BY DESIGN

A Designer Creates a Secret Garden in a Dutch Former Factory

Valentin Loellmann shares his home with the trees that inspire his work.

The walnut-clad kitchen of the furniture designer Valentin Loellmann's home in Maastricht, the Netherlands, overlooks the building's indoor garden.

By Gisela Williams Photographs by Kasia Gatkowska
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The German furniture and interior designer Valentin Loellmann, 39, was a restless child. Growing up on a farm in the southern state of Baden-Württemberg, he would rearrange his bedroom weekly in an attempt to feel more in tune with his surroundings. "If I dreamed about being in a jungle, I would cut some branches, dig up some plants from the garden and install everything in my room," he says.

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Some 30 years later, Loellmann continues to reimagine his environment more regularly than most. "I've made peace with the fact that I often feel lost," he says. "That's why I'm always making and remaking things. It's like therapy for me." His current home, a 3,800-square-foot section of an early 20th-century former hat factory in Maastricht, the Netherlands, has already been through several reinventions under his direction. When he first discovered the three-story brick building in 2010, not long after graduating from the Maastricht Institute of Arts, it was being used, in part, as a series of ateliers for painters. He rented a portion of the garage at the front, where he began to produce the organically shaped furniture for which he's become known: sinuous wood and metal tables, benches and cabinets with delicate branchlike legs, each piece hand-shaped and polished to a soft sheen.

In the primary bedroom, a painting by Paul Fägenskiöld and a Serge Mouille lamp hang over a bed and side table of Loellmann's own design.

In the living room, a 1999 photograph by Nobuyoshi Araki from his "Grand Diary of a Photo Maniac" series hangs behind a Blüthner piano that once belonged to Loellmann's grandfather.

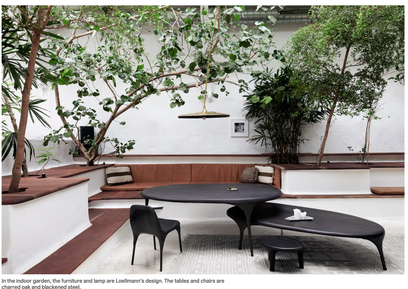
Later, he started tending to the building's 2,700-square-foot backyard, even installing a 1920s glass orangery, which was sourced from a vintage dealer in Belgium, at the rear of the property. In 2012, he bought the building, eventually turning it into a work space for the three team members he employed at the time. But before he did, he opened up the center of the structure to create an enclosed 2,000-square-foot garden, planted with exotic flowering saplings — including hibiscus, plumeria and cinnamon — and illuminated by large rectangular skylights. "Everything, my company included, grows from the trees," he says. "My furniture is the fruit of my spaces."

At the time, Loellmann was living with his then girlfriend, with whom he has a 5-year-old daughter, in a nearby converted stable. But during the pandemic, he bought an abandoned 9,000-square-foot 1920s gas plant (Maastricht, which is the Netherlands' oldest industrial hub, has a wealth of large former factory buildings) and moved his company there, converting his former atelier into the greenhouse-like two-bedroom residence where he now lives.

In Loellmann's bedroom, "Sphère" (2021) by Kaspar Hamacher, left, and an artwork by Michael Birmanns, right.

Loellmann designed the furniture in his daughter's bedroom in oak, including the stairs.

The indoor garden is still the heart of the space and resembles a wooded grove, but for the 20-foot-wide skate ramp hidden behind the trees. (Loellmann was a serious skateboarder in his teens and is now teaching his daughter.) Lining the rest of the room are long built-in benches with polished tops cut from meranti, a reddish tropical wood, and a seating area comprising curved, flame-blackened oak tables and chairs of Loellmann's own design. Every evening, he has to sweep up the leaves and faded blooms that fall onto the room's glossy cream-painted concrete floor, and he often invites friends and musicians to come over for concerts beneath the branches.



In the indoor garden, the furniture and lamp are Loellmann's design. The tables and chairs are charred oak and blackened steel.

At the back of the covered courtyard is a glassed-in kitchen, whose U-shaped counter — embedded with a stovetop and a wide blue Belgian limestone sink — Loellmann made from polished walnut. A 10-foot-tall Chinese perfume plant grows up through the meranti floorboards, creating a canopy over the breakfast table. Next door is a spacious living room with a low-slung, '70s-style cognac leather couch, a grand piano that Loellmann inherited from his grandfather and a framed image by the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki. A glass sliding door leads to the backyard, lush with clusters of bamboo, at the end of which is the orangery, now fitted with a sauna.

In the living room, a Living Divani sofa upholstered in brown suede leather and a 1969 Jean Messagier painting. The lamps and tables were designed by Loellmann.

Loellmann in his indoor garden.

An ornate cast-iron spiral staircase, which the designer found in a derelict factory in Brussels, leads from the kitchen to a circular second-floor hallway, its ceiling decorated with a mobile of tiny jewel-like handblown glass spheres by the German artist Anne Büscher. Straight ahead is a bathroom with a light-flooded, partially glass-walled shower stall otherwise made of granite blocks — and filled with products from the Australian skin-care brand Aesop, for whom Loellmann has designed stores in Amsterdam and Paris. Across the hall is Loellmann's bedroom, anchored by a walnut platform bed that he designed. Beside it is his daughter's room, for which he fashioned a child-size door and a lofted walnut bed with hand-carved oak steps, both of which call to mind the hobbit dwellings of J.R.R. Tolkien's Shire.

But despite the time and effort he's put into the building, turning it into "my own island," as he puts it, Loellmann is ready for another change. He will soon move into an apartment in the converted gas plant — he's always felt more at home where he works — and turn the onetime hat factory into a residency for musicians. "The space has already given me so much. It's time to give it a rest of sorts," he says. "To give it to the trees."

Photo assistant: Roel de Niet