

Vincent Van Duysen

The acclaimed Belgian architect and designer discusses essentialism, his design process and the importance of context.



“Essentialism means undoing the clutter and getting to the core, paring back to the bone and achieving authenticity, simplicity and purity.”

Vincent Van Duysen has championed a distinctly minimalist aesthetic and is one of the foremost advocates of the modern Belgian style. After getting his start assisting Cinzia Ruggeri and Aldo Cibic at Milan’s renowned Ettore Sottsass studio, he founded his own studio in 1990 in Antwerp. Today he employs around 15 collaborators who work on a variety of assignments ranging from commercial spaces to residential units. We speak with him about how he incorporates essentialism into his creative process.

How does the concept of essentialism play a role in your work? How is this reflected aesthetically in your designs? — Essentialism within my work is typically of a monolithic nature, or archetypal in a sense that it has a classic proportion or familiarity. It can

be at once refined, solid and brutal, such as the staircase I designed for the Graanmarkt 13 project, or simple and classical, such as the pottery I created for When Objects Work. If it’s airy, then it’s usually in connection with nature, like the pool pavilion at the VDC Residence.

What does essentialism mean to you? — It means undoing the clutter and getting to the core, paring back to the bone and achieving authenticity, simplicity and purity.

What characterizes Belgian design, and how has your Belgian background influenced your style? — Belgium has had a rich history of arts and crafts from medieval times to the present. Although there’s a strong sense of pride in industries such

as linen and stone craft, what I find difficult about defining a Belgian “style” is that it becomes easily commercialized and reduced to an “export product.” Belgium is cosmopolitan in both arts and culture and has a huge breadth of creativity— theater, dance, fashion, art, performance—with participation from many people. I’d say that the Belgian influence in my work is more about this collective individuality than a shared aesthetic or palette.

Tell us about your design process. — It is constant. I’m always designing in my mind, never from a “blank canvas.” I enjoy being as observant as possible and have a strongly visual approach. I regularly sit with my team and discuss ideas and directions to achieve a shared vision.

What elements are crucial to your workflow and creativity? — Every project is different and it’s always so important to connect it to its culture. We must also consider the context, location, relationships, program and brief, and this diversity always results in work that’s distinctive and tailor-made.

How do you like to begin and end your days? — In the morning I catch up on yesterday’s news that I may have been too busy to see and then enjoy a simple breakfast. In the evening I like to briefly read or look through magazines.

When faced with distractions, how do you manage to clear your head? — For me, design is a continuous process. My mind is always working, imagining and connecting.

Exercise, cooking, conversing, walking the dogs—these quotidian aspects of life help to decompress and order the mind.

What elements of life are most important to you? — Eating, sleeping and conversing.

What are some of your essential work tools? — My inspiration comes from travel, conversations, exhibitions, people and everyday life, but my absolute work essentials are my senses.

What’s currently on your reading list? — I have a broad range of interests and read widely on art, photography and architecture. Currently I’m enjoying Nicholas Alan Cope’s *Whitewash* and Reyner Banham’s *Brutalism in der Architektur*.

What are your essential foods and drinks? — My diet is honest but diverse, and I enjoy foods from different cultures. Some items I like to have on hand are berries, rice milk, small amounts of dairy and cheese, fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, water and wine. And always a carrot-ginger juice.

Why do you do what you do? — There are so many elements to consider, but my interactions and relationships with clients are of utmost importance. I always take a narrative into account when designing. I enjoy being a storyteller because it’s not always about pragmatics—it’s about soul. Aside from the utilitarian, and with respect to tradition and familiarity, the experience has to have something unexpected and create an emotional connection. **JH**



Above: The staircase of Vincent's home in Antwerp, Belgium. Right: Vincent's spacious dining room, which is anchored by two Atelier Tables from the St-Paul Home Collection designed by Vincent himself. Artwork by Tadashi Kawamata hangs on the wall.



PHOTOGRAPHS, LEFT: JAN VERLINDE, RIGHT: MARTYN THOMPSON