

MODERN MEXICAN

architect: Aurelio Cimato, MCM Architects

interior: by owners

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CONTEMPORARY STAINLESS STEEL ITALIAN CHANDELIERS, A VAST STAIRCASE IN OFF-SHUTTER CONCRETE SUPPORTED ON A SINGLE SHAFT OF STEEL. OTHER SCALES WHICH ARE HARD TO COMPREHEND INCLUDE THE FACT THAT IT TOOK A DUTCH CONSTRUCTOR TWO MONTHS TO MAKE THE WOODEN SHUTTERING TO ENABLE THE FLOTATION OF THIS STAIRCASE. HE USED THREE TONS OF CONCRETE. SUCH IS THE FIRST IMPRESSION OF THIS QUIRKY CONTEMPORARY MASTERPIECE IN SANDHURST, SANDTON WHICH COMPRISES 1350m² UNDERCOVER.

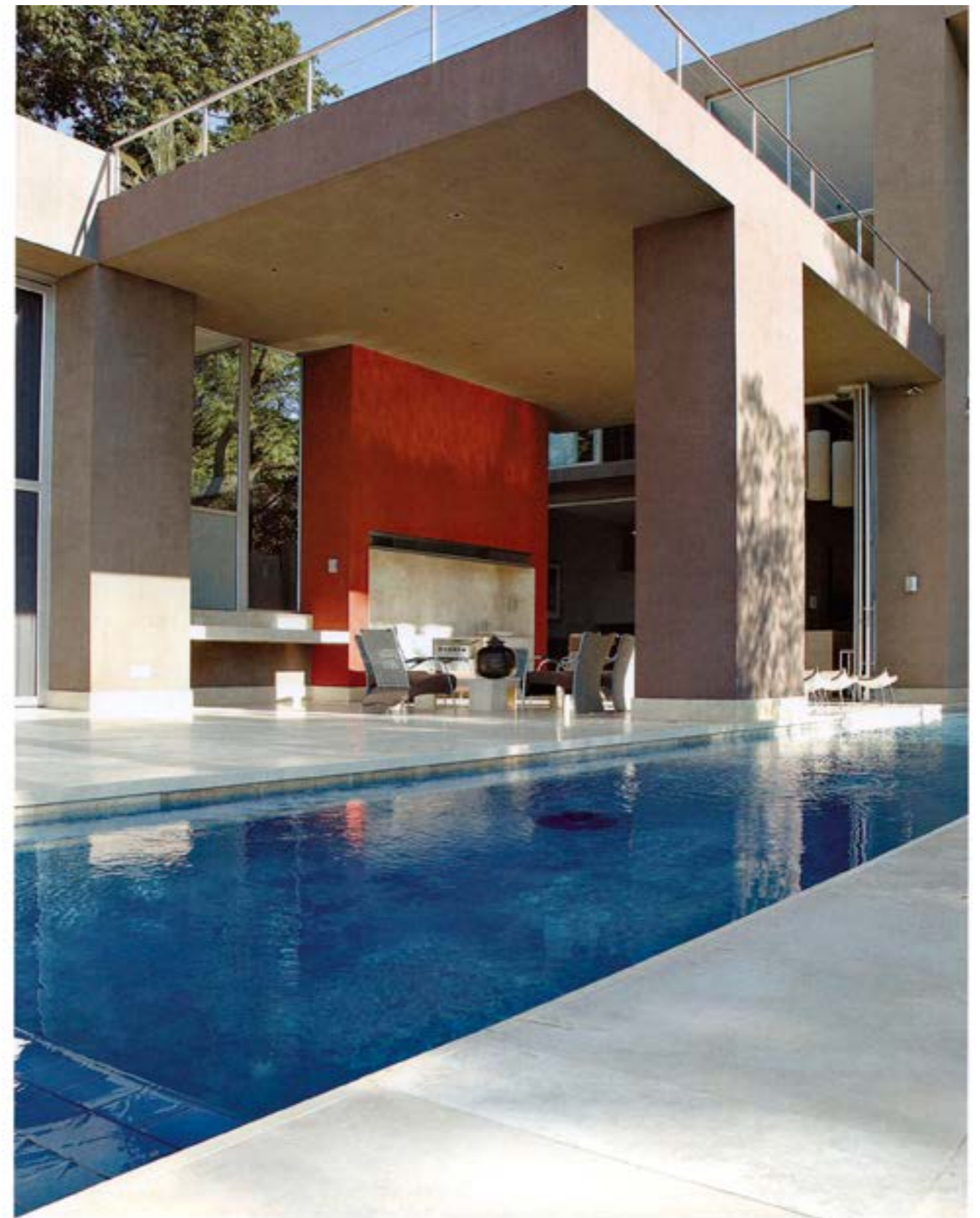


Touring this house is a voyage of discovery. It begins with huge sandblasted pivot glass doors, moves on through the gallery/hall to the library entrance which has some eclectic writing on it to show that it's a library. Says the owner: 'I took a page of writing we enjoyed and cut off the edges so you're not able to read it as that would be unsubtle. One should merely be able to gain an impression from it.' Seemingly acres of Italian travertine floors are laid with 600 x 600 tiles of creamy beige, key walls are similarly clad. Says the owner: 'If my wife wants to lose me it would take me two days and a horse to find her.'

Subtle touches include the design of the guest toilet which overlooks the pond/water feature that surrounds the house, one can see out but nobody can see inside. Here, green bubble-type glass tiles, vitrified under extreme heat, beautify

the walls with green grouting to match. They were imported from Italy and are unique in South Africa. Outstanding overall features throughout include: several million rands worth of shopfitting and custom-designed furniture that is actually built into various interiors; these include the library, the bedrooms – headboards here are actually built into the walls and are permanent features – the cigar bar and the indoor/outdoor bar itself.

The kitchen makes extensive use of solid mahogany with stainless steel accents and wall cladding. In order to get the smooth granite look, the owners used Caesar stone – otherwise known as engineered stone/man-made stone – imported from Israel. It's as hard or harder than granite. This is a compact kitchen with everything tucked away, all is made to fit. An interesting mechanism operates the sand-blasted cupboard



previous pages: Loosely modelled on the work of '50s architects Louis Barragan and protégé Ricardo Legorreta, this design by Aurelio Cimato of MCM architects is the result of local topographical influences and his clients' very individual needs. Volumes are vast and spaces generous.

these pages: Structural engineering for this project was considerable. An example is the entrance hall where the floating concrete staircase utilised three tons of concrete. Ceiling height here is 8m. Contemporary artworks throughout the house include original works by Miro, Dali, Kenridge and Catherine.

doors which have hydraulics, much like a garage door, which – when lifted – stay up independently. Industrial extraction fans are ducted through the ceiling and out via the pantry to the exterior. The kitchen discreetly overlooks the dining room and when chefs cook, diners are not able to see them but are able to see their signature white hats. Surreal indeed!

This is a Smart house in the sense that it has a central digital imaging system and digital sound system. What that essentially does is it allows the operation of CDs, DVD's, TV, DSTV and video in every room of the house. And it's not on one programme, it's all rigged up on a dual recorder. Piped



music throughout the house runs off a central 12-CD player and can adjust to various volumes in each room; TVs are plasma or LCD screens. Says the owner: 'I think mood lighting – which we chose not to have – is very American and over-the-top, we create our own moods, creating selectively what we want and reject instant gratification.'

In the triple volume library, a key architectural feature is the skylight that starts from the ground level and slices straight through the mezzanine floor to the ceiling and beyond. Quite a lot of engineering was necessary to divide a room of such height into two. The library was designed to be slightly set off

from the house so that it could be used as an office. A personal indulgence here was the vast sum needed to create a spiral staircase which leads up to the mezzanine level where books are stored; the staircase is in its own glass and aluminium cage. 'It's a lift shaft without the lift,' the owner quips. 'An entire room on its own to accommodate a spiral staircase. When we have meetings, the patio/courtyard outside looks onto the pond feature, we use this as a buffet area for business lunches.' There's an antique conference table in the office.

Most furniture throughout these triple volume spaces is modern but in the library eclectic modern is combined with



antique; the cigar bar below the dining room has a similar feel. The owner's wife designs the furniture and has it custom made so that it fits to the millimeter. Art is from SA and overseas and the owner enjoys painting himself, in a custom-fitted studio overlooking the garden.

Indoor and outdoor areas adjoin and seamlessly complement each other over three floors: lower ground, ground and first floor and four bedrooms have en suite bathrooms. Sitting room, dining room, gym, cigar bar/wine cellar, painting studio, library and conference room comprises the accommodation. The Cigar & Cognac bar/wine cellar has a humidor and

plasma screen TV for watching sport: it's very cool here and is air-conditioned with significant extractors to remove the smoke. The wall behind the plasma screen is made of granite which is what supplies a natural two to three degree drop in temperature. All furniture fits to the millimeter.

The dining room table seats 10 but 20 - 30 have been served. On summer evenings the owners add another identical table outside adjacent to the bar in the original dining space. He adds: 'Half dine in and half dine out, al fresco.' In the courtyard that the dining room overlooks, is another of the owner's wife's innovations. Here, she took red roof tiles, had fun



***this page:** The main bedroom suite is a generous space where the colour palette is virtually monochrome; curtains are a natural silk, ceramics and hardware in the adjoining bathroom are state-of-the-art.*

smashing them with hammers and made a little garden where blue LCD lights light up to create the feel of a landing strip. On the main patio is a braai area, steak house grill, basin/wash-up; and the notorious smoke associated with braais is removed with restaurant extractors.

Inspiration for this house came from a Mexican architect who won all the Nobel prizes for architecture in the 50's; his name was Louis Barragan. In later years he had a protégé called Ricardo Legorreta who created other interesting designs. Their ideas were the basis for constructing this contemporary house inspired by Mexican architecture; it's further complimented by a Mexican garden planted with cacti and aloes and laid with pebbles and rocks of varying tones and textures.

Comment from the architect:

The departure point for the design was the unique view of Sandton's vibrant CBD, coupled to the topographical character of the site. When I visited for the first time, the immediate image that struck me was the Peregrine winged-roof office building in the distance. It offered obvious structural clues and the contours of the site allowed us to create a middle volume entrance where one would either descend to lower areas, housing lounges, dining and bar area, or access the bedroom level above. This was to become the hub of the house, around which guests would socialise because it links all the various areas. The level above, accessed from the entrance, contains bedrooms and en suite bathrooms. The entrance/motorcourt has an eight metre high entrance gallery/hall and the double volume library/study contains a spiral staircase which allows access from the upper level. All the spaces seem to gel and fade into each other to create a bold, almost landmark-like structure. □