

DESIGN

VOICES

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Milan Design Week and Salone del Mobile. Milano is as much about the people as what's presented. We spoke to six leading voices about their latest work and shaping the future of design.

Hannes Peer	pg 181
India Mahdavi	pg 186
Vincent Van Duysen	pg 192
Arno Declercq	pg 198
6:AM Glassworks	pg 204
David Lopez Quincoces	pg 210

MASTERING THE NARRATIVE

Molteni&C Creative Director and architect Vincent Van Duysen

Interview: Sophie Lewis

“People are the protagonists of my work,” Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen says as we sit within a vast stand of his own design for Italian brand Molteni&C at this year’s Salone del Mobile.Milano. Fundamentally, he adds, “We’re here to make people happy – we’re creating furniture for people. Of course, you can create beautiful forms, but I’m not a person who designs for design’s sake.”

For almost 40 years, the architect has pursued ‘the art of living’, leading him to the role of Molteni&C creative director in 2016. Tasked with celebrating the brand’s 90-year ‘Italian Design Story’ for this year’s Milan Design Week and Salone del Mobile.Milano, Van Duysen drew inspiration from Milan’s famed Villa Necchi Campiglio by 20th-century Milanese architect Piero Portaluppi. “For this special edition, I wanted to enhance the monumentality and grandeur,” Van Duysen says. “Portaluppi wasn’t scared of being grand but modernist in heart

and soul. He had his own decorative way of seeing materials, graphic patterns, textures and colour juxtaposition”.

Portaluppi’s influence could be seen not only in the pieces themselves but also in the different spaces across the Molteni&C stand, which Van Duysen describes as more elevated, richer, and ‘residential’ than ever before. “I went out of my comfort zone. I am usually quite restrained with colour, but these beautiful colours – the green ceiling, the blue velvet ‘Augusto’ sofa and the new red marble ‘VVD’ kitchen are still linked to nature. It’s a very sensorial world I’ve created,” he adds.

Van Duysen designed the brand’s first fully modular wall unit, ‘Logos’, as part of the 2024 collection. This unit echoes Portaluppi’s world in how materials such as wood, marble and fabric have been combined to offer a variety of compositions. Van Duysen says the ‘Logos’ also explores ‘unexpected

geometries’, linking the wall system to the work of 20th-century Milanese architect Gio Ponti.

Just over a decade ago, Molteni&C collaborated with the Gio Ponti Archive to reissue original designs first created for private homes and small projects. As part of the brand’s 90-year anniversary, the iconic ‘D.154.2’ and ‘D.151.4’ armchairs were recognised for shaping its history, capturing Ponti’s design DNA and, at the same time, Molteni&C’s signature materials and technology.

“It’s a huge responsibility, but it also comes with a lot of passion,” Van Duysen says, who regards Gio Ponti as a master in the Italian ‘art of living’. “Ponti was one-of-a-kind because he’s an architect who covered the entire creative spectrum with his interiors, exteriors and product design,” he says. “I like how he did it in a very bespoke and unique way.”



Photography Courtesy of Molteni&C



The Augusto sofa by creative director Vincent Van Duysen evolved into a versatile new modular system in 2024.



Parallels can be drawn between Gio Ponti and Van Duysen's design approach. "It's how my brain functions," he admits. "My mind is trained to work across different facets and typologies that all belong under the world of architecture. It's a way for me to be as complete as I can." He attributes this consistent mindset to his 'creative longevity'. "I always aim for pureness in design, reduction and serenity. I created my own style about 35 years ago, and I'm building on that constantly," he adds.

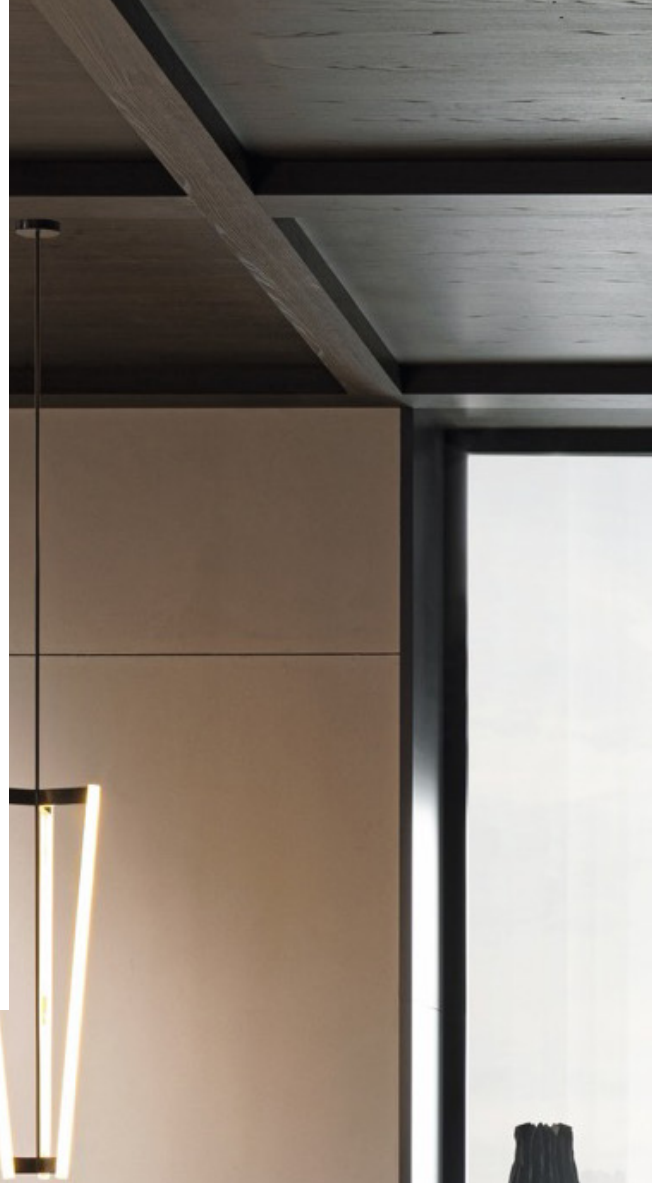
Under Van Duysen's direction, Molteni&C released their first outdoor collection last year. When he first started working with the brand, the architect recalls conversations about translating

their specific, long-standing design language to an outdoor range. "It was both exciting and challenging. Ultimately, the art of living doesn't begin indoors but outdoors, and through the interaction between the two," he maintains.

'Exteriorising the interior' has been a thread through the Belgian architect's work since he taught architecture in Brussels 30 years ago. He believes working with the earth is both existential and imperative — and a way of guaranteeing the well-being of his clients. Casa M, Vincent's home in Melides, Portugal, is his proudest example. Built over three years, the home is designed to be experienced barefoot, completely open and connected to the surroundings, without

art and with minimal furniture. "In summer, it's like an open-air pavilion," he says. "The views and perspectives are so beautiful and endless. It's a sensorial experience at its best, and I am in absolute harmony with nature."

Casa M and Vincent's Antwerp home are the subject of his new book *Vincent Van Duysen: Private*, created in close collaboration with French photographer François Halard. The book frames his two houses in a more personal, artistic light, gleaning insight into his creative practice with never-seen-before angles and details. "It's an invitation into my world — my books and my art," he says and importantly, "my life with my dogs".



The VVD Kitchen with new elements and finishes for the 2024 indoor collection.

