number of fashion designers were already changing their ways of

working, turning away from an overloaded fashion calendar and speed-to-market strategies, focusing instead on sustainability and responsible, transparent and often local production.

Accordingly, WBDM updated its fashion programme with the goal of promoting innovative and greener approaches. “Before, everything was tailored to the fashion shows, meaning we supported seasonal collections. But that’s the fashion world of the past,” Capitani explains. “Now, we prefer to give individual subsidies for a variety of projects. This can be a more mature company that wants to launch its brand in Dubai, or a young independent designer who is planning on opening a pop-up store in the Netherlands.”



• Designers to Business, Brussels 2019



• The collaboration between 42|54 and Samsung



• Imprevu SS20

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## FRONTRUNNERS

The pinnacle of WBDM's Fashion Programme: a grant of €35,000 for a single brand. This year, the jury composed of the WBDM team and external experts selected 42|54, a fashion-forward, eco-conscious sportswear label created by two Belgian Olympic gold medallists, Olivia Borlée and Elodie Ouédraogo. Named after their national record times, 42|54 reinterprets classic pieces such as the traditional hoodie or the Japanese kimono using sustainable materials. With their experience in professional sports, they know exactly what the discerning wearer needs in terms of high-end functionality and breathability.

Justine God, who received a WBDM grant of €15,000 in 2020 for her Imprevu label, couldn't be happier with the impact it had. "The Fashion Programme opens doors that we wouldn't dare to knock on without this financial aid," she says. "We dared to make investments that enabled the brand to establish its reputation and legitimacy and find a place in the magnificent establishment Le Bon Marché in Paris. In addition,

the WBDM team helped us to make the right decisions and to invest the money in the best possible way."

Vandeputte wholeheartedly agrees: "WBDM programmes have served as major boosts for my career. I wouldn't be where I am today without their support."

[wbdm.be](http://wbdm.be)