



## A TABLE IS ALWAYS A TABLE

VINCENT VAN DUYSEN

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### **Antwerp**

*At the last minute, Vincent Van Duysen decided to change the location of our interview. He wanted to meet me at his house, a multi-storey building in the centre of Antwerp, which dates back to 1870 and features remnants of the eras that followed. Van Duysen renovated this place by creating an almost theatre-like open space whereby the sense of the external is filtered in through two lateral private courtyards, towards which most of the rooms in the house face. Inside, the place is filled with soft lighting, which is enveloping even on rainy days such as today; I can only imagine what it must be like on a beautiful sunny day.*

*Besides designing many private residential projects, Van Duysen is the name behind several commercial retail spaces such as Sportmax, the department store La Rinascente and Selfridges. He also created a series of interiors for various companies. A second book of his work was published by Thames and Hudson in 2010.*



***You have cleverly managed to evade any kind of definition. Does this help you avoid being labelled or categorised in a specific historical context? How much of this is intentional?***

I have always been the type of person who dislikes being categorised. I have never, and I mean never, been someone who has worked well within a large group. I also have never wanted to be conditioned by any truism, standard or anything else like that. I am someone who is open-minded, I have an open-minded way of thinking and I want to be able to act on that as freely as possible.

***You made a statement saying: 'I could have been a photographer, a painter ... I could have been a fashion designer or a dancer.' You have to decide: what will Vincent Van Duysen do when he grows up?***

[Laughs.] If only I could see into a crystal ball! Life is so full of surprises and I've never been one to plan too far ahead. I live every day, indeed every moment, differently. I am interested in photography because it offers a different perspective on things. I am a very visual person, very sensual in the literal meaning because I use my senses a lot to work. I would have liked to have been a fashion designer because the idea of creating clothes around a body is like a form of architecture; just like dancing is a means of expressing oneself through movement in a space or painting is an efficient way of expressing one's ideas. These complex aspects together represent my approach in being an architect.

***Even though you do not like being defined, your style is very close to Minimalism. Is it a trend that is a bit in decline?***

When I finished my studies and went to Italy in the late '80s I was just a boy, not even 23. It was a Deconstructionist period where there was more architecture happening on paper than in reality. This stemmed from a very formal type of Mannerism. I worked with Aldo Cibic and Cinzia Ruggieri in that period where they worked for Sottsass Associates and Studio Alchimia respectively. I found myself working from within this kind of formal expressive language. At one point however, I felt that there was the need for something more spontaneous, more closely tied to simple architectural forms like the ones I saw in Morocco or even in Japan.

Could it have been that simplicity, that Spartan element that is so characteristic around the Mediterranean ... I have been trying to reinterpret these elements since the beginning of my career, and going towards the essence of those pure forms within a space, using natural or raw materials, has slowly but surely become a trend. It wasn't something done consciously but this became a shared sentiment with others. I was also very interested in Minimal Art ...

### ***... Donald Judd ...***

... Yes, I have always been a big fan of Donald Judd's work and that of Dom Van der Laan. Roman and religious architecture has always inspired me ... for its solidness and for the way in which natural lighting is brought in.

### ***What made you decide to live in Italy?***

Italy is the highest reference point – both culturally and architecturally as well as in terms of interior design and fashion. My thesis was about the duality of architecture/fashion and I found that Italy, particularly Milan, had the right combination between these two disciplines.

### ***Speaking of architecture, what does the word 'timeless' mean to you?***

It means something that lasts over time, ages well and makes it possible to experience space and its objects to its full potential over the course of time and in a 'human' way. It has something to do with what you have inside, which is not conditioned by dogma or anticipated by the media. I, in particular, do not want to be influenced by the media.

### ***Is there a project you have designed that you consider important but has not yet been built?***

Whenever it happens, it is always frustrating. If you are really moved by your passions, it means being committed to something for the long term. We had one in Dubai, which I consider my masterpiece and which many of us were really involved in. It was a villa, or rather a group of single-family villas that included a

study of the landscape by a Lebanese architect. There were no boundaries between the architecture and landscape, giving the sense that they were intertwined. The project was approved and was really beautiful. We did a lot of research; we went to Granada to visit Alhambra with a whole team of people in order to understand the origins of Islamic architecture and find a means of reinterpreting it and then transposing that to a modern context in Dubai. But because of the financial crisis, which all of us have had to face, especially that region, the client decided to pull out. It was one of those really rare occasions for a young architect and his whole team ... We still have to digest it all but I hope we can get back to it someday.



Above  
**CONCORDIA OFFICE BUILDING,  
Waregem, Belgium, 1998**

Photography: copyright © Alberto Piovano

***A second book on your work was released: is this an important goal for you?***

First of all, creating a book means cataloguing all the work that has been done in order to look back and see where the starting point was and where we find ourselves now. The thing I like most about my work is that it has to do with integrity and honesty in design that is evident. I don't use tricks in order to make it look more seductive. My work 15 years ago is as current as what I am doing today.

***Do you have any regrets at this point in your career?***

No, I am happy and I am passionate about my work.

***And in your private life?***

This work takes up a large part of my time and gives me the opportunity to be in contact with many people. Many of the people I have worked with have become my friends and are part of my world. I have always sought to mix my work with fun.

***Is there something that you always wanted to do but never have?***

At the moment nothing else comes to mind.

***Who are your heroes in architecture or in life?***

I am not someone who admires a person enough to consider them a hero. Alternatively, maybe there are too many to mention. A hero could also be someone [I pass] in the street, their way of expressing themselves, their behaviour or the way they dress can become a source of inspiration and in some way [they] become a hero in my eyes.

***Do you consider yourself a hero?***

Not at all. I don't have the aptitude. I tend to be in a rapport of equals with people I work with, my friends, family and my clients. I find that this way of being is more humble and even more flattering.

***Between us, I find you a bit on the defensive.***

You see, when people interview you they always tend to go in the same direction. I am an honest person and I am self-aware. I do not have anything to hide even though I realise that this form of apparent simplicity can in fact be a kind of complexity. There are many other things in life that deserve more attention, for example: science, people's health or nature. I don't like to overdo things. I do not need to give it that kind of spectacle.

***So, is there something you would like to say which no one has ever asked you before?***

[Laughs heartily.] That's a tough one ...

***Do you have a secret side, a passion? A butterfly collection perhaps?***

No, there are no butterflies. There is nothing mysterious about my life or me. I do not have a particular hobby or any kind of extreme passions except for my architecture, my books, magazines and my dog ... look at him! [Gaston, his dachshund, is scratching at the rug that perhaps he finds a bit rough]. Then there is this place that is my slice of heaven on earth, a place that I always go back to. I wanted you to interview me here because this is where I feel most calm and relaxed. I am what I am; that is, not very different from other people. I love to do sports. I go to the gym and restaurants. I love food!

***What kind of food?***

I love Mediterranean cuisine or at least a very light and simple cuisine ... I hate Nouvelle or Fusion cuisine, whatever that may be ... I believe in remaining faithful to dishes and to its ingredients, which is consistent, if you like, with my skills as an architect.

***Like you once said: 'A table is a table, or if you prefer, a plate with four legs.'***

That's it!