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flemish master

With a winning mix of sedate design and strong splashes of colour, architect Vincent van Duysen has created some serious Brussels clout



Where do you create your perfect home if you are a Dutch Francophile and fanatical lover of the arts without moving to France? Why, Brussels, of course. That haven of overblown government blocks, fat-cat MEPs and endless bureaucratic wrangling may not speak tranquillity and romance to some, but for a retired Dutch barrister and his wife, the city was the obvious choice in which to create their ultimate abode.

Fast connections to London, Amsterdam, Paris and Antwerp (where they previously lived and have children) and the mix of Flemish and French that permeates every aspect of the city, from its language to its architecture and food, made Brussels irresistible. And so it was that four years ago they bought a plot of land in the chic Uccle district in the south of the city and set to work creating their dream house.

First, Belgian architect Marc Corbiau built a complex of 20 apartments in four blocks. The barrister bagged one, along with a penthouse overlooking the 19th-century Flemish houses and swish diplomats' homes that define the quartier. Then, through a friend, the couple heard about Belgian architect Vincent van Duysen. Admiring his serene, austere aesthetic, they asked him to design the interior from an empty shell.



Van Duysen, witnessing the barrister's 40-year-old collection of furniture from the likes of Eames, Bertoia and Eileen Gray, judged his client-to-be as a man of good taste and agreed to do the job. 'There was a refinement about the couple that I had to translate into their living space, and knowing they wanted to keep their furniture, I had to accommodate that, too. I'd never created a space with this kind of furniture in it before. It's much warmer and with less "design" than I would normally go for.' Yet the barrister's bright yellow Eames

ucle up: clockwise from left, the combined flat and penthouse make a stunning space. Despite a pared-down decorative scheme, there are splashes of bright colour in each room; in the living room, it's provided by Massimo Vitali's vibrant beach diptych. The open-plan layout creates a wide, sunny duplex

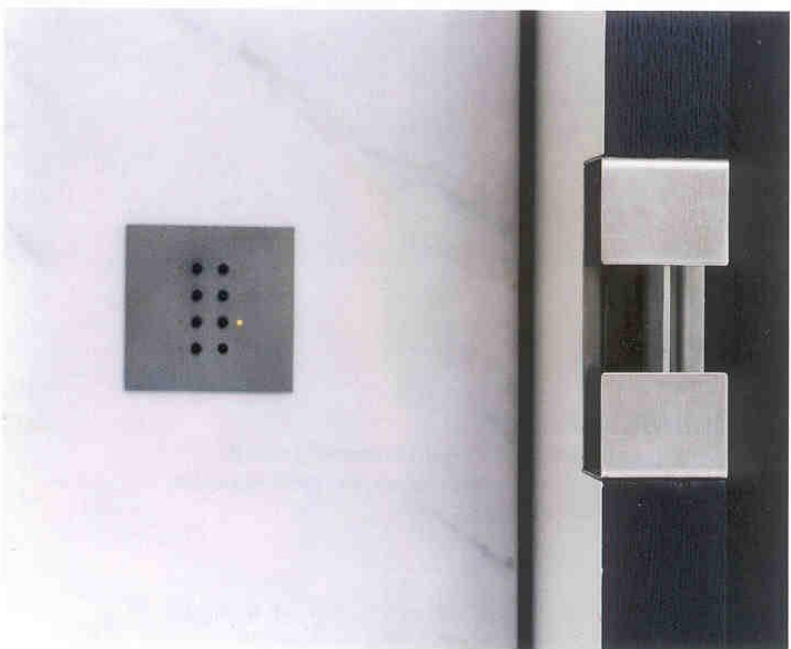
IN RESIDENCE

colour technics: *clockwise from right*, van Duysen was so inspired by the yellow Eames chair that he used it for a B&B Italia collection. Sliding walls in oak create a 1980s effect. The simplicity of some features belie the overall warm feeling of the space

chair inspired van Duysen to use a similar colour on a collection of furniture designed for B&B Italia last year.

Aiming to evoke 'a sophisticated 1980s look', a chequerboard of Carrara marble and dark oak forms the palette throughout the space. Sliding walls, some in glass, some in oak, carve up the penthouse in a variety of configurations, but essentially it is a one-bedroom place, with guest quarters and his 'n' hers offices beneath, connected by a spiral, marble staircase. Van Duysen designed everything from the foldaway mirrors and bedside lamps right down to the gallons of storage space. Every detail was considered and discussed at length; even the plant pot holders on the wrap-around terrace were custom-made to slot into the 40 sq cm tiles.

The job was not without its conflicts; the architect wanted all sockets to be hidden, the owners found this impractical; van Duysen wanted to get rid of a table and chairs with green upholstery and replace them with a marble slab rising out of the ground; the barrister forbade it, saying the table represented 'his life'. No surprise that the project took more than a year to complete.



IN RESIDENCE

natural desire: *clockwise from below, every detail has been carefully planned, like the hidden bathroom mirrors. The kitchen is the epitome of a clutter-free zone. The house lies shaded by trees and surrounded by bushes and greenery*



Both agreed, however, that possessions needed to be edited. The barrister threw out all the law books gathered over the years from his practice in The Hague, while his wife left lots of stuff in Antwerp. The oldest things in the apartment are some musical score sheets on top of a new piano and a collection of Chinese pottery from the 1880s. A clock by Jenny Holzer sits in his office 'waiting room', while Massimo Vitali's vibrant diptych of the beach at Riccione, purchased at the last Venice Biennale, lights up the living room. It took three trips to Paris before the couple finally bought their 1923 Jean-Michel Frank sofa, and van Duysen designed a wooden screen around it to echo one of Frank's own designs.

A superficial glance might lead you to assume the space belonged to a time-starved, gadget-loving bachelor. All the accoutrements are there – the lift that comes right into the hall, touch-panel lighting, air-conditioning, under-floor heating and music in every room, electric blinds and an oven in which you could cook a whole pig without having to chop it up. Yet the details, the dashes of colour (van Duysen insisted on colour in each room) and the furniture suggest a space which is much more ambiguous. It is not prescriptive. It could belong to someone old or young, male or female. For their part, the couple finally have the home they always dreamed of. No wonder the neighbours came knocking and immediately asked van Duysen to do their apartment, too. ★

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