

Q&A / BELGIUM

Labour of love

With impeccable taste and a passion for art and architecture, Belgian interior designer and collector Axel Vervoordt has drawn on years of experience to create Kanaal, a new cultural and residential development that masterfully blends the fabric of an old industrial complex with new architecture. We catch up with him at his Antwerp castle.

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For Axel Vervoordt art and architecture are inextricably linked. We meet the Belgian designer, art collector and art dealer at his castle near Antwerp. It's the morning before Kanaal, his ambitious residential, arts and commercial development, celebrates its official launch. The project, on the fringes of Antwerp, has been two decades in the making and has seen a ruined industrial site transformed into something of a self-sufficient vertical village. Kanaal features apartments, offices, shops, a restaurant and art – lots of art. From Anish Kapoor's gigantic bell-like *At the Edge of the World* installed ceremoniously at the building's centre, to an extensive collection of paintings from the experimental Gutai group from postwar Japan and centuries-old statues, the works here reflect Vervoordt's esoteric taste. Art has also deeply influenced the architecture. It's a novel ploy that has successfully helped sell most of the flats at Kanaal already, despite a location well away from Antwerp's more coveted neighbourhoods. Art buyers will be making their way here too, since the gallery, the final piece in the 20-year development puzzle, is now complete and open.

Vervoordt seems totally unphased by the fact that in a matter of hours 1,000 or so visitors will make their way through a project that may be his greatest personal achievement to date. He's also taking deep pleasure from the fact that Kanaal is a collaboration between himself and his two sons. His eldest, Boris, manages the art collections and exhibitions, while Axel's youngest son Dickie is responsible for property development. And while Vervoordt senior is not giving any secrets away, there's a cheeky glint in his eye when asked if Kanaal might be just the first chapter in a series of similar developments with his sons.

Vervoordt – who has designed interiors for high-profile clients such as Robert De Niro – is relaxing fire-side in a second-storey room of his castle, where a masterwork by Kazuo Shiraga hangs on the wall. It's a calm space that adheres to his take on the Japanese design philosophy of wabi-sabi, which Vervoordt popularised in the western design world in the early noughties. His journeys to Japan and love for Japanese art have made an indelible mark on his zen-like persona. With the fire crackling and rays of winter sun streaming in from a grand window, Vervoordt is clearly in his element.

Monocle: How did you create the brand for Kanaal?

Axel Vervoordt: It is about the saving of an industrial building and giving it a new purpose. The old building [which has served as a brewery and a grain silo] is something I really love and that is why we added contemporary architecture that forms a dialogue with it, rather than overpowers it. We left the old walls as untouched as possible, that's the way I like to do restoration. The next dialogue we thought about was the one with the building and the art. For this to work it needs strong art. Something weak or decorative would simply not have worked. Bringing the art of Anish Kapoor to the centre of the site gives it a strong foundation. This, of course, is not easy, it's a big expense, but I believed in the power of that art piece.

M: You call the art spaces 'temple-like' rather than 'museum-like'. Can you expand on this?

AV: For Kanaal we were able to provide something authentic, not just because it was part of an old industrial building but in the contemporary architecture we added too. We used natural materials, covering the walls with earth, and we worked with sacred proportions in building certain spaces. All my working life I have studied these proportions. Even if the people in these spaces don't understand the complicated mathematics and the meaning behind them, they feel it. It can provide a serene atmosphere for all the art; it's an expression of peace.

M: When did this blurring of art and architecture begin for you?

AV: It started with a little medieval street in Antwerp when I was 21. My son Boris lives there now but it was my family home. However, to buy the two houses I originally wanted I had to buy the whole street and renovate, decorate and sell the rest of the properties. When I think about that now I wonder, 'How could I do it when I was so young?'. But in fact I was working towards this project long before I was 21. At 14, I was going on my own on art-buying trips to England. I'd find beautiful things and I'd return home and sell them to my parents' friends. I made good money doing that so I ended up doing it every school holiday. Things only accelerated when I was 18 and



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got my first car to make the trips. However, I did crash twice on that first drive through England. Perhaps I wasn't ready to drive on the wrong side of the road quite yet.

M: Stories like this are highlighted in your memoir 'Axel Vervoordt: Stories and Reflections'. The theme running through it is intuition. You seemed to always know what was right at the time and this helped you grow as a designer and an entrepreneur.

AV: People can develop intuition but I never had to force it, even from a young age. But a lot of what I know comes from the people who influenced me. I was fortunate to have friends and mentors who impacted me early on. And then intuition comes from experience, of course. It's like knowing about wine or music: you learn to look at things differently the more you experience them. I am always searching for things that have an extra quality – and that quality is not always beauty. I don't mind if it is beautiful or not, it's the expression that counts, particularly with art. With architecture I feel that it should always belong to where it is built. A good building, old or new, should feel like it has been grown there. With Kanaal we put years of work into it but the aim was that when it was done it was to look like it had always been there. Once I visited the convent of La Tourette by Le Corbusier to see an Anish Kapoor show. I made a comment to the head brother there saying that the work is beautifully exhibited here and his reply was, 'No monsieur, the work is not being exhibited, it lives here.' I love this expression. That's exactly how I like to put things together. Like they live there.





Clockwise from top: Gravenwezel Castle outside Antwerp, which Vervoordt bought in 19984; minimalist furnishings inside the castle; old meets new at Kanaal; the Kanaal development; Axel Vervoordt at his castle; gallery space inside the new development; a painting by Kazuo Shiraga

M: So Kanaal is a distillation of this idea?

AV: This is what I try to do in everything. Look around you: there’s an old table here, natural objects there and even the way I have lit one of the paintings is part of this expression. The painting had a spotlight pointing onto it originally but it felt too much like a gallery and not a home so I exposed the stone underneath the artwork instead. A spotlight can kill the soul of a painting. The Shiraga room at Kanaal for me is the most moving component of the project and its a collaboration between myself and Brussels-based Japanese architect Tatsuro Miki. We do a lot of work together. Right now we are working on the renovation of a ruin close to the works of Le Corbusier and Eileen Gray at Cap Moderne in France. I initially thought to go with the modernist style



but the way Tatsuro wanted to go was from the roots of the place. So we looked at a nearby village from the 10th century and took inspiration from that. We’re building with local stone and creating something that appears hidden in the mountain. We want to make it an example of how we can make it beautiful inside but from the outside for it to appear almost invisible.

M: You worked with several architects at Kanaal. Did you have a problem of too many cooks in the kitchen?
AV: My son Dickie brought together different architects and we let them choose which part of the site they wanted to work with. They all chose something different so it was actually very easy. Coussée & Goris wanted to work on the old buildings and they did a beautiful job extending them. Beel did a great job transforming the grain towers. We worked very closely with Bogdan & Van Broeck to form an architecture that was not too modern, something that harked back to the Roman period. The result is not designer architecture – it’s interesting and lively architecture and the overall look is something of a village.

M: How do you see this community developing?

AV: It’s a mix of people. Some are my friends, some are musicians who have their studio there, there are people from Switzerland who prefer to be in Belgium, there are also Belgians, of course. It’s not a monied selection. There are very wealthy people but there are also people with more humble means. The connection is that they are all interesting, all with good minds and so they all get on naturally. Normally in big real-estate projects developers promise much more than the residents get. I think in this instance we gave more than we promised.

M: And finally, what lessons from working in the worlds of art and architecture would you like to pass on to others?

AV: I think the key is to give things their best place; it’s always about adding value. Some architecture doesn’t need art and in this case you have to have the courage to say, ‘It looks better without anything’. That’s the added value. But some art can look so much better in one house than another and that is a beautiful moment, when you find the right home for a piece of art. I have a lot of fun working with non-interesting architecture because then you can better furnish it. When the architecture is too good you don’t want to add anything, which doesn’t make it an easy place to live. I love a house where both is possible: some empty and beautiful spaces, which are kept clean, simple and admirable and those that are not so nice, which you can fill books, souvenirs and objects and create a warm atmosphere. Then you can choose which room you want to be in, depending on your mood.



ARCHITECTURE / AUSTRIA
Taming the slopes

Innsbruck shows the alpine way with Snøhetta’s help.

“Build an attraction to view an attraction.” This was the unusual brief received by architecture firm Snøhetta’s Innsbruck office. They answered it with a series of architectural works along a mountain trail, including benches and a viewing platform. “Cable-car operator Innsbrucker Nordkettenbahnen approached us to create the project after it became clear that many customers, unfamiliar with Alpine landscapes, didn’t know what to do once they arrived at the summit,” says Patrick Lüth, architect and head of Snøhetta’s Innsbruck studio.

The Norwegian firm is well known for its work in the wilderness. For example, a highly publicised tree hotel it designed in Sweden appears almost invisible from the forest floor thanks to clever material choices. For Perspektivenweg, due for completion in summer 2018, Snøhetta applied similar principles to build sensitively within nature. Instead of trying to plant another attraction atop a hill, the firm realised that its job was to use design to pave the way for visitors to enjoy what was already there. “The panorama speaks for itself so we created a path that makes it easy for everyone to access and enter into a dialogue with the view,” says Snøhetta architect Thomas Niederberger.

A trail was created that can be explored during a leisurely 45-minute walk and features 10 architectural interventions. The key



piece is a viewing platform that veers dramatically off a cliff.

“The architectural elements are in viewing distance of each other so you will always know where to go next,” says Lüth. “This allows visitors who are not familiar with exploring the steep hills to feel safe while roaming around.” Material choices were an important consideration as the 10 elements needed to be easy to spot without being an eyesore.

“We drew upon larch wood that is sourced in the region and has been used in Tirol for centuries,” says Lüth. “The Corten steel we integrated with it will continue to blend in with the surroundings, appearing to age with them.”

He says that taming the mountain seemed easier from the comfort of their office than on the rocky, snowy slopes. Thankfully the new structures are standing strong and are a hit with hikers. And the skill set this Scandinavian firm has gained in the Alps is allowing it to take on ever more ambitious projects in the region. Next up? A cable car in Bolzano, South Tyrol. **Carlo Silberschmidt**