

SOOTHINGLY SEAMLESS

This architect's seaside retreat is an ode to minimalism and the belief that the key to calm lies in often-overlooked details

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A refuge far away from the polluted city air was the dream for Antwerp-based architect Mark Mertens, founder of AM Designs. And he discovered it, in the small seaside village of Retranchement. With fewer than a thousand inhabitants, this sleepy spot in the Netherlands is just an hour and a half drive away, but may as well be another world. It's the ideal place for Mark and his family (plus English springer spaniel Alfred) to recharge their batteries – not just at weekends, but often for impromptu trips that help him to maintain an enviable base level of calm.

Built in the 1950s, the four-bedroom cottage is situated on a quiet street, one of a row of six homes in the local architectural style. Externally, Mark respected its original dimensions, maintaining the high pitched roof and black frames around the windows and doors, but simplifying the overall look with a seamless coat of Mortex – a mineral-based plaster that creates an appearance similar to waxed concrete. The biggest changes have been inside, where, Mark admits, 'we took out everything we could, completely changing the floorplan on both storeys'. He also built a cabin in the back garden, which functions as an extra bedroom when he's not in there painting.

The finished property is testament to Mark's design preferences, which tend towards the ascetic, but it was also influenced by a recent trip to Japan (the spiritual home of modern minimalism). 'One of my sons works there and, after many visits, I was feeling very inspired. Then this project came across my desk,' he explains. 'I poured a lot of ideas I'd distilled into this house and the garden, too.'

Describing the stripped-back approach that his studio is known for, Mark talks of minimising the number of materials used to create something timeless. Here, that translated into a palette of Douglas-fir wood (used to create the ceiling beams, cabinets and much of the furniture), Ceppo di Gré stone (featured on the kitchen splashback and in the bathroom) and, for the walls and floors, more Mortex.

'In all of our projects, we are very much focused on the details,' says Mark, who believes that paying attention to the smaller things can have big results. He is a stickler for a synchronised approach. As he explains: 'If a door is one height, you will find those same dimensions repeated everywhere. The edge of the kitchen cabinetry in this home, for instance, aligns perfectly with the ceiling beams. It's exacting, and you may not clock the precision straight away but,' says Mark, 'you notice it without seeing it.' It gives you what he calls the 'feel-good vibe', which, he adds, 'is only achieved by hours and hours of work'. That may sound tiring, but the relaxation afforded by knowing that things are done just so is invaluable. There's an undeniable serenity to this perfectionist's paradise. amdesigns.com

Exterior Mark's partner and English springer spaniel Alfred enjoy the garden at the rear of this contemporary seaside home in Retranchement ►





Kitchen Boasting a seamless connection to the garden thanks to bi-fold cast-iron doors, this calming space has a restrained material palette – Douglas fir for the bespoke cabinetry, dining table and built-in bench seating, plus floors and walls coated in Mortex. The tap is from Vola and the pendant lights, in a matching metallic finish, are from the 'Bulb' collection by Am Designs. The teapot is the 'Theo' from Danish brand Stelton, which also created the wooden serving board. On the shelving sits a sculpture and print by Swedish artist Marie Beckman ►

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Living room Connected to the open-plan kitchen/diner, this is a space designed to relax. The sofa is the 'Eclipse' by Am Designs, upholstered in Berber fabric. The 'Boxy' rug and coffee table made using Ceppo di Gré stone are also by Am Designs. The floor lamp is the 'Daphne Terra' by Tommaso Cimini for Lumina. A large potted palm brings the greenery of the garden further into this home ►





Bedroom Building the bed into a boxed-off space in front of the window frames the view and makes the most of a small floorplan. The bedding is from Am Designs and the wall light is by DCW Éditions **Bathroom** The all-white scheme in this space (even the taps from Vola co-ordinate) is only broken by the Ceppo di Gré stone used to line the dual basins ►





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Main bedroom Sheer Belgian-linen curtains from Am Designs allow this monochrome space to be flooded with natural light. The pendant light is from the ‘Bulb’ collection by Am Designs, the wall lamp is from DCW Éditions and the bench was also sourced by Mark’s company – for similar, try the ‘Le Roi’ bench by NORR11. **See Stockists page for details** 