



From left: Hotel August's historic brick façade; the August Bar.



Divine Inspiration Antwerp's celebrated designer Vincent Van Duysen stays close to home for his first hotel project, inside a former convent.

by Gisela Williams. Photographs by David De Vleeschauwer

NINETEEN YEARS AGO, Mouche Van Hool, a former interior designer, opened Hotel Julien in two adjacent 16th-century mansions in the Old City of Antwerp. With its smart design and eclectic mix of Art Deco and mid-century modern decor, the property quickly became a magnet for the fashion and design crowd that has made the city Europe's avant-garde capital.

A few years ago, having noticed that her town's hotel scene hadn't kept pace with its international influence, Van Hool decided to open a second hotel, this time in a historic convent within a former military hospital complex. Turning the elegant but dilapidated Flemish-style buildings, which had been empty for 20 years, into a luxury hotel would require a particular Antwerpian ingenuity, so Van Hool reached out to one of the city's best-known designers, Vincent Van Duysen.

"I knew he could bring the space back to life," Van Hool told me. However, while Van Duysen, the 57-year-old art director of Molteni&C | Dada, is known for spare yet transcendent high-end residences around the world, as well as commissions by companies like B&B Italia and Swarovski, he had never designed a hotel (despite being asked to several times).

"I was thrilled that my first hotel project would be in my hometown," said the designer, who counts Julianne Moore and Kim Kardashian among his clients. He was also excited by the challenge of repurposing a sacred historical space that had sat unused for decades. According to Van Duysen, the cloister, once inhabited by nuns of the Order of Saint Augustine, still felt "spiritual in some way." The renovation was "intense," he added, "but we treated the rooms with respect and kept many original features," including stained



The library at Hotel August. *Left:* A guest room with exposed beams.



glass and painted floor tiles. When it came time to design the hotel's public spaces, "We could have brought in a DJ booth, but we didn't," said Van Duysen.

The complex consists of three gardens and five brick buildings, including a former chapel that has been turned into a café and bar. Collaborating with his usual producers (Flos, Molteni&C), Van Duysen commissioned bespoke furniture and objects, such as a circular, Adolf Loos–like glass-and-metal chandelier that hangs over a former altar. "I tried to design furniture that was related to what you might find in a church," said the architect. Other features include a spa with a natural outdoor swimming pool that has its own filtering reedbed.

The 44 rooms and suites are modest yet luxurious, an effect achieved with materials like hand-glazed bathroom tiles and handwoven carpets from Portugal. Art on the walls is scarce, such as a small oil of a Flemish landscape. "In all the rooms I wanted to create a sanctuary and a space to reflect," explained Van Duysen. "It's what I aim for in all my projects." Rounding out the local talent, Van Hool commissioned Antwerp-based designer Christian Wijnants to create custom-made outfits for the staff, while the outdoor gardens were designed by the eminent Belgian firm Wirtz International Landscape Architects.

The public spaces required a personality that would

attract locals and international visitors, so Van Hool approached Nick Bril, the chef at the city's wildly popular Jane restaurant. While rooted in Flemish tradition, the 35-year-old Bril is confident enough to reinvent traditional Belgian fine dining, and August's restaurant is his take on casual bistro cuisine, with dishes like a risotto with white asparagus and a springlike herbal broth. Breakfast alone is worth the stay—a beautiful buffet laid out on the altar and featuring pastries by the beloved Domestic bakery.

Only a week after opening last April, the restaurant's banquettes were filled with Antwerp's fashionable set. Yet, as Van Duysen had hoped, all was quiet in a hidden courtyard just to the left of the open kitchen. There, in the middle of a garden, something like a giant sandcastle emerged from the ground. At first glance it appeared to be either an art installation or an ancient ruin, but, as Van Duysen explained, it's actually a steel-and-cement grotto made by the nuns. Once it held a figure of the Madonna; now it contains a pair of modern metal chairs.

"For me, it's like a sculpture," said Van Duysen. "It's a manifestation of the soul of the place." He added, "Some people love a hotel that is nonstop entertainment and people dancing on the tables. I'm the opposite. I want to bring people together, but I want to slow things down." *Rooms from \$170; august-antwerp.com.*