

# My safe haven

Thanks to savvy design principles applied by his architect son, retiree Ben Smit has made a happy home in this **compact, contemporary cottage** in Grabouw.

By Marian van Wyk  
Photographs Francois Oberholster

The structure consists of a timber frame with an exterior cladding of galvanised zinc and interior walls of 9mm gypsum board.

Fiat 500 supplied by William Simpson Cars Newlands



45m<sup>2</sup>

## Who lives here?

Ben Smit  
(WHERE) Grabouw, Western Cape



Retirement years are often synonymous with downsizing and scaling back – plus the challenge of becoming accustomed to a smaller home. But Ben Smit (77), who worked at Unisa in Pretoria, sees this phase of his life in a whole new light. Since 2013, this widower and father of five has been living in a 45m<sup>2</sup> (with a 9m steep) cottage specially designed for him by his architect son Marcus.

Even though he calls it a cottage, Ben's home looks fresh and contemporary, thanks to the exterior cladding of galvanised zinc. It has a cosy open-plan living area that's

separated from the bedroom by a ceiling-high bookshelf. There's no room for clutter, just books because reading is one of Ben's great loves.

"I don't watch TV; I sometimes miss the sport, but it doesn't bother me," says Ben. "I like listening to the radio and read more now, of course."

A tiny open-plan galvanised zinc house is not every retiree's cup of tea, but Ben is young at heart and has an open mind about the modern design. "In my head, I'm still young and as a singleton I live well; when the kids visit, we have a great time.

## A fresh perspective

Ben didn't find it difficult to scale down: "If I compare this place to the huge space I shared with my children in our former home, it's actually consistent with how I live now.

"I still have personal space in my own bedroom, there's just no longer a huge building that has to accommodate lots of people like before. And it's no longer necessary.

"I wouldn't have wanted a bigger place. To be honest, there's nothing I would add. The only adjustment to living in such a small space is that everything must be in its place – even though I'm actually someone who likes to just leave things where I've put them down and never put them away," admits Ben, laughing. >>

**The stoep is Ben's favourite spot. Although it faces west, the tall trees and the roof keep it cool. A screen made of transparent polycarbonate sheeting shelters the stoep from the north-westerly wind and rain without making it dark.**



The dining table is big enough for sociable get-togethers when Ben's children and friends pop in.

Vases from Nap Living; mug from Le Creuset

The best thing about Marcus's design was knowing that this was where I would put down roots; it's my safe haven. – Ben

A small bookshelf divides the living area and compact kitchen, which runs along the wall underneath the window. A taller bookshelf (opposite) separates the living area from the bedroom.

[WHAT DOES THE ARCHITECT SAY?]

Marcus offers the following tips for building a cottage or garden flat for a retired parent:

• **Privacy, security and accessibility**

Consider and discuss this beforehand, because it will determine the cottage's position and overall design. For peace of mind, make sure that the cottage has its own security.

• **Floor** Keep it as level as possible with no (or few) steps, even in the shower.

• **Layout** Plan your space around specific furniture pieces to utilise the floor surface as economically and practically as possible, especially if your budget or space is limited.

• **Cupboards and shelves** Always keep functionality in mind so that everything can be packed away and the small space doesn't become untidy or cluttered.

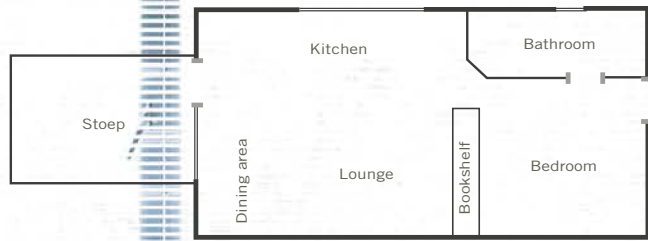
• **Climate** Heat control and orientation are important in creating a comfortable, energy-friendly unit.

• **Stoep and garden** A covered stoep and garden, albeit small, increase the living space. A 'dry' stoep is very useful and practical in a small dwelling.

• **Private accommodation** If the space is too small for a bedroom with a door, you can separate the sleeping area from the living area with something like a bookcase, a half wall or a cupboard.



Floor plan



“My fireplace makes winter a pleasure – I love it,” says Ben. “It’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed so many pleasant winter evenings in front of a fire.”

Laminated wooden flooring in the design Rustic Pine from Flooring Depot; carpet and ottomans from MRP Home; cushions from Skinny laMinx

## Insulation

Grabouw gets extremely hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. This is how Marcus ensured good insulation for the cottage:

**Walls** The 114mm cavity between the interior walls and exterior cladding was filled with wool fibre insulation, and there's a layer of reflective foil insulation under the exterior cladding. Such walls provide nearly four times more insulation against heat and cold than ordinary brick walls.

**Roof** The same foil and wool fibre insulation is used in the ceiling. The large gap between the ceiling and the pitched roof also contributes to excellent insulation.

**Orientation** The longest wall, where the kitchen and bathroom windows are situated, faces north. A glass door on the east-facing side lets morning sun into the bedroom. The stoep is on the west-facing side; it's under cover to keep the afternoon sun from the large living room window. ↑

The bedroom is stripped of unnecessary detail. The bed belonged to Ben's son Marcus when he was a child.

Linen throw from Loads of Living; scatters from Skinny laMinx



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