

In Belgium, a Home That Celebrates the Elegance of Utility

A designer and an artist have dedicated their lives to producing spaces, objects and furnishings that say only what they need to — and nothing more.

By Michael Snyder Photographs by Martin Morrell
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GROWING UP IN the 1980s and '90s in the Belgian city of Genk, the industrial designer Michaël Verheyden had little interest in art, fashion or design — the fields that would later shape his career as a creator of austere, luxurious housewares and furniture. He did, however, enjoy making things, working with his father to lash together a child-size crossbow from spare pieces of wood or sewing a pair of fingerless gloves in homage to “Bad”-era Michael Jackson. After completing his degree in industrial design at the Media and Design Academy in Genk and following a stint as a runway model for the fashion designer Raf Simons (who had also studied in Genk), Verheyden, now 44, began making handbags from a studio in his hometown. In 2007, he moved into a 1,600-square-foot townhouse in the center of the city with his wife, Saartje Vereecke, 46; together, they established a design firm under his name that sells objects like precisely tailored leather place mats and minimalist furnishings such as solid oak stools. Craft, Verheyden says, has always been central to Flemish identity: “For us it comes naturally. Often people see the difficulties that come with making things. We see opportunities.”



In the entry hall, Verheyden’s Ghia Busk vase in Murano glass and Medi leather-covered bowl on a Profilo table in steel and Crema Valencia marble. The painting is by Vereecke, and the vintage chair is by Christophe Gevers. Martin Morrell



Verheyden’s Komm bowl in Nero Antico on the dining table and Soli cast brass vases, partly polished, on the windowsill. Martin Morrell

Though Verheyden knew his town as a minor industrial burg, its shifting population and fortunes shaped by coal mining and auto manufacturing, Genk had once been a thriving creative hub. From the 1840s, when it was a sleepy village, it drew painters and naturalists from cities like Brussels and Antwerp who came to study the surrounding heather fields and juniper-filled moorlands. Part of a newly minted and ascendant leisure class, they saw Genk's rural landscape as a respite from the steel and smog that had overtaken other parts of the country. The opening of the area's first coal mine near the end of World War I marred those idylls, but local artists (among them Verheyden's maternal grandfather, a primary-school teacher) continued to conjure pastoral romances of church towers and shepherds ranging over open country.



A 2012 leather-covered mirror over a prototype of a custom Perlato Royal sink. In the foreground, a Tabou stool in Calacatta Viola marble. Martin Morrell



Alabaster tea lights on an aluminum table. Martin Morrell

Genk likewise offered Verheyden and Vereecke a sense of tranquility — not to mention an affordable place to live. Twelve years after launching their collection of furnishings, they now sell their work (jars and vases, trays and tissue boxes, lamps and furniture made from wood, brass and stone, severe in their simplicity) to shops and galleries around the world; they also take on the occasional hotel or restaurant commission, after giving up handbags a decade ago. “Our focus is to make beautiful things,” Verheyden says, “but we only develop objects that you can really use.” In Genk, they collaborate with a local workshop on brass hardware that Verheyden hammers and patinas himself, applying the pieces as bases for light fixtures and side tables. Another local artisan carves the wooden trays that he covers with leathers in jewel and earth tones sourced from two of the last small tanneries in Belgium, final holdouts of one of the country's fading craft traditions.



In the library, the aluminium-and-saddle leather Edo chair, and a Panser table lamp in Calacatta Viola marble on a Volta table with a resin finish. Martin Morrell



In the living room, a sofa upholstered in bouclé wool, an aluminum coffee table and another version of the Ciub chair. In the foreground, a Holt Tre chair in chiseled tulip wood. Martin Morrell

By 2012, Verheyden and Vereecke had outgrown their original home and studio. “It was painful because we’d only just finished the house,” he says, but as Vereecke adds, “We just needed more space.” The 4,844-square-foot house they found that year, built in the early 1950s, matched their interests and aesthetic, its rationality — all straight lines and expansive windows — tempered with flourishes like restrained crown moldings and fluted wainscoting that gestured toward the past.



One of Vereecke's large-scale abstract canvases hangs in the guest room. Martin Morrell



The desk and chair, center, in the home office are solid oak with leather inlay. The sheepskin rug is by Carine Boxy and the artwork on the wall is by Vereecke. Martin Morrell

Named Ten Berken, or “At the Birches,” after the forests that had once surrounded it on all sides, the house stands on a corner lot in a tree-filled suburban neighborhood across the train tracks from the Bokrijk historical museum. Three times the size of their previous home, it allowed them to experiment with designing larger furnishings and new light fixtures — made at their studio, now located inside a second home they own down the street — that punctuate the house’s sun-washed rooms with reflective and matte surfaces of aluminum and brass. “Most of our designs begin with our needs and our space,” Verheyden says. “For us, the house is also a tool.”



The main entrance of Verheyden and Vereecke's home, named Ten Berken, or "At the Birches." Martin Morrell



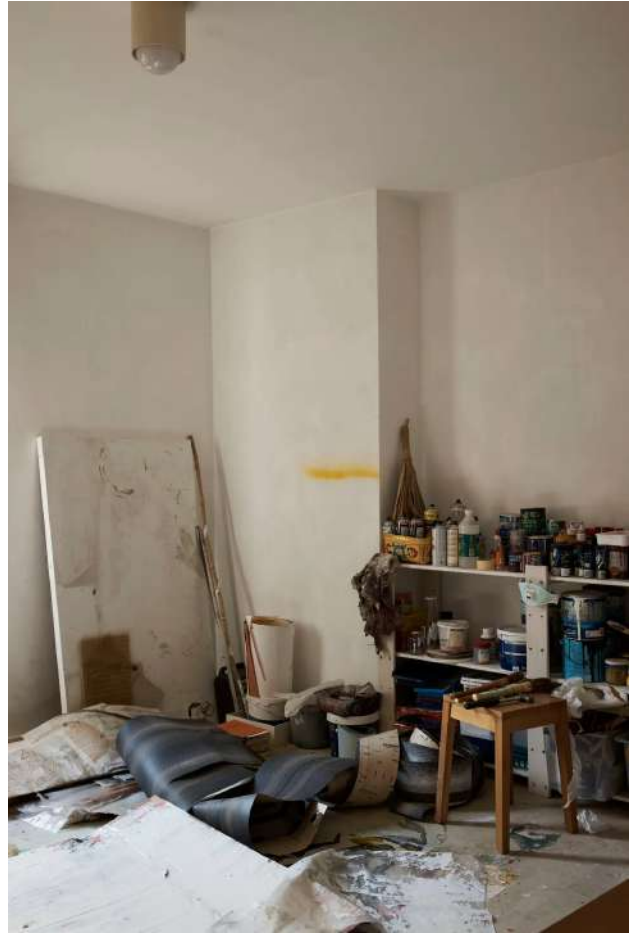
In the living room, an artwork by Vereecke hangs above a Tactile sofa from Baxter, designed by Vincenzo De Cotiis. The bar cabinet is made from solid oak with a custom bronze lock, with a Vasque vase in Lasa marble and a glass artwork on top. Martin Morrell

ON THEIR FIRST visit to Ten Berken, Verheyden and Vereecke were surprised to meet not only a real estate broker but also the youngest daughter of the original owner, who'd grown up on the property. She'd already turned down several potential buyers who'd talked openly of ripping out the original finishes that she'd so lovingly preserved: a flamboyant wrought-iron

banister on the main stair — “like a ribbon tied around a gift,” Vereecke says — or the arched thresholds that pass under the main stairwell from the airy south-facing foyer to an office space in the back. Others had hoped to capitalize on the house’s proximity to the Bokrijk train station by turning the place into a restaurant. The couple only got the house, Verheyden says, because “the owner could see that we loved it as it was.”



In the primary bedroom, a marble stool of Verheyden’s design and a small canvas that Vereecke painted as an art student. Martin Morrell



A view of Vereecke’s painting studio. Most of the artworks in the house are by her. Martin Morrell

After a quick-fix renovation, they’ve spent the past decade gradually updating it. Worn carpets were torn out for polished concrete floors, and the kitchen was relocated from a cramped corner off the back entrance into a larger 194-square-foot space adjacent to the dining room. Working with a fourth-generation carpenter, the pair built custom cabinets to form a corridor that hides the kitchen from view — Vereecke, an avid cook, hates when dinner-party guests can see an untidy sink — and installed shelves throughout the house with a tiger-stripe veneer that mimics the original red oak surfaces of some interior doors.



In the dining room, the original wainscoting and a vintage carpet tufted with goat's hair lend texture to the otherwise austere space. Martin Morrell



In the kitchen, from left, Cont marble containers, a Solid rectangular tray made of oak and hammered bronze, a Swan Neck vase by Rick Owens and a Busk salad bowl in solid oak. Martin Morrell

Upstairs, Verheyden designed aluminum-and-brass sconces inspired by Donald Judd's wall boxes to illuminate the gallery that overlooks the foyer and connects the house's six original bedrooms. What was once the primary bedroom has been refashioned into a 269-square-foot dressing area and bath with a marble pedestal sink of Verheyden's design and a deep shower booth washed from floor to ceiling in impermeable Mortex, whose concretelike finish is similar to Moroccan tadelakt. They turned the other modestly sized bedrooms into their own sleeping area, a guest room, a second dressing space, a music room for Verheyden and a studio for Vereecke, who creates large color-field paintings that hang on some of the walls.



Verheyden (left) and Vereecke by the entrance to their kitchen. Martin Morrell



In the entranceway, a pair of arched thresholds frame the raw linen curtains and gleaming basalt floors. Martin Morrell

Every room is populated with furnishings mostly of Verheyden's design, but it's the downstairs living area that best represents the couple's shared vision: It's both warm and spare, defined by muted tones enlivened by the flash of canary yellow in a contemporary Iranian rug and by the luminous shine of an ivory epoxy table — like “spilled yogurt,” Vereecke says. “A little bit alive.” On warm summer afternoons, the sun filters through curtains of raw, flax-colored linen hung throughout the house with deep Flemish pleats, a detail that “reflects the way people used to live,” Verheyden says. “Just a few things, not too glamorous, nothing that screams for attention.” Spoken by the designer, these words sound like a mantra, as clear and direct as the objects with which he surrounds himself. For him and his wife, tradition and craft are less an aesthetic than an ethic — sobriety its own kind of luxury, utility the ultimate source of pleasure. The real goal, as Verheyden sees it, is to be “very serious about the most ordinary things.”