

A Portuguese Hideaway That's Part Refuge, Part Shrine

For his vacation home near Comporta, the Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen has conceived of a sand-colored, bunkerlike home that blends seamlessly into its surroundings.

By Kurt Soller

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VIEWED FROM THE end of a long, dry dirt driveway on an October morning, the house looks like nothing special: a decommissioned military bunker, maybe, though barely recognizable as that, a pair of one-story, sand-colored rectangle structures nestled against a 45-degree dune like a set of dresser drawers. But once you get closer, you see that their ordinariness is an illusion. Here, in Melides, Portugal, a half-hour drive down the coast from the stylish resort town of Comporta, the 57-year-old Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen and Mateo Bou Bahler, his 30-year-old boyfriend, a model, sit in the shade of the umbrella-shaped Mediterranean pines on the grounds of Casa M, a deceptively high-concept vacation compound built over three years by Van Duysen's 30-person Antwerp studio.

The 14-acre, 7,104-square-foot complex — which includes the main U-shaped house, a detached garage with a rooftop pool and a guest cabana — is, for the man who conceived it, both a disappearing act and the purest expression of the texture-obsessed, materials-driven strain of modernism that has defined his work for more than three decades. Though Van Duysen's sparsely furnished, whitewashed, raw-wood-hewn residences and commercial projects throughout Europe, including the August hotel in Antwerp and the Aesop store in Hamburg, have established him as one of design's leading minimalists, he detests the label; he's always felt his work is softer, richer and more livable than the movement with which he's often associated. "You could call this minimal, but it's not minimalist," he says of Casa M. He prefers the term "warm Brutalist" instead, suggesting an approachable, even sumptuous take on the concrete-driven construction that in the mid-20th century challenged the steel-and-glass orthodoxy of the International Style. With an exterior of exposed aggregate (a type of concrete left unsealed to reveal its craggy components) tinted a bone hue that Van Duysen tested a dozen times to ensure it would vanish, mirage-like, into its sandy surroundings, the compound achieves the opposite effect of its Brutalist forebears, which overpowered cityscapes.

This recessiveness is especially apparent in the 4,520-square-foot main house, with its nine-foot-tall sliding wooden barn doors of caramel-colored Brazilian ipe, invulnerable to the elements, and wall-size expanses of glass that fold like accordions to transform the three-bedroom residence into an open-air pavilion, complete with an unadorned colonnade that references clean-lined Greco-Roman classicism. Looking out in every direction, you realize the lot is entirely void of greenery beyond a few errant cork trees and dozens of native pines that throw feathery shadows on the concrete as the sun shifts throughout the day. Van Duysen considered adding plants along the walls but decided their natural shapes and verdant hues clashed with the property's lunar-like severity; when wild grasses sprout, he pulls them up and rakes the terrain smooth. "I wanted to build something that's embedded in the landscape, almost hedonistically," he says. "I wanted to literally have the dunes rolling into my house."



In the kitchen, counters of sandstone and ipe wood cabinets. The faucet is by Cea Design, and the bowls are by Van Duysen from When Objects Work. The terra-cotta tiles match those on the exterior. Ricardo Labogue



In the living room, from left, a chair by José Zanine Caldas in macanaiba wood, a pair of 1958 chairs by Lina Bo Bardi in tropical hardwood, a table by Atelier Carlos Motta in peroba rosa wood and a custom sofa designed by Van Duysen with cushions and fabric by Catherine Huyghe. Ricardo Laboughe



An Isamu Noguchi lantern hangs over a square ipe table and chairs designed by Van Duysen and fabricated by local craftspeople. The fireplace floats between the living and dining areas. Ricardo Labougle

IN ADDITION TO the emotional appeal of a home that seems to crouch in its surroundings, there was a practical reason as well for his muted approach: Van Duysen wasn't originally permitted to create something so large here. He first traveled to the region more than a decade ago to visit his friend, the Portuguese architect Manuel Aires Mateus, known for his blocky white stucco homes in and around Melides, a serene town in a region that has, of late, welcomed residents such as the French shoe designer Christian Louboutin and the German painter Anselm Kiefer. While on vacation in 2014, Van Duysen toured the plot, which is a few miles from the coast, and knew it was the only place he could imagine building a refuge: "It gave me a sense of protection and well-being, and it was close to the sea — without seeing the sea," he says. "The ocean is very restless. Facing it would also make me restless."

But when he tried to buy the land, Van Duysen was told that zoning laws required any new construction be limited to around 2,000 square feet and be related "to agriculture or agrotourism." The architect considered creating a cluster of cabins that referenced the country's vernacular fishing shacks, with their dried-reed walls and roofs, a popular typology among Comporta's luxury-hotel developers. But that felt clichéd. Instead, over the next few years, Van Duysen (citing the 7,265-square-foot dwelling that once stood on the site) won clearance by village authorities to build something larger and more architecturally relevant.

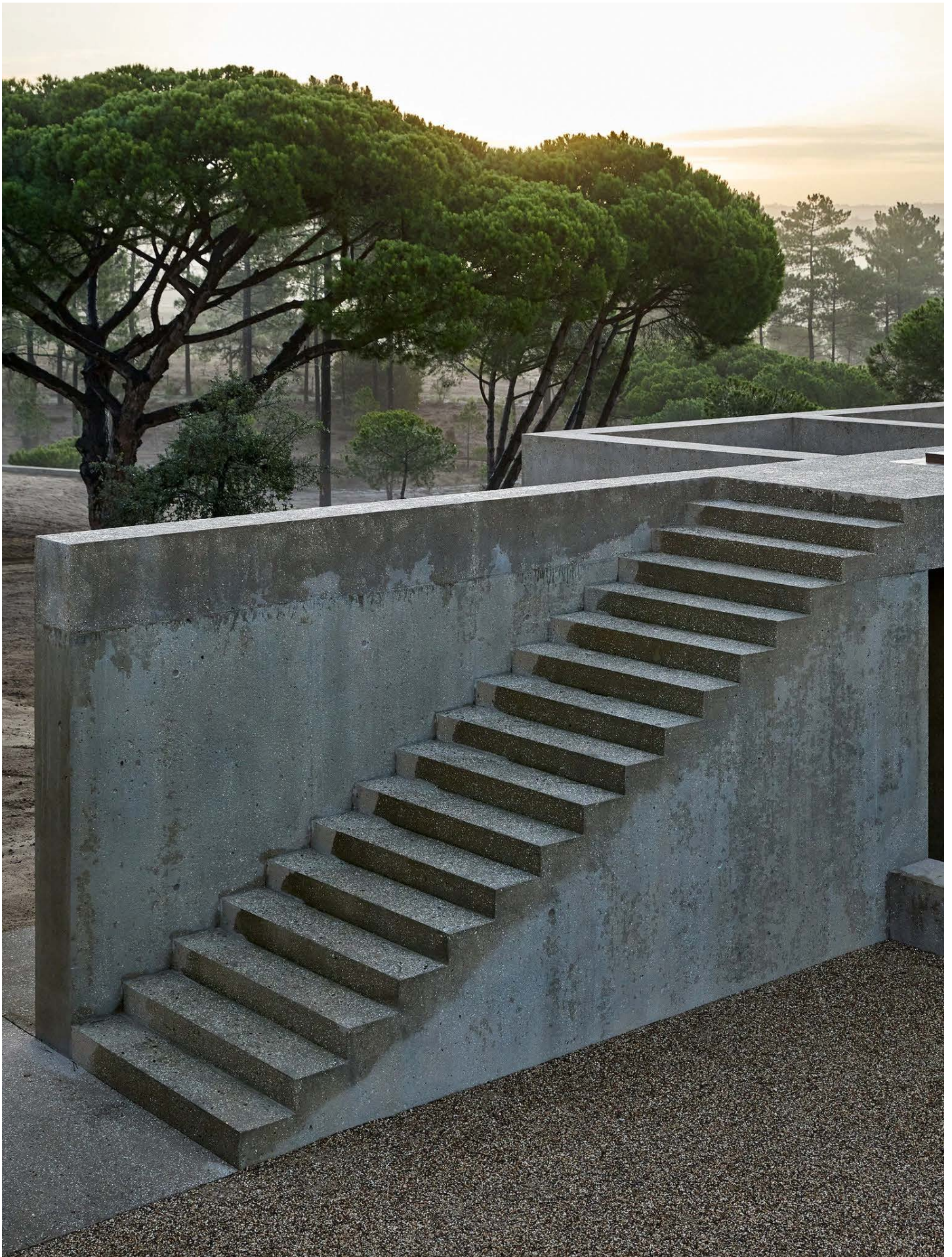
What he envisioned was a monument that might outlive him, one that, paradoxically, could enshrine the career from which he was seeking reprieve. Though he doesn't usually work with concrete, he chose the material in part because it alludes to one of his first major commissions two decades ago: the corporate campus of Concordia Textiles in Waregem, Belgium, a 19,375-square-foot row of boxes made from concrete, glass and steel. He also studied some of the world's most enduring examples of residential design, including the Italian architect Adalberto Libera's 1942 Casa Malaparte, which retreats into Capri's rocky hillside; the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe's 1940s-era Ghost Ranch home in New Mexico, known for its colossal yet humble adobe structures; the 1968 Cuadra San Cristóbal estate designed by the Mexican architect Luis Barragán north of Mexico City, with its courtyard and abundance of right angles; and the Danish architect Jorn Utzon's 1972 family home near Portopetro in Majorca, rimmed like a fortress by several pale pillars. "I wanted the house to become an icon," he says. "It's hard-core but with soft content."

The same could be said of Van Duysen. After graduating with an architecture degree in 1985, he got his start in Milan's postmodern scene, notably under the designer Aldo Cibic, a member of the Memphis group whom Van Duysen credits with encouraging him to concentrate on the elemental shapes that still dominate his work. After he returned to Antwerp to establish his practice in the early '90s, the British designer Ilse Crawford, then the editor of *Elle Decoration*, praised his novel use of pale poplar and off-white linen,

which heralded the now much-copied Belgian aesthetic. Throughout his career, he has been among the few architects of his generation to create everything from tableware to entire apartment towers — he currently oversees the Italian furniture conglomerate Molteni&C Dada and collaborates on the creative team behind the German textile brand Sahco. Throughout his firm's residential commissions, he has given equal consideration to objects and buildings, interiors and exteriors, landscapes and structures, rooms and their décor, eschewing the traditional divisions between architects, makers and interior decorators: “We never build anything without envisioning everything inside it.”



An alternate view of the living room. Ricardo Labougle



The stairway leads to a roof covered in custom terra-cotta tiles. Ricardo Labougle





The glass doors from the living room open entirely onto a central columned space. The color of the exterior blends in with the surrounding sand. Ricardo Labougle



In the guest bedroom, which has its own adjacent courtyard, a lamp designed by Van Duysen from FLOS and a chair, also designed by Van Duysen, made by a local carpenter. Ricardo Labougle

CASA M'S RIGOROUS planning is especially clear in the late afternoon sun, when the 20-foot concrete staircase that slashes perpendicularly from one side of the house casts stark diagonal shadows across the pebbled courtyard below. These steps lead to a balustrade-free rooftop deck, its terra-cotta floor tiles hand-painted a burnished red and installed without grout to add dimension and enhance their symmetry. The same eight-inch-square tiles cover the roof's two chimneys — one for the kitchen's oven hood, another for the fireplace — and downstairs, they serve as a grid for the home's entire floor plan, with the rugs, walls, tables and toilets all lined up against their edges.

Despite the neutral palette and uncompromising austerity, the house manages to feel comfortable, thanks to its nubby textiles throughout and the fact that the rooms offer only the necessities: The two guest bedrooms include little more than ipe side tables and matching beds designed by Van Duysen and built by local craftspeople; the master suite on the opposite side is slightly more opulent, with a free-standing stone bathtub in front of a floor-to-ceiling window that frames the undulating hills. The central 14-foot-long sitting area is similarly streamlined, with a Van Duysen-designed sofa in beige Belgian linen against the back wall, a pair of low chairs carved in tropical hardwood by the Italian-born Brazilian Modernist Lina Bo Bardi in 1958 — an allusion to Portugal's colonialist history — and, in black linen, two of the high-backed English reading chairs that Van Duysen has had custom-made for many of his projects. Though he collects contemporary art, particularly photographs by the likes of Nan Goldin, Robert Mapplethorpe and

Wolfgang Tillmans, which he displays in his Antwerp home, Van Duysen plans to leave Casa M's walls blank, fearing that anything decorative — beyond the Isamu Noguchi lantern that hangs over his bespoke ipe dining table — will cloud the visual clarity. “Here,” he says “the nature is a living painting.”

Nowhere is that more evident than the pool deck. This 15-by-52-foot plaza is engineered so precisely atop the car park that, despite the slope of the terrain, the narrow cerulean-tiled pool and the small parcel of man-made beach that fronts it seem to sit level with the roof of the main house. While reclining in one of the ipe-and-cotton-fabric daybeds of his design, Van Duysen can gaze out over the horizon, the sun melting into the rice paddies in the distance, all but forgetting the concrete sanctuary beneath him and, too, the ambition that spurred it. “It’s a shelter where I can escape from all of those demands,” he says. “Where I can disconnect from what people expect — yet in a way that still feels architecturally significant.” This is where he and Bahler spend most afternoons at Casa M, swimming laps, listening to Brazilian jazz and awaiting the usual early evening arrival of a muster of squawking storks. They have taken shelter in his pines, never seeming to notice that Van Duysen has carved his indelible mark into the dunes, changing them, and himself, forever.

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