The image shows the interior of a large, vaulted hall, likely a former cloister, during renovation. The ceiling is dark and features a series of arches. The walls are light-colored and have several arched windows, some of which are covered with white plastic sheeting. The floor is partially covered with construction materials and debris. A circular stained glass window is visible on the right wall. The overall atmosphere is one of historical grandeur being transformed into a modern space.

The Making

A former Augustinian cloister becomes a modern-day sanctuary under the guidance of legendary Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen in his first-ever hotel project



of
August

Words Sophie Lovell

Photographs Robert Rieger

“My style is very understated. It is very subtle. It’s timeless. In a way there is a modernity with a hint of conservatism”

Vincent Van Duysen

The Flemish city of Antwerp is, quite simply, beautiful. From the point of view of an architecture fan, it has that rare combination of ingredients: centuries of trade wealth translated into bricks, mortar, heritage, and culture, balanced with a forward-looking attitude that does not shy from experimentation and statement. It is also the home of excellent taste.

Situated on the river Scheldt, with its North Sea access, Antwerp has been one of the world’s largest ports since the 16th century, trading everything from sugar to oil and, most famously, diamonds. In the Late Middle Ages, the city’s merchants, understandably proud of their pecuniary prowess, started building tall, tightly packed townhouses with distinctive stepped-gable fronts, each with its own additional “bling” in the form of carvings, statues, gold leaf, twiddly brickwork, and even turrets. The old medieval city center is full of them, like squeezed Venetian palazzos robbed of their canals, all clustered around a magnificent Gothic cathedral that looks as if it has been woven from the finest lace.

Fanning out from the center, the buildings get a little younger, but the architectural range and variety of styles and the expressions of comfortable wealth do not lessen. If anything, the buildings get more elegant: tall and slim with perfect proportions, front doors and window frames immaculately glossed in discreet muted colors.

And it makes sense that some of the best-dressed buildings in Europe should house some of the best dressers: Since the 1980s and the emergence of the so-called

“Antwerp Six” (fashion design graduates from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts including Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester), the city has grown into a major fashion center.

Add to that mix dynamic music and art scenes, and Antwerp has grown into one of the continent’s resurgent culture capitals. And now, southwest of the city center in the upcoming neighborhood of Berchem, a leading figure in Antwerp’s design scene, Vincent Van Duysen, has transformed a former Augustinian cloister into his (remarkably) first-ever hotel project—August, opening in spring 2019.

“I’ve been approached many times by other people, even big names, to design hotels,” said Van Duysen. “In a way, I was never ready for it. But with August, the building, the location, the fact that it’s my hometown and with a family that I know, means that the chemistry is just right.”

The story of August begins with Mouche Van Hool, owner of what has to be the most stylish boutique hotel in Antwerp, Hotel Julien, set in one of those beautifully-boned residences in the city center. Van Hool worked in public relations and advertising before she and her husband Laurent De Scheemaeker, a shipping and business lawyer, bought the house and converted it into a hotel. It wasn’t long however before it was exceeding capacity, so they were looking for a new location to add to their portfolio, says Van Hool, “when in 2014 a friend called me about this former cloister in the Green Quarter that was being sold as a hotel project.”





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TRICH ELEMENT

A leading figure in the Antwerp design scene, Vincent Van Duysen works in an understated style that clearly stems from the city's historical architectural cadence



“When you restore a building, you have to do it with respect. We have to consider the past as being a beautiful gift”

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Het Groen Kwartier (the Green Quarter) is a pedestrian-only luxury development on the site of a large 19th-century former military hospital complex that used to belong to the Belgian army. Van Hool and De Scheemaecker saw the potential of the site immediately. The area is a vibrant one with numerous new shops and restaurants and small cafés. It is close to the Zurenborg area, with its stunning Art Nouveau and fin de siècle-style mansions. The De Koninck brewery—a family-run business that has been brewing the local beer “bolleke” since 1833—is also nearby, as is the main ring road. One of the first businesses to open there in 2014 was The Jane, a two-star Michelin restaurant in the former hospital chapel at the center of the building ensemble, whose young star chef, Nick Bril, is developing the entire food and beverage concept for August. It has been joined by three new apartment blocks, luxury apartments in the renovated former officers’ houses, an advertising agency, a bakery, and now, this rather special new hotel.

“The three huge walled gardens were a big draw for us,” says Van Hool, “Antwerp is quite a dense city. This place is so close to the city center and yet so peaceful with lots of space.” They knew, however, that creating a hotel on this site would not be easy: “It is a heritage listed building; we can’t change anything,” says Van Hool, but they knew just the man who could. “We immediately contacted Vincent Van Duysen to ask if he would be interested in designing the hotel. We have always loved his work and thought that if we did another hotel, we would do it with him.”

Van Duysen made his name as an architect and designer in the 1990s. Right across his broad range of architectural and design output—from private houses,

offices, and showrooms, to furniture, light fittings, cutlery, and even his own range of gorgeous pottery storage vessels—a sense of “less is more” and a meticulous attention to detailing have become his trademark. Yet he hates to be called a minimalist. His particular aesthetic vision, restrained choices of materials, forms, and desaturated color palettes are very much pared to the essentials, but there is a richness there that is anything but spartan. Perhaps luxurious functionalism best describes his much aped and admired style, which is in high demand from clients around the world. Van Hool and De Scheemaecker were delighted when he accepted the commission, beginning work in November 2014.

The project began for Van Duysen Architects with the development of the core concept: “When we start working on each of our projects I always try to give my team the maximum that I can. My mind is full of accumulating ideas. I travel a lot. I see a lot. I meet a lot of people. I see a lot of hotels. So, I throw these ideas out verbally and on paper and my team and I start working on them. Then we create different moods and try to design style directions for the hotel,” says Van Duysen.

The August site is a combination of five buildings. The biggest challenge for Van Duysen and his team was to link them together in an optimal way without falling foul of heritage restrictions. The nuns’ former private chapel will be the main lounge and bar area. There are two terraced townhouses with gardens adjacent to the site, one of which will accommodate a spa complete with an outdoor swimming pool with its own filtering reed bed. The building behind the chapel, which was the nuns’ living quarters, will contain most of the guestrooms, the kitchen, and a guests’ library.

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“This sacred soul, or sacred feeling, is still around, and you cannot deny that”

Vincent Van Duysen

After the initial idea phase, says Van Duysen, “I start to eliminate and calm down the process. This place has its own soul, there’s a lot of emotion. My own style is very understated. It is very subtle, it’s timeless. In a way there is a modernity with a hint of conservatism. I’m not the kind of person that wants to create immediate effects. There is a pared-down attitude that we Belgians have in our aesthetics: very humble, very desaturated colors.”

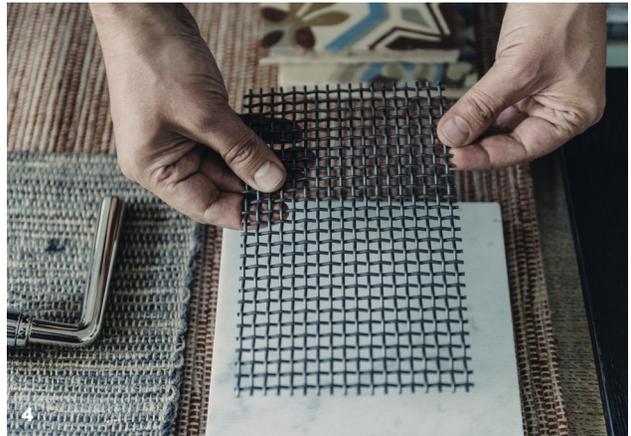
Vincent’s distinctive style is one that clearly stems from the historical architectural cadence that is Antwerp’s own, but without the flashy need to show off occasionally. For precisely this reason, in addition to designing many residential and office buildings worldwide, he has worked as a creative director or designer for a number of interior furnishing companies, including Molteni&C, Dada, Kvadrat, Paola Lenti, Olivari, B&B Italia, and Flos, to name but a few. This experience and his range of contacts in the business has put him in a unique position when it comes to furnishing his first complete hotel project.

The bar, for example, the centerpiece of the former chapel, will have a beautiful Adolf Loos-like light feature by Flos, and all the furniture will be customized and derived from designs he did in collaboration with Molteni&C. “The interior has some traditional forms, in a modern way, with beautiful, huge taupe and gray-beige sofas combined with little tables as well as more club-like dark black and brown leather sofas that I’ve seen in bars and lounges in traditional hotels,” he explains. “The cupboard systems and door handles are

more archetypical, they just blend in and could have been there forever. The sanitary fittings are also my designs for Fantini Rubinetti. The cutlery is designed by me—literally everything is tailor-made.”

Dealing with a listed monument means there are a lot of rules they have to respect. “We have to make sure that the program of the hotel fits in the kind of building that we are interfering with,” he says. “It’s also a challenge for me to design without too much ostentation within this type of building that already has a strong identity. There were floor tile patterns, for example, which needed to be restored, particularly in the chapel. They are part of an existing aesthetic that determines the kind of style I have to pick up on, yet I still needed to design a hotel that has its own unique features that make it different from any other hotel.”

“When you restore a building, you have to do it with respect,” says Van Duysen, “We have to consider the past as being a beautiful gift. We need to work around it, but in the modern way we are living in now.” The entire project is a labor of meticulous love for the architect: In the end, he says, “the most important thing is that this has to be a place where people can feel calm, comfortable, and at home, but without neglecting the fact that we are still in a place that was sacred. This sacred soul, or sacred feeling, is still around, and you cannot deny that. You don’t have to have a chapel to disconnect from the noise around you. I call my own home in Antwerp a ‘sanctuary,’ and I’m sure that this will be another sanctuary, which makes me very happy.” ■



1 Mouche Van Hool, owner of August and Hotel Julien

2-4 Together with restoration architect Wouter Callebaut, Vincent Van Duysen painstakingly renovated the building, outfitting the interiors with a palette of materials and colors in tune with the original