

NATURAL GEOGRAPHIC

ROOTED BETWEEN MOUNTAINS AND SEA, A DE KELDERS HOME HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A STRIKING YET PEACEFUL SPACE THAT IS IN SYNCH WITH NATURE

THIS PAGE A well-thumbed collection of *National Geographics* lives on as an arresting display piece OPPOSITE Everyone who was involved in the building of this seaside home, from the builder and the labourers to the owners, left their mark on this wall by drawing a line in the wet cement, to great visual effect

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A LIVING SPACE THAT IS IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH ITS INHABITANTS HAS A FEELING THAT REACHES beyond the sum of its parts. Neil Stemmer's De Kelders home, near Gansbaai, has a spirit of quiet kindness, thoughtful generosity and a relaxed ease where there's space for both lively conversation and rejuvenating silence.

What's even more remarkable, then, in this house that feels like an old friend, is that the building has only just been completed and Neil and his partner David Patrick moved in very recently. The first few pages of the guest book are still celebrating the honeymoon phase of first times – first visitor, first braai (to celebrate with their builder, Hennie Kriel) and first lazy lunch on the stoep overlooking a slope of brick and pastel holiday homes and a sweep of sparkling ocean.

Neil, who heads up Konzept Design and Architecture, has a rare gift: he can quickly create interiors that appear long established. This is the case with his new home – he put the decor together in under a month. The grounds and architectural structure, however, grew slowly and organically.

The indigenous garden was planted years ago, when Neil first bought the property and long before building plans were conceptualised. Plants were chosen for aesthetic and functional reasons – low-maintenance blossoming types soften the landscape while the tough and thorny variety mesh together into a natural boundary. The vegetation also provides a natural screen high enough to allow privacy and low enough to frame the view.

As for the architecture, Neil drew inspiration from the design principles of Tadao Ando, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. He wanted the house on this insignificant corner plot to disappear into the hill and become part of the landscape, and yet contain the grace and practicalities of an old Overberg country cottage. This was the antithesis of the original brick home that dominated the property. With the help of his builder and a draftsman, new plans were carefully conceived for the modernist structure he envisaged. However, during the process of rebuilding the house, unforeseen changes were made. 'People would come to the house and say "I'd do it like this" and we'd see a new possibility and change things. Every day we'd change a line or adapt for a new function. It's as if the house became the owner and dictated its own design and format. And now it's exactly as it should be,' says Neil.

Opposed to mass-produced, factory-made materials of inferior quality, Neil took the long route in building this home and chose to include remnants of the previous house and what the land yielded. Cement tiles were hand-cast on site and used as exterior stepping-stones and bathroom tiles. Old vibracrete perimeter walls were taken

'THE HOUSE EVOLVED AROUND WHAT IS SPECIAL TO US: PRIVACY, SPACE, VIEWS WITHOUT BEING VIEWED, THE FLOW OF AIR, BEING ABLE TO WATCH THE REFLECTION OF THE MOON ON THE OCEAN AND SLEEP WITH THE WINDOWS OPEN'

FROM LEFT A canal on the sea-facing side of the house functions as a cooling system; the home, screened by indigenous foliage was built to disappear into its surroundings; water and fire: cement stepping stones traverse the canal while burnt branches found nearby create a natural screen

A cabinet of curiosities and a collection of books and magazines wordlessly tell the story of Neil's life





THIS PAGE The mirrors in the blue-tiled kitchen bring the outside indoors. The red velvet curtains and blood-red couch contrast with the room's cool tones. Transparent chairs and glass vessels offset the heavy wooden furniture
OPPOSITE Cross-sections of branches and tree trunks create a feature wall reminiscent of Gustav Klimt's 'The Kiss'





down and, with the help of screed and paint, recycled as interior shelves. Sandstone mined while digging the pool was laboriously hand-cut into the desired forms and used to clad exterior walls and pillars.

Climate was given deep consideration and helped shape aspects of the home. A glass wall protects the stoep from wind. Windows were placed to maximise both views and privacy, and were designed to be left open at night, allowing cross-ventilation of the cool sea air without compromising security. A lengthy canal runs along the sea-facing side of the house, and sunbeams bounce off the water to dapple the interior with sparkling reflections. On hot summer nights, warm air is cooled as it flows in over the water, while solar-powered under-floor heating and a vast central fireplace make it cosy during winter.

Inside, Neil has curated a universe filled with the things that he loves and has acquired over a lifetime. A white floor and ceiling form a pure shell in the open-plan living area within which he has created spaces within spaces. 'I believe that the process of sharing spaces is so important,' explains Neil. 'It all ties in to how we should live and how we should treat each other.'

Here, there's room for doing things and sharing quality time together: preparing food, dining, contemplating the view, playing the piano, working through the extensive film library and exploring the vast cabinet, the contents of which tell the story of Neil's passions and journeys. At the heart of the myriad of books, vessels, sculptures, clocks and blocks of *National Geographic* is a copy of *A Cabinet of Natural Curiosities*. The title encapsulates the owner's inquisitive nature and mirrors the home's natural elements that form a curious thread of contrast in a modern context. The trunk of a myrtle tree becomes a pillar that disguises a skew interior wall while, throughout the home, various found horns, an animal skull and clusters of crustaceans form sculptural display pieces. An enviable collection of artworks is hung throughout the house, but it is a feature wall consisting of cross-sections of branches and tree trunks, and reminiscent of Gustav Klimt's 'The Kiss', that steals the show.

An abundance of thought has been poured into this dwelling – and yet some of its rewards are unexpected. 'By accident rather than design, the acoustics in this house are amazing,' says Neil. 'At night we sit outside and the music becomes part of the house and flows out into the darkness of the garden. This is the house of music.' ■

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'THROUGHOUT THE HOME, VARIOUS FOUND HORNS, AN ANIMAL SKULL AND CLUSTERS OF CRUSTACEANS FORM SCULPTURAL DISPLAY PIECES'

FROM LEFT Old and new combine as a modern bed and antique side table showcase two different approaches to wood; hand-cast concrete tiles, beach pebbles and a wooden bowl filled with horns bring a natural dimension to the bathroom; this throw knitted from T-shirt material was bought from an empowerment project in Uppington; old vibracrete walls were recycled into slick built-in shelves