

DESIGNER BABY



ONCE A HUMBLE GARAGE, THIS SPACE IS NOW THE MOST COMPACT STUDIO IN TOWN... WHOEVER TOLD YOU THAT SIZE MATTERS?

TEXT **JANINE STEPHEN** PRODUCTION AND PHOTOGRAPHS **NEIL STEMMET**



THIS PAGE The art – including a print by Sydney Kumalo – was mostly picked up on auction, as was the sleeper couch, which Neil reupholstered in red velvet. The Driade table stands upon a novel floor covering: placemats Neil sourced from a wholesaler
OPPOSITE Beloved books, magazines and collected treasures find a home on vibracrete shelving

THIS PAGE The huge Victoria & Albert bath dominates the space. Neil hates harsh mirrors, so has recessed lights behind them for a softer look. 'But the mirror does capture the view and light, and adds dimension,' he says

OPPOSITE Neil likes to create focal points within a room, though 'the spaces between are as important,' he says. The floor is sealed with a few layers of Plascon's extremely hardwearing Glatex 8 epoxy – commonly used on yachts



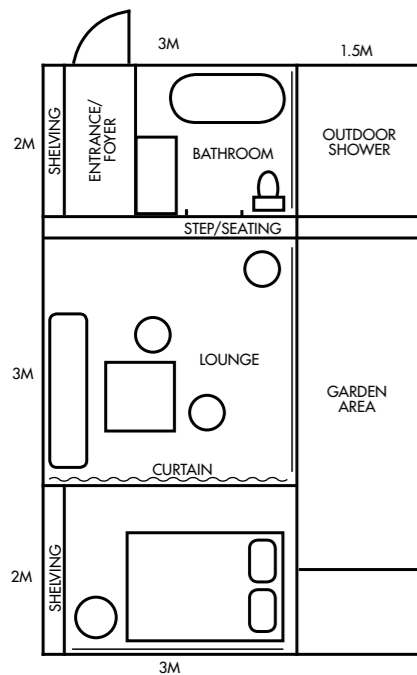
NEIL'S TIPS FOR SMALL SPACES

- Elevate the roof by another metre or so – and use that gained space for shelving where appropriate.
- Break the area up into segments (like the foyer and lounge zones).
- Have multifunctional items: the sleeper couch is used for everyday lounging, dining, and, of course, sleeping.
- Trick the eye by using one oversized piece per focal area, such as the large standing lamp in the bedroom.



THIS PAGE The cantilevered windows are designed to channel sea breezes through the mezzanine bedroom. This elevated, playful space is lit by a red Philippe Starck 'Miss Sissi' lamp, and a much larger companion that's a copy of a better-known design. The bedspread is from Sideattraction3, while the painting is by Conrad Theys, who studied under Gregoire Boonzaier

OPPOSITE Neil likes the way open shelves and cupboards can be used as 'exhibition spaces'; collections of magazines, books and found objects can be displayed alongside more utilitarian possessions



IT DOESN'T SEEM POSSIBLE, BUT THE PROOF IS IN THE PICTURES: GIVEN A STRUCTURE not much bigger than a shoebox (and smaller than your average RDP home), 'space curator' Neil Stemmet has created a mini studio apartment with heavyweight appeal. Actually, ever since the finishing touches were made to this former garage in De Kelders, Neil hasn't gone back to his 'grown-up' home next door: instead, he's slept blissfully in the compact elevated bedroom, a sea breeze wafting over his face as he dreams of childhood days.

'I think the [main] house is very eclectic and full of antiques and loads of modern and imported stuff, and I just wanted to get away from all that. In a way, it's about going back to my youth. So it's not terribly serious; there's a sense of fun throughout,' says Neil.

The garage conversion, which took a good six weeks, was initially undertaken to create a private space where Neil's partner, David Patrick, who is reading for a Masters in music, could retreat to work. First called the garage, then the study and finally the studio – 'very French' – the space is very much a home. The secret to its success is structural as well as aesthetic: the roof was raised dramatically, and the 3.7-metre tall interior has a surprisingly roomy feel as a result. By elevating the bedroom, recessing storage space, using shelving that stretches from floor to ceiling, and painting the entire space an ethereal white, Neil made the 21-square-metre space seem considerably larger.

The charm of the studio lies in its pared-down simplicity and carefully chosen furnishings. 'My design process is completely organic,' Neil explains. 'I stand in a space and allow my mind to speak; it's not always conscious thought, the ideas just come. When I travel, I store things I see in my mind like in a filing cabinet. And when I design a space, it's like pulling the images from the cabinet into the room.'

Neil believes in objects with a story and sense of history. It's this that gives the brand new studio the feeling that it's 'been lived in for a lifetime'. In keeping with his nostalgic impulses, most of the items in the house come from auction houses – from the collection of African art, to the framed butterflies adorning a strip of wall. There's a childlike touch of humour in items such as the plastic cups in the bedroom, inspired by caravanning holidays, and a delightful mix of found objects paired with key 'high-end, designer' items.

Focal points are made from unexpected couplings, like the oversized velvet sleeper couch in the lounge and the contemporary Driade table. And Neil believes in using an oversized element per area to trick the eye into imagining a larger space. 'People wouldn't normally match a small table with a large couch, but think like Obama: yes you can!' Neil says. 'David's studying an Estonian composer called Arvo Pärt, and his music is about the spaces and pauses between the notes. I think design should be similar. It's about taking a breath between objects.'

It's also very much about fun, about childhood dreams and spontaneity. 'It's as if the main house next door belongs to a very mature, grown-up, well-travelled, affluent man,' Neil muses. 'This is almost a tongue-in-cheek way of countering that, of saying that even though I've got all that, I can escape to this. It's my wonderland.' ■

SEE MORE ON THIS HOME ON OUR WEBSITE WWW.ELLEDECORATION.CO.ZA. NEIL AND DAVID'S MAIN HOUSE (FEATURED IN ISSUE 54), IS AVAILABLE FOR EXCLUSIVE USE RENTALS. VISIT WWW.DEKELDERS.BIZ

NEIL'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Interior design Neil Stemmet

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