

THE EDUCATION ISSUE

MONUMENT

113

WHERE CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS BEGIN

sitting pretty

A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR
OUR LATEST DESIGN
GRADUATES



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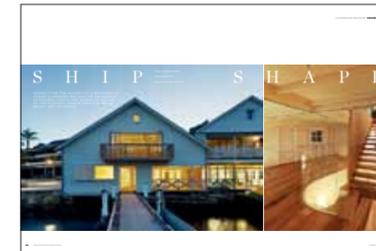
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Neutelings Riedijk's striking terracotta Museum Aan de Stroom

IN THE Flemish FASHION

WRITER *Robert Bevan*
PORTRAIT & STUDIO
PHOTOGRAPHER *Ronald Stoops*

HAVING LONG BEEN A FIXTURE IN THE WORLD OF CLOTHING AND COUTURE, ANTWERP HAS IN RECENT YEARS MADE ITS MARK ON THE MAP OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

Dries van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk Bikkembergs – think Antwerp and you think fashion. Or so has been the case for the past few decades at least. The Antwerp Six, who graduated from the city's Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the 1980s, rebranded the city as an incubator of radical chic – a serious rival to the Tokyo fashion scene. Previously it was more likely that images of van Dyck, diamond trading and dining on horse meat sprang to mind.

Many local architecture studios got their breaks creating shops for their fashion friends and they have been joined more recently by a roster of international architecture stars; Zaha Hadid's new port authority building, for instance, will hover like a giant concrete stiletto above the banks of the Scheldt river when complete. Increasingly, Antwerp is defining itself through architecture as well as by assiduously courting the 'cool city' moniker with its fashion museum and design centre.

For some 150 years from the beginning of the 16th century Antwerp was the main port of the Low Countries, a centre of the Northern Renaissance before it shuffled away from the limelight of mainstream cultural, if not economic history. And despite the best efforts of Hitler's V-2 rockets – nowhere was targeted by them more – a legacy of glorious art and architecture remains. Arrive at Antwerp's flamboyant central station and you are immediately witness to its riches. The tallest building in Antwerp remains the pierced stone spire of the Cathedral of Our Lady, despite the city also claiming Europe's first skyscraper, the 26-storey Boerentoren (1932).

The city's port itself, however, is now a long way down river and the old docks area has become the focus of the city's regeneration efforts after decades

of post-war decline. Now there are buildings by luminaries including David Chipperfield and Diener & Diener and the recently completed Museum Aan de Stroom by Neutelings Riedijk, a startling terracotta colour and curved glass tower that exhibits the history of the city. This regeneration is being guided by Kristiaan Borret, appointed as Stadsbouwmeester by Antwerp's design-conscious aldermen. Not a city architect as such, more a critical friend and design champion: "There is a stable political coalition that creates a baseline for good architecture," says Borret. It is inspired by the Dutch model rather than the French: "But the scale is completely different, more piecemeal." It produces more variety with smaller developers and smaller projects. "It means a finer grain, a richer urban renewal. In comparison to, say, London's docklands, we have more quality and the historic layers are preserved. The city we produce is more complex."

Belgium might be increasingly divided between Flanders and the francophone south but, with a population of half a million, Antwerp is by far the country's largest city, competing with the colossal port of nearby Rotterdam and acting in concert with other nearby cities such as Ghent. International names such as Studio Job, Vincent van Duysen and Gert Voorjans still make their home here, anchored by its creative community, great transport connections and the lack of global city stresses.

The coming challenge, says Borret, will be dealing with a 10 per cent growth in population over the next decade: "We need to think about the renewal of the 20th century belt of the city to make it more dense and accessible by transport." The city has a structure plan by Italian practice Secchi-Vigano, but, he adds: "We have to apply the same ambition as in the 19th century city. It is not as sexy but it is necessary."



Q Antwerp is most well-known overseas for its fashion culture. How has this affected the city and the place for other kinds of designers within the city?

A Antwerp is a cultural city. Design is a fairly new discipline for the city but there are great interior designers and decorators situated in Antwerp who all play on the highest international level, such as Gert Voorjans, Vincent van Duysen and Axel Vervoordt.

Q Is there a distinctive Antwerp approach to design that is different from French-speaking Belgium or the neighbouring Netherlands?

A In the post-war period there were more international overlaps. In that period, in the Netherlands, you see Cees Braakman and Wim Rietveld inspired by the US, designers like Eames and Nelson. Nowadays, I would say Belgium is more inspired by the French than by the Dutch. In fact, it is the same in politics. Design is also influenced by interior architecture – it's about how to feel good in your living, shopping or working space.

Q Has your work been influenced by the local context?

A Very much so, but the historical context – the Flemish Primitives and [Belgian] Surrealism. I'm always surprised contemporary design in Belgium hardly seems to be influenced by the city's

unbelievable artistic inventions. Many designers separate art from design and are drawn toward architecture. Architecture in Belgium is mostly influenced by modernism. The Primitives and Surrealism are too dramatic for these true Modernists.

Q Is Antwerp a good place to operate from and work in?

A Historically Antwerp used to be an important harbour city with its own golden age and that is what Antwerp is still to us: a do-city, an export city.

We know the craftsmen, the artists, the workshops and the ateliers. Antwerp is big enough to have a decent private life – when not travelling – but compact enough to be surrounded by the things you need to realise ideas.

Q So do you often work on projects within Antwerp?

A Never, Flemish people don't like the Dutch unfortunately.

Q Which other Antwerp designers do you admire?

A That must be the fashion side. We admire their skill in building up these amazing international brands – we know how difficult that is. Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten, Martin Margiela – but also painters like Luc Tuymans. Overall, Belgians are smart entrepreneurs.

Artful design

Dutch duo Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel met at the Design Academy Eindhoven with both moving to Antwerp after graduation and setting up Studio Job in 2000. Their work prioritises the decorative and ironic over the modernist or industrial



A GERRIT RIETVELD CHAIR ON DISPLAY AT THE STUDIO JOB SHOWROOM



A BLEND OF CLASSIC AND BOLD DESIGNS

Ukrainian designer Lena Lumelsky graduated from the Antwerp Academy in 2006, where she worked within various ateliers before setting up her womenswear label in 2009. Her futuristic style, which still uses crafts, won the Mango Fashion Award in 2010

Made with love

Q Is there a distinctive Antwerp approach to design that is different from French-speaking Belgium or the neighbouring Netherlands?

A Yes, I think it starts at Antwerp academy [Royal Academy of Fine Arts] where students are guided from the first year to develop their own unique style and vision. This is the main characteristic of Antwerp fashion to me: each designer has an original style. In Holland I see a more surrealist, futuristic or architectural approach, while in Brussels [fashion] designers are influenced by French heritage. In Antwerp every designer is a personality. It gives another spirit to the clothes and a certain attitude to somebody wearing them.

Q Why did you decide to come to Antwerp and how has your work been influenced by the local context?

A I was influenced by the revolution that happened in fashion thanks to the Belgians and Japanese and I was inspired by what is idealised as the freedom that Antwerp designers have. Antwerp's fashion scene nowadays is very international, so there is this mix of cultures that creates an atmosphere you want to be in. I am trying to follow traditions of craft, which I believe are fading away little by little. I believe in slow fashion, in clothes made with love and understanding. While computer technologies can bring my work to a modern level I



WORKBENCH OVERLOOKING ANTWERP

cannot feel using a computer, I need to work on a doll – to touch, to feel.

Q Where do you fit into the Antwerp picture? Is it a good place to operate from and work in?

A It is small and cosy, it's sometimes very grey. But I am so happy to live in this city – I feel at home. When it's raining I am happy to stay indoors and work in the studio, and when the sun is shining, I'm happy to drink coffee outside with friends.

Q Which other Antwerp designers past or present do you admire or feel the influence of?

A Martin Margiela – I think my first strong feeling about seeing a piece of clothing was his. I was captured by conceptual fashion, by deconstruction, by breaking the rules, as were many students of my generation. Raf Simons is an example of an intellectual approach and of a personality you want to be like. I fell in love with tailoring and design for men because of his collections. A.F. Vandevorst – there is always something mysterious and seductive in their style; I love leather and love their sophisticated/provocative design. Haider Ackermann makes bohemian clothes without falling into bad taste or too bourgeois a look. I think he is exploring a new type of sex-appeal without vulgarity.



LENA LUMELSKY'S WORKSPACE FEATURES A FELINE AND PLENTY OF FASHION

26° 6' 0" S 28° 9' 0" E

Taking many forms

Stefan Schöning was born and raised in Antwerp and set up his industrial design office in 1994. His output ranges from his origami chair, Folder, to corporate design for the Belgian railways and improving the design of traffic lights



OFFICE AND WORKSPACE OF STEFAN SCHÖNING

Q Antwerp is most well-known overseas for its fashion culture. How has this affected the city?

A The fashion scene in Antwerp has definitely helped put our city on the map but this [creative] scene has always been present, with ample examples such as, historically, the painters Rubens, van Dyck and Permeke, and novelists Conscience and van Ostaïjen. And today, artists – such as Luc Tuymans – to authors [like] Tom Lanoye, theatre, opera and music from artists like dEUS and Netsky. Less known is that the design school also has an output of successful graduates in car and furniture design.

Q Is there a distinctive Antwerp approach to design that is different from French-speaking Belgium or the neighbouring Netherlands?

A Difficult to say, but the Flemish approach is often sober, with a lot of serenity and with an elegant simplicity.

Q How has your work been influenced by the local context?

A Since Antwerp is, and always has been, a port and trade town, there's a strong international influence. The fact that the first presentation of the Antwerp Six fashion designers was such a success encouraged me to show my work at 100% Design in London, Salone del Mobile in Milan and imm in Cologne. In a way, what happened in the city has pushed my boundaries.

Q Is Antwerp a good place to operate from and work in?

A Its human scale makes it a very liveable city with the advantages of a compact town, yet with all 'big city' amenities. Another plus is the proximity of major European cities such as Amsterdam, London and Paris. Our studio is in the heart of town, which helps me a lot to connect to people in the street.

Q How is the identity of the city changing? Is what is happening in the docks a good thing or is it becoming like any other European port?

A You can see what a building such as the Museum Aan de Stroom brings to a rather neglected neighbourhood; new bars and restaurants that jostle for clients, supermarkets and businesses settle and property prices rise. Yet on the other hand, I sincerely hope that the original character of 't Eilandje [the docks island] will not disappear completely, because the mix of all the different nationalities holds a lot of charm.

Q Do you often get to work on projects within Antwerp?

A We realised the 'modenatiesofa' for the MoMu, the fashion museum in Antwerp, but I would love to design something for the city that stimulates people to get together.

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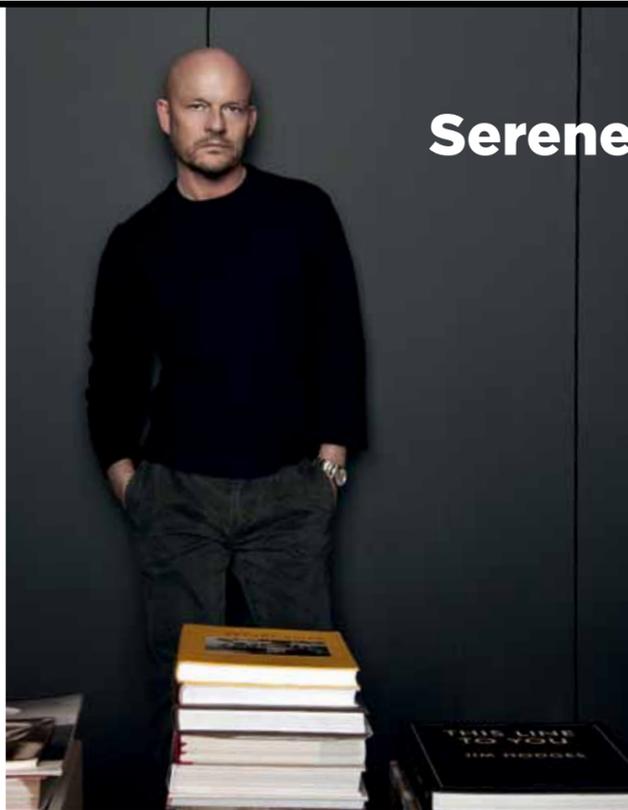
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Serene and simple

Architect Vincent van Duysen's respect for local craftsmanship is evident in his designs

BORN IN NEARBY LOKEREN, Vincent van Duysen's career has seen him make waves internationally, as well as making an impact on the landscape of Antwerp. Touting his own brand of minimalism that is at odds with the 'bland' and 'impersonal' style of the Flanders region, van Duysen values the choice of local materials and the craftsmen who know how to work with them.

Antwerp's new Central Youth Hostel, with its honed bluestone facade and projected artworks, must be the most elegant hostel going. For a humble building type the quality is astonishing. "The ambition that the city has to promote creativity makes me proud to live in Antwerp," says its architect, Vincent van Duysen.

He graduated from Ghent's prestigious Saint-Lucas architecture academy before spending time in Italy working with Aldo Cibic and Ettore Sottsass, fighting off both the post-modernism excesses of the time and Belgium's suburban mentality where everybody "has a brick in their stomach" – the desire to build their own little house.

Van Duysen set up his own practice on his return to Antwerp in

1990 and is in demand at the high-end internationally.

Often marked down as a minimalist, Van Duysen says the characteristically minimal contemporary Flanders style actually doesn't appeal to him. "I'm not really fond of it. The linens and woods, neutral tones – bland, monochromatic, impersonal." Instead, he confesses to a severe bent that has its roots in Calvinism. "I'm attached to serenity, to simplicity, to vernacular spaces that people have made themselves with local materials and primary forms." A dairy or cloister would be ideal commissions. "We have amazing small workshops in Antwerp," he says. "Carpenters, stonemasons who can carve a basin or a bath from a block of stone. This is very rare in New York or London or even Italy." He now exports his craftsmen along with designs – whether working on an office building in Riyadh, private houses or the largest men's shoe department on the planet at Selfridges, London – but he doesn't need to be based in a global city: "I can access the world from Brussels. I'm a very loyal person; my family are in Amsterdam and I have found an amazing space which is my sanctuary."



HOME AND LIVING ROOM OF VINCENT VAN DUYSEN

DESIGNER INSIDER

Antwerp carries the 'cool city' moniker. Spend your time in the city in the finest fashion



SHOP

RA Designer soup? Opening in 2009, the rather fabulous Ra concept store promotes local fashion – Lena Lumelsky included – books, avant-garde bits and bobs, as well as a cafe. Ra Paris has since followed. **Kloosterstraat 13, ra13.be**



HOTEL JULIEN

STAY

HOTEL JULIEN Hotel Julien is a contemporary remodelling of two historic buildings with a roof terrace offering panoramic views of the old town's roovescape. Fine-art photography lines the walls. **Korte Nieuwstraat 24, hotel-julien.com**

ARCHITOUR

See map p93



Hendrik Conscienceplein This is a charming, cobbled Italianate square and contains baroque Carolus Borromeus church with a facade reputedly by Peter Paul Rubens.



Law Courts Building The 2006 building by Richard Rogers was inspired by oast houses (hop kilns) and the barges on the nearby Scheldt. It was built on the site of the old Zuid freight station, closing off a 1.5km boulevard through the city.



The Antwerp Cathedral The cathedral, finished in 1518, is the tallest in the Low Countries. It sits between the Groenplaats and the Grote Markt both lined with magnificent 16th century guildhalls and houses.



Cogels Osylei Cogels Osylei is the spine of the art nouveau Zurenborg housing district and is home to some of the city's most freakily self-indulgent architecture. Lots of fun.



MODE MUSEUM



FISKEBAR

Eat

FISKEBAR Belgian seafood is not to be missed and this great fish restaurant in the lively Zuid area is stylish and friendly with a white-tiled utility interior. **Marnixplaats 11, fiskebar.be**

