


Nothing about a dreamer

For a space entirely your own, nothing beats building your home from the ground up. But be warned: it demands patience, commitment and money. Most of all, it demands a dream – as this 32-year-old Capetonian businessman discovered.

By Jamie Innes

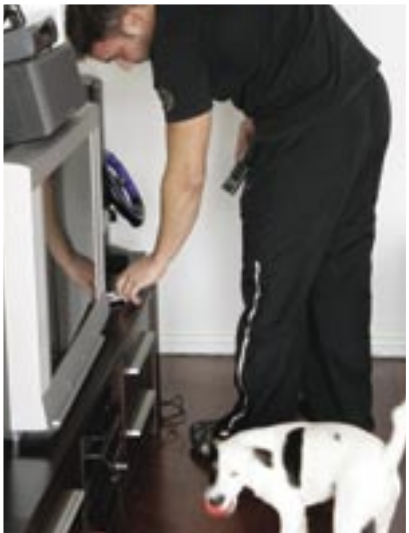



For anyone on the lookout for property in Cape Town, the words “High Cape” and “Vredehoek” conjure up thoughts of spectacular city, harbour and mountain views and plenty of mountain air. Too much mountain air, actually. Because these words are also synonymous, for those in the know, with gale force winds, slamming doors and windows, messed up hairdos, and frazzled, windswept tempers.

But, as fate would have it, when I arrive at Paolo’s house in High Cape there’s not a breath of wind and it’s hard to imagine even the notorious Cape Doctor marring what really is a spectacularly zen spot.









The first sign that you're entering a calm, still space, is the Japanese symbol for the number three on the outside wall. "It's my personal artwork," explains Paolo. "I knew I had to put a number up but I wasn't just going to go down to the hardware shop and buy your garden-variety brass number. I wanted something to suit my vision for the house. So I created something personal."

Step through the wooden security door and you immediately realise that when he talks about creating "something personal" he's actually talking about so much more than just the number on the outside wall. The interior is clearly the product of someone who knew exactly what he wanted and refused to cut corners to get it. "I had a vision of my dream house, and this," says Paolo, "is it."

But getting to this point has been a long and painstaking process. "It started years ago when I was sitting on the boundary wall of the neighbour's house having a few drinks with some friends, one of whom happened to be an architect. We were just chatting, having a few beers, when we looked over and saw this plot with a 'Private Sale' sign on it. We couldn't believe our eyes – we didn't think it was possible to find an open piece of land in the city bowl. But there it was. Anyway, my architect friend said, 'If you don't buy it, I'm going to, because I could make the most awesome house there.' And right then and there the seed was planted.

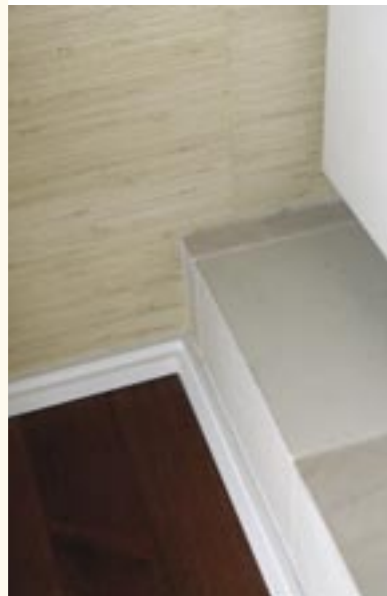
So the plot was bought. The dream begun. "At that point I really didn't have the money to start building anything but as time went by I started designing the house. I even got a student to build a model of the house – I wanted to see it as a three-dimensional thing and see if it worked before I started spending money on something which wasn't going to work."



But work it did. Still, there was no money to start building. “I would carry that model house with me into every new place I lived in – it would sit in my rented flat looking at me, reminding me. And whenever anyone asked me what it was; why I was lugging it around with me, I’d tell them ‘That’s my dream house, something I intend to build by the time I am 30’.”

The big push eventually came when the internal layout was finally completed. “It was perfect. It was exactly how I wanted to live and exactly how I wanted to see the city. It really made me want to get started.” But at that point Paolo still didn’t have enough money. “But I had a jet ski... so I sold that and the money from that paid for drawings of the detailing, things like the fireplace, the balustrades, the staircase...”

Still, while it’s all very well to dream big, when it comes to turning that dream into reality – and throwing pots of money at it – it can be scary. Paolo’s designs had by now cost him R100 000. “Here I was with this expensive pile of paper and now I was scared that I was never actually going to get this thing built. The real fear was now having to make



CLEVER DESIGN

There were two stumbling blocks, both overcome with good design.

1. Wind Cape Town is renowned for its evil South Easter. Having doors ripped from your hands or slammed in your face is common, and the whistling howl is enough to make grown men weep.

2. Corners Building on a corner plot is great from a view perspective, but it’s not always easy to efficiently utilise the space.

THE SOLUTIONS

1. There’s no escaping the wind. But you can minimise the effect with the right gear – in this case, pneumatic hinges. Pneumatic hinges operate so that the door slowly closes on an air pressure system. An air tube inside the cylinder fills with air when the door is opened; release the door and the internal spring will automatically pull the door shut, but movement is cushioned by the air in the tube.

Another simple solution is to use sliding doors and windows.

2. To make the most of his corner plot, Paolo had to build the house on a curve. Both the bedrooms are built with a curving balcony to make the rooms automatically seem bigger. “Even if you can’t use the balcony because of weather, the extra light and illusion of space will add to your quality of life. But designing with curves is a lot more expensive as it’s a great deal more labour-intensive.”



Captions to go here



those drawings a reality.” But having spent that much money there was no turning back, so Paolo started building the superstructure – the roof, windows, plumbing and electrics. “I got one builder in to do all these initial ‘wet works’. After that it was time to get in a project manager, because at this stage you really need someone who understands the costs involved in the finishes – these are the really expensive bits – and who will take a bit more care in making sure nothing gets stuffed up.” One and a half years after building started, the house was finally ready.

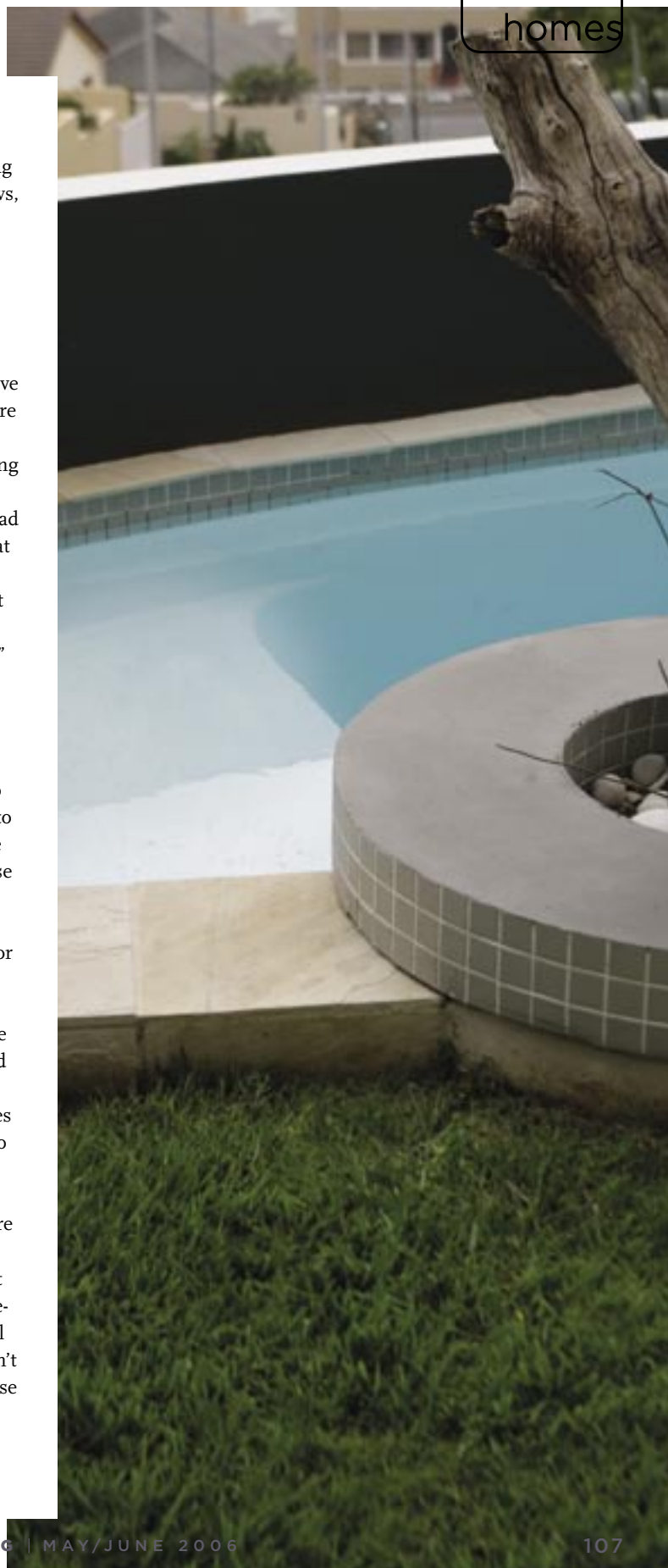
“It had been this thing in my head for so long that it’s hard to believe that it’s now a real space. I’ve become so used to living in it I sometimes forget the dream. Until the next time someone walks in and is blown away by it.”

Because blown away you will be. And not by the Cape Doctor either. “I had lived in High Cape before so I knew that I had to think about the wind and come up with something to minimise that problem. I knew how to position the house so that it would be windy from the back only, and because the house is rear entrance, you walk into stillness and views. I also put pneumatic hinges on every single door so that no doors can slam.”

Wind issues aside, there is an obvious sense of serenity. Every single room is bathed in light. Furniture and finishes are simple and minimalist, and there are plenty of natural touches like the liberal use of wood. Paolo also played with textures – using wallpaper to warm the master bedroom and frame the fireplace – to get a more natural feel.

“What people don’t realise is that wallpapering is a lot cheaper than special paint techniques, but you can still achieve the same effect. Wallpaper isn’t like it used to be in the old days – these days they use natural fibres and you can find really great stuff.”

Every room has wonderful views





but the real clincher is the master bathroom. Stand in the shower and you have a view of Table Mountain and Signal Hill. Face the mirror while brushing your teeth and you can see Table Mountain, Signal Hill and Lion's Head. Sit in the bath and look out on Lion's Head and Signal Hill. "A bathroom with a view just can't be beat, can it?" beams Paolo.

What really makes this house home though, is the fact that Paolo didn't just throw out the old and bring in only new. "I brought quite a lot of my old furniture with me. Stuff like my stove – which was the first thing I ever bought, and my bed. So before building anything I referred to all this old furniture and built around that to make sure the size and feel of the spaces were right." Paolo also designed a lot of the detailing himself, including the bathroom handrails, soap dishes and toilet-roll holders. Paying attention to the small things makes a big difference to the overall look, subtly increasing your quality of life, not to mention the investment value of your home. And that includes the level of craftsmanship you finally settle on. "When it comes to choosing professionals like your joiner and your ironmonger, don't choose cheap. The work will look cheap. Also, go for the guys with passion because these are the guys who will be happy to fix stuff until it's exactly how

you want it to be. Choose the guys who take pride in their work."

It's hard to believe it now but Paolo insists that the house is riddled with mistakes. "Mistakes always happen when you build. But instead of letting the mistake stress you out, you need to think about how to fix it so it turns out for the better. For example, the studio flat and bathroom, outdoors spiral staircase, covered entrance and water feature were all the results of mistakes or changes made to the original design. All rectified, and all for the better."

Paolo moved in the year he turned 30 – "just in time to make my 'by-the-time-I'm-30' deadline!" The entire process, from buying the plot to moving his furniture in, took four years. Patience is clearly key.

But Paolo admits he had added incentive to persevere: "My family thought I was mad. The most important part of realising my dream was in fact my friendship with the architects and designers. There were often times when I wondered 'Will I ever actually build this monster?' But my friendship with them – people with such passion and vision – meant that I never gave up hope. Throughout the whole long process they could envision the day they would be walking through the front door. I just knew I had to build it so that that could happen."



“If I could give prospective homeowners any advice it would be to build from scratch if at all possible, especially if you’re planning on renovating whatever you buy anyway. Sometimes you come across a piece of land with a house already on it and you know have two choices: break it down completely and build or renovate. Definitely break it down. This way you’re putting all your eggs in one basket and maximising the full potential of the land. Whereas if you just renovate, you will inherit already existing problems which you’ll have to fix, and you’ll run into snags. It’s just not worth it, especially if you have vision. The only real way to own an asset is to build from the ground up.

“I knew that if I bought an apartment it would always just be an apartment. A piece of land though... That could be anything in my wildest dreams.” And so it is.

Paolo's architects were Frank Bohm and Dion Max Walters from Bomax (www.bomax.co.za); (021) 426 5133.

