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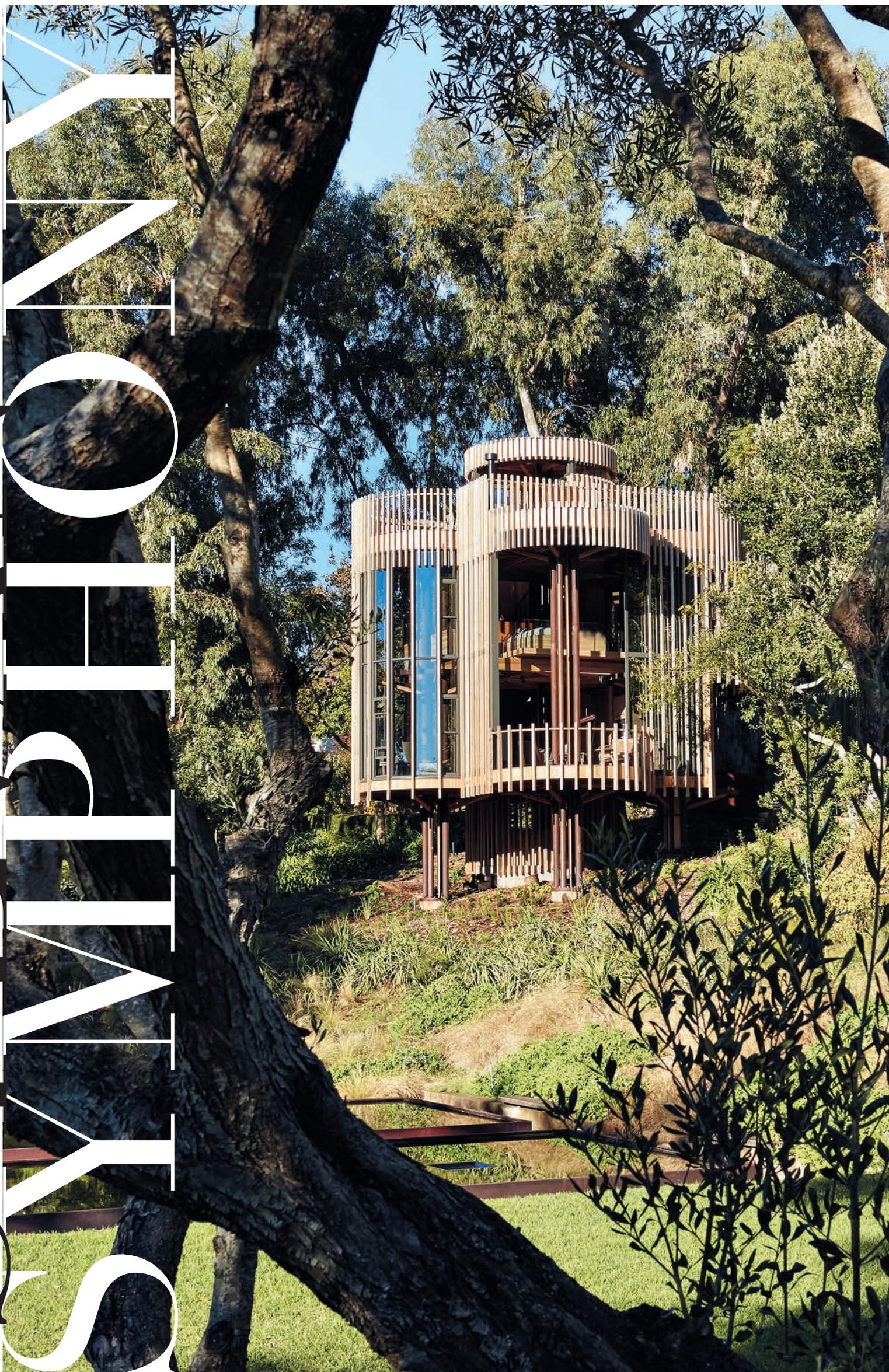


SOUTH AFRICAN DESIGN COMES OF AGE

The tree house on the Paarman family estate is a floating architectural interpretation of a forest

Text GRAHAM WOOD Photography GREG COX

SWAN





From left: This modern, cedar-clad cabin in the woods is raised on pillars so it appears to float above the ground; You enter the cabin via a suspended timber and steel ramp, which enhances the sense that the building is floating

THE PAARMAN FAMILY ESTATE in Constantia, Cape Town, has spectacular views of the surrounding valley and mountains. It's arranged along the lines of a modern interpretation of a "Cape Dutch Werf" or traditional Cape farmyard, with a manor house and a number of other buildings scattered among the extensive landscaped gardens.

For some time, businessman Graham Paarman had the idea that he'd like to add a one-bedroomed, tree-house hide-away to the estate's dwellings. Malan Vorster Architecture Interior Design had worked on various buildings on the property over the years, so Paarman called on the firm to design his tree house. He wanted something small. "I never wanted a building that was going to impose itself," he says. "I hoped it would blend in and enhance its surroundings, and would invite the outside in."

Paarman and the architects — Pieter Malan, Jan-Heyn Vorster, and Peter Urry — found the perfect spot in a wooded area overlooking a quartet of sharp-edged, square reflection ponds. The architects had been involved in designing the ponds with garden designer Mary Maurel. The ponds seemed to bring a certain magic to the clearing, and their geometric shapes among the organic forms of the trees prompted Paarman and his architects to extend their intervention. Paarman says that unlike the ponds, he "didn't want something symmetrical".

Rather than an actual tree house, the architects envisioned a floating architectural interpretation of a forest. What began to form in their minds was an elevated building — one that seemed to levitate, so it felt as if it were among the branches of the canopy, but was actually more like a modern cabin in the woods.

A veil of vertical, slatted, western red cedar articulates the asymmetrical form that resulted. The striped pattern of the wood helps the cabin blend with its surroundings, so that it almost disappears in the landscape, but at the same time is a homage to nature.

To enhance the sense that the house is floating, you enter via a suspended ramp. Once inside, you feel as if you are aloft in the branches of a tree. The structure is essentially a glassed-in steel frame, and the varying densities of the cedar envelope provide views in some areas and privacy in others.

The rooms are arranged vertically: one living space per floor. The living area is on the first level, the bedroom on the next, and at the top an open-air viewing platform and entertainment deck. The living area includes a kitchen and seating area. Half-round bays projecting outward become a patio and a dining alcove, while on the bedroom level they accommodate a bathroom and the deck on the roof. A double-volume space creates a vertical connection between the bedroom and living area.

architecture

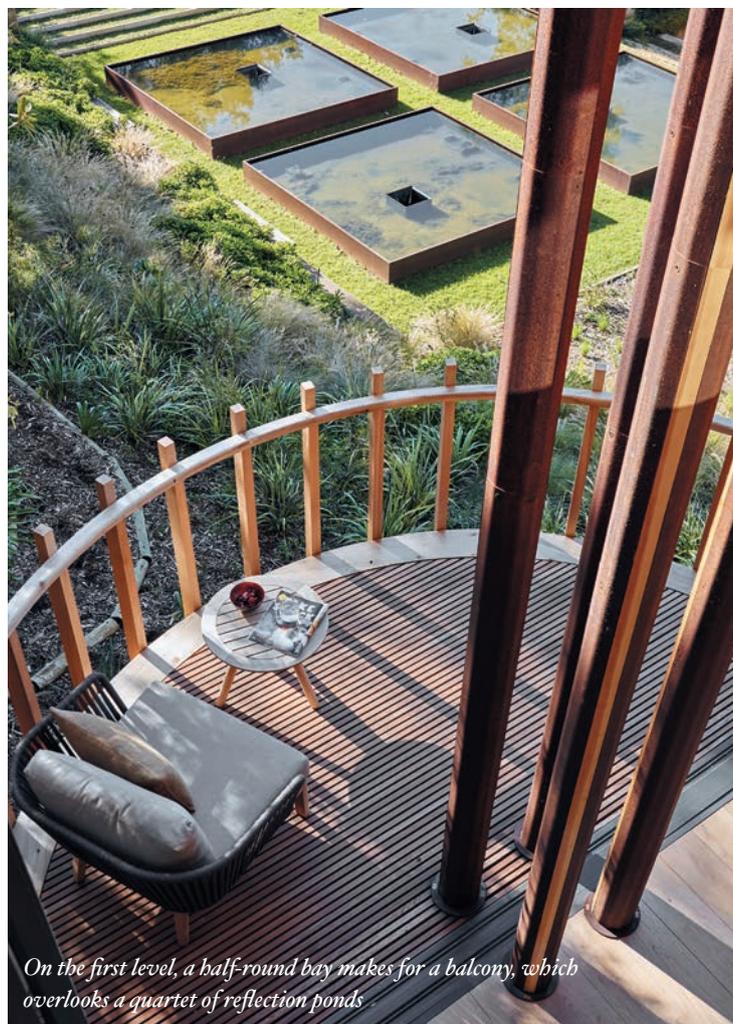
"There are tall sliding doors at the front that open up over both levels," Malan says. Vorster points out how you feel at once embraced by the building and open to the "vastness of the landscape".

"You can see the fantastic night skies, and the squirrels in the trees," Paarman says. "You can hear the birds from inside, too."

The design concept was a series of abstracted trees. Steel pillars in groups of four represent tree trunks, and branch-like beams circumscribed by steel rings overhead support the floors above. This geometry of four circles is positioned around an imperceptible square at the centre of the design — a subliminal tribute to the reflection ponds — resulting in "curves flowing from straight lines and rectangular shapes that become drums", as Malan puts it, giving the cabin its form.

A cedar-clad drum contains the staircase, which is the only solid part of the building, contrasting with the light, veil-like transparency of the rest of it. The architects consider the staircase one of their major achievements.

"It's so crafted and sculptural and it changes with the light," Malan says. "You get different shadows at different times of the day." Ascending the stairs feels a little like climbing a tree.



On the first level, a half-round bay makes for a balcony, which overlooks a quartet of reflection ponds

The small size of the cabin meant that minute attention to detail was possible in every aspect of the design. One example can be found in the junctions where the steel and wood meet. Most of the steel elements are vertical, while the horizontal elements, such as the floors and beams, are wood.

The bed and other cabinetry were all custom made in solid oak, using traditional jointing details. The focus on natural materials is carried through in the furniture. "I'm a fan of warm materials and textures — wood, stone, and leather," Paarman says. The architects stuck predominantly to natural dyed linens, wool, and leather in ochre, deep blue, taupe, and brown for the soft furnishings "We tried to keep the colours subdued and almost neutral, so that you're really more aware of what is going on outside the house," Malan says.

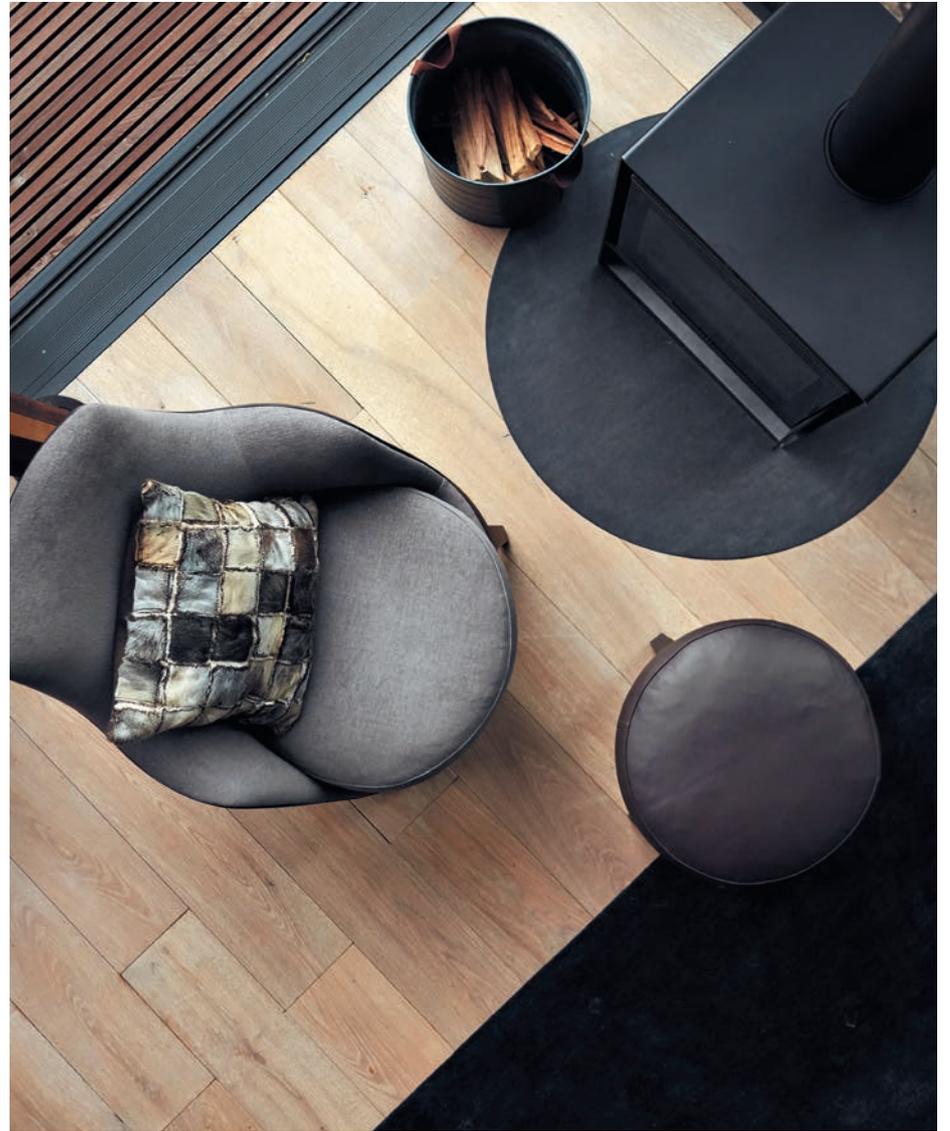
The way in which the details and the overall concept of the architecture work in harmony are at the heart of this little cabin's unexpected power. "It makes a strong, singular statement," Paarman says.

But more important is his experience of living in it. "It's the encapsulation of cocoon living," he says. "It has become a sanctuary. I think we all have a connection to nature, and this house captures that in a very special way." 

"I never wanted a building that was going to impose itself. I hoped it would blend in and enhance its surroundings"



The living area includes seating area with a fireplace and a dining alcove



Clockwise from top left: The cultural staircase from below; the fireplace seen from the bedroom balcony above; the bathroom; the bed and other cabinetry were all custom made in solid oak with traditional jointing

