



Mud house

HANDMADE IN AFRICA

In the Waterberg, a new adobe-style marvel by Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens is redefining the fatigued bush lodge aesthetic, one extraordinary feature at a time.

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THIS PAGE The shower – a Rech-Carstens trademark – is crowned with a sky-lit turret and detailed with doors carved by Zanzibari craftsmen. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The kitchen features a giant leadwood butcher's block and cupboards and doors carved by the Zanzibari craftsmen who worked on site for a number of months; An outdoor staircase leads up to an Angus Taylor statue keeping watch over the Waterberg. Lighting expert Paul Pamboukian consulted on the lighting of the house; The "007"-style sunken lounge features chairs by John Vogel and gleaming copper uplighters. The ceiling was created by stitching culled wildebeest skins together and the coffee table of knotted fabric was a collaboration with State of the Nation; The adobe walls of the house are made by combining mud and concrete. **PREVIOUS SPREAD** Panorama over the Waterberg from the front verandah **OPENING SPREAD, LEFT** An adobe-style staircase leads up to the TV lounge. **OPENING SPREAD, RIGHT** The copper dome and automated astrological observatory were built in California and shipped to the Waterberg.





THIS PAGE The dining area features an over-scaled, hippo skeleton chandelier, a sandstone slab table sourced from a local quarry, and Indian doors and columns that break from bush-chic stereotypes. **OPPOSITE** An aerial view of the cellular, African-village style of the home. **NEXT SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT** The glass front of the house looks out over the Waterberg with great leadwood columns holding up the patio; The poufs were crocheted by Maymott, a collaboration between Danny Myburgh and Kate Carlyle; A slatted wooden boardwalk leads up to the front entrance of the house.





The first time I came across Silvio Rech's work was in the early 90s, before he was known as an organic architect: working with teams of craftsmen and building with available, often unconventional materials, in response to the site's needs and possibilities. Soon afterwards, he created the fantastical Middle Earth known as Makalali Lodge – a series of adobe-style buildings complete with suspended wooden walkways and fanciful wrought-iron light fittings and balustrades.

Rech now works with his wife, Lesley Carstens, and major coups include North Island in the Seychelles, a two-year epic that was dubbed “Haute Couture Robinson Crusoe” and entrenched a signature style that somehow married raw village authenticity with six-star luxury. When Rech meets me on their Westcliff property, his passion for his latest projects is evident in the Porsche-pace of his explanations and the mountain of detail he offers. But the detail is necessary. A wall and a roof is more likely to be a stripy rammed earth endeavour that took many months and more guesses and – well, if it's a guest loo – a sky-lit turret.

When I visit the 1 000-square-metre home that the pair has almost completed along with fellow architect Marco Corazza in the Waterberg (three years of almost), the shift towards a more considered approach starts making sense. The use of glass and mirror

and jagged retro forms in gleaming copper render the space more challenging and yet more mature. It is the kind of work that stands comfortably on a world stage – as their recently completed Dalrymple Pavillion did when it made the short list at the 2011 World Architecture Festival in Barcelona.

The refined finishes complement the undulating, almost edible organic contours of the adobe sand-castle mould that anchors the house. The sea of Waterberg green seems all the more endless through the sleek expanse of glass that slouches open onto the deck of planed railway sleepers.

The owner, Rory Sweet – a geek-rich, gung-ho, English, Hemingway reincarnation – and his wife, a Norwegian decorator, had stumbled across the architects on North Island. They offered them free reign in conceptualising the project, and from a personal perspective, “There wasn't any point in doing a lodge if we couldn't find a new approach,” Rech says.

Hence, the gradual evolution of a discernibly different signature. “More considered,” Rech states confidently – and it is the right word. The interiors too are far more of a curated space than a decorated scheme. The whimsy of chimneyed toilets remains, but juxtaposed with less predictable urban elements, the home assumes a confident internationalism. The bar is a Cubist façade of copper and hammered railway sleepers.

The 60s retro mood slides elegantly into a circular sunken lounge that Silvio calls the “007 moment”.

The elusive 007 is evidently on a secret recce in a natural history museum. How else does one explain the contentious but quite astounding hippo-skeleton chandelier that dominates the dining area? As it turns out, this is not simply Hemingway folly but the result of a disturbing tale of a rather cocky rhino with a phallic horn and an attitude which saw three hippos sated, jugular style.

A convenient neighbouring taxidermist cleaned the bones. “We tried to give it the right volume,” explains Aparna Ramani, the team's super-cool, young interior designer, “but in the end we just let some dangle.”

The result is a slightly animated skeleton, on gleaming steel callipers, thus toning any macabre possibilities. Think Damien Hirst, against a vast acacia installation. The dining table is a slab of white rock, sourced with great fuss from a regional quarry, and splendid atop a cluster of white cowhide mats.

And so each piece tells a story, not only a narrative but also an exploration of a new technique. There are ceramic tiles stitched together with leather into a table top (Dust alert). And over-scaled, melting crocheted forms, alien enough to have been sourced on Saturn, but actually just an enchanting project, Maymott (the brainchild of the Rech's

kids' art teacher to create jobs for a group of Soweto *gogos*). In the nursery are Maymott's almost animate poufs, and a great furry white crocodile that is far more charming than it sounds. That the architects motivated successfully for soft toys in an already swollen budget says a lot for their determined, holistic approach to each project.

And so, while some explorations are more successful than others, each has its design integrity, and the overall effect is one of a fertile artisanal laboratory as opposed to a stock catalogue. At first the salvaged Indian columns and door frames appear incongruous, but hell, who said lodge design must be quarantined for eternity in Africa? The designers' passion for timber threads through to the bedrooms where the bedposts are great winding silvery twists of leadwood, and to the kitchen, where the cupboard doors are salvaged railway sleepers – distressed erratically enough to appear accidental.

Indeed, serendipitous mistakes are the project's most soulful and enchanting moments, and they rescue the home from the miserable fate of a contrived over-designed invasion of the blessed Waterberg.

There's a swing-seat in the bedroom, strung on a heavy industrial chain, and on one link there's the tiniest remnant of red paint. It's so tiny and intimate, I do hope no-one scrubs it off. Then again, who's to say that

incongruous millimetre of gloss scarlet wasn't carefully considered? And perhaps it's that ever-so-slightly disarming mystery that makes the design language so very alluring.

Ultimately, the client's adventurous magnanimity combined with the insatiable curiosity of the Rech-Carstens crew makes for an inimitable space, advancing the somewhat fatigued interpretation of the luxury lodge.

As a self-made millionaire, who makes time to embark on a maverick trek to the North Pole with his mates, anything more conventional would have been a cop-out for Sweet. If you're heading hunting in Africa armed with Branson-esque swagger, you want your chill zone layered with luxurious, slouchy pillows in fine, subdued linens and velvets. You may even enjoy the woven leather ottoman that looks like a generous dollop of liquorice. And of course, the hand-stitched blue wildebeest ceiling.

With all this detail, (OCD? Dare I suggest?) the home's astounding volumes, sleek expanses of glass, and restrained palette forge a critical relationship with the surrounding veld. The sleek, egg-shaped baths are accompanied by broad, towelling daybeds for a leisurely and panoramic drying ritual. And why on earth not?

For me, the most intriguing recurring element is that of scattered explosions of gleaming copper. While these might carry

ambiguous references to the sort of Africa-shaped clocks that give you hives, the material has a rare ability to evoke both blingy luxury and time-worn alchemy – kind of like these designers do. ▽

• Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens Architects, 011 486 1525

All about the observatory

Surely the most astounding element of Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens' handmade Waterberg palace is the giant copper dome housing an astrological observatory. Both dome and telescope were made in America and shipped to Africa, where they now sit atop owner Rory Sweet's man cave. A library beneath the dome is the final phase of the home, set for completion early in 2012. So, on any given evening in the Waterberg, Mr Sweet may enjoy some quiet time with his books before climbing the ladder to the observatory where, joined by friends, a bottle of whisky, and cigars, he may instruct the computer to find Saturn. The dome will spin, the telescope will turn, high-speed internet will kick into action, and the African skies will reveal all.