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Property of the month
Rock Art: Idwala Lodge

Words: Anne Shauffer Photograph: Sally Chance

The Japanese have a unique design philosophy, one that prizes an element of surprise, even secrecy. It's to do with not revealing everything from the outset, so as you move through the space, the design unfolds and reveals itself gradually, in a mysterious kind of way.

Idwala's like that, particularly from the approach road. There's something there in the distance, but it's smudged, unclear. George Elphick, principal architect of Elphick Proome Architects (EPA), is content with that perception, for his stated ideal was to design something in the landscape, not on it. 'It is quite illegible from that perspective, and when you arrive in the kraal, there are surprises.' And while it may be stretching the imagination to attribute an Eastern consciousness to this overtly African environment, many of the principles applied to this project have those undertones. There's an honesty and simplicity about the materials, the manner in which they've been used, and the very particular relationship between the spaces, which wholly endorse the point.

Idwala is the Zulu word for rock – apt, for the site was, and is, covered in a uniquely beautiful orange-tinged rock, a material used extensively in all the structures, one that contributes substantially to Idwala's gentle invisibility.

The site is breathtaking, not only for its intrinsic beauty, but for its perfect vantage point in this, the northern sector of the Nambiti Conservancy. Elevated, it has the wild world at its feet.

The founder members of the syndicate behind Idwala searched long and hard for the perfect location for their escapees' concept: a syndicated, fractional-ownership bush retreat accessible for a weekend from both Durban and Johannesburg. After a few futile attempts in northern KwaZulu-Natal, they discovered an opportunity in the 10 000-hectare Nambiti Conservancy, 25 kilometres east of Ladysmith. Its malaria-free status was a bonus. There were 20 sites that allowed for the development of a lodge in a given radius in predetermined positions in the conservancy. They chose Idwala's site for its views south over the Nambiti Plains and its proximity to the Sundays River. With that position secured, a loose group of friends was assembled, presented with the architect's sketches and given the option of a 10-per cent shareholding. In or out? In.

EPA was responsible for the entire design and interior delivery, right down to teaspoons and doorstops. EPA director Melissa Wilkins collaborated on the project with George Elphick and, as with all remote-controlled operations, it was a challenging, lengthy process.

Three years from concept to construction. The challenges not only stemmed from the rockiness of the site, but the rough roads, relative inaccessibility for builders and deliveries, and the near-impossibility of securing an experienced site manager and builder at such a remote location. A lack of skills meant an intensively hands-on experience for the architects.



The scheme was designed on site, with the core concept capitalising on the 270° view from the promontory. George explains: 'We selected three acacia trees as the axis, then, using the natural stone, arranged a kraal-like enclosure. The kraal was the anchor – a protected space in which you could circulate different elements. We then broke it up into five pods for sleeping, a main lodge and a boma. They all clip onto the kraal wall. Each of those elements was then conceived on the basis of a glazed pavilion.'

George and Melissa consider it to be a strong concept. 'The idea was of a glazed pavilion anchored to the wall, with a very simple double-pitched thatched roof. In that way, there's an element of transparency and openness, because the glass walls slide away to access decks and, in some cases, connect with the bush, which comes right up to the units. The bathrooms are the interface zones between the sleeping areas and the kraal wall. The sleeping areas then are totally transparent and facilitate that connection physically and visually with the bush.'

Open the front door, and exhale, for nothing stands between you and the Plains. Like the sleeping pods, so too the lodge – that element of surprise, a vista nobody could tire of. Nothing prepares you for the scale or the drama of it. George describes the lodge in architect's shorthand: 'A linear structure, long pool on the northwest side running against the slope so quite aggressive in form, but softened with the roofscape.' Translated, the lodge is cool and cavernous, never cold, with a glorious rim flow pool hugging the one side, and an expansive wooden deck stretching out into space with no balustrade to interrupt infinity. Fishing net is the safety substitute, suspended on the horizontal, just below the sight line on all the decks.

EPA has designed a number of lodges, and valuable lessons have been learned. For George, one of the key issues is to open up the space as much as possible. 'The traditional kind of "colonial solution", where you've an expanded,

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organic, rambling rondavel with stone or brick walls and punctured openings like an English cottage, was the complete antithesis of what we were trying to achieve. Hence the extent of glass and sliding doors. In the lodge, two full sides of the building open up, and in the bedrooms, three. You can literally be in an umbrella space and allow the natural ventilation to permeate. It's also easy to control the privacy aspect, notwithstanding the fact that the bedrooms are quite close together.'

The choice of materials is very simple, says George. 'Traditional gum poles, natural stone, cement floors, cementitious wall paint, laths, thatch, and that's it. A very simple recipe.' Having said that, it's always going to be about how the ingredients work together, and EPA chose to up-end the predictable. The boma is purposefully square, not round. 'And there's a fair amount which is rectilinear, like very flat canopies. We also explored alternative materials, such as rusted steel, so in its raw state it becomes part of the stone and timber. They all meld into each other and ultimately into the surrounds.'



Handling the interior design was a blessing and a burden: a blessing, for seldom do architects get to ensure the interior works with the structure; a burden, for balancing a contemporary interior with traditional African artwork and furniture is not for the faint hearted. Most of the furniture was designed and customised, the art sourced from south, east and west Africa. Melissa was intimately involved with the interior, and stresses how adamant they were about not going 'organic' or 'colonial' or putting masks on the wall. 'We really wanted to give it something new. The idea was to use natural materials in their true form, so, if it was glass, it wasn't painted, lacquered or combined with other materials, it was used as is, honestly. There was a clear definition between the different materials.'

Idwala's landscaping consists exclusively of plants that grow in that specific sector of the conservancy, so, says George, 'it has an extraordinarily natural quality'. It's true, for the bird life is visible and voluble. As visually integrated as Idwala is into the landscape, the architects made a conscious attempt not to impinge on the environment. 'The pods float above the landscape, they do not grow out of it – they sit in it and touch it in a delicate way, rather than being grounded.'

Idwala has been designed with a number of separate but linked spaces, so no matter your mood, there are wonderful permutations on space – to be solitary, secluded or sociable – and there's always room to breathe in that unmistakable scent of privilege.

Elphick Proome Architects, +27 (0)31 275 5800, www.eparch.co.za

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Property of the month: Idwala Lodge

Posted on: 07/01/2009

Posted By Robert on 19/01/2009

An absolutely fantastic setting. The official website Idwala Lodge gives you a little more info on the lodge as well as the game that can be seen at the Nambiti Conservancy.

Posted By Don Mycroft on 15/01/2009

Looks impressive. Please send rates for March/April

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