

Culture KINGS

Built on the style and attitude of Swedish streetwear, WeSC has crafted a unique culture and brand that is making its mark on the global fashion industry.

Images by Rickard Aronsson

Since its establishment, WeSC (short for We are the Superlative Conspiracy) has always been regarded as a contemporary clothing brand. WeSC got its start sponsoring underground artists, musicians, and skateboarders in Sweden without engaging in any other marketing. This unique approach helped create the alternative image that WeSC prides itself on.

Johan Heijbel, CEO of WeSC, looks back on the history of the brand and how it has changed. “WeSC was formed in 1999 by six founders, each from specific industries, and they all came from this street/grunge culture of skateboarding and snowboarding. If you look at the street brands back then, they were very basic, so the founders realised that it was a very big space to move in with different products. So you could move in with high-quality jeans, you could move in with shirts, and everything else.

“We also have come to realise that our customers, even if they started out as skating teenagers, are more mature today. They still have that attitude, which I think is super-important in everything, but they have grown and matured and they may work at jobs where they need to look a little more dressy, so it’s our job to provide that, but with the attitude that comes with our brand. I want everyone to be able to wear it to any meeting. It is expression and it’s a feeling that comes with a true lifestyle brand.”

WeSC has always been well-regarded for its authenticity as a true Swedish streetwear brand. “One of the things that we really do benefit from is that we have a true brand story—a true lifestyle brand coming out of a culture where the people who formed it were really living it—as opposed to a lot of brands today that go to a brand agency to form their brand identity. We have the luxury of having the full story ourselves. We just have to make sure then that we’re very close to it.

“Of course that is being influenced by the US and California, and that is an important influence in streetwear culture. At the same time, we are Swedish; we are born and raised in the streets of Stockholm. I think clarity is a big secret to a lot of these brands today, especially if you have the luxury of having a true brand story. It’s a different thing if you don’t have it and you’re trying to grasp on to something, but we just have it and we just have to stay true to it.”

Stepping into the CEO position in September last year, one of the first things Johan brought to the company’s forefront was a passion for WeSC’s products. “I think a little bit of focus had been lost on the design and actual products; there was a lot of focus on brand, which you need to focus on, but you just have to remember that it is like a scale and you need to bring the brand together with fantastic products. We’ve now implemented a focus on the products that I think actually fills >



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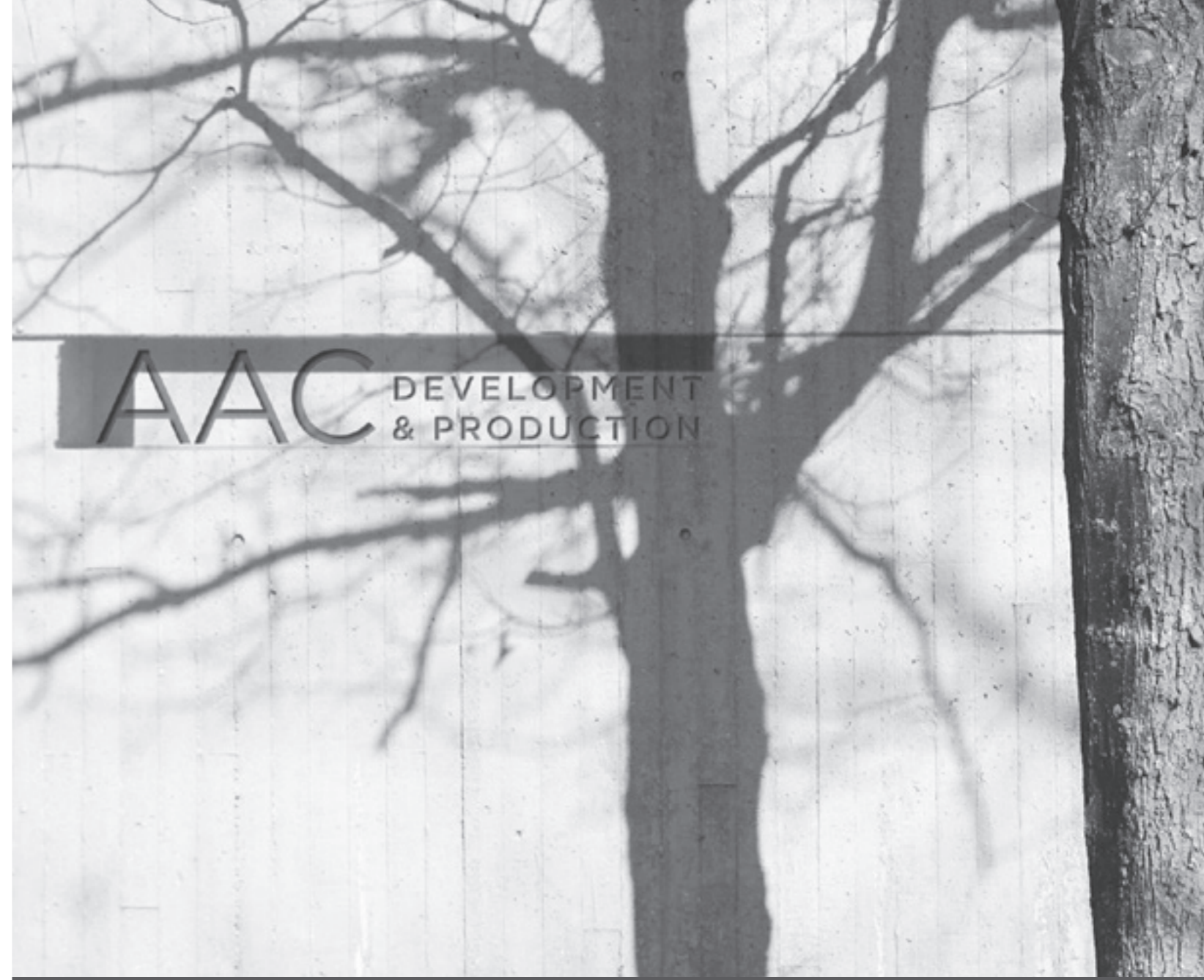
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The Company

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this great brand with the products it deserves. Right now, I think the products look better than they ever have before, and it's very interesting to see that creative process that has been behind all of that?"

By refocusing on WeSC's product line, there has been a rekindling of the passion and creativity that made WeSC a pioneer streetwear label. "You have to be proud of every product that leaves your company. Everything that you put your name on has to be something that you're really proud of and you want to wear yourself. I think we've created a situation now where everyone is really pleased.

"This is an industry that has been really challenging for a few years now, but I think we're seeing it come back to better times again. A lot of companies did not make it, but we did and we're coming out stronger, better, and with better looking products than before. We want to fill the brand with these great products, and that creates pride within the organisation. Also, the factories and suppliers are seeing this with their attention to detail and so on, which makes them proud to be a part of this, and the same goes for distributors and our big accounts."

From day one, WeSC has been seen as a cultural collective, emphasising the notion of teamwork and supporting iconic figures within sport, art, and music. "It starts with teamwork internally within the company, but then you have to be surrounded by great people that you do great things with together.

"That's where all our activism started; people with similar interests or backgrounds, great representatives and very successful people in whatever it is, such as skateboarding, snowboarding, racing, music, which is similar to anyone wearing our clothes. This is a lifestyle brand and this is what we have to do. And that partnership extends to all the partners that we work with, all the factories, all the

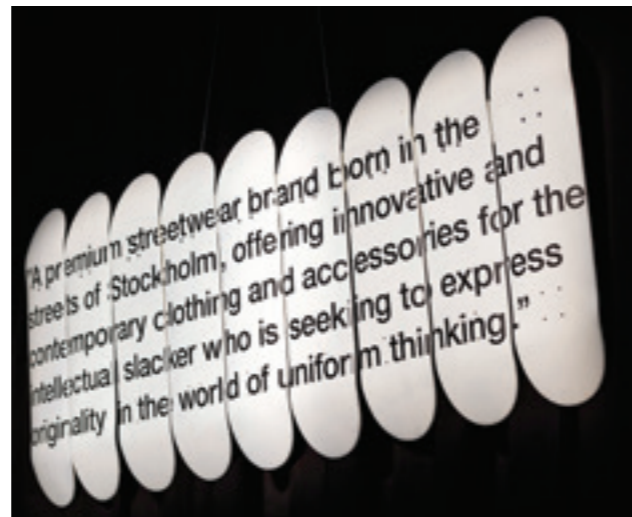
suppliers, all the distributors; it always has to be a great network of people doing things together, not people as individuals."

Working closely with suppliers, distributors, and those that the brand sponsors, Johan believes communication is paramount to WeSC, particularly during times of difficulty. "Anytime you have challenging times, as an industry or an organisation, you need to increase communication. You have to make sure that you talk through all the situations that come up and make sure that everyone acts as one team and on the same side, so we don't get into a scenario of us versus them.

"For us, it has been extremely important to work with our suppliers, and what has made a difference for us is that we have continuously kept up the communication and dialogue with all of them. They know our intentions have always been to sort this out, and we're extremely happy to see that they're still there for us and we're still there for them; together we have managed to survive the storm and come out stronger."

Collaboration with suppliers has also helped WeSC become more environmentally conscious and adopt good CSR practices within the business. "It's one thing if you're one of these huge companies like H&M or Zara because they can demand so much, but we are a much smaller company so we have to make sure that we work together with the right suppliers as a partnership because we cannot demand that they should do things differently. They should do things differently.

"We have to really start by looking at the kind of factories and suppliers that we're working with and we also have to make sure that we are very sincere in the efforts we make, and the only way to do that is to be a little narrower in our focus. We cannot say that we'll be an industry leader in everything from chemicals to water usage to labour conditions, because we simply don't have the pushing power to do that. For us, one of the natural things that we think is really



important is water usage, so we start by focusing on that.

"We also have high standards in everything we do, so we're ambitious in this, but we have to focus on some areas, because if we focus on all of them, we will dilute and not really make a difference anywhere. We need to focus on water usage, and that works very well with some factories that we're working with."

In the area of water usage, WeSC is inspired by the effort of its denim supply. "They are Bluesign certified, they're working with a fully integrated process where they actually start with pure cotton and out comes denim and denim products on the other side, and they're the best in the industry when it comes to water usage throughout that whole process. I know the founder and owner of that company. He is extremely dedicated to these questions, and he has made a huge difference not only for his factory, but how it is seen in the industry, and I think it's hard to find a manufacturer anywhere in the world that has higher standards when it comes to water usage.

"Also, we have been a member of, since it was more or less founded, STWI [Sweden Textile Water Initiative] working with all the water-related questions. I also think we have to remember that to make a difference that is long term and sustainable, it has to be business driven as well. All of these things are good examples of that; both the factories that have the focus and us taking the product focus."

Johan is excited for the future of WeSC. "If we look at the latest collection that we are selling right now, it is spring and summer 2015, and we have been receiving so many positive comments and

"Great people with strong ethical values has been the fundamental of WeSC's engagement process, which in turn has nurtured a solid foundation of trust and allowed our relationship of more than five years to evolve into a meaningful partnership." - Sanjeev Bahl, CEO, SAITEX



feedback on it. We've also started to collaborate with many premium stores and we've had new distributors ask to work with us because they've seen or heard how good our products are now. I do think we have a very strong future ahead and I think it is going to be done in a more sustainable and healthy way.

"This is a company that has historically seen some periods of extremely strong growth, and in this case it is all about creating a balance; we have to make sure that we still stay focused, that we do the products that we should do, and we don't dilute our brand or offering, and remember to build something that is resistant to good times and bad times."

"I think so many lessons have been learned, and I think we will be a strong partner for anyone who

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- Johan Heijbel

wants to work with us. With the product focus and remembering that our customer is the one that leaves the store with a bag of our stuff and we should be proud of it, we will come a long way. It's also about the partners and we are making sure that we are up to date, contemporary, and working with people that are relevant to our customers today.

"We have to be very humble as well. Without an extremely competent, dedicated, and committed board of directors, headed by Theodor Dalenson as the Chairman as well as major shareholder, this company would not exist today. The board has worked extensively to formulate a new vision and objective for the business as well as a completely new take on the brand identity."

WeSC is cementing its place in the competitive global streetwear market. With Johan at the reins, the company has renewed its focus on products and this has ensured strong relationships with suppliers, distributors, and brand ambassadors from all over the globe. ●

"Working with WeSC for the past 14 years has been challenging yet rewarding for us at AAC. Their loyalty and quality driven approach pushes us further every season, and we share their vision and values when it comes to sustainability." - Paulo Pereira, CEO, AAC Textiles

