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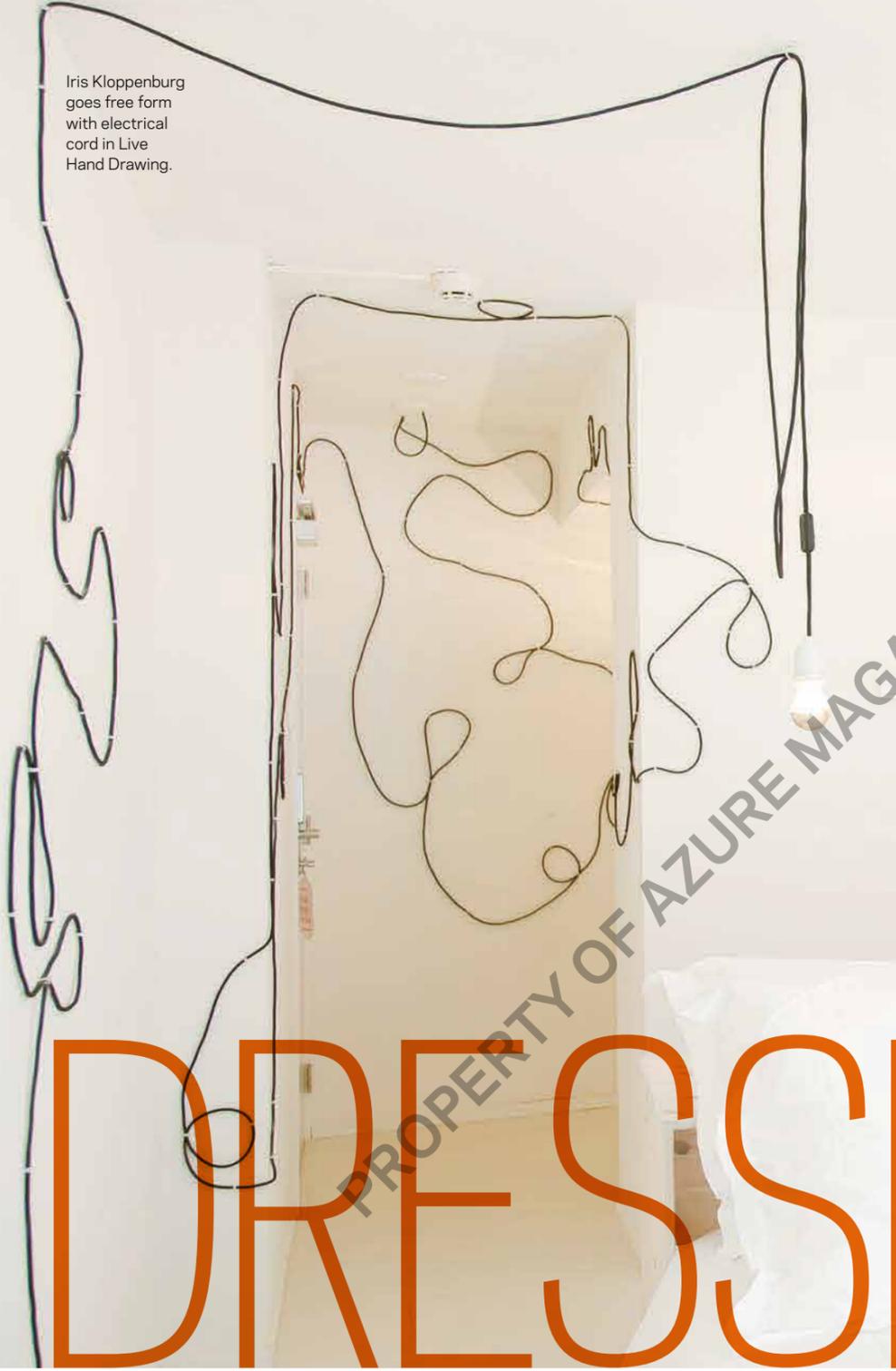
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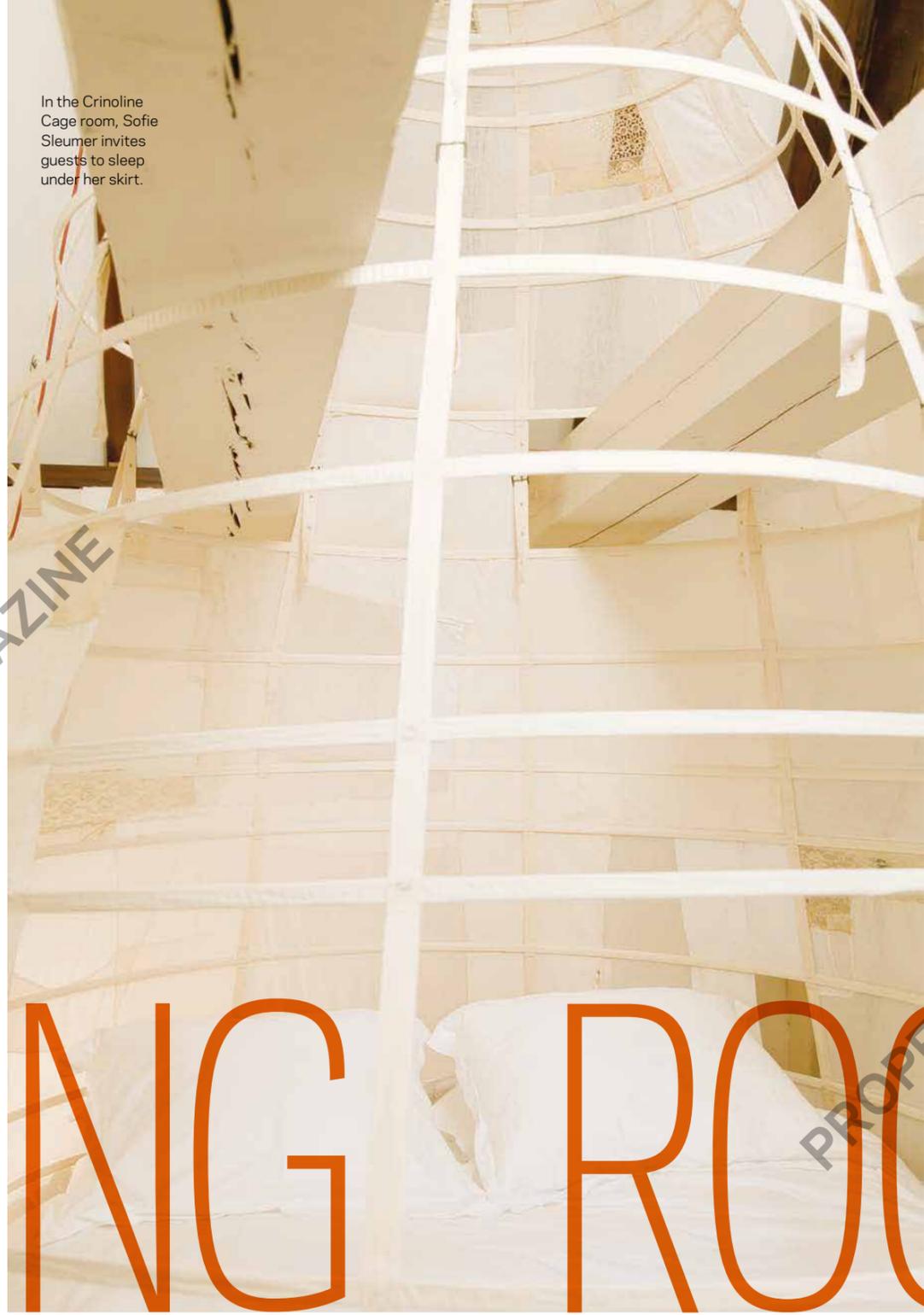
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Iris Kloppenburg goes free form with electrical cord in Live Hand Drawing.



In the Crinoline Cage room, Sofie Sleumer invites guests to sleep under her skirt.



Supersized braiding dominates Malu Gehner's Epaulettes.



DRESSING ROOMS

A NEW HOTEL IN A SCRUFFY PART OF AMSTERDAM GETS A ROOM-BY-ROOM MAKEOVER FROM FASHION STUDENTS

By Rachel Howard
Photography by Mirjam Bleeker

WHEN SUZANNE OXENAAR AND OTTO NAN DECIDED TO CONVERT A FORMER PRISON AND immigrant hostel in Amsterdam's desolate Eastern Docklands into a design hotel, most people thought they were crazy. "We had no money and no experience," recalls Oxenaar. When Lloyd Hotel finally opened in 2004, it had taken eight years to realize, but their perseverance paid off: the area has evolved into a creative hub centred around the hotel's Cultural Embassy, an innovative program of exhibitions and events meant to familiarize guests and the public with Dutch design and culture.

The duo's latest project, Hotel the Exchange, which opened last December in central Amsterdam after just two years of work, presented a different

set of challenges. They had scarcely two weeks to submit a proposal to develop the site, an awkward amalgamation of three buildings: a typically narrow 17th-century Dutch residence, flanked by a rundown hotel built in the 1970s and another from the '80s. The development formed part of an ambitious government-sponsored plan to revamp the Damrak, the grubby strip that connects the main rail station to Dam Square. Although the Damrak is renowned as the home of the former stock exchange, the main scene along it today consists of stoned tourists stumbling past tacky souvenir shops and shawarma stalls. Around the corner lies the Red Light District, which has been somewhat sanitized of late, with boutiques and

design studios cropping up among the peep shows, thanks to the Red Light Fashion initiative.

Out of this unlikely location arose the concept for the Exchange. "The Damrak is like a red carpet," explains Oxenaar. "Every day, millions of people parade up and down the street. So we thought of connecting the hotel with fashion." The result is a far cry from the chic hotels branded by luxe fashion houses; the Exchange is all about rough-edged, experimental, homegrown design. The Dutch architecture firm Onswerk connected the three buildings by strategically inserting glass panels in the structural walls to create visual continuity. Designers Matthijs van Crujisen and



↑↑ In I Still Remember, Sofie Sleumer's appliquéd and moulded 3-D collage takes its inspiration from a Grimm's fairy tale.

↑ Bedsprings, padding and layers of foam become ornamental features in Roos Soetekouw's Mattress Room.

→ Ina Matt designed the hotel's public spaces and dressed a few rooms, including Tailor's Dummy.



↑ Denise de Geijter alludes to homelessness with Living in a Cardboard Box.

↓ The Stock café's counter of faux gold bars gives an ironic nod to the former stock exchange across the street.



Ina Meijer, partners in the studio Ina Matt, were commissioned to design the public spaces and some of the 61 bedrooms. Their rooms are adorned with giant buttons made of upcycled porcelain plates, or upholstered entirely in jute like a tailor's mannequin.

However, the most daring rooms were decorated by eight students and alumni from the Amsterdam Fashion Institute, in an unprecedented move typical of Oxenaar and Nan's avant-garde approach. "We asked the fashion students to dress the rooms as if they were models," says Oxenaar, "and to treat everything else in the room as accessories." Playing with pleats, creases, textures and prints, the fledgling designers drew inspiration from objects found on site, as well as the surrounding buildings and museums, and the city itself. The result is a riot of styles and influences, from a minimal box modelled on a plain white T-shirt, to a sultry boudoir embellished with sequins, trinkets and beads inspired by Frida Kahlo. Fittings and furnishings are dressed in bespoke fabrics created by the students in collaboration with the Textile Museum in Tilburg, the Netherlands.

As at Lloyd Hotel, rooms are rated from one to five stars, depending on size. There's a surcharge for booking a particular room; otherwise, it's the luck of the draw on whatever is available. But it's worth paying the premium in advance, since the rooms vary wildly in style, size and ambience.

Several contain minimal yet dramatic interventions, such as Malu Gehner's Epaulettes, a plain white space with supersized, hand-braided pale blue ropes dangling from the ceiling. Others are more elaborate and experimental, challenging the idea that a hotel room should be all about comfort. For instance, Sofie Sleumer has constructed a crinoline cage in a tiny 17th-century attic. To climb into bed, you must pull up the skirt, a patchwork of vintage lace and linen. To get to the bathroom, you have to manoeuvre the crinoline to one side, like the long-suffering women who wore these garments. Meanwhile, Roos Soetekouw subverts the notion of a great bed as the essence of a good hotel room by turning the mattress components – bedsprings, padding, layers of foam – into ornamental features.

Other designers chose to make political rather than fashion statements. Denise de Geijter's Living in a Cardboard Box is a commentary on homelessness. She photographed dozens of discarded boxes in the room and printed the images onto 30 metres of fabric, which were then draped over every bit of wall space. The result is disquieting, yet more playful than depressing.

The hotel café, Stock, is bookended by the hotel entrance and a concept store called Options! The shop carries an eclectic mix of cushions, clothes and ceramics, and a selection of fabrics and furniture designed exclusively for the hotel. Stock's all-day breakfast is laid out on a counter made of faux gold bars, an ironic reference to the former Amsterdam Stock Exchange across the street. But there's nothing flashy about this new landmark. "The idea was to create an exciting place to stay and exchange ideas that is much more casual than a classic hotel," says Oxenaar. Like Amsterdam, it's laid back and unconventional, and doesn't take itself too seriously. **AZ** → exchangeamsterdam.com; +31 20 523 0080

PHOTO OF TAILOR'S DUMMY ROOM BY ARJAN BENNING