

Tales of the Unexpected

The home of Élise Van Thuyne

WORDS: AN MICHIELS



AUTODIDACT

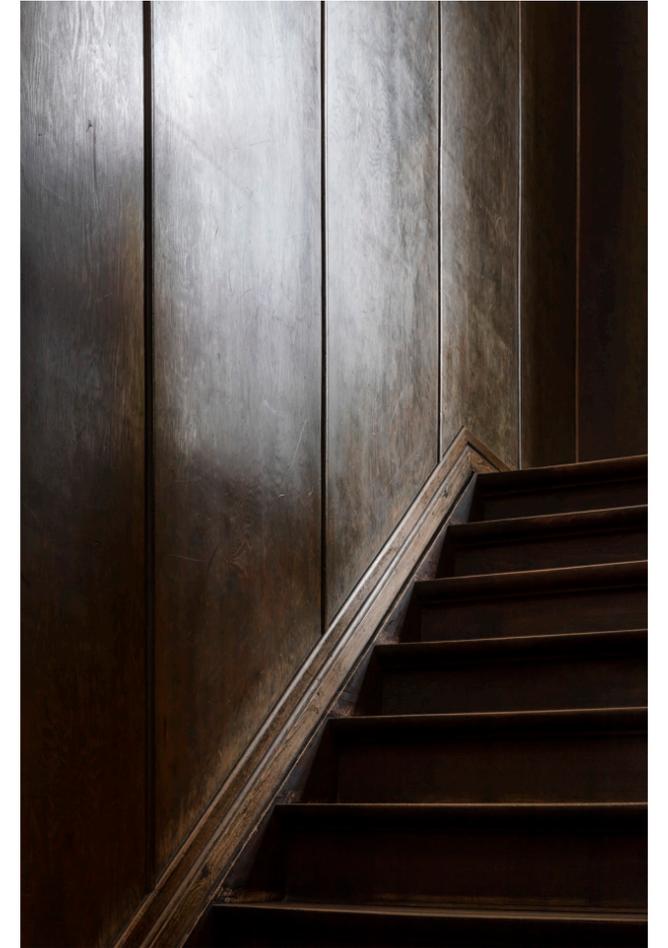
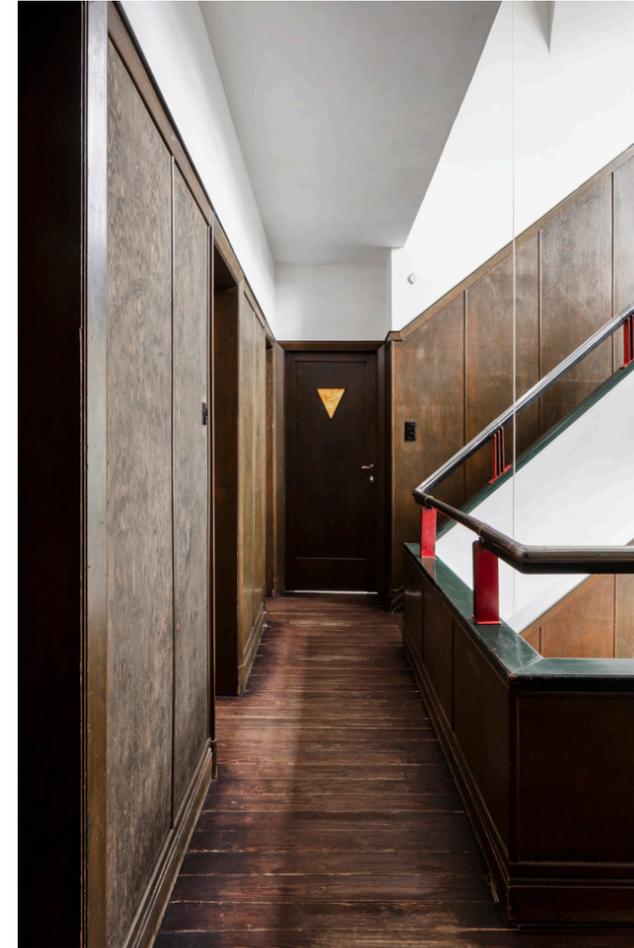
'I was trained as a linguist and entered the field of interior design from a completely different angle. What I actually do in my architectural reconversions is like 'writing a story with materials'. I construct a home, as if I would build up a novel. I am a real autodidact, in work, but also in life generally. I jump into the sea and I keep swimming.'



The day we meet interior designer Élise Van Thuyne to talk about the reconversion of her own home, she excitedly shows us a preview of the book that she has been working on for the past year. It marks an important point in her career. After 13 years, rolling from one assignment to another, she has taken time to stop, take stock and document her past work; with a group of collaborators and artists that are dear to her.

To her own amazement she can look back on an impressive 72 reconversions, mostly residential projects. The book is as unconventional as her path in life, and it offers a very personal look into the nooks and crannies of her work. It reads like a metaphor for her approach capturing her intuitive, experimental and collaborative spirit.

Élise's interventions are very much informed by contextual finds, and she has a great talent for gentle reappropriation. Her own home is in the final stages of reconversion. It was built in 1936 for a respected linguist (an interesting coincidence as Élise also trained in the same field.) Originally a lone country house, it is now surrounded by the urban sprawl on the outskirts of Ghent. She found the house around 8 years ago, prompted by someone who was describing its authenticity. She went to visit it, fell instantly in love, and bought it the next day. There was an immediate attraction to making this abandoned and dilapidated house a home for herself and her two boys. The house has proved a force to be reckoned with, it's a building that has not been easy to change, but it's a challenge that Élise has happily embraced.



EMBRACING CHALLENGES

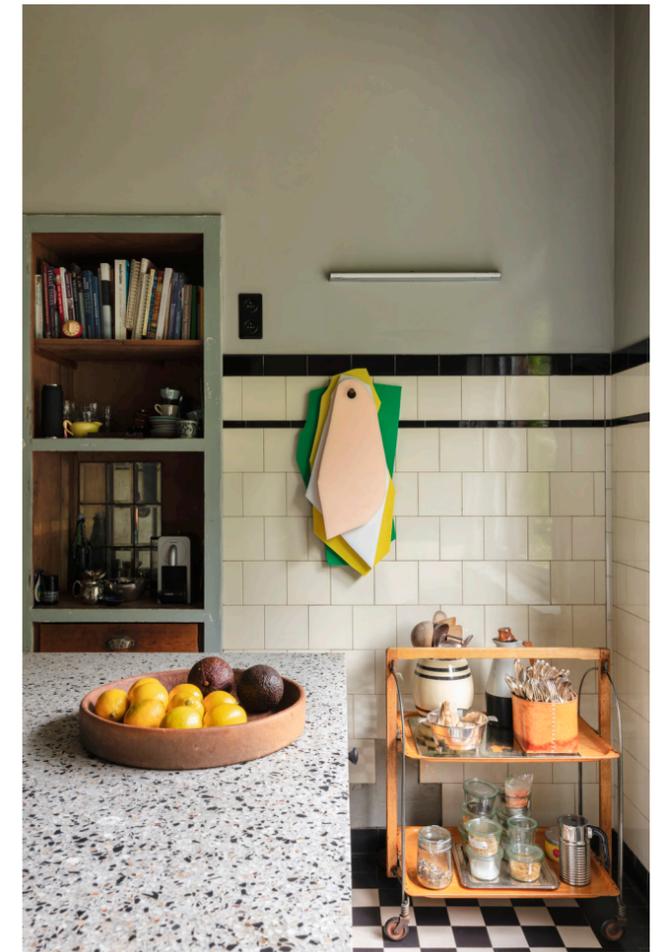
‘This house dictates certain things that can’t be ignored. One of those challenges is the single-glazed corridor with stained glass, which is cool in summer, but absolutely cold in winter. It is literally like living at the pace of the seasons, but I wouldn’t want it differently. We accept it and I don’t feel like putting in extra glazing, which would obscure the details of the original design.’



INSIDE OUT

'The original owner of the house was also a linguist who worked from home a lot. He had the house built by an interior designer. You can feel this in the many ways that the interior manifests itself through details and unexpected corners. The beautiful reflections of the sunlight through the stained glass and the triangular door windows create an ever-changing atmosphere.'





THE INVISIBLE MARK

'I respect the context and try not to remove too much but neither do I shy away from experiments. It is a subtle balancing act. What do we have and what do we do with it? In my house you get the strange feeling that nothing has been changed at all, but then again, it was a serious reconversion. Most of the floors and the timber paneling were left untouched, but the "soft parts" were completely gutted and replaced to allow for new openings and a complete electrical update.'



TACTILITY

'I love art, but my bedroom is too small to cover the walls in paintings, so I decided to turn the walls themselves into a canvas. The wall was covered in weaved jute, which was then painted with white chalk. The subtle tactility of the walls has a very calming effect and has turned the room into an intimate cocoon.'





AUTHENTICITY

‘It is a confronting house. It might sound strange, but its authenticity doesn’t allow you to be something that you are not. It demands honesty and it doesn’t allow you to manipulate it completely. When I saw all the wood paneling at first, it was dark and overwhelming. I decided to keep it, but to paint all the upper parts of the walls in white. This framed the paneling, they become almost abstract and it made the rooms much more airy and contemporary. It is a constant quest to find the balance between keeping and removing.’

AUTONOMOUS FURNITURE

‘Two years ago, after a lot of hesitation, a good friend who is an expert carpenter, convinced me to create a series of furniture. He saw how much detail I put into my work and kept saying that I should share it with a broader audience. I created three prototypes. They demonstrate the possibility to build a refined cabinet with stacked raw materials and very straightforward joinery. One of them is placed in my living room as if it was created especially for it, which is a coincidence really. The creation of these autonomous objects made me realise how much I enjoy working freely, without a context. It marks a new step that gives me great satisfaction.’



Élise Van Thuyne's book 'The Invisible Mark' is published by Luster.