

The property was positioned to ensure most of the trees could be retained during construction

AT A GLANCE

Name Marcus Smit
Age 48
Location Grabouw, South Africa
Property Modernist new-build
Bedrooms 4
Bathrooms 2
Project started 2005
Project finished 2006
Size of house 225sqm
Build cost R2,000,000
(approx. \$115,250)

Forest hideaway

This secluded home brings the outdoors in, with open-plan living that capitalises on the scenic surroundings



An open-plan interior suits Marcus's sociable lifestyle, and in summer the house is perfect for al fresco entertaining

My house is like a train station – guests are always popping in and out,' says architect Marcus Smit of his pavilion-style home. However, its charm wasn't immediately obvious to everyone. When the white steel structure started taking shape in the town of Grabouw, an hour's drive from Cape Town on the western coast, many residents weren't enthused by the industrial-influenced building in their midst.

'Most houses here are typical country homes – barns, and thatched and timber types,' Marcus explains. 'But people got to know the house and accepted it, and today it is sheltered by the garden and barely visible from the street.'

Marcus designed his idyllic property to be a secluded space set far back on the 5,000sqm site. The garden forms an impressive backdrop to the narrow 50m-long building, especially when viewed across the reflection pond – or 'the dogs' swimming pool', as he calls it. He shares his home with two schnauzers and a greyhound cross, and his father, Ben, has his own studio space with a separate entrance.

Apart from the generous size of the site, it was the forested setting with its abundance of tall trees that sealed the deal. 'It's so quiet here that the frogs' nocturnal croaking is the loudest disturbance,' he says. 'When I bought the plot, there were mainly alien species like pine and bluegum trees growing here. I managed to keep most of them during construction, but also planted a variety of indigenous species.'

'I love the fact my garden is wild rather than manicured. It's home to chameleons, insects, birds, frogs, bats and even harmless snakes. It self-sows, so I stopped planting long ago. Nowadays I just pull out plants and give them to friends.'

All of this natural landscape softens the rigid graphic lines of the steel structure, which is punctuated by tactile materials such as concrete, brickwork and corrugated >



The sunken floor separates the seating area from the section leading to the bedrooms, making it a more intimate space

HOMES | South African steel-frame build

iron. The corrugated iron ceilings have tricked many visitors into believing that the house can't retain warmth, but a double roof with high-density insulation helps to keep the interior at a moderate temperature year-round.

As an architect trained in modernist design, Marcus likes Bauhaus style and an uncluttered, functional interior. 'With so many built-in units in the house I only needed a few pieces of freestanding second-hand furniture. The Wassily chairs are comfortable, and I love the combination of pine seating with the steel-framed dining table in the kitchen.'

The slate-like slasto flooring is a childhood reference. 'I grew up in a house with black slasto floors. It's a warm, earthy extension of the garden into the house, and the brown hues show less dust and dirt when the dogs come running in straight from the pond covered in mud.'

Colour is assigned to olive-green accent walls and Marcus's art and ceramics collection. 'My love of African art and ceramics comes from my mother, who was a potter – my

siblings and I practically grew up in her studio and were creative with clay from early in our childhood,' he reminisces.

An open-plan interior suits Marcus's sociable lifestyle and in summer the house is perfect for al fresco entertaining. The living area opens up onto the outdoor entertainment zone, with a bar counter along the kitchen window, a 10-seater table and a built-in barbecue. This table is situated on the northern facade, conveniently close to the kitchen's windows and well-placed to catch the last of the evening sun.

In the living area, a sunken floor defines the space, which opens out to the kitchen. Marcus designed the large dining table with an African mahogany top as a centrepiece to match the steel structure of the house. The pendants above the table are 1970s track lights salvaged from a renovation project, and the painting above the prep bowl by Eric Duplan is a favourite, with splashback tiles chosen to match.

Moving from the living area through to the rest of the property, a wide passage on the way to the main bedroom >

right Marcus designed the kitchen table with an African mahogany top as a centrepiece, to complement the steel structure of the house

below Stacking windows increase ventilation in summer, and offer a view onto the lush landscape



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remains light and airy thanks to a floor-to-ceiling window, with a relaxing view of the veranda. A lean-to skylight runs along the length of the house, lighting up the interior and enhancing the architecture. 'By day it lets natural light in, and at night it becomes a diffused strip light,' says Marcus.

The house is north-facing, which is ideal for the southern hemisphere. When the sun is low, the interior is still flooded with sunlight, and at the height of the day the overhangs keep the glare out. No mechanical cooling is required as the trees provide shelter from the harsh western afternoon sun, and cross ventilation keeps the inside cool.

However, South African country life isn't all about embracing the sunshine. Grabouw is in a winter rainfall region with long wet winters, so to tackle this Marcus has fitted two stylish fireplaces. One is a slow-combustion wood-burning stove that heats the water pipes in the insulated floor slab and provides underfloor heating; the other is a traditional open fireplace that is lit mainly for atmosphere.

As well as Marcus' bedroom, there are three further guest rooms – two on the mezzanine level on either side of the living areas, and another on the ground level behind the kitchen. 'The house can sleep 10 people, so I always have space for friends who want to get out of the city, often for mountain-biking in our valley,' he says. 'That said, it's great to be alone here, and that's when I enjoy my other hobbies – painting, reading and pottering in the garden. The scale is more intimate and personal than it seems, yet it's spacious and varied enough for entertaining large groups.'

So what was it like to have himself as the client? 'I was impossible! I had far too many ideas and took too long with my design – and of course, I blew the budget. If I could rebuild the house now, it would be even more graphic and sleek. The older I get, the more I aspire to simplicity and a reduction of the design. But realistically, the house is perfect for me. As time goes by, I love it more and more.' **GD**

TURN TO THE NEXT PAGE FOR PROJECT DETAILS »



above In this guest bedroom on the mezzanine level, the window follows the slope of the roof, making the layout much more dynamic

left The garden has several pause areas linked by footpaths. When seen from the entrance walkway, the house is hidden by the surroundings

Project details

The outline on this impressive South African property

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SUPPLIERS

PROJECT TEAM

Architect Marcus Smit Jacobs (+27 21 852 1362; marcussmit.co.za)
Landscape architect Albert Venter (+24 82 513 168)

STRUCTURE

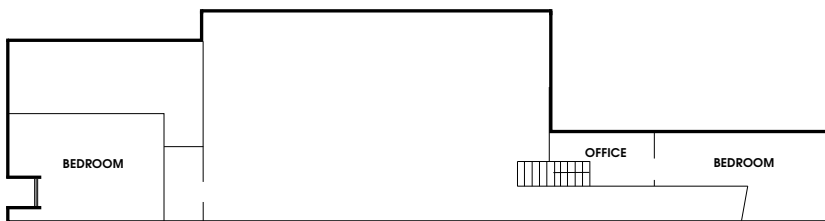
Accent walls Midas Midalux (+27 21 447 0217; paintsmiths.co.za)

FIXTURES & FITTINGS

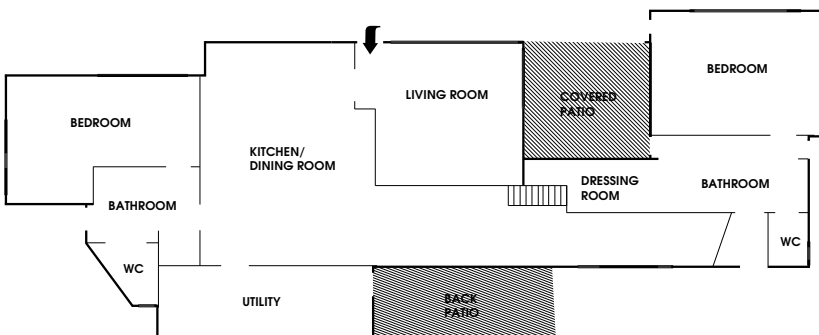
Oversized scatter cushions Nap Living (+21 421 6482; napliving.co.za)
Geometric cushion Skinny laMinx (+27 21 424 6290; skinnylaminx.com)
Throw Weylandts (+27 21 914 1433; weylandts.co.za) **Ochre throw** Lim (+27 21 423 1200; lim.co.za)



FLOORPLAN



MEZZANINE



GROUND FLOOR

SPOTLIGHT ON

EXTRA SEATING OPTIONS

Built-in benches are versatile and can add more seats without breaking up the flow of the room. 'I designed mine as part of the living room seating arrangement, but it doubles as a bed for extra guests,' explains Marcus. For a similar dark material for your bench covering, try Osborne & Little's new Mikado Velvet, available in 21 colourways, £65 per linear metre. (020 8812 3000; osborneandlittle.com)