

Country Contemporary - The Reeds at Balgowan

When taking a road less travelled in the Midlands, there can't be a soul who doesn't play with the idea of, 'I could live here'. The mantle of calm descends as slowly and soothingly as an intravenous drip, and gradually, the quiet, the landscape and the sheer simplicity of life become your desire.

Of course, this doesn't preclude extreme comfort, luxury and privilege. 'Simplicity' is more a reference to pure, uncomplicated pursuits, such as fishing, birdwatching, hiking and just watching and feeling the slow, unmistakable change of the seasons.

Donovan Neale-May owns this, the first home in The Reeds at Balgowan estate. He's also the accidental developer. 'A friend of mine put in an offer for the land to an old Midlands farming family who'd owned large tracts here since the days of the Voortrekkers. He asked me to finance the project, and when I visited the area, I was captivated by its setting and the potential it had to combine eco-living with an active outdoor lifestyle.'

The Balgowan area is redolent with history, even to the point of old wagon trails on the property. His purchase of the site's adjoining land ensured a combination of indigenous and commercial forest, so the natural privacy of The Reeds is perfect for those who value serenity and space in an exquisite setting.

Donovan invited Stan Field of Field Architecture to draw up the concept design of what he describes as 'a home in harmony with nature'. He was determined to push the boundary when it comes to contemporary living, architectural innovation and green building practices, with local sourcing of materials and support of local businesses an integral part of that quest.

South African-born Stan is a world-renowned American architect, based permanently in California. He outlines Donovan's initial brief as, 'Listen to the land and create a unique architecture specific to this place.' He says, 'When I arrived on site, I was instinctively drawn to the nexus of the land – the dams – and my first designs reflect that seduction. The initial sketches were inspired by birds landing on the water, until I began to understand the bigger site and its varying landscapes and ecologies.'

'The idea of environmentally conscious, energy-efficient homes in sync with the land and its natural resources became the ethos of all design decisions, and together with the availability of local natural building materials, the architecture began to unfold. The form of Donovan's house would clearly play out the design direction, which was to create a fresh expression of the regional architecture, comprising layers of stone and concrete walls that traditionally define the transition from the public to more private areas of the

home. Simultaneously, these thick earthen walls act as heat and cooling engines, using their huge thermal mass naturally as the seasons and time of day dictate. Visually, these walls, together with their interconnected roofs and heavy wooden beams, echo the shape of the landforms on which they're built. These finely crafted structures dialogue harmoniously with their environment and become the evocative new landscape.'

While Stan conceptualised the external envelope, Marita Nell of Elements Architecture was tasked with completing the design development. 'My job was to assimilate Stan's impressions, and – without distilling it too much – translate the concept design into an environment suitable for the KZN Midlands climate and lifestyle,' says Marita. 'The home has a strong masculine quality, and exterior textures and finishes were kept quite rough and uncomplicated. Although the interior undoubtedly reflects that masculinity, I find the contrast of the refined contemporary design, fittings and furnishings quite refreshing. Most Midlands homes tend to pick up on the traditional Natal veranda style with a fairly eclectic colonial interior.' For Marita, this design opens the debate on alternative ways to interpret how we interact with nature in our search to make a home.

Sustainability was paramount, from the functional aspects, like solar-heated water and energy-efficient lighting, to the passive structural design elements incorporated to assist seasonal cooling and heating. Marita explains: 'On summer days, the structure is designed to prevent the sun from entering. Cross-ventilation allows the summer breeze through the interior, over the cement floor – cooling the air as it moves over that surface and through the space. This eliminates the need for mechanical temperature control, like air conditioning. The interior adjustable shutters act as a further control mechanism to direct airflow and block out or allow sun into the spaces when needed.

On winter days, the design allows sun penetration deep into the spaces, thereby heating up the well-insulated cement floor. At night, the floor then gives off the heat it's absorbed. This passive heating mechanism will assist the radiant underfloor heating system (water circulating in underfloor pipes heated by an energy-efficient heat pump and solar panels) to maintain a pleasant temperature in winter and save energy as well. This mechanism can also cool the floor down to a temperature of 5°C, assisting the passive cooling mechanism of a breeze across the floor in summer.'

Everything about the home is carefully considered: the high ceilings are insulated with an accredited sustainable material made from recycled plastic bottles to further assist the passive heating and cooling mechanisms.

Wherever possible, materials were sourced from the immediate area: stone cladding from a nearby quarry, reed ceilings under roof projections were harvested locally and concrete was left natural and sealed, not painted.

Marita took a similar approach to the interior design and decor. If it could be local or from sustainable sources, it was. All timber furniture was manufactured from African hardwoods sourced from sustainably managed forests, and interior accessories and fittings were first sourced from Midlands craftsmen and designers and constructed from local, natural materials. Artwork, too, is local. Imported was always last resort.

Briefed by Marita, local landscaper Gary Cox of Environmental Studios approached his arm of the project gently. No massive earthworks, but rather a rehabilitation of existing contours and shapes and the eradication of alien plant material. Marita says, 'The architecture needed to be softened further into the landscape by using natural grasses, indigenous trees planted in a natural configuration, and endemic plant species that would provide cover for buck moving through the property, past the home to the water, as well as attract birds.' Around the home, Gary's plantings now encourage birds right into the heart of the living spaces.

The goal was to create a low-maintenance, indigenous garden that complemented the contemporary experience of the home's interior, blending the building into the landscape. Gary planted material that would be found naturally in the different areas around the house. The scrub on the northern side would be that which enjoys a hot, exposed situation; the shady southern walls have plants that enjoy shady forest conditions. He says, 'This would aid in creating a stable planting theme that echoes the natural habitat of the area.'

There were other considerations. The Reeds will encompass other homes, so Gary needed to provide screening and privacy, while preserving views. The choice and layout of the plant material was important to reinforce vistas of the landscape, so he created view sites at key points on the deck and within the rooms. There's a continual reinforcement of the inside-outside connection, which, as Marita says, is why we go to the Midlands – to regenerate tired spirits by submerging ourselves in nature.

Donovan's home is strong, bold and contemporary. Some areas lend themselves to sculptural or impact planting; others need a sense of intimacy. Gary describes the thinking behind design elements, such as the lawn terrace off the vast deck: 'It offers a contrasting, cooling medium, and gives the architecture some breathing room, contrast; acting as a firebreak before the veld begins.'

One of the glorious aspects of The Reeds is the cooling, calming dams. The low-impact walkways that wind down and around there from the deck give easy access to the water, the stream and the natural trails through the landscape.

At sunrise, looking across the dam towards the house, you feel that 'good to be alive' sensation rising as the dawn chorus tunes up, thin mist sways over the surface of the water, and the sun casts a soft, pink wash across the home's concrete face. It is, quite simply, restorative. Just as it should be.

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