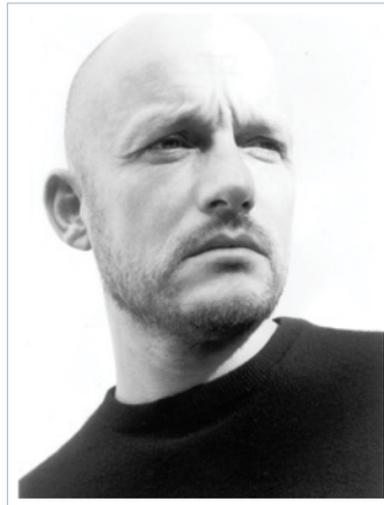


The Eloquent Man

Text by Rachel Lee-Leong

Vincent Van Duysen's subtle and elegant works are pure poetry in a landscape of loud, explicit design.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLY VANDERPERRE

IN A WORLD WHERE ARCHITECTS ARE trying to outdo one another with one sensational edifice after another, those who intentionally turn away from the architectural circus are increasingly, and also ironically, the ones receiving much acclaim. Of the latter group, *Vincent Van Duysen* is one of the leading protagonists. Previously a student at the *High Institute of Architecture Sin-Lucas* in 1980, the Belgian architect's works are highly sensual, unflinchingly honest and unequivocally poetic; he is the quintessential romantic's architect.

"I prefer understated design where details and subtlety is hidden, but it's still beautiful and emotional. Rather than something that has been forced so much...so obvious, so spectacular, that it's completely wrong because it becomes ugly in the end," he relates, with a slight note of disgust at the end. "Subtlety is very important."

The architect was recently in Singapore as a guest speaker at the *Furniture Design Forum* held in conjunction with the *International Furniture Fair Singapore*. Garbed in a black T-shirt, a casual navy blazer, dark forest-green pants and brown leather shoes, Van Duysen's approach to fashion is very much like his approach to architecture and design: nothing flashy; subtlety, tactility and proportion (and good taste) are everything. A quiet pair of rimless spectacles with light beige temples only serves to reinforce the fact.

↑ VINCENT VAN DUYSEN: The Belgian architect and designer is known for his purist forms

→ MEASURED TOUCH: Pure proportion coupled with tactility makes a contemporary classic residence



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALBERTO PIOVANO

Despite a serious and slightly severe mien, Van Duysen is in fact soft-spoken and quite gentle. As he takes to the stage to present, he brings a ring-bound booklet, from which he slowly reads his commentary as he goes through a slideshow of his works; it's like he's telling the audience a story from the book. There are no impromptu anecdotes or off-the-cuff comments. There is no room for error here. It's not what we're used to for design presentations, but if anything, it's very telling of the man. This doesn't seem like a person who likes to work on the fly. One would guess that he works best when given time to contemplate and prepare. He indirectly

confirms his contemplative nature when asked about what he likes to do during his free time: "Silence, just doing nothing. Just disconnect, even without music. Just being on my own."

Van Duysen's buildings follow the same contemplative mood that the architect is akin to. And while many categorise his works as being minimalist, they would perhaps be better described as purist, the former denoting a kind of emotional detachment and coldness that is uncharacteristic of his works. Many of his projects, especially residential ones, exude a natural robustness – it comes from a penchant for natural materials like stone and wood – despite their distilled forms. In his presentation

he attributes much of this to the influence of Flemish culture when he was growing up, where he "[lived] with nature, textures, smells and the aging of nature".

In particular, this idea of "aging nature" is a recurring idea in his works. His are designs that work with, not against, time. "When you think timeless, you think about something that is durable, which will age nicely. There is nothing wrong with doing something [differently] so that after a few years, [people] still say that [the project] is very nice, very emotional. I still feel very comfortable with [the work] even though it has aged and has a certain patina. I think that's part of life. That's the essence of living," he says.

Apart from his own Flemish background, Van Duysen is also very clear on his other influences. He mentions Romanesque architecture for its contemplative spaces, one of the most important buildings for him being *Roosenberg Abbey* by *Dom Hans van der Laan*, a Dutch architect (and also a monk) who had formulated a system to modulate space meaningfully. He admires *Mies van der Rohe's* vision of free, open plans and his attention to detail, and American minimalist sculptor *Richard Serra's* works of distilled form and space. Of all his influences, Van Duysen mentions Mexican architectural great *Luis Barragán* as one of the most important, referring to him as a "great mentor" even. In all these sources of influence, the idea of pure, uncomplicated, but



MATERIAL COMFORT: Van Duysen's kitchen is a complex but honest amalgam of materials



↓ GOLDEN JEWEL: The Jeddah skyscraper is a play on textured structure and volume



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALBERTO PIOVANO

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Van Duysen's works are more than the sum of its parts; there is an intangible, almost spiritual, quality to his spaces that owes itself to the architect's innate sensitivity and intuition.

SPACE CRAFT: Van Duysen is a master of crafting highly poetic space with minimal gestures



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALBERTO PIOVANO

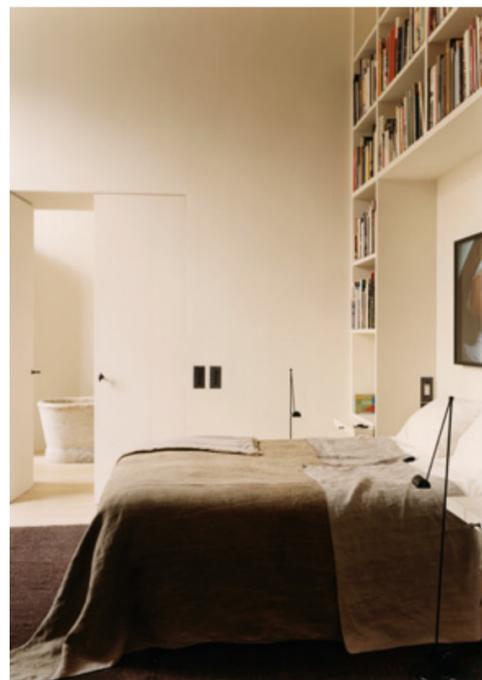
thoroughly rich and expressive spaces is immediately evident as the connecting thread. And so it is in Van Duysen's works.

The clarified forms of projects like *VVD_VDV Residence* and *VVD_VDD Residence* seem to suggest that Van Duysen approaches his works like how a chess player would a game of chess. That is, slowly and with much consideration. "Even in this pure, minimalist language, it is packed with hidden details that people cannot see with the eye," Van Duysen elaborates. But it's not the deliberate concrete plane, the hidden groove or even the painstakingly detailed door handle that makes his buildings. Van Duysen's works are more than the sum of its parts; there is an intangible, almost spiritual quality to his spaces that owes itself to the architect's innate sensitivity and intuition.

In his furniture designs for the likes of *Pastoe*, *B&B Italia* and *Tribu*, Van Duysen also adopts the same intuitive approach. "I'm not an industrial designer. I don't come up with this kind of highly-technical drawings. We can do it, but I prefer to do it with a sketch, giving very little information – but just enough information so that a person can react to it and we can find each other in a human way."

In recent years, he has started to design skyscrapers. Such projects seem a little out of character – where do ideas of nature, tactility and emotionality come into play in the design of a glass tower? Van Duysen readily agrees that it is not an easy task. "In Jeddah, the tower building was for me like

D.R.Y. DETAIL: Inspired by dry and irregular cracks, the D.R.Y. ceramic tile was designed for Brix

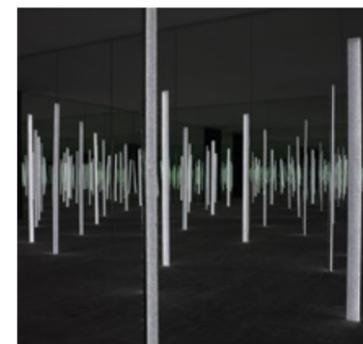


PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTYN THOMPSON

HOLISTIC LIFESTYLE: Warmth, light and well-being are essential qualities embodied in his interiors

a jewel [with] a beautiful golden texture. It's difficult, it's true. It's more difficult to feel it, but I hope once you're there, that it's going to have the same expression [as] a beautiful wooden table that you want to touch. I hope that people will touch it when they pass the building!" he says with a hint of childlike delight.

Van Duysen may have expanded his scope of work to include shimmering glass



BRIGHT LIGHTS: LED lights and Swarovski crystals are compressed into linear forms

towers, but interestingly, it was his own quiet, humble home in Antwerp, Belgium, that first catapulted him into the limelight.

Ilse Crawford, then the editor of *Elle Decoration UK*, first brought it to the public's attention in the early 90s. In her foreword for the architect's recent monograph, she described him as a designer with a "sound grasp of materiality, someone who could take materials that were not in the lexicon of 'modern' and make them new".

Van Duysen now lives in a different home, also in Antwerp – an 1870 townhouse located in the city centre that is no less impressive in its quietude and warmth than his previous home. It is a direct reflection of his own lifestyle: "informal but elegant". There is an almost meditative quality to the spaces, with natural materials forming the backbone of the design – bleached timber floors, off-white plaster walls with a soft, chalky appearance, even a bathtub hewn completely out of

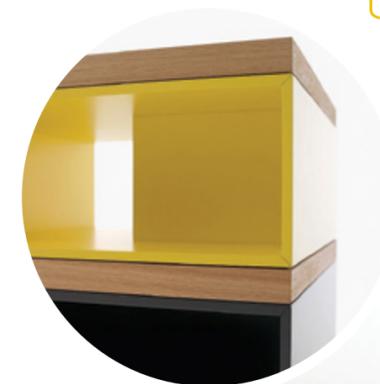
intricately veined marble. "Most important are the sensory perceptions, the visual as well as the tactile," Van Duysen says.

Even as the world around him forges ahead with technological advancements, he is adamant about not having a "house dominated by technology" and says that he has an "old-school" mentality. When asked if he's a romantic at heart, he replies indirectly, "I'm not this person who only thinks about consumption. The world is dominated by consumption and there's a big danger of losing the values of, [for example] a piece of clothing, or a pair of shoes, or a house or a table as it should be. Therefore, I always believe in creating things that will stay, that are timeless."

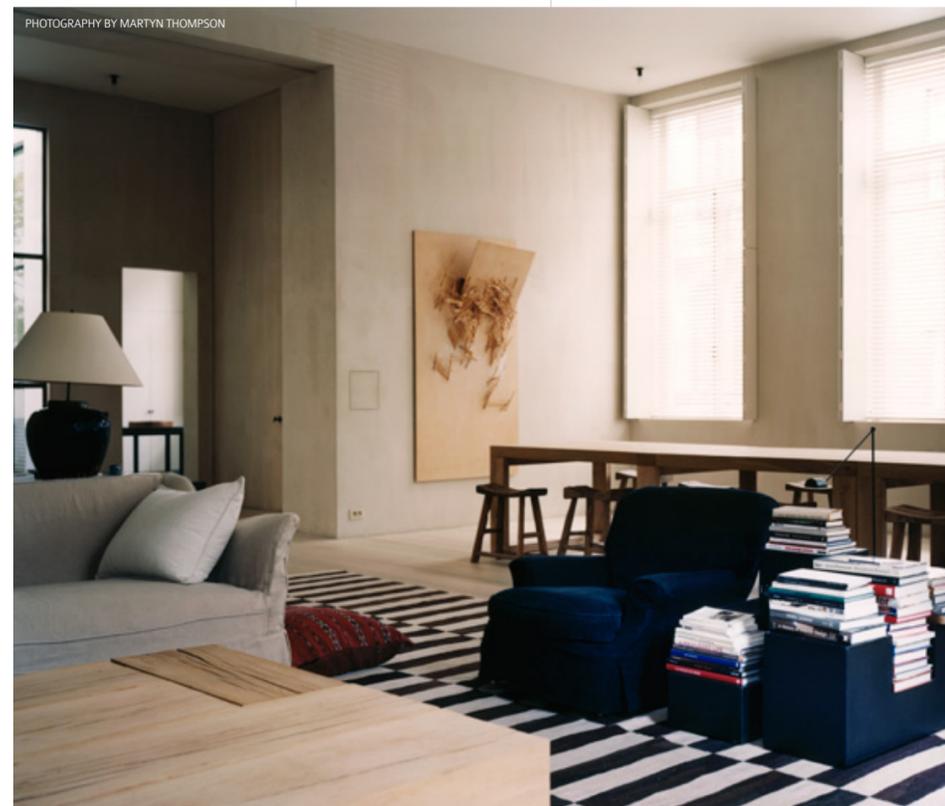
He hasn't answered the question. So we tell him that we've concluded that he is, to which he says while breaking out into laughter, "I am a romantic! I just didn't want to say it!"

◆ vincentvanduyesen.com

"Most important are the sensory perceptions, the visual as well as the tactile"



STACKED EFFECT: The Totem cabinets for Pastoe are boxed modules allowing numerous configurations



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTYN THOMPSON