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BORN OF THE VELD

When architect Johan Wentzel set about designing this house for his client, he did not immediately choose an architectural style but first spent time watching how the sun moved across the sky and working out to make the house 'grow' out of the veld.

● The guiding principle for the development of a holiday home in the Waterberg Mountains was for the occupants to feel that they were close to – and almost inside – the veld when they entered their house. Architect Johan Wentzel explains, 'The location and the site are quite special and inspiring and gave me the opportunity to work outside the normal practical limitations that a city property would place on the project. The house is a weekend getaway, so "normal" requirements such as a double garage did not apply.'

The house is located on a game farm close to the small town of Rooiberg at the foothills of the Waterberg – somewhere between Bela-Bela (Warmbaths) and Thabazimbi in Limpopo Province. It is less than a two-hour drive from Pretoria but, once at the farm, the visitor is completely surrounded by untouched bushveld. Ideal for a holiday home, it is far enough away from the city to provide the opportunity to experience a different climate and landscape, but close enough for frequent visits.

The client was adamant that the house should inspire awareness of the bush at all times and give the visitor a tangible experience of the natural environment. Johan explains, 'The structure needed to allow a constant connection with the context. The house simply consists of three boxes: two are bedrooms and the third contains the living space.'

'The first and most lasting impression of the site, and the whole project, is the constantly changing view: the different layers of the Waterberg lie to the north and west, while on the ridge one is surrounded by beautiful bushveld. A large raasblaar tree (large-fruited bushwillow) guided us in positioning the building and is now the "centrepiece" of the three structures,' says Johan.

The game farm is owned by a group of shareholders and the buildings are subject to certain aesthetic guidelines, the main one being that all structures must have a thatched roof. Exterior walls had to be painted in a specific colour or built from the stone found on the site. The design process developed over time and although he was never given carte blanche, the client was willing to consider Johan's ideas.

The construction system is a reinforced concrete deck that makes up the base and floor of the various units. The wooden pole and thatched roof form a separate element that serves as an enclosure or shelter. 'Everything between floor and roof is open or in the veld,' says Johan. 'A system of "light" glass sliding doors allows one to reconfigure openings according to wind direction, areas in use, or time of day. The private and service areas of the house are contained in stone boxes.' Materials and finishes are not a feature and are extremely basic: the floors and worktops are natural concrete, the service boxes are stone and the roof, kitchen units and furniture are natural wood.

Johan completed his degree in architecture at the University of Pretoria, going on to work for various architectural practices in South Africa and the UK, the most notable being time spent in Nicholas Grimshaw's office working on a motor manufacturing plant, and later the master planning of the London Docklands area with Richard MacCormack. W Design Architecture Studio was founded in 2003 and the company has since been involved in mainly residential projects. 'For me, the design of a large housing development holds the challenge of trying to offer a solution to its anonymity,' Johan says.

A far cry from this anonymity, the Rooiberg house gave him the opportunity to be creative within a brief – even though he was under the watchful eye of the client, a property developer who constructed the building while living on the site in his rooftop tent. 'Whenever you design anything outside of the normally accepted way of doing things, you need to have a lot of trust from the client. Selecting locations for the structures between the trees, rocks and steep slopes was a great experience and his passion for the area made it a great pleasure to spend time on the site.'

One of Johan's most admired architects is the Spaniard Alberto Campo Baeza, whom he quotes as saying: 'What is important is precision in choosing the right number of elements and in giving the project time to develop.'

Johan explains further: 'Time is one of the key concepts in his architecture – the central concerns are how to control gravity and to relate it to light. Time is constructed by light – as the sun passes, so does time. If one spends a day at this house you are completely aware of the outside – the sun moves and with it the shadows. At night the moon does the same – exposing its sometimes bright light through the east and west gables. The architecture used at the house aims to be less than the context – it should be all about the veld. While the structure by no means disappears into the landscape, one is completely aware of the context – more so than the structure,' he concludes.

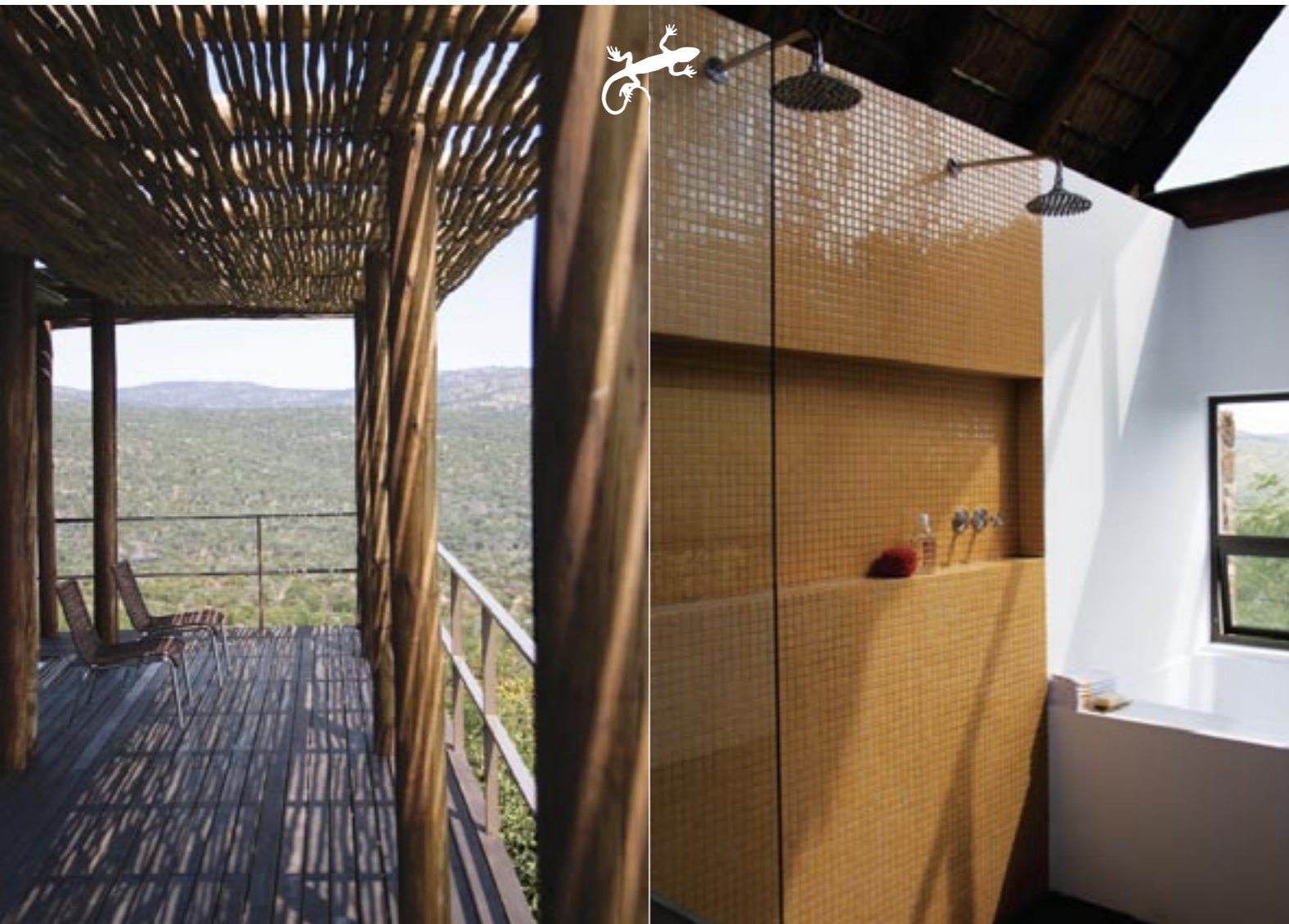
● Johan Wentzel, W Design Architecture Studio, 083 445 0424, jw@wdas.co.za





The structures almost appear transparent, allowing a constant awareness of the context. The bedrooms are located in two separate structures, each consisting of an open-plan bedroom area and a solid service area. The rooms can be closed off with canvas roller blinds for privacy. **OPENING SPREAD, LEFT** The entrance to the living area reveals the view of the Waterberg Mountains. Located on a ridge surrounded by beautiful bushveld, the house is part of nature – the fireplace was painted in a colour mixed specially by Africote to match the trees on the property. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT** The house consists of three simple boxes. Two are bedrooms, while the third contains the living area.





ABOVE LEFT A wooden pergola breaks the sunlight into striped shadows on the terrace. **ABOVE RIGHT** The bathrooms, located in the 'solid' areas of each bedroom, feature an open double shower and large concrete bath positioned so that the bather can enjoy the view. **OPPOSITE** The living areas are designed to maximise the views – all the finishes and materials are basic and cause the least possible interference. The kitchen service area is opposite the dining room, and the bar and entertainment service area is opposite the living room. A TV is hidden behind two flush panel doors under the bar countertop. Located above each service area are two lofts, providing extra sleeping space for visitors.



ABOVE, LEFT Architect Johan Wentzel designed the house with the constantly changing vistas of the surrounding mountains and untouched bushveld in mind. **ABOVE, RIGHT** Evenings are spent around a fire in the boma. The paint colour used for the fire pit is 'ox blood' from Africote. **OPPOSITE** The swimming pool is placed lower than the deck, which makes it invisible from inside the house.