

An education no university can produce

David Baker recently undertook the design of his own house. The finished project is in harmony with the environment and took many of its cues from the site

Designing a house is a daunting task – the clients will have to live in the structure, use it, interact with it, and ultimately, enjoy being in the building. So when an architect designs his or her own home, the dynamic of the design is forever altered. "You have to keep reminding yourself that you will have to live in the house – and with the mistakes too," says David Baker, a Durban-based architect who recently undertook such a task. "Designing your own home is like playing with a ball of plasticine – budgets aside, the possibilities are endless. Designing is a continual process that only ends when the last coat of paint is applied. It's also a natural amphetamine. I'd often wake up at silly hours of the morning with new ideas," he says, the excitement of the project clearly still with him.

Baker has always loved open-plan living and finds solace in cooking and playing the piano – he wanted these three facets to be embedded in the design. "My wife, who is a school teacher and wine lover, also contributed to the brief and requested a study and wine cellar," he says. But for the most part, the 1 800m² site itself determined the brief. Originally part of the Farm Albinia, established around the turn of the 19th century, the site was previously vacant land with infestations of alien plants and

Main picture: The house was designed to have as little impact on the environment as possible.

Right: Entering the house at a split level you are taken either upwards to the first floor or downwards to the ground floor and onto the timber deck overlooking the valley below.





Leading project

Left: Green elements in the house include solar-heated water, aerated tap fittings, dual-flush toilets and under-tile roof insulation.

Below: A study, wine cellar and a music room were called for in the brief.

natural grassland interspersed with indigenous trees prevailed. There was also evidence of a few local residents – a family of wild pigs and the occasional shy duiker. This was a great influence in keeping the overall architecture as in tune with nature as possible, a recurring theme of the project. "All the bricks are recycled," says Baker, adding, "the house is built from parts of the old King George Hospital in Sidenham, the old Shell garage on Berea road and a demolished house in Gillitts. The decking and staircases are made from reclaimed timber from the Baltic areas of Russia (the timber was previously used in packing crates for the automotive industry), and the retaining walls and landscaping were constructed from the stones retained after the foundations were dug." Other green elements in the house include solar-heated water, passive insulation under the floor slab in the form of compressed polystyrene sheeting, aerated tap fittings, dual-flush toilets and under-tile roof insulation.

trees. A fifth of the upper portion is on a slight slope but then drops dramatically, transforming the platform into a natural stage with views over the valley below. "This was the first house that I designed and built myself, so I relied on the site's characteristics to develop the architectural brief and then let the design evolve from there. The only constraints I had were a realistic budget and the future saleability of the building," Baker explains. A limit of R3 500 per m² was set, and even though no compromises were made on the quality of finishes, the final product came out at R3 400 per m².

Recycling

Once the site had been cleared of the alien bush and overgrowth, the





It is this choice and use of materials which Baker believes contribute to the defining characteristics of the house, along with the interesting level changes. "Entering the house at a split level you are taken either upwards to the first floor or downwards to the ground floor and onto the timber deck overlooking the valley below."

Baker describes the project as having a simple, almost bucolic feel that

The bedrooms are standard sizes, but a sense of volume and openness is achieved through the exposed timber roof beams.

was achieved through the uncomplicated architectural lines and indigenous surrounds, complemented by the use of natural materials and honest aesthetics. The inspiration was mixing the old with the new. "I worked in England for quite a few years and really love those old country houses – they have such a warm homeliness about them. When I got back in 2005, I was pleasantly surprised to find that a few developers and architects were starting to think outside the box and were combining raw elements with contemporary styles. East Coast Architects exhibit this well in their projects and OMM Design have done a few fine projects combining rough brickwork with clean glass facades. My current employer, Ruben Reddy Architects, also has a fresh, global attitude towards current South African architecture which is evident in our competition-winning designs."

The general architecture in the area is pretty much standard South African residential style. Baker would have liked to have gone a bit more contemporary but the site location, budget restraints and long-term commercial prospects played a part in controlling the design. "I'll definitely stretch the architectural imagination and sustainability on my next house," he laughs.

Simplicity of design

Baker tried to keep a sense of aged rawness and simplicity about the design, with an almost juxtaposed contrast to the modern, minimalist feel that he strived for in the kitchen and bathroom areas. He cites as

examples "the natural pine floors vs. the chocolate porcelain tiles" and "the raw brickwork vs. the neutral coloured walls". The stained concrete breakfast counter works well with the white melamine wrap cupboards and black granite tops in the kitchen, complemented by the matt aluminium light fittings. In the bathrooms, the sanitaryware was kept white with simple lines, and again, harmonised well with the concrete vanities. The

Leading project



Left: The decking and staircases of the house are made from reclaimed timber from the Baltic areas of Russia while all the bricks are recycled.

Below left: A modern, minimalist feel was strived for in the kitchen and bathroom areas.



bedrooms are standard sizes, but a sense of volume and openness is achieved through the exposed timber roof beams. Externally, the reclaimed bricks and timber lend a sense of environmental conscientiousness to the overall structure and blend well with the stone terraced landscape.

"I wasn't able to supervise the construction process, as I was working during the week (on the Durban 2010 stadium), so I had to pass by the site on my way to work in the mornings, give instructions to the builder, dash off to work and then check on the progress on my way home in the afternoon. It was quite stressful and resulted in compromising the design in some places. But over and above the few mishaps, the sense of self-achievement from taking a design from a sketched conception to a finished building is the ultimate reward," he explains. Asked if he would have done anything differently given the opportunity, Baker says that he would have taken three months unpaid leave and paid more

attention to the finer details. "And next time I'll be more careful with using SA pine as a flooring material – that stuff moves like a living organism!"

In closing, Baker says, "An old tutor of mine told me that the architecture of a building is born in the site. Before the first brick was laid, I spent many evenings watching the sun go down, feeling the wind blow from the valley and listening to the surrounds. It's a fundamental starting point for designing which so few architects take seriously enough. Every architect should design, build and live in his or her own house – it's an education no university can produce." **LAD**

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