

# Nicolas Schuybroek

THREE TIMES NAMED AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S  
TOP 100 DESIGNERS BY FRENCH ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST,  
BELGIAN ARCHITECT NICOLAS SCHUYBROEK ADHERES TO  
AN AESTHETIC THAT IS THE PARAMOUNT OF CONTEMPORARY  
ELEGANCE — A TACTILE, TIMELESS, INDEED ALMOST  
SPIRITUAL FORM OF MINIMALISM.

Eons ago, the theory goes, back when human beings first began planning structures, the buildings they designed were of two types. There were houses, to satisfy everyday needs, and there were temples, to satisfy the need for something beyond the everyday. In both cases, the function of architecture was to nurture culture by uniting souls, joining families and congregations into societies and states.

Rising Belgian architect Nicolas Schuybroek carries this theory to its fitting conclusion. His designs treat the familiar—homes, offices, hotels, and objects alike—with a reverence that he describes as almost mystical. The aim is not to bind people together into ever-larger and more powerful collectivities, but rather something more modest, more subtle, and perhaps, these days, more difficult: to reunite the individual with himself.

“In the background of every project is an idea of serenity,” Schuybroek says. “Quiet is extremely important right now.” He comes by the conviction honestly, as the product of schools run by the Benedictine order of monks (whose motto is “Prayer and Work”). Likewise, one of his foremost influences is the Belgian Benedictine monk-slash-architect Hans van der Laan, whose designs, both religious and secular, were minimalist and tranquil in a recognizably monkish way, but also warm, open, and inviting rather than severe or ascetic.

It was on a trip to view van der Laan’s work that Schuybroek, then a 20-year-old student, first experienced the feeling that he now aims to create with every one of his designs, be it a single home or a large hotel: that feeling when an unfamiliar place somehow reminds you of who you are, and you feel at peace, neither arriving nor departing but present. In a sense, the one thing you are most likely to find in Schuybroek’s designs is yourself.

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Schuybroek hastens to point out that he’s not a religious person, and the serenity he has in mind is of a worldly sort. “Urban life is hectic, filled with stress and burden,” he says. “All of our spaces strive to have deep positive influences.” Think of them as retreats rather than escapes.

His MM House—the Mexico City residence of Grupo Habita co-founder Moisés Micha—is an excellent example. Schuybroek’s work inside the Brutalist 1970s structure builds feeling by combining restraint and comfort in equal measure. The lines are clean, but the materials are rich and the textures deep: for instance, a marble bedside table accenting a bed and headboard panel of luminous tropical raintree. The effect is akin to submerging yourself in a warm, still bath in exactly the right tub. In contrast to the naked pursuit of superficial happiness characteristic of much “luxury” design, Schuybroek deals in the deeper satisfaction that comes from what he calls “apparent simplicity.” Sometimes the most elemental pleasures are the most difficult to achieve—but when you do...

Micha commissioned Schuybroek and his occasional collaborator, interior architect Marc Merckx, to work on his personal residence after he saw what the pair was doing in Chicago with Grupo Habita’s largest hotel, The Robey, housed in a landmark 1929 Art Deco skyscraper. When Schuybroek first undertook the 13-floor, 69-room project in 2013, his office consisted of himself and one associate. And though the project was immensely complex—the challenges of cultural diplomacy among Belgian architect, Mexican developer, and American landlord adding to the usual logistical tangles of such a large and historic project—the result is calm and assured. Welcoming public spaces, done in a strong but understated modernist palette and riffing on materials salvaged from the

## Side Notes:

NAME *Nicolas Schuybroek*

COMPANY NAME *Nicolas Schuybroek Architects*

COMPANY HEADQUARTERS *Brussels*

NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN COMPANY *4*

WEBSITE *ns-architects.com*

SIGNATURE PROJECTS *Bilzen, Belgium: Tribù offices Brussels: Sonkès store Antwerp; MK House Antibes, France: S House Paris: RK Apartment Chicago: The Robey Mexico City: MM House*

## Significant Awards:

2013, 2016, 2017 *Architectural Digest France, AD100*

2017 *Wallpaper\* Design Award, (shortlist) Best Urban Hotel for The Robey*

2017 *Travel + Leisure It List for The Robey*



*Nicolas Schuybroek’s minimal design meets a raw industrial setting at The Robey, where hardwood floors are offset by sublimely sleek pieces.*





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1 For this single-story holiday house on the French Riviera, Schuybroek artfully blends elegance with clean, geometric sparseness.

2 As part of a complete transformation, this apartment in Paris's 6th arrondissement features wooden floors with chevron patterns, vintage French furniture, Scandinavian lighting classics, and a large living space crafted from what had been three small rooms.

3 This piece in MM House in Mexico City was carefully selected to augment an environment defined by polished concrete floors and cement walls and ceilings.

4 For the Belgian design brand When Objects Work, Schuybroek designed a bowl using Iranian travertine marble, Egyptian sandstone, and perforated bronze that presents in two ways: as a masculine, heavy, miniature piece of architecture, and—in a lighter version—as feminine and elegant.

5 + 6 For the high-end outdoor furniture maker Tribù, Schuybroek collaborated with interior architect Marc Merckx to create a two-story geometrical, industrial structure that is infused with warm interiors, making it feel like anything but a workplace.

tower's former life as an office building, reach back into the city's past. Large-windowed guestrooms, bright and contemporary, look ahead.

Today, Schuybroek's office is four. In addition to a number of distinguished residences in Belgium and France, the Brussels-based team recently completed a new hybrid headquarters/showroom in Bilzen for the high-end outdoor furniture maker Tribù. Private homes in New York, Paris, and Bali are among the projects underway.

Staying small allows Schuybroek to go deep. His method is immersive, contemplative, and focused, and his ambition encompasses every aspect of every space. "It's an old-school way of working," Schuybroek admits, inspired in part by "the complete work of art" (Gesamtkunstwerk) concept often associated with Bauhaus efforts to rebuild industrial Europe at a human scale following the mechanized destruction of World War I.

In Schuybroek's case, the vision of "the complete work of art" grows not out of a

need for control, but rather a love for the intellectual discipline, sensory thrill, and freshness of vision that comes with working across scales. It comes, for instance, from working on a Chicago skyscraper or a 1,200-square-foot New York apartment, from the beautifully balanced bowls he created for the Belgian firm When Objects Work or the line of signature door hardware he's developing based on pieces he designed for a residence in Belgium.

Striving for depth and completeness in all things, giving form and life to the harmony of the integrated whole, does have its challenges. It takes time, it takes ceaseless effort, and perhaps above all it takes devotion to the process—faith that the hours and hours of thought and labor will result in something special. Yet this is simply the way Nicolas Schuybroek is called to work, and at this moment in history his gospel of serenity just feels right, even like a saving grace.

*Text: Augustine Sedgewick*