

“The Two Popes”

a translated interview with Vincent Van Duysen & Gert Voorjans, published by Knack, a Belgian news magazine. Original text & interview by Amélie Rombouts

Two different lives, two different styles, two different visions. Or are there similarities between interior designers Vincent Van Duysen and Gert Voorjans? We found and seized on one of them — their sixtieth anniversary — to interview both by playing a questions game. They took turns drawing cards with questions about various matters. You can listen to their conversation on “Tegenpolen”, a Dutch-language podcast by Knack.

Vincent Van Duysen and Gert Voorjans are clearly elated when I meet them at Graanmarkt, a town square in the historic centre of Antwerp. Spring has arrived, illuminating the tree-lined piazza with its warm light. Mouth masks are no longer required. Instead, the architects greet each other warmly: a handshake, an embrace — finally, it's allowed to happen again.

They're no strangers. The two small-town boys — one from Lokeren, the other from Stokkem — arrived in Antwerp in the early eighties and occasionally bumped into each other in the city's creative scene. It's the first similarity between the two Belgian interior design icons who, design-wise, couldn't have been greater opposites. A second similarity was not far off.

Both men will celebrate their sixtieth anniversary three weeks apart this year and are experiencing this milestone with somewhat mixed feelings. However, it was the starting point of a candid conversation that they were looking forward to.

How does it feel turning sixty?

Van Duysen: "It's a number that has been flashing before my eyes for a while. I still feel young, but I do look at things differently. I mean, I live much more consciously than I used to. I watch what I eat, though I like to drink a glass of wine, and I exercise. Leading up to my birthday, I also started meditating daily. It helps me to make more deliberate choices, to be more focused, but also to be alone more often. I have worked and lived very hard and sometimes need to take back control of my own time. I need more rest. I also withdraw more often; let's say I'm not exactly a social butterfly... The past year has been challenging. I lost my mother. As a result, I'm still in a period where I need to process the loss and grief. As an only son, one of my most significant duties is caring for my 87-year-old father. I try to take half a day for myself every week, now primarily for my father, to ensure that I still have him with me every week. Being with him gives deep meaning to my life and stands in such stark contrast to everything that's superficial or shallow. Fortunately, I have a profession that gives me energy. Creativity is my youth elixir. One thing I do connect to my upcoming birthday is the rest I now create for myself. I wouldn't mind celebrating it in Portugal with people I have known since I was twelve or sixteen. People who have known me for sixty years, so to speak. I try to enjoy more of the real value of life right now."

Voorjans: "I also want to set more boundaries. People sometimes expect you to be with them full time and to remain available day and night. The project on which we work together is a highlight of their lives, while I have ten or twenty

projects running simultaneously. In the long run, it's like running a marathon, so you have to pace yourself. It's like being a musician: you can't perform night after night. For me, sixty is the time of less but better... or more intense. I don't want to stop either; I want to continue until the very last moment! Quitting at 65, with all this experience, with everything one can still become? I think that's the most foolish idea ever. But of course, I simply couldn't exist without my job."

What is the essence of what you do?

Van Duysen: "What I do is always about well-being, comfort, feeling safe, and rest. Ultimately, my message is a deeply humanistic one. Tranquillity is something I've always tried to put into my work. But that doesn't mean that people don't have the freedom to make it their own. Nothing is as beautiful as a book-filled home library. I'm not too fond of libraries that have only two books, so to speak. For me, it's about creating a sanctuary with visual silences. In my home, people's reactions tell me that a certain tension is released when they enter. You can retreat here safely. That's what I'm aiming for."

Voorjans: "I also think that's very important. Homes have to be interesting, even without furniture. When that's the case, you get an interesting playground that you can explore much more purposefully. Generally, I think there's too much clutter everywhere. An interior can't serve the purpose of camouflaging things, which was sometimes thought of in the past. It's not a set or a melting pot that you have to fill with all sorts of objects. You can have taste and good ideas, but creating an interior is a craft at the end of the day."

Gert, what do you think of calm, contemplative spaces?

Voorjans: "Well, I could definitely live in one of Vincent's homes. Who knows, maybe one day? I'm actually a great admirer of his work. And I'd live in it without bringing all my clutter into it! So, yes, I definitely appreciate his designs. I have just chosen to do it differently."

Van Duysen: "The feeling is mutual! I wouldn't say I like it when people categorize me as a minimalist. Okay, my work and how I create a balanced space are clear and pure. But in the end, I'm also surrounded by objects, sculptures, books, and art. I've always been attracted by cabinets of curiosities, by what people collect. Because through collections, one can also see an abstraction, which, in turn, brings a certain calmness."

Voorjans: "If you have to photograph my house, you'll think: "Oh my God!". You'll go crazy! But people forget that it's not a set. Behind every object is a story. But then again, no one lives the way I do. You simply can't, because it's not about what's beautiful or ugly. And indeed, what's considered to be minimalism is, in fact, not so minimal. It's all about stories, materials, qualities and shapes. With me, there's another layer on top with colours and patterns. Except for the colour of their car, people often haven't consciously chosen colours before. They can't, and then they don't. But it's not just opening a fan and picking some colours. No, it all has to make sense. People have to see that. It's not just about decorating. Nothing is as terrible as decorating."

What did you dream of becoming when you were a child?

Voorjans: "Pope! (laughs) I was an altar boy at a very young age. The silver, the incense, and the beautifully embroidered clothes were spectacular. But that didn't last very long. My parents had a furniture store. And I knew early on that I didn't want to manage a store. Everything revolves around if something

is beautiful or not, pricing and sales instead of the intrinsic value of something. I think you have to be able to place objects in their context and appreciate them for what they are. That's why I really wanted to study interior design. And, you know, I have a hard time with people who claim to be entirely self-taught. Education helps to assess things differently. Studying interior design, yes, that was absolutely it for me! It was inevitable."

Van Duysen: "I had some doubts. But it was evident that I wanted to pursue an artistic path. Contemporary dance also fascinated me. At the time, I auditioned with Jan Fabre and danced with Marc Vanrunxt. But I was also very preoccupied with fashion. In a way, I was a bit of a new waver. I even took the train from Lokeren to see Antwerp's first fashion show. Ultimately, I studied architecture, somewhat following the recommendation of my parents' entourage, who also wanted me to study law. But when I flunked my first theory exam, I secretly sat the entrance exam at the Fashion Academy, then managed by Linda Loppa. I passed, but I also passed my resit exams. Regretfully, I gave up on the idea of pursuing fashion. However, it's not that far off. Fashion is a bit like architecture but then for the body. I'm a great admirer of Dries, of Ann, and most certainly of Margiela and his architectural shapes and the timelessness of his designs, which you can combine endlessly. I also love what Demna Gvasalia did a while back for Balenciaga. I was fascinated by that architectural dome, those models, those silhouettes. That was a haunting show!"

Have you ever felt frustrated when people tweak your designs?

Voorjans: "I go back regularly. (laughs) But not because I want to put people in a straitjacket. In fact, I only finish things up to a certain percentage. I'm not going to hammer in the last nail in the wall; I think that's completely wrong. I certainly leave enough room. A good interior allows things to happen. Of course, I sometimes prefer to see things differently and for them to remain picture-perfect. But an interior must be able to evolve."

Van Duysen: "Designing isn't just a one-way street. It fascinates me endlessly to work with people who want more than just a house by Vincent Van Duysen Architects. I work in a very interactive way with those clients. Those are my best projects. Now, there are other clients — fortunately not too many — who appropriate everything from beginning to end. I don't allow that anymore. If people can do it themselves, they should. Unfortunately, because of social media — it used to be magazines — people are quick to think that they're architects or interior designers. I've always had an issue with that."

Voorjans: "It has to be a top-notch collaboration, a win-win situation. If not, I don't start it anymore because there's plenty of work. If there's anything I want for me at sixty, it's work that allows me to grow. Interesting projects with interesting people. Then that issue won't even come up anymore. I don't even want to have done it alone. It has to sound like an orchestra, a symphony."

How interesting is it to work with international brands? Are they necessary to make it?

Van Duysen: "I'm the creative director at Molteni&C and Dada, so I'm very much linked to Italian design culture, the know-how, and craft. Even though production has been industrialized, they still manage to do it in such a way that the maker's hand remains visible. I find that immensely fascinating. The company isn't just a furniture manufacturer that limits itself to furniture but sees design in a much broader context. One of the founders even started the

Salone del Mobile (in 1960, editor's note). I love the history behind it! I would find it frustrating to only think about living with Belgians or within the Flemish culture. It would feel limiting. Such a collaboration is an extension of my architecture, which carries added value. This is true not only in Belgium but also internationally."

Voorjans: "The whole design thing is less important to me because I mainly renovate. I prefer to fill my projects with elements that blend with a room, rather than having to shout "wow" ten times for an iconic piece of furniture. That's totally different from Vincent's approach, where furniture blends in with the light, the space, and the volumes. Not so with me, otherwise, it becomes too much. It's also very tiring to repeat how fantastic and crazy something is. (laughs) My main challenge is that you don't notice my interventions and that a clear logic dictates them. When that's the case, there's no need to talk about them. By the way, I often say: "a table might have a crooked leg; that doesn't make it design."

What percentage of your success has to do with talent? Does luck play an important role?

Voorjans: "In French they say: "Rien ne tombe du ciel", in German: "Der Erfolg hat viele Väter". It's a mix of both. At least, that's how I see it."

Van Duysen: "Without my parents, I wouldn't be here, nor would I be who I am today..."

Voorjans: "But it's not just luck. Every successful person I know does one thing: work! So, the foundation must be there, but it must also be cultivated and encouraged."

Van Duysen: "It's definitely a confluence of circumstances. But I also see many extremely talented people who aren't successful. So, I ask myself if we're lucky to be who we are? When so many talented people can't seem to get their foot in the door? I mean, sometimes luck is spontaneous — the luck of having connections or being introduced, for example."

Voorjans: "When we came to Antwerp, the city garnered worldwide attention. This isn't entirely irrelevant to our success. I was incredibly fortunate to work with Dries Van Noten because, ultimately, our work introduced me to the rest of the world. However, I don't know if I would do it the same way today. We live in a different time, with a different drive. Fashion has become something else entirely, but so has interior design. (...) To be honest, I think many people get considerable opportunities but simply don't take them."

Are you competitive? Who or what do you see as your biggest competition?

Voorjans: "I view my peers as colleagues or kindred spirits, not as competitors. People have started to love colour tremendously while equally loving minimalism. The spirit of the times dictates our line of work. If what I do were suddenly no longer relevant, I would experience that as competition. Of course, sometimes I might feel like competing, but there's room for everyone."

Van Duysen: "Same here! When the sun rises, it rises for everyone. I know I have inspired people and continue to do so today. I want that, just as the world and other people inspire me. I also wish the best for my former co-workers. I'm very proud that I helped train them. They're a bit like the school of Vincent Van

Duysen, like in the old days. But do I, therefore, feel like I'm competing? No. Everyone has the freedom to do what they want with their inspiration and talents. I take it as a compliment when I inspire someone. Copying, however, is something else. It happens often, and I see it too. I deplore it, although it doesn't keep me up at night."

Does the price of design or architecture reflect how good it is?

Van Duysen: "Absolutely not. I'm a democrat in heart and soul and appreciate simple, affordable things. I don't discriminate between clients. I'll do anything to realize a project when I connect with someone with an interesting vision, even when the budget is limited. I don't want to be categorized as someone who only works for the happy few. However, a project must remain lucrative. I'm responsible for the well-being of my employees. These are young people who have just gotten married, are expecting a baby, or bought something. During the economic crisis in 2008, I had to lay off half of my team. So no, don't call me elitist."

Voorjans: "What's expensive isn't necessarily good, but the nature of the materials I work with ensures, sooner or later, that the costs add up. Materials will become more and more expensive in the future. So, then why are we still working? Because we create something that you can't buy off the shelf. Doing so might work as well, but we don't do that. With us, everything has to be custom-made just for that one project. So, if it's just about shopping here and there: that's not our job. Right?"

Vincent Van Duysen and Gert Voorjans talked at length about how they experience art in space, the influence of their parents on their life choices and remaining calm during times of crisis. They also talked about the skills and motivation an architect must have and the developments in their profession. You can listen to their conversation on the Dutch-spoken podcast 'Tegenpolen' via <https://weekend.knack.be/podcast/>

ID Vincent Van Duysen

- Born in Lokeren, Belgium. Obtained his architecture degree at Sint-Lucas in Ghent and interned with Aldo Cibic in Milan and Jean De Meulder in Antwerp.
- Founded Vincent Van Duysen Architects in 1989, which currently consists of thirty employees. Their work ranges from product design for numerous brands to commercial and large-scale architectural projects and residences across the world.
- Known for reducing designs to their very essence. His use of pure and tactile materials translates into a sleek, timeless design in which the sensory experience of a space is central.
- Received several awards, including the Flemish Culture Prize, Designer of the Year and the Henry van de Velde Lifetime Achievement Award. In addition, architectural Digest included his name on several occasions in its AD100 list.
- Became creative director at the Italian brand Molteni&C en Dada in 2016.
- Well-known fans of his work include actress Julianne Moore, musician Kanye West and fashion designer Jenni Kayne.

ID Gert Voorjans

- Born in Stokkem, Belgium. Studied interior architecture in Hasselt and completed his education with post-graduate degrees in art history in Siena and Sotheby's in London.
- Joined Axel Vervoordt's team in 1988.
- Designs rich, layered interiors infused with colour, patterns and textures. Or, as Vogue put it: "*There is no place for timid, mundane, or formulaic in his design vocabulary, instead Gert's brilliantly coloured world celebrates the daring and the exceptional*".
- Created the interior of Dries Van Noten's first flagship store in Tokyo in 1996, after which he started his interior design studio. Numerous boutiques and residential projects followed. His clientele includes designers Edouard Vermeulen (Natan) and Inge Onsea (Essentiel), Nina Garcia (editor-in-chief of Elle) and rock star Mick Jagger.
- Authored several books, including Interior Life and Collectibles (Lannoo).
- Works as a guest designer at Jim Thompson Fabrics, a manufacturer of luxurious interior textiles and wallpapers.
- Was named one of the world's top 100 decorators in 2020 by AD France.
- Will deliver his first hotel project next year: the renovation of a five-star hotel of luxury hotel group Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts in a Unesco-protected nature reserve in Hangzhou, China.