



*Above left and below right: Van Duysen's "main house" in Antwerp. Above right and below left: The Molteni&C showroom in Melbourne.*



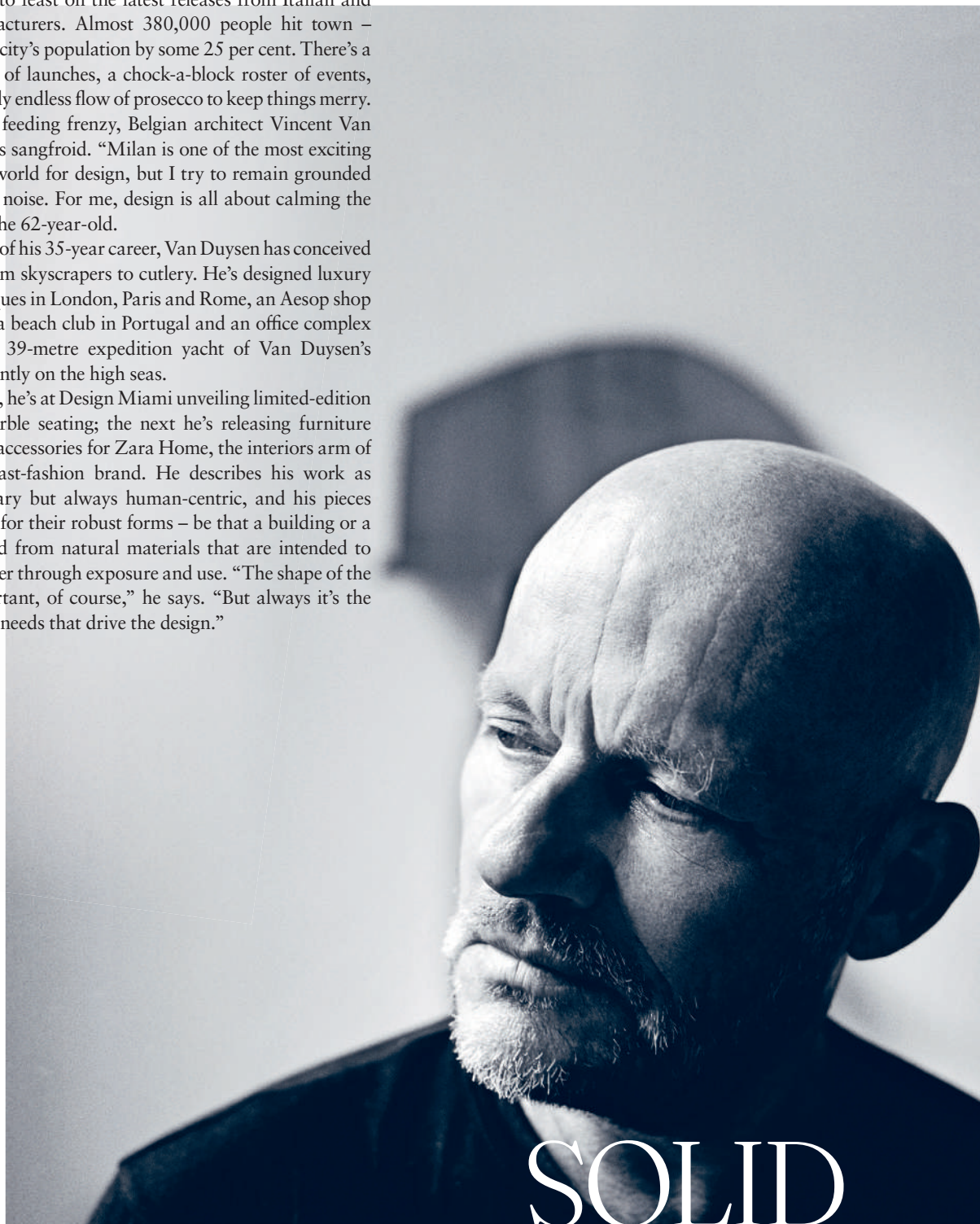


**T**HE MILAN FURNITURE FAIR IS AN OBJECT LESSON in controlled pandemonium. In April each year, the international design flock descends on the Lombardian capital, eager to feast on the latest releases from Italian and global manufacturers. Almost 380,000 people hit town – increasing the city’s population by some 25 per cent. There’s a tight schedule of launches, a chock-a-block roster of events, and a seemingly endless flow of prosecco to keep things merry.

Amidst the feeding frenzy, Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen exudes sangfroid. “Milan is one of the most exciting places in the world for design, but I try to remain grounded amidst all the noise. For me, design is all about calming the senses,” says the 62-year-old.

In the space of his 35-year career, Van Duysen has conceived everything from skyscrapers to cutlery. He’s designed luxury fashion boutiques in London, Paris and Rome, an Aesop shop in Hamburg, a beach club in Portugal and an office complex in Riyadh. A 39-metre expedition yacht of Van Duysen’s design is currently on the high seas.

One minute, he’s at Design Miami unveiling limited-edition sculptural marble seating; the next he’s releasing furniture and domestic accessories for Zara Home, the interiors arm of the Spanish fast-fashion brand. He describes his work as multidisciplinary but always human-centric, and his pieces are renowned for their robust forms – be that a building or a bowl – created from natural materials that are intended to artfully weather through exposure and use. “The shape of the work is important, of course,” he says. “But always it’s the user and their needs that drive the design.”



# SOLID INFLUENCE

Vincent Van Duysen, the visionary creative director of Italian design powerhouse Molteni&C, opens the door to his personal spaces.

STORY BY **STEPHEN TODD**



Clockwise from below: The living room in Van Duysen's Antwerp home; the Van Duysen-designed Melides house in Portugal; stairwell of the Graanmarkt concept store, Antwerp.



"HIS NORTHERN EUROPEAN MINIMALIST INSTINCTS ARE A PERFECT ANTIDOTE TO THE INTENSITY OF AN ITALIAN FAMILY BUSINESS."

Giulia Molteni

Brand Italia was consolidated, indeed consecrated, with the landmark *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1972 which introduced designers like Mario Bellini, Gae Aulenti and Joe Colombo to the world, and inevitably drew attention to brands with now global cachet such as Cassina, Cappellini, B&B Italia and Molteni.

Today, Molteni&C has 100 flagship stores worldwide, including in the Melbourne design district of Richmond which became fully operational late last year. Like all Molteni stores, it adheres to aesthetic codes established by Van Duysen, to showcase what Giulia Molteni refers to as "a legacy of understated style and sophistication". Devised as a series of majestically scaled spaces arrayed around a central courtyard, the Melbourne branch is intended to entice through a series of "rooms" into which customers can project their own existence.

We're huddled on a banquette in a relatively quiet corner of the 2000-square-metre Molteni&C stand at the far end of the kilometre-long purpose-built, multi-storey Rho fairgrounds complex, 13 kilometres north of central Milan. Over the course of the week-long fiesta, Molteni will clock up more than 30,000 visitors to its booth, all coming to see the 90-year-old company's latest offering, designed under the creative direction of Van Duysen since 2016.

"As a student in the 1980s, I understood how significant Molteni is to Italian design history. It was No.1 in terms of modernity," he says. "Everything was so exquisitely crafted and was being designed by some of the greatest architects of the time, like Luca Meda, Aldo Rossi and Jean Nouvel." Architects, he points out, are able to "think beyond the object" and "conceive of entire environments according to user needs, not just aesthetics". Does he feel pressure, following in such big footsteps? "No, but I do feel a great responsibility."

For Giulia Molteni, Van Duysen incarnates the kind of timeless elegance the brand identifies with. "His northern European minimalist instincts are a perfect antidote to the intensity of an Italian family business," she says. Giulia is the granddaughter of Angelo Molteni, who established his own-named brand in 1934 with a small factory in the province of Brianza at the foot of the Alps, today the epicentre of the Italian furniture industry.

Spurred on by the economic boom of post-World War II recovery, Molteni tooled up in the 1950s, equipping the artisanal atelier to become an industrial powerhouse. In 1962, Angelo Molteni co-founded with 12 other companies what would become the Salone del Mobile, aka the Milan Furniture Fair. About 12,000 people attended that first edition which managed to pull together work by a few hundred studios, most of which were selling well in Italy, but only beginning to bubble up into the international market.





GIULIA MOLteni AND HER BROTHER, GIOVANNI, AND sister Anna grew up in a sprawling and airy modernist villa in Brianza, commissioned by her father Carlo of Italian architect Carlo Scarpa, in the mid-1980s. “It was such a beautiful place to spend our childhood, not very common,” she recalls, noting that the house is still the family seat and that the company – spread over four production sites for a total of 200,000 square-metres – remains nearby.

While it was assumed Giulia and her siblings would enter the family business, she initially balked. “Growing up with such a prominent family name, I wanted to be more than just the daughter or granddaughter of a Molteni. It was important for me to forge my own identity.” So, she moved to New York in 2003, aged 23, and secured a communications job for renowned Italian textile and fashion company Loro Piana. “I was not really being in love with fashion, but I had fallen in love with New York”. Her family and its business tugged at her heart strings, and in 2007, she returned to Brianza to join what in Italian is known as Gruppo Molteni.

She began as a retail manager at Molteni&C/Dada, the company’s kitchenware arm. By 2014, she was the division’s head of marketing and in 2022, she was appointed chief marketing officer of the entire Molteni Group. It was while in the trenches in the mid-2010s that she first encountered Van Duysen.



The attic in Van Duysen's 19th-century Antwerp residence.

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“WE’VE OPTED FOR REFINED MATERIALS THAT HARKEN BACK TO THE 1930S. THIS COLLECTION IS SLIGHTLY MORE DECORATIVE THAN PREVIOUS YEARS.”

Vincent Van Duysen

no legs on show – which adds to the lounge-y, slightly louche allure of the collection. Upholstered in cut-silk velvet in deep jewel hues, it’s easy to imagine oneself living la dolce vita. “We’ve opted for refined materials that harken back to the 1930s,” says Van Duysen. “This collection is slightly more decorative than those of previous years, adding an extra layer of sophistication.” Ceramic, plinth-like coffee tables and padded pouf cushions mounted on brushed metal legs make for perky punctuation points around a room.

Looking around the stand, teeming with admirers, the pieces feel notably smaller than the typical Molteni offer which tends to the monolithic (all the better, one suspects, to optimise the impression made by such impeccable finishing). “The sofas are definitely more fluent, more feminine, in a way,” as Giulia puts it. “The proportions of the Lucio seating are very harmonious, molto gentle, and the crafting in very soft leather is intended to enhance that aspect. As for the Augusto, it is totally modular, people can choose their own configurations. But despite the slightly modest dimensions, it is intended to be the protagonist of its setting.”

For Van Duysen, while the reference to Portaluppi implies “a certain grandeur” which infuses the spirit of the new Molteni collection, “there is something cocooning about it, which feels right for today... Not everyone has the kind of grand salon spaces and living areas of a 1930s Milanese home, it’s true. The challenge was to convey that particular aesthetic, that heritage, but make it relevant for now.”

VAN DUYSEN WAS BORN IN LOKEREN, MIDWAY between Antwerp and Ghent, in 1962. After graduating from the Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, he was recruited to the Milan studio of Aldo Cibic who had co-founded with Ettore Sottsass the iconoclastic post-modern Memphis design group in 1980. Van Duysen, however, was not swayed by the flamboyantly superficial, pop-culture focus of Memphis. “Even as a kid, I went against anything that was categorised as a trend,” he recalls. “I still don’t believe in trends in that way.”

He does, however, acknowledge lessons gained from his Memphis moment, notably in its formal language and

“We’d engaged Vincent to work on a very important job we had in the Middle East, and he’d really excelled at the design and the delivery. Also, he was very good at understanding that we are a big company, run by a big family. It’s not just my dad, it’s my brother, cousins,” she sighs, noting that her sister has abstained from joining the industrial endeavours of the brood. It was Giulia who championed the appointment of Van Duysen as creative director of Molteni&C, a role he took on eight years ago.

For this year’s Molteni furniture collection, Van Duysen tapped the grand Milanese *estetica borghese* – bourgeois aesthetic – as incarnated by Piero Portaluppi. (The Italian architect, who died in 1967, has become the poster boy for interior designers looking to channel the chic-austere 1930s style of his Villa Necchi Campiglio, the setting for Tilda Swinton’s star turn in *I Am Love*, and Lady Gaga’s in the *House of Gucci* biopic.)

There’s the Augusto sofa system, composed of gently curved, armless seats that can arc around a room, eventually coalescing into a single ring, a kind of freestanding conversation pit. And the Lucio sofas and chaise longues, the backs of which segue seamlessly to become the arms, creating a slit-like effect in space (the name is an homage to modern painter Lucio Fontana, who would famously rip his canvases).

Seating this year is designed to sit directly on the floor –

Above: The main bar of the August hotel, Antwerp. Right: New York penthouse.





celebration of “archetypal” shapes. “There was, despite all the riot of colours, a sensual aspect to the designs. In a weird way, it formed my way of thinking and turned my focus to beautiful, naturally sensual materials.”

Since establishing Vincent Van Duysen Architects in 1989, the *Elle Decoration* Designer of the Year of 2022 has delivered private residences of an avowedly restrained elegance across his native Belgium (in Kortrijk, Zonhoven, Zwevegem as well as Antwerp), Europe, North America and the United Arab Emirates. But nowhere is Van Duysen’s manifesto more eloquently articulated than in his own two homes: one in Antwerp, the other in Melides, on the Atlantic coast of Portugal.

The first, what he calls “the main house” in the old centre of Belgium’s second city after Brussels, dates to 1870. When Van Duysen happened across it, the former notary’s office was a ruin (it even had its own hermit ensconced in the vestiges of an attic). The architect saw the potential under a palimpsest of old wallpaper and linoleum and plasterboard, gently paring it back to bare bones in order to build it up into a structure that incarnates the past while at the same time looking to the future.

He sought “to recover its original simplicity”, make it “fluid, natural, well structured and well proportioned” – words that might well serve as a de facto Van Duysen motto. He replaced the floors with massive planks of raw poplar; the walls were treated with bone-coloured plaster; the open hearth is engaged in dialogue with classic Belgian bluestone flooring. Furniture is mostly constructed from robust French oak. “I’m not afraid of cracks, of wood that moves,” he says, noting how surfaces are designed to appeal to the touch, to patina from use over time.

The Melides residence, an entirely new build, draws inspiration from iconic concrete homes by modernist masters including Jorn Utzon’s family retreat on the Spanish island of Mallorca, Luis Barragán’s residence in Mexico City and Casa Malaparte on the island of Capri, designed by architect Adalberto Libera around the same time as Portaluppi began work on the Villa Necchi.

Despite its very evident heft, the in-situ poured concrete structure is intended to meld seamlessly with the dunes in which it sits. Tinted a bleached-ossuary hue, the concrete, he points out, has been sandblasted with high-pressure water jets “to bring out the little pebbles”. Such attention to detail could be deemed obsessive, if the effect didn’t come across as so effortless. At both residences, his approach is closely akin to that of Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, who coined the term “eyes of the skin” to refer to an “anti-ocular-centric” approach to the built environment that celebrates all the senses, particularly touch. The architect confesses he loves to go barefoot at home.



Above: Giulia Molteni and Vincent Van Duysen.  
Right: The Molteni&C store in Richmond.

“I love being in Vincent’s spaces,” says renowned architecture and interiors photographer François Halard. “There’s something very human about them, which is quite different from the preconceived ideas about architectural minimalism: life, emotion, a special relationship to light.” Halard and Van Duysen have collaborated on a book, *Private*, showcasing the architect’s two residences, which was released in July. The photographer sought to incarnate the different essence of the two houses in imagery: what he sums up as “the muted white-grey mood of Antwerp” compared to “the exotic, marine atmosphere of Melides”.

“I photographed these two houses in two distinct ways. I had to make people understand that Vincent’s work fits with all kinds of light in life.” The rigid, gridded architecture of the beach house, the way stark southern light slices across its exterior and bleeds into rooms, seems almost melodramatic.

Whereas the watery northern light of Antwerp insinuating itself into the sensuously reconfigured 19th-century house’s complex nexus of rooms borders on the melancholic.

The two homes effectively bookend an aesthetic that coalesces in his work for Molteni, which, while rooted in the very history of 20th-century Italian design, is being driven forward into the 21st by a Belgian. Van Duysen admits that at times his trans-Alpine existence is “challenging”. “But I can say I’m half Italian in a way. My first job after graduating was here, and I’ve done many, many projects here over the years. So, I’ve never lost touch with Italy.”

Was there any resistance to this Belgian guy, coming in to take over the helm of such a venerably Italian brand? “No, no, no, no,” he insists. “I’m friends with all Italian designers ... and we are all very respectful of each other.” If anything, he laughs, “I was more surprised than them.” ●