

VISUALLY *SILENT* ARCHITECTURE

The radically simple spaces that Antwerp-based architect Nicolas Schuybroek designs smoothly wrap up complex contextual layers, tactile depth and personal narratives through architecture, interiors and objects.

WORDS BY HARRIET THORPE





When architect Nicolas Schuybroek was studying architecture, first in Brussels and then at McGill in Montreal, 'starchitects' were making headlines with spontaneous abstract shapes and brash colours. The 'Guggenheim effect' had taken its grip and buildings by the likes of Koolhaas, Nouvel and Gehry were landing like aliens on skylines. Instead of being seduced, Schuybroek started searching: "I began visiting monasteries of the 10th to 14th centuries, where thick stone walls and plaster brought a calming, soulful and emotional experience quite opposed to the buildings of the 90s," he says.

He visited Cistercian abbeys of Sénanque and Thoronet in the south of France, Le Corbusier's Saint Marie de la Tourette on a rainy day. As a self-proclaimed product of schools run by the Benedictine order, found affinity with the work of Dutch Benedictine monk and architect Hans van der Laan (1904-1991): "Here in these abbeys and cloisters, I discovered light, texture and a mathematical scheme of proportion," he reflects.

The qualities of these humble, spiritual places became the grounding influences of his architecture and interior practice, founded in 2011 in Brussels and comfortably established today with projects of all scales and typologies across the world. Even after reaching the prestigious 'AD100' and celebrating 10 years with a monograph published by Hatje Cantz, he ceaselessly continues to distil the essential qualities of shelter inspired by these places: "The act of extreme and timeless simplicity, which is often much more challenging than something complex from a visual standpoint, has really driven me for the past decade," he explains, "creating visually silent architecture, alongside warm and tactile interiors."

Because whilst a Schuybroek-designed space is minimal, its expression surpasses surface level in a philosophical meditation on life itself; where the rich patina of exposed raw materials is a gesture to the earth; a handcrafted detail reveres the living history of artisanal craft; and a 20th century chair nods to the idealistic endeavour of the Modernist movement. The aura of a painting unlocks our imaginative inner worlds, while the planting of a native species defers to the reality of what lies beyond us.

This holistic approach was influenced by Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen, for whom Schuybroek began working at 25 years old. "Vincent pushed me to concretise the search for emotions through the link between landscape, architecture, interiors, art and furniture," he recalls, "but also through the use of materials – natural, timeless materials that only get more beautiful with time. The experience completely reshaped my vision of architecture, the main influence being that context is paramount."

We often consider context solely as landscape and site, yet for Schuybroek, it encompasses cultural and sensory dimensions of design, craft and personality. Take for example his Mexico City house renovation for Moises Micha, creative hotelier of the design-led Grupo Habita, alongside architects Marc Merckx and Alberto Kalach. The architect and hotelier became acquainted working together on the interiors of the Robey Hotel in Chicago's Wicker Park neighbourhood, where they meshed Americana with cool Belgian minimalism and carved a triangular pool into the rooftop of the Art Deco skyscraper. Micha's new house was just as architecturally unique, this time a brutalist bunker from the 70s clad in brown-coloured glass.

Schuybroek began the design process by immersing himself in Mexican living, language and culture (he had already visited every Luis Barragán-designed house in the city) and the dimensions of Micha – his impressive Latin American art and furniture collection and life driven by the art of hospitality. Soon a flowing circulation of connected indoor and outdoor courtyards emerged within the house, layered with sculptural works by artists Damián Ortega, Jose Dávila and Terence Gower. The relationship between the drama of entertaining and the calm of a retreat is balanced with materials; polished concrete floors, Arabescatto marble, locally sourced Parota wood and exposed raw steel.

He singles out a local master metalworker, who welded the muscular pivoting steel window frames from a sketch on site. Craft is context, because this feat would never have been impossible in Belgium he says: "We can't do anything without local artisans, we respect and listen to them. A highly skilled craftsman can add a layer of tactility to space and we profoundly rely on developing an extremely close relationship." He concludes with certainty, "The very idea of designing something *carte blanche* simply doesn't exist."

Both methodical and lyrical in his responses, Schuybroek articulates with precision, reflecting the discipline that he prides himself in. He achieved his self-imposed goal to establish his own practice by 30 years old. And while the 'school' of Van Duysen was influential, his own personality is the driver of the more radical flavour to his approach, where proportion, geometry and modelling of light is highly consciously controlled, as are the materials that he uses. "We are known for using a restrained material palette – one type of stone, plaster, wood, metal finish – and we try to find a way to perfectly balance these four or five materials together, which then raises the pressure to find the perfect materials and craftspeople."



From the renovation of a derelict farmhouse in the Flemish countryside to a monolithic new build apartment building in Antwerp (the expansive 320m² penthouse pictured here), and storied heritage homes in Paris and New York, Schuybroek gravitates to materials such as Carrara marble, German travertine, muschelkalk, oak, sandstone, concrete and lime-washed brick. Though his application is precise, he relinquishes control over their attributes, “we always look for what will age beautifully, because patina is what makes a natural material special,” he explains. When designing a signature kitchen for Belgian company Obumex, he sculpted a Brutalist composition of blocks clad entirely in tin, imagining the materials’ unique evolution within each space it inhabits.

One material that has been captivating him recently is clay. “It’s hard to explain the effect of heavy clay plaster on a room or space – the way the material wraps around you,” he says, “its very matte tactile texture has a brutal honesty, yet generates a complex acoustic, visual and emotional impact.” He uses it to bring warmth, often to large homes in both urban and rural settings, and sings the praises of Belgian manufacturers Aardig Gedacht and UK-based Clayworks – “both know their product by heart and work with natural pigments that bring structure to the clay.”

“We are less radical than we used to be,” admits Schuybroek of his ‘five material rule’. “Slowly we are bringing in materials that blend with the palette, where different materials and textures create depth. I think that quest for very tactile and natural interiors is even stronger than a few years ago.” So what has shifted? “We live in an extremely complex and polarised world,” he says, “and the need both physically and intellectually contemplative and calming soothing places is even stronger than a decade or two ago. So the way we imagine our projects – residential, but even commercial or an office project for that matter – is as shelters; protective, meditative and secluded spaces, in the most positive way, where the clutter of daily life doesn’t really belong, and unnecessary items are stripped away.”

He describes his ability to curate and edit furniture, objects and art in space as ‘intuition’, labouring over the sourcing and ‘strategic’ positioning of each one. “Furniture has the power to transform space so you have to be radical in that exercise – if a project starts from the consideration of context, landscape, architecture, interiors, you can’t stop there, you need to extend that line to art and furniture and retain that necessary grip on a project. Once everything is settled, it suddenly all makes sense.”

Schuybroek is drawn to Modernist furniture by the likes of George Nakashima, Jean Royère, Gio Ponti, Jose Zanine Caldas, and art by Wyatt Kahn, Richard Nonas and Imi Knoebel – often using these pieces as devices to celebrate the spaces that are most meaningful and intimate to his clients. For the 19th century Antwerp home of Peter Philips, a fashion industry virtuoso, a round marble bathtub is paired with a small artwork by Günther Uecker from the 1970s. In the Paris apartment of Barbara Boccara, the cofounder of fashion brand Ba&Sh, he placed a custom-designed tree-trunk table in the hallway alongside a playful painting by Harold Ancart. In the open plan living space of a family home for Thomas Ostyn, third-generation owner of Obumex, tactile Pierre Jeanneret chairs and a Rick Owens console holding custom-designed vases bring structure and warmth to the space they use the most.

This is the reason that there’s a revolving gallery of vintage and custom-designed furniture in his Brussels studio, alongside shelves of books and architectural models in cardboard, concrete and wood. In the 200sqm former wood workshop filled with natural light, the atmosphere is professional yet homely. He describes it as a ‘bubble’ of calm in the city, not far from his home. Here Schuybroek runs a tight ship of 10 team members, believing in the virtue of maintaining a small scale practice where each project must be an absolute ‘click’ from context, to client, to budget and importantly must stimulate the required ‘intellectual gymnastics’ for them as architects and designers.

They’re currently exercising those muscles with a private residence and museum hybrid for an art collecting couple in Antwerp and a subterranean building in Sharjah made of a sand and concrete composite. Schuybroek feels most comfortable within the process, identifying with the tension of problem-solving and the burden of his own perfectionism. As he writes in a personal essay introduction to his monograph: “To be completely honest, I constantly feel as if I’m looking for something that I haven’t found,” later continuing, “But in a sense what I’m looking for in my projects is what I’m looking for in my life. What I’m unable to find in myself is precisely what I’m trying to create for others.” His sincerity is refreshing, and it is the intensity of this journey that results in sensitive spaces that listen – to people, history, context and culture, dissipating the pressure of the outside, and encouraging a conscious physical and mental interior life, among only treasured objects and materials that rather than distracting us, only serve to enrich us.





