

IN PERFECT BALANCE

East meets west at an entrepreneur's historic estate in the Belgian countryside, with interior design by Axel Vervoordt and grounds by landscape firm Wirtz International

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A 17th-century house anchors this expansive property in northwest Belgium. The home's interior design and the construction of two adjacent barns were overseen by Axel Vervoordt; the grounds were planned by Wirtz International. **OPPOSITE:** Linden trees shade a table for outdoor dining. For details see Sources.





Exploring this estate in the Belgian countryside is like looking through a kaleidoscope: Every turn brings a transformation. Intimate spaces give way to airy rooms, earth colors to pure whites, European influences to Asian ones. It's not a property that can be grasped immediately, but a gradually unfolding collection of buildings and gardens that share a fluidity of tone—one the owner delights in.

"It's like living in several houses at once," says the gentleman, an entrepreneur whose business interests range from fashion to real estate. "In most houses you're

obliged to do things in a particular place, but here we can move around." Meals, for example, can be taken in the kitchen/living area, the library, the garden, or in either of the two barns. "My friends and family like that. They ask, 'Where are we going to eat this evening?'"

Thirty-five years ago, when he bought the 50-acre property to serve as his primary residence, it consisted of a charming traditional 17th-century house—long and low, with a symmetry emphasized by stepped gables and dormer windows. Wanting to formalize what he describes as a "prairie of a garden," the owner turned to the doyen of Belgian landscape design, Jacques Wirtz, who used hornbeam hedges, yew topiary, and linden trees to divide the landscape into "rooms." "The closer to the house you get, the more intimate they become and the further away, the more open," explains Jacques's son Martin, who now leads the highly respected Wirtz International with his brother Peter. The effect is nearly that of walking through a maze: "It's very important to

ABOVE: Orderly allées of apple and pear trees and yew topiary in the estate's orchard.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: A narrow moat is sited to the northwest of the main house. The towering stepped hornbeam hedge provides privacy.



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The symmetry of the main house is emphasized by its dormer windows and stepped gables. Roses and boxwood soften the painted brick exterior.







be alone in your own little world,” says the owner. “I want to be able to swim where no one can see me in the pool, and when I’m walking in the garden I don’t want to take in everything at one time.”

For the house he first employed a Belgian designer known for her cool contemporary interiors; though he was pleased with the result, his family and friends found it uncomfortably stark. He also wanted to expand the building, and in the end he sought advice from Belgian antiquarian and interior designer Axel Vervoordt, famed for his eclectic and impeccable taste. “I told him I like purity and simplicity and warmth,” Vervoordt recalls. “A house to live in, not just to show.”

The designer suggested altering the roof to bring light into the hallway, creating a cozy library with a floor of reclaimed walnut, and, to provide the needed expansion, adding a barn at the home’s eastern end. With its bare beams (which Vervoordt salvaged from the 1980s restoration of the Louvre), compacted-earth floor, and

enormous smoke-blackened chimney breast, the barn looks as if it has been there forever—even as it enjoys the benefits of underfloor heating, air-conditioning, and an industrial kitchen that can cater parties for 400.

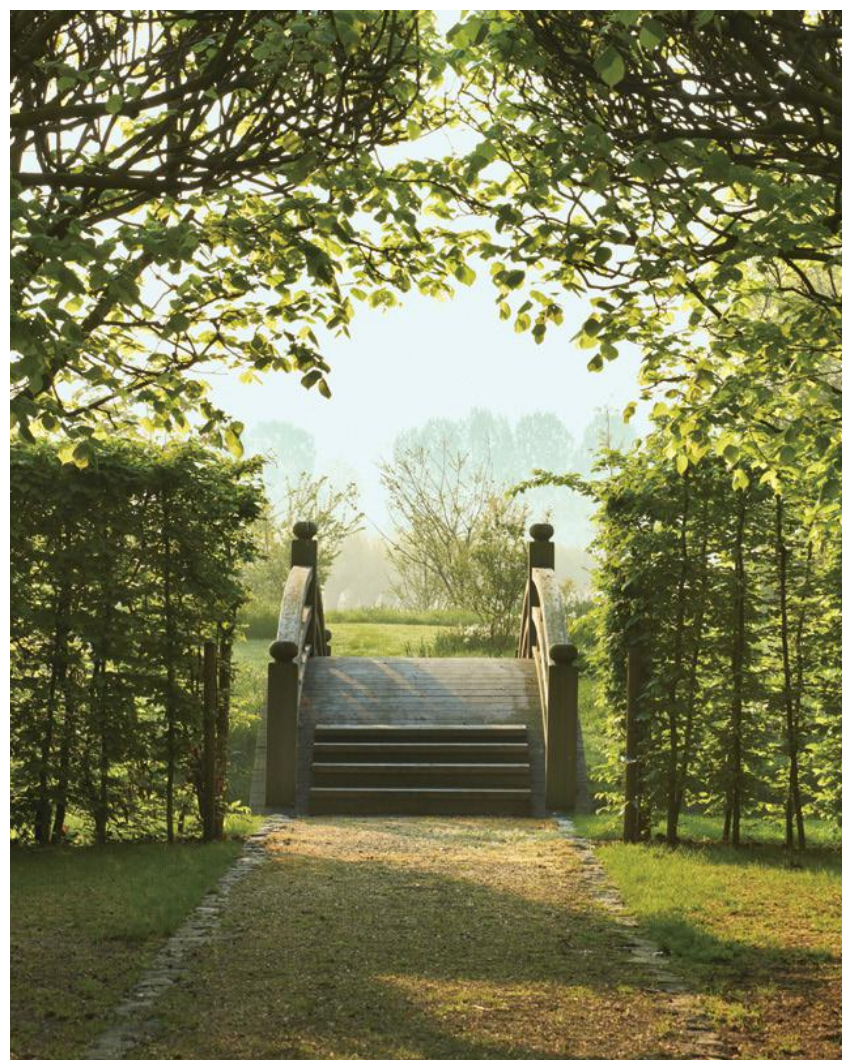
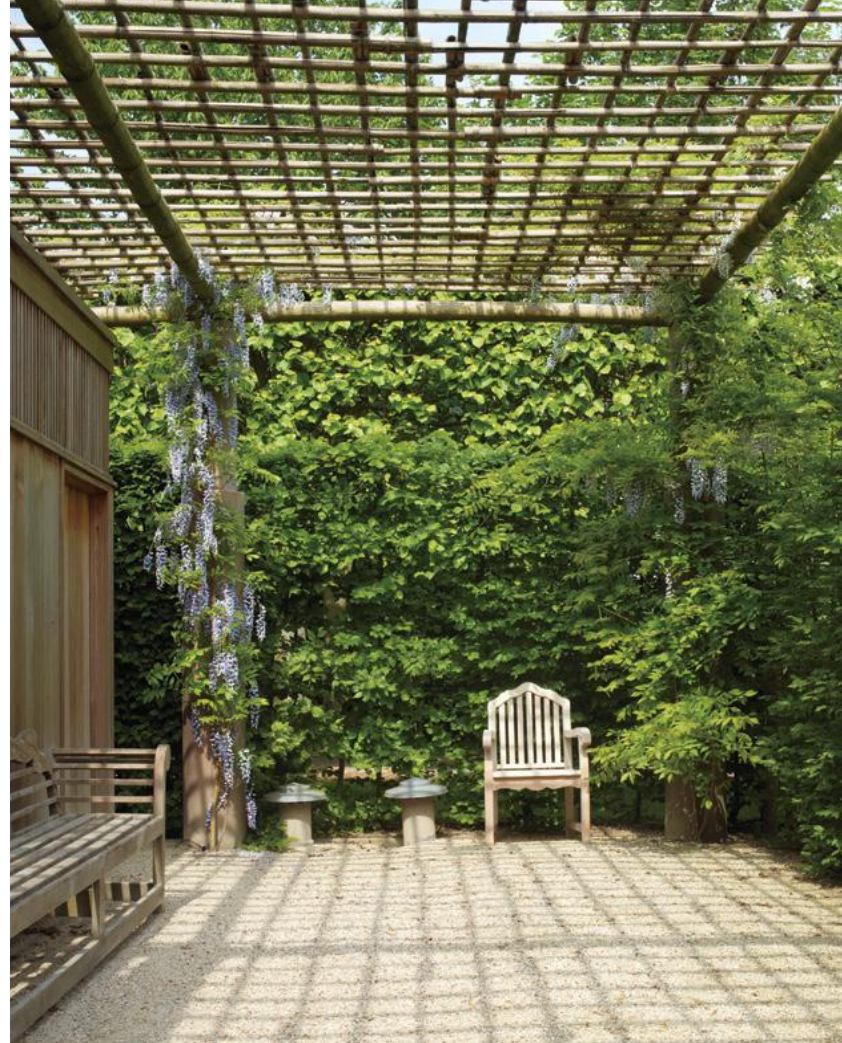
To connect the two buildings, Vervoordt refurbished a staircase worthy of a Wagnerian stage set that leads to a capacious underground chamber. This large space doubles as a music room and art gallery, displaying works by such artists as El Anatsui, Saburo Murakami, and Marthe Wéry—all bought on Vervoordt’s recommendation—as well as a Native American headdress. “It’s very important to take the best of every civilization,” says Vervoordt. “This is a house you can travel in.”

The barn to the east left Vervoordt with a problem though. “There was a lack of balance,” he explains. “The house demands symmetry.” So the designer contacted Tatsuro Miki, a Japanese architect friend based in Brussels, and together with the owner they traveled to Japan to buy a *minka*, or thatched barn, that would act

ABOVE: The main entrance leads to an airy hall with antique oak flooring and a double stair.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In the living room, the cocktail table and slipcovered sofa and club chairs are by Vervoordt; the antique armchairs are Louis XIII. The light-flooded master bath. The seating in the library is 18th-century English.







The property's 17th-century dovecote features a studded door. **ABOVE:** A simple thatched pool pavilion sits adjacent to the Japanese barn, or *minka*, visible at right. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The dovecote was once used as an observation post during the Dutch Revolt. Chinese wisteria climbs an arbor by Wirtz. A view of the moat's footbridge, framed by hornbeam trees. A pergola festooned with wisteria.



The traditional minka barn, with its shallow pool and sunken dining area, was transported from Japan and reconstructed on-site. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:** A Flemish-style earthen-floor barn stands to the east of the house. The underground gallery displays works by, from left, Richard Serra, Kazuo Shiraga, and Saburo Murakami.







The minka serves as a tranquil retreat for baths, simple meals, and massages; its sliding door opens wide to the garden.

as the home's second bookend. Some 200 years old, the barn was transported to the Flemish countryside and reconstructed by a dozen Japanese craftsmen, using (the owner notes proudly) not a single nail.

The minka's main room—simply furnished, like the European barn—contains a traditional Japanese stove, a shallow pool, and a sunken eating area. Off it are a massage room and a bathroom with a pinewood tub; steep steps lead up to a bedroom tucked under the rafters. On a warm day, with birdsong echoing from the garden, it is a cool, tranquil haven.

For the owner the structure's unadorned appeal recalls a monastery he visited while in Japan. "It was the most beautiful place I have ever seen," he says. "It wasn't luxurious, but it was authentic." Vervoordt, meanwhile, was sufficiently inspired by the minka to write a book on the Japanese concept of *wabi*: the timeless beauty to be found in humble, imperfect objects. (He's now designing a property for Robert De Niro in New York City's Tribeca area along the same lines.)

The entrepreneur takes great pleasure in the evolution of his home. "Often designers ignore the personality of the owner," he says. "But Axel Vervoordt tries to understand you—how you live, and how you *want* to live." □