



The View From Above

The Belgian architect Bernard Dubois is creating eye-popping interiors all over the world. His own apartment is a simpler—but no less arresting—affair.

By Christopher Bollen

*Photographed by
Lukas Wassmann*

Some designers regard their homes as the consummate showrooms for their visual sensibility. Others treat them as relaxed crash pads a world apart from the rigors of their work life. For the 42-year-old Brussels-based architect and designer Bernard Dubois, a sprawling, high-in-the-sky, light-strewn apartment turns out to be a little bit of both. Dubois's recently renovated home serves as a low-key ode to his personality and aesthetic obsessions. And just in case he misses the office too much, his company headquarters happens to be right across the hall, a commute of roughly seven seconds.

In the past few years, Dubois, a tall, lanky neo-Minimalist, has become one of the most in-demand designers working on either side of the Atlantic, taking on an array of projects that range from origami-like leather furniture pieces to the fabrication of an L-shaped, canal-front house in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, made of cast concrete and travertine stone. Unsurprisingly for a designer who has a penchant for clean, near-to-abstract forms, Dubois has become particularly celebrated for his elegant yet breathable interiors. "I'm a minimalist despite myself," he admits, laughing. "I'm Belgian, so that's my background."

Dubois grew up in a family of doctors and engineers in the suburb of Lasne, a 45-minute drive from Brussels. In college, he studied chemistry before finding his artistic groove in photography. Eventually, his fascination with form and function migrated to architecture, and he graduated in 2009 from the prestigious La Cambre architecture school. Dubois didn't wait long to make his foray into the art world—his first commission consisted of a white marble shelving system for Balice Hertling Gallery in Paris, followed in 2013 by a sleek wood and marble desk for Patricia Low Contemporary gallery in Gstaad. But it was his inclusion in the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, at the age of 34, that put him squarely on the map. He had applied with three friends a year earlier, and they were selected to participate by none other than star architect Rem Koolhaas, who was a committee judge. "The project was a study of the vernacular of Belgian interiors, so basically we drove around looking inside hundreds of people's homes," Dubois explains. He and his cohorts catalogued all manner of design trends, among them the shift from the fireplace hearth to the television as the focal point of the living room.

Soon after, Dubois opened his own firm and found his first wave of success in home, retail, and restaurant renovations. "I started working from an architectural point of view," he says of what sets his interiors apart from those of designers who focus on more decorative elements like fabrics or lighting. "I consider space, perspective, assembly, and a hierarchy of forms. I gravitate toward raw and natural materials, but they're there to serve the principles of architecture." His memorable interventions include sumptuously monastic retail and artistic temples (the Icicle showrooms in Paris and Shanghai, with their austere curves; the Courrèges stores in Paris, in hushed monochrome spliced with mirrors; the Xavier Hufkens gallery in Brussels, featuring minimal concrete accented with birch plywood cladding) and more intimate and personable domestic residences. He particularly excels at working with clients who have extensive art collections. "It's a constant back-and-forth between the functionality of the plan, the space, and the art," Dubois says of these projects. He likens the various elements of design to characters in a movie or a play: "how they relate to each other and, in putting them together, how they create a story."

Post-pandemic business is booming for the young designer, who currently oversees 12 employees and maintains a satellite apartment in Paris to keep up with meetings. Aside from

This page: Bernard Dubois on the terrace of his Brussels apartment. Opposite: Tangible Abstraction Grande Table Pliable and Petite Chaise, the desk and chair Dubois and Isaac Reina designed for Maniera.



Dubois mentions that Belgian designers are known to be “humble and bold at the same time,” which is the perfect description of his own decor. It’s style that doesn’t overwhelm, taste that feels both intentional and capable of endless improvisations and metamorphoses.



This page, from top: In the living room, design icons such as the Soriana sofas by Afra and Tobia Scarpa, the FM62 chairs by Radboud van Beekum, and the Vase 8 by Mario Botta surround Dubois’s irreverent coffee table made of bricks; Dubois, with a Mezzoracolo orb lamp by Gae Aulenti; a Ciuingam sofa by De Pas, D’Urbino, and Lomazzi, flanked by a late-19th-century Japanese mortar stool (left) and a 1950s African stargazing chair, with Léon Wuidar’s *Juin 98*, 1998, on the wall.



the Fort Lauderdale house, his latest projects include a hotel in the heart of Brussels, a restaurant in Miami Beach, a duplex apartment in the Invalides neighborhood of Paris, and a residence in Waterloo, Belgium, consisting of concrete slabs that grow progressively wider as they emerge from the ground.

Despite Dubois’s aesthetically adventurous and technically ambitious projects, when it came to creating his own spaces, his approach was far humbler. In 2017, he purchased a large 14th-floor apartment in a 1960s white modernist high-rise on the south side of Brussels. Called La Magnanerie, the enormous 17-story building looms over the green parks of Forest, one of the city’s quieter residential communes. Dubois initially used the flat as a personal office, until one day he noticed a real estate agent haunting his neighbor’s door. Dubois asked to see the nearly 2,400-square-foot apartment, which was decorated with faded fabric wall coverings, wall-to-wall carpeting, and cork panels—“every 1970s trend you can think of”—and agreed to buy it on the spot. He spent two years renovating it, and finally moved in last summer with his partner of nine years. He also turned his original apartment, across the hall, on the other side of the elevator, into the headquarters of Bernard Dubois Architects.

With his office 10 feet away, Dubois pointedly avoided making his residence a prototype of his design philosophy. “I’ve always differentiated where I live from where I work,” he says. “Plus, I had a very different budget than my clients. They tend to have a budget of 10 times as much as I do, sometimes 100 times. Also, for my clients, my intervention is much more present. Here, the idea was to keep the architectural spirit of the building.” That kind of modest approach meant painting the walls a muted white and choosing a light oak parquet for the floors, which gives warmth and spaciousness to the rooms without calling attention to itself. The designer’s



This page, clockwise from top left: The spare kitchen features birch plywood cabinetry; the dining table, designed by Dubois, is paired with Seconda chairs by Mario Botta, with a fruit basket by Ettore Sottsass on top and a Vase 9 by Mario Botta in the background; a photograph of the North Sea, taken by Dubois, with a chair by Studio Mumbai/Bijoy Jain for Maniera and an Onfale lamp.



insistence on maintaining the character of the midcentury modernist architecture is apparent even in his choice of accessories, such as the vintage light switches that fit the style of the time.

Nevertheless, Dubois's distinctive taste comes through in idiosyncratic touches, like the birch plywood kitchen cabinets (complete with orbicular hand-carved knobs); the smooth, cellular concrete blocks used as bed platforms; and the hand-selected red bricks stacked loosely on their sides to create a Carl Andre-esque coffee table on a cream Moroccan rug. From the living room, with its bountiful banks of windows, Dubois can look out across the lush landscape for miles, all the way to the stainless steel Atomium landmark in the north ("Belgium's Eiffel Tower," as the designer calls it, built for the 1958 World's Fair). The bedrooms, on the opposite side of the apartment, offer similarly majestic views, punctuated in the far distance by "the Lion of Waterloo," a memorial to the historic Napoleonic battle of 1815. Sunrises and sunsets are a main attraction, washing the walls orange and pink.

Given the minimal architecture, Dubois wanted his art and furniture to take center stage. "It's like when you're a child or a student," the designer says, "and you just collect the things around you

that you like. That's how I wanted to treat this place. I like things I relate to intimately." In keeping with this casual ethos, art books are piled in corners or next to chairs. Small, unassuming vases hold bundles of wildflowers. Low lamps and sculptures sit directly on the floor. Taking pride of place are the art photographs that inspired his early interest in the medium: a black and white male nude by Robert Mapplethorpe ("the first work I collected") and a Rineke Dijkstra color portrait of a handsome young French foreign legionnaire. Other artworks include an abstract painting by the overlooked Belgian artist Léon Wuidar, a trippy collage by Sterling Ruby, and an emotional father-son letter work by Danh Vo.

Dubois likes to mix furniture styles—placing, say, a 19th-century Japanese wood workman stool next to a late-1960s bulbous metal lamp by Gae Aulenti, across the way from a set of 1980s Mario Botta black dining room chairs and a tin vase in the form of a human hand, also by Botta. This eclectic mélange includes furniture that Dubois himself designed, like the long caramel lacquer dining room table and a geometric leather wall sculpture that folds out into a writing desk. Dubois mentions that Belgian designers are known to be "humble and bold at the same time," which is the perfect description of his own decor. It's style that doesn't overwhelm, taste that feels both intentional and capable of endless improvisations and metamorphoses.

Along with his slew of upcoming projects, Dubois is also debuting a show of his own vases, tables, lamps, and stools this month at the Belgian gallery Maniera. But perhaps the most exciting prospect on the horizon is back in his native Lasne. "As a boy, I wanted to escape Lasne to come to the city, and now that I'm working all over the world, I've noticed that it's so beautiful and full of nature," he says. He recently purchased a white brick midcentury bungalow there, which he describes as quite typical of the period—a fresh canvas on which to continue pursuing his idiosyncratic vision. "It doesn't need much work, just small stuff," Dubois says. He doesn't sound very convincing. ♦