

REAL

ESTATE

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FORWARD MOMENTUM

Design's international stars |
Driving forces: new in motoring
| Investment-savvy renovations

SPECIAL REPORT

INVESTING IN RETIREMENT
PROPERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA

CASTLE IN THE SKY

This low-slung family home bordering Cape Town's Groot Constantia wine estate was raised on tons of soil to take advantage of its spectacular setting

TEXT Graham Wood/bureaux.co.za **PHOTOGRAPHS** Greg Cox/bureaux.co.za
STYLING Sven Alberding/bureaux.co.za

Matt and Victoria Bresler first went to see the site of their house in the Constantia Valley because of a photograph Matt had seen in the property pages of the newspaper. It showed just three palm trees and a hint of vineyard in the background. 'The house wasn't even in the photograph,' says Matt. When he got there, he could see why not. 'I spent two or three minutes inside the house and an hour on the roof looking at the view.'

Matt soon realised that to do justice to those views, they would have to build from scratch. The existing house, as architect Jan-Heyn Vorster says, was built really badly in the 80s. It was sunk low into the plot with no views to speak of or any sense of connection to its remarkable setting. Trees and large bushes all along the fence severed the house from its potential views even more emphatically.

Before they even considered the design of the house, Jan-Heyn, along with architect Tiaan Meyer, had to figure out how to create the views Matt had begun to sense were possible. 'Matt spent a lot of time on the old site standing on carefully measured ladder rungs surveying views from a standing and seated position,' says Jan-Heyn. From the right position, it would even be possible to catch a glimpse of the 300-year-old Groot Constantia homestead.

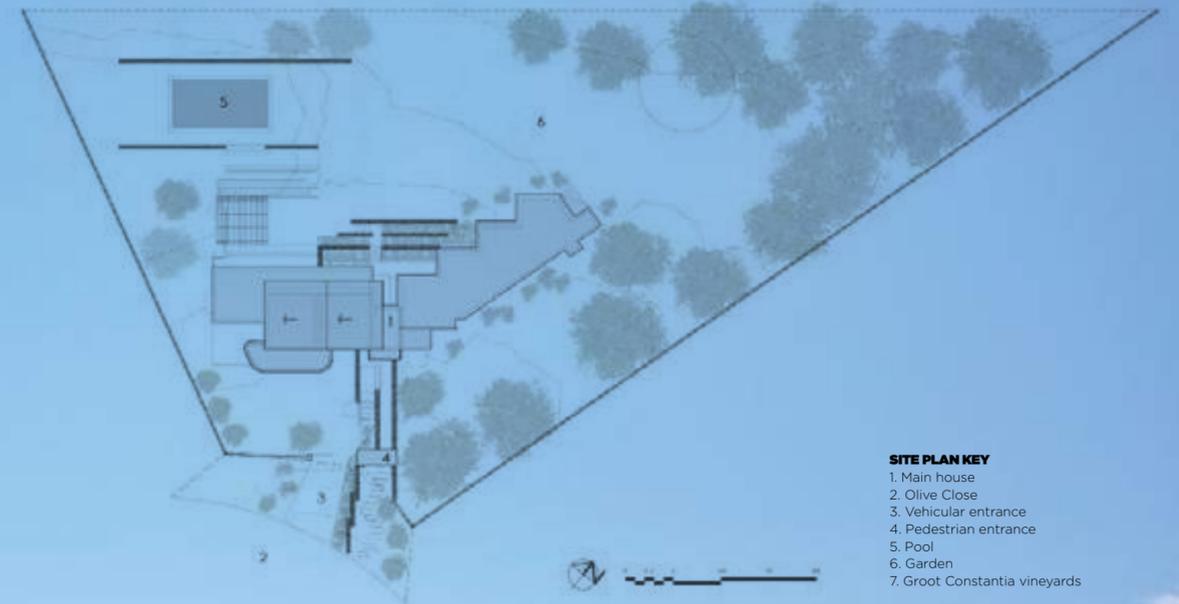
The solution was to raise the level of the ground. 'We brought in quite a lot of soil to bring the house up to a level that took full advantage of the views of the vineyards,' says Jan-Heyn. At the same time, he was aware of how important it would be for the house to be integrated with its site. 'You have to come up with clever landscaping solutions to bring the site back up to the house so that it doesn't feel like an apartment in the air,' says Jan-Heyn. 'It still needed to be a family home with seamless connection to gardens and pool.'

Added to this was their awareness that people are allowed to walk in the vineyards along the property's edge. 'It was important for the scale of the building to be quite sensitive,' says Jan-Heyn. They didn't want to blight the setting with a selfish lump on the landscape.

Because of this, they decided to set the house as far back on the stand as they could. From the back of the house, it appears as a double-storey. From the vineyards, however, it's long, low-slung and ground-hugging, with two mono-pitch flip-up roofs over the living areas.

From the front door, you ascend via a staircase in a glass box. On the upper level, the living areas are located to one side and the bedroom wing to the other. The stairway creates a kind of procession, as Jan-Heyn puts it. 'The building creates views, moments when you pause to turn and look back,' he explains.

You can glimpse the sea to the south over False Bay as you ascend the stairs – and you are also aware of the beautiful, naturalistic gardens that come right up to the



SITE PLAN KEY

1. Main house
2. Olive Close
3. Vehicular entrance
4. Pedestrian entrance
5. Pool
6. Garden
7. Groot Constantia vineyards



The formality of the front garden and its large open lawn contrasts with the wild planting of the garden at the back of the house. The extensive lawns and the stone-edged grass steps manage the changes in level, and gabions provide a combination of raw materiality with architectural structure. The house is given character with the flip-up roofs that let light into the living areas

house, almost as if you're immersed in it. Once you've fully ascended the stairs, you are confronted with the house's expansive vista to the north over the vineyards towards the mountains. 'The elevated positioning means you have no sense of this setting when you first arrive, so it is often quite a surprise for guests,' says Jan-Heyn.

An off-shutter concrete wall is the most definitive architectural feature here. 'Lots of effort went into getting that wall beautifully cast using sand-blasted spruce to impart a wood-grain finish to the concrete,' says Jan-Heyn. He adds that the materiality of the house was important throughout. Much of the facade at the back of the residence is clad in western red cedar. Inside the concrete of the ceilings, pillars and ring-beams is softened with wood – the solid oak flooring, the cedar ceilings of those angled roofs in the living areas and much of the interior oak joinery. Untreated cedar, which weathers to grey over time, is also used for slatted entrance gates, window screens, the front door and the pergola. 'It was Victoria's idea to design bespoke window facades made entirely of cedar for the children's bedrooms,' says Matt.

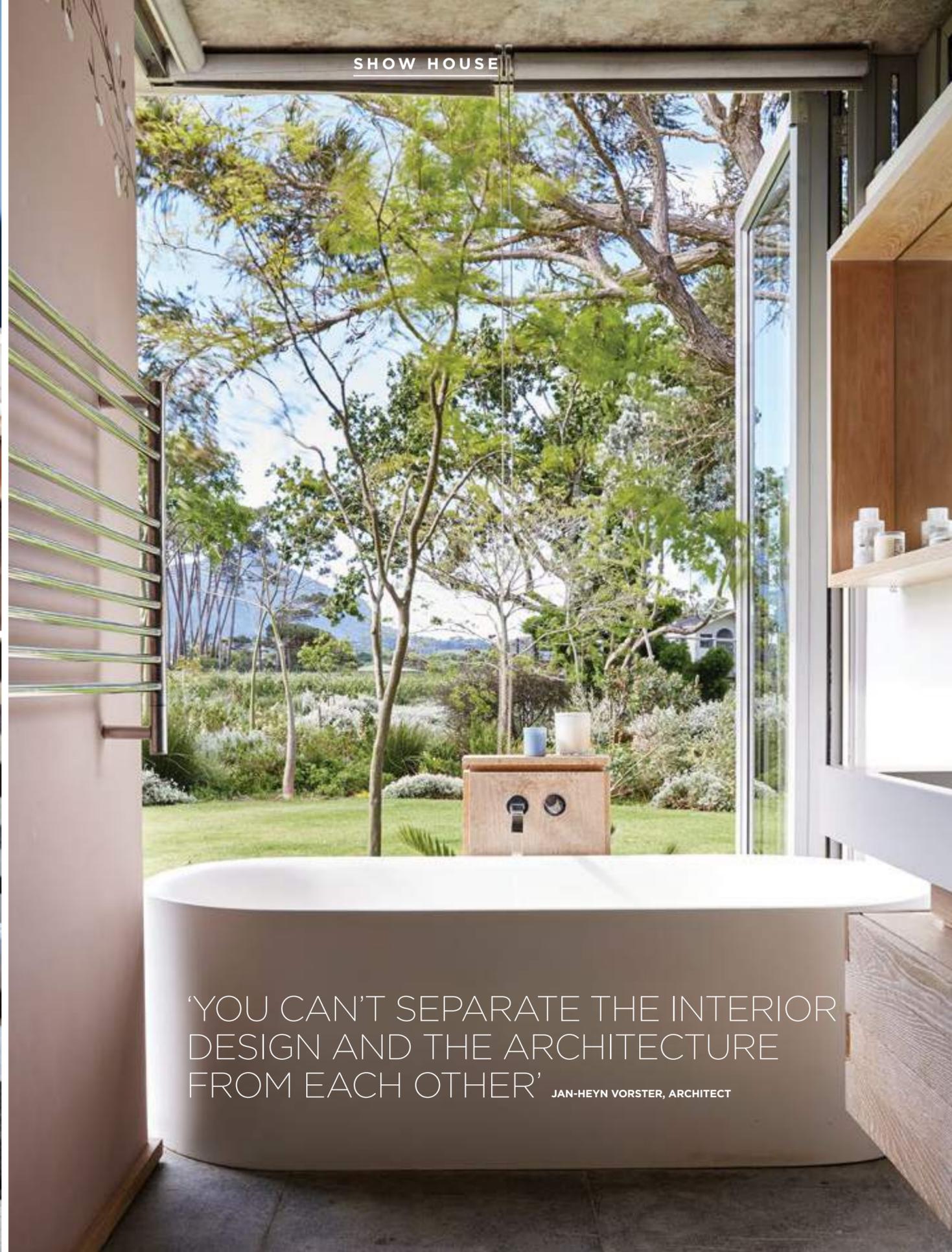
Of course, the north-facing aspect of the house (toward the vineyards) is mostly glass. The two flip-up roofs impart character, while the bedroom wing is angled inward to hug the garden. The bedrooms form a stepped or zigzag arrangement to allow for views in two directions instead of one and to catch both the northern as well as western sunset light. The bedroom wing is flat-roofed, which makes it less conspicuous, and it floats on a raised platform.

Below the living areas, the ground drops away more radically – the architects populated this natural void with the guest suite, wine cellar, staff accommodation and garages.

The interiors essentially form another layer of the architecture rather than functioning merely as containers for furniture. 'You can't separate the interior design and the architecture from each other,' says Jan-Heyn. 'From the beginning, we considered how the architecture and fixed furnishings would connect and fit together.' For example, the unit between the kitchen and the living space is an extension of the architecture, concealing a TV and a fireplace, with the other side forming a coffee station including Matt's collection of espresso cups.

'The building is basically quite neutral,' says Jan-Heyn. 'The furniture, furnishings, decorations and art provides distinct character and colour.'

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Son Jonty's bedroom carries the raw materiality evident in the wood and concrete throughout the rest of the house, and brightens it with muted primary colours; the en-suite bathroom off the master bedroom has views west over the garden. The glass doors can be stacked away so that the bath is projected outwards on a plinth, immersed in the garden there are no ceilings in the bedrooms. Instead, they feature raw off-shutter concrete. The anthropomorphic Sitting Lamp is by Graeme Bettles (graamebettlesdesign.com), from the garden, the bathroom and bedroom appear to float, an impression enhanced by the planting where floor meets ground



SHOW HOUSE

'YOU CAN'T SEPARATE THE INTERIOR DESIGN AND THE ARCHITECTURE FROM EACH OTHER' JAN-HEYN VORSTER, ARCHITECT



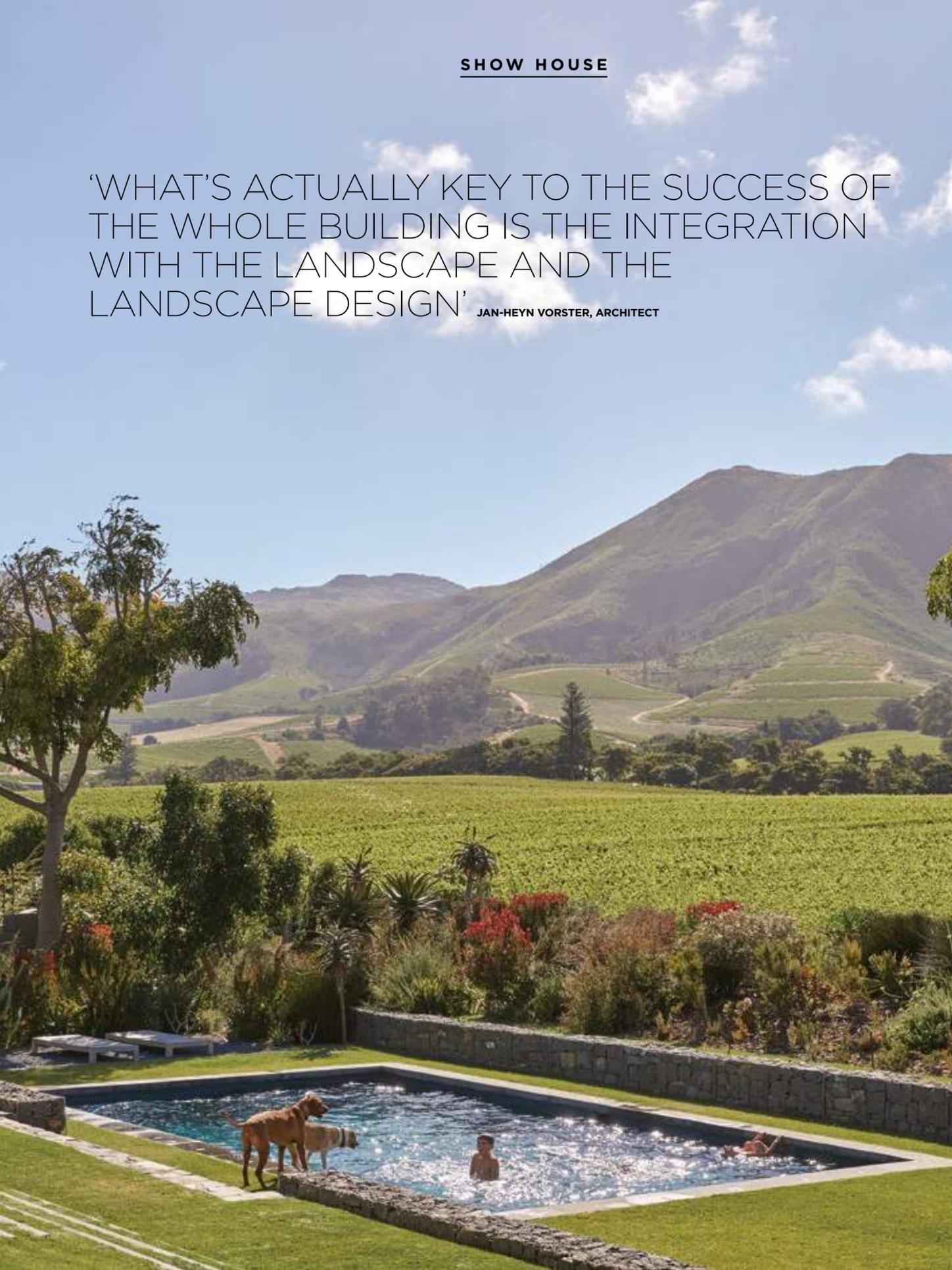
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The living areas are emphasised architecturally by the flip-up roofs, with Cedar-clad ceilings that create larger volumes than the other areas and let in extra light. The painting above the matching pair of white Frystark tub chairs is by Esther Nienhuis, a Dutch artist who Matt and Victoria met when living in London; wood is used for the floors, ceilings and joinery functions, introducing a level of detail and refinement to the design, and a subtle transition from architecture to interiors. They were custom-made by Versfeld Custom Furniture (customfurniture.co.za); the fish tank is integrated into the architecture, plumbed into the wall, creating a hatch between the kitchen and living room. Matt completed the technical details of the installation himself. His interests in zoology and botany are evident not just in the fish tank, but also in the garden, particularly the trees

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT From the entrance to the house, with its beautifully cast off-shutter concrete, the stairwell leads upstairs from the lower level. This 'knuckle', as Jan-Heyn calls it, is the central circulation point for the house; in the kitchen, it is particularly evident how the fixed furnishings and the architecture are so much part of each other. The concrete, visible here in the feature ring-beams holding up the roof structure, has been polished, but left unadorned, softened by the wooden ceiling and kitchen cabinets. The loose furnishings, too, are designed to express their materiality, with the effect that they add another layer to the architecture rather than merely filling a room; the TV room forms a separate area from the main living areas, and, like the bedroom wing, features a low ceiling. The white leather sofa from Klooftique (klooftique.com) was purchased before the house was built on the advice of Jan-Heyn, with an eye to how it might suit the house when complete

SHOW HOUSE

‘WHAT’S ACTUALLY KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF THE WHOLE BUILDING IS THE INTEGRATION WITH THE LANDSCAPE AND THE LANDSCAPE DESIGN’

JAN-HEYN VORSTER, ARCHITECT



These include local design, much of it influenced by mid-century modernism, such as the sofas, coffee table and dining room table from Joburg’s Mezzanine Interiors. There are also some refurbished vintage items. Much of it is also made with natural wood, expressing the character of its materials.

Matt points out, however, that he is by no means a minimalist. He travelled extensively throughout his twenties and early thirties, always filling his backpack with carefully selected artefacts, such as masks and statues. ‘It has been challenging but fun to try and balance my desire to display these hard-sought, memory-steeped items with our desire for a minimalist look,’ says Matt. ‘I wanted to display the things that I love and feel passionate about.’

He and Victoria also collected art and artefacts on their travels together. ‘For example, we now have a set of 14 little etchings in the passageway,’ he says. ‘There was a great deal of satisfaction from pulling those out of boxes, agreeing on framing and hanging.’

Outside, the landscaping and planting help the house, its landscape and view melt together beautifully. ‘What’s actually key to the success of the whole building is the integration with the landscape and the landscape design,’ says Jan-Heyn. ‘It would have been a different building if that wasn’t as well-resolved.’

Landscape designer Mary Maurel worked closely with Matt and Victoria on the planting. She devised a layered approach with naturalistic gardens around the house, progressing via a wide-open lawn to a fynbos bed along the border. This approach creates gentle transitions from architecture to landscape, and blurs the boundaries between the Bresler’s property and the vineyards, borrowing the extensive views. ‘It sometimes feels as if the vineyards belong to this property,’ says Jan-Heyn.

A passionate plantsman, Matt has brought in more than 200 trees – both indigenous and exotic – with a focus on prolifically flowering trees. ‘I’ve brought in many saplings from trips abroad. I’m currently rearing from seed some of the exciting species I can’t find in the country,’ he adds.

There’s a gate in the fence leading directly onto the vineyards, so the Breslers can walk their dogs through them whenever they feel like it. When Matt goes jogging in the vineyards he always slows to a walk for the 130m stretch bordering his property. ‘When I’m not focused on some weeds that need removing, I feel a great sense of pride when I look back,’ he says. ‘I think we’ve done justice to the views and the setting.’ meyerandassociates.co.za; marymaurelgardens.co.za

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT The swimming pool was one of the only features of the original house that was retained. It was marbled in a darker colour to make it appear less artificial in the landscape; the pergola between the pool and deck creates another outdoor entertainment area, and a further architectural transition between house and garden; the Bresler children, Jonty, Hannah and Ollie, enjoy using the pergola as a climbing frame; from the south side of the house, it’s easy to see how the bedroom wing is angled to hug the garden to the north. Lush, wild, naturalistic planting comes right up to the residence, grounding the house in its landscape. This dense garden area, which will eventually be a curated forest, is visible from the staircase and the passage along the bedroom wing

