

AT GARY PLAYER'S KAROO FARMHOUSE, HIS DAUGHTER, DECORATOR MICHELE THROSSELL, CONCEIVED A THOROUGHbred INTERIOR OF TRADITION, LUXURY AND CONTEMPORARY LIVING FROM THE REMAINS OF AN OLD HORSE BARN

TEXT LIZ MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPHS ELSA YOUNG

DESERT CLASSIC



The atrium with koi pond and vast open skylight in mirrored geometry. The leather and chrome swing seat is by Egg Design OPPOSITE PAGE The living room has fireplaces at either end. Portrait of Gary Player by John Meyer. The walls are coarse grass cloth. Curtains are from The Silk & Cotton Company and the Ralph Lauren upholstery fabric on the sofa and pale chair is from St Leger & Viney

People familiar with the Karoo know that what seems like miles of doleful wilderness beside the N1 can also harbour pockets, or in this case, swathes of magnificent cultivation. In the 34 years that golf legend, Gary Player, has raised thoroughbred horses on this stud farm on the banks of the Orange River outside Colesberg, he has developed an oasis estate of irrigated pastures, neat paddocks and gabled stable buildings thick with wisteria and boughs of bougainvillea blooming in hot-pink ruffles. Although surrounded by ragged *koppies* and stoney ground, the scene around the house, that Gary calls home in South Africa, is cinematic in its loveliness.

The house has recently been rebuilt on the same site where a not-very-remarkable Karoo homestead stood for decades. Nothing of the original was worth preserving except a 70-centimetre-thick wall that was discovered to be the relic of an old horse barn, onto which the original house was built in a far less glorious style. 'This wall was what we used as a precedent for the new building,' explains architect Rowley Watermeyer, who took over the commission after his father, Phillip, became ill. 'It sparked the concept, and was valuable not so much for its structural contribution but more so for establishing the DNA and spirit of the project.'

Too often, new structures built on old sites lose a sense of connection to their time and place, but the opposite applies here. Rowley suggests that the barn was obviously built there, in the first place, for a good practical reason. 'The original farmers knew the winds, the weather, the scorching sun and winter light much better than we did, and so when it came to planning the new building, we respected the original barn's orientation.'

The new house is a long, extensive single storey with an intriguing progression of rooms interlinked with ramps and courtyards featuring a double storey of three bedrooms to the right and two externally accessed loft bedrooms. It has no definite vernacular, but feels artisanal and modernist at the same time. Inside, the decor is fresh, current, and blends location-appropriate style with clean-edged contemporary elegance. For that reason, architect and decorator have accomplished their mission. 'More than anything,' says Michele, 'I didn't want it to feel like a new house. I wanted to create slick modern living with a rural farmhouse feel.'

Blending the design benchmarks of two styles to compose another is Michele's 'thing', and she's become an astute purveyor of laid-back, glamorous interiors using a textural, neutral palette and top-notch furniture. Her inspiration for this interior came from near and far. 'My parents gave me carte blanche more or less. After all, I know how they live, how they go about their domestic day and how the house needs to be tailored to their and the family's needs. All Dad asked for was a leather wingback bed from Ralph Lauren.' The bed was shipped in, along with an assortment of key pieces, accessories, and bed linen, in particular for the five bedrooms.

Of the decor directive, Michele acknowledges intuition and instinct. 'It's a process. I work towards how I feel it should look. My mind started thinking about all the contexts that this house had going



Michele Throssell and her father, Gary Player, with one of the stud's champion sires in the grass and brick-paved stable yard that forms a square behind the house

for it – where it was, who it was for. Rowley and I worked together to streamline all that information into a design language. We'd say "let's dome the ceiling here, let's panel here" as we were planning, and the rest – the look, the colours, textures, shapes, the mix – followed on in line with the vision.'

The concept of wood-panelling select walls and bulkheads was an important departure point. 'I saw Siberian larch panelling installed at Ralph Lauren's Montauk studio in Long Island that was gorgeous,

pale silvery, but too chic for the Karoo. I wanted a similar feel, but more rugged. On site one day, I saw a piece of old scaffolding that was exactly what I was after. After a bit of experimenting we used pine planks, with a wash, to cut the yellowness.'

The house is organised in two sections: the living areas and sleeping areas. The kitchen – fabulously chic, a benchmark of contemporary country taste – is to the left off an entrance hall with Gary's huge study to the right. Beyond that is the soul of the house, an open-air atrium with a square koi pond mirroring the open roof and cantilevered bench around the edge framing the water. The floors are café au lait-coloured concrete from the farm, frequently covered with rug custom-woven by Coral Stephens. Some walls have white-painted rocks set into them. Again, artisanal, organic, but modern looking.

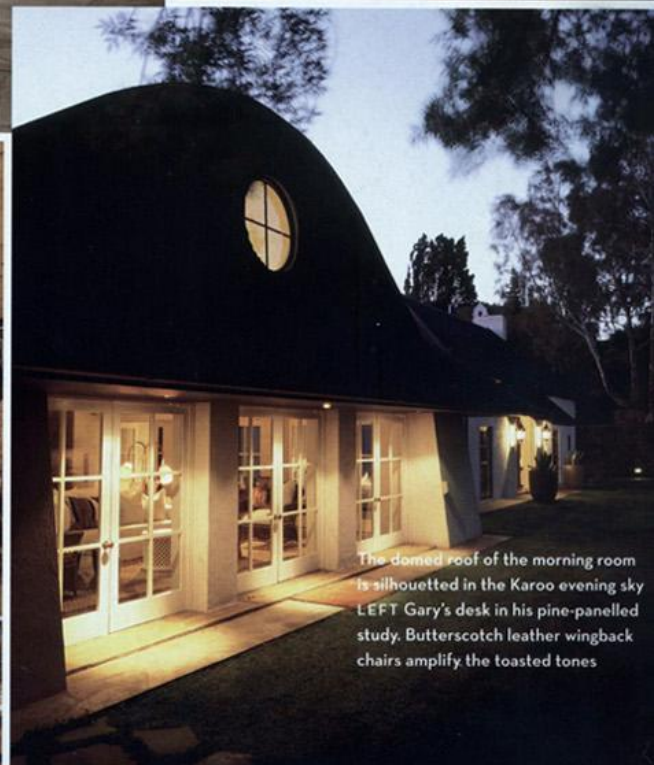
To the left of the atrium (which can be closed off during the bitter winters to make heating the house easier), is the 11-seater dining room table – an aloe stem found on the farm supporting a vast glass top – spans the width of the room under a pitched pine-panelled ceiling with millions of little LED lights fitted into it to resemble a Karoo night sky. 'Dining under that twinkling indoor sky is absolutely magical,' recalls Michele. In the formal sitting room, contrasting textures (leather, velvet, chenille and silk upholstery) in palomino and chestnut colours create sophisticated and suave look, while glass accessories and fine ceramics impart cool refinement. In contrast, an all-white morning room looks out onto Liz Steyn landscaped beds beneath a grove of trees as well as Gary's two greens that he was planting at the time of photography.

The bedrooms are rich, romantic cocoons of wood. They are warm textiles, evocative textures and organically shaped, contemporary design elements throughout, be it a choral four-poster, an egg-shaped free-standing bath or a folding mid-century chair with a springbok-skin seat. Of the whole, Rowley comments, 'I'm a great believer in homes being homes.' And to both Michele's credit, the interior architecture and decoration seem made for each other. In fact, they become one to engender a very special experience of great spaces and great style. ■

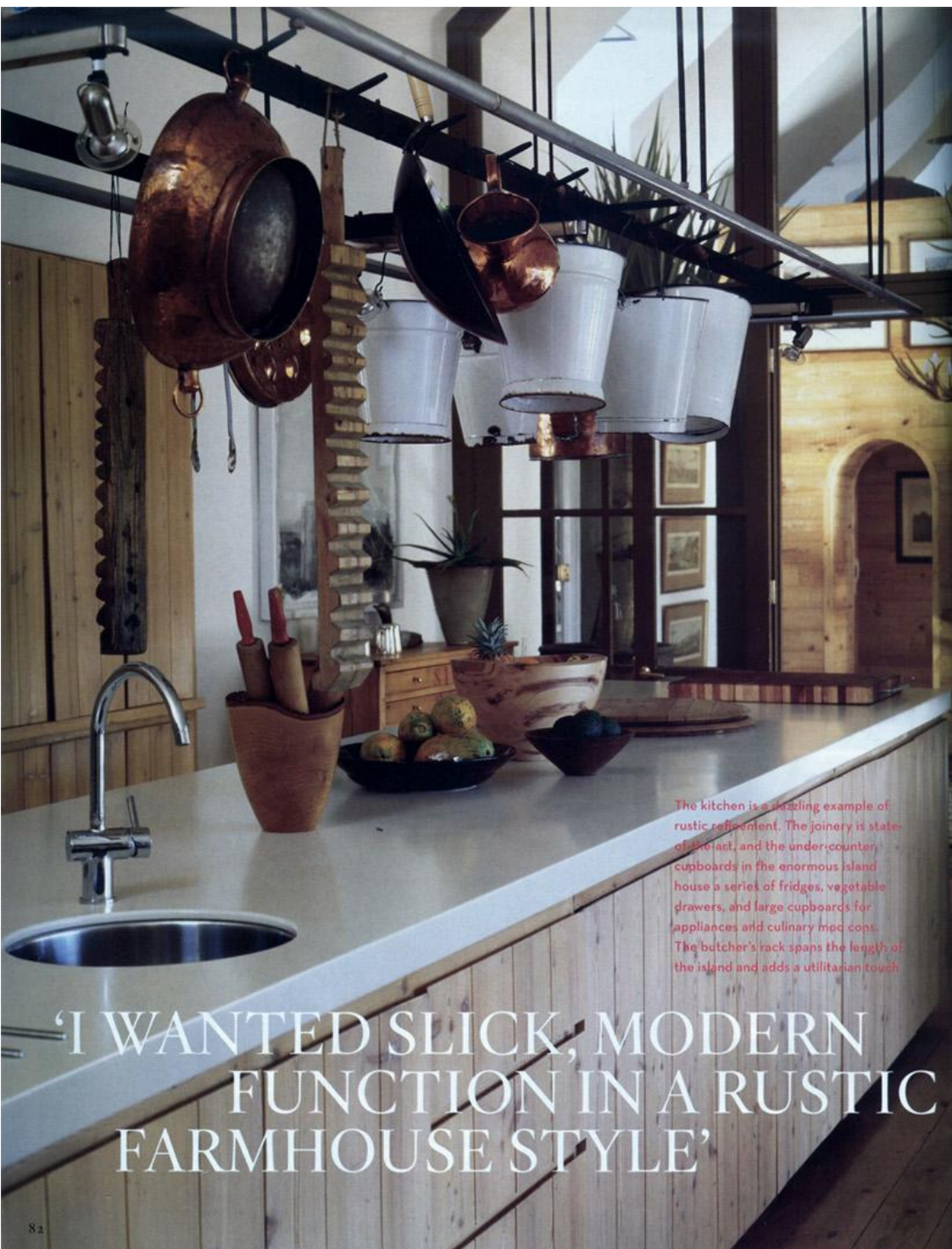
Michele Throssell @michele@michelethrossell.co.za
Rowley Watermeyer @ 011 788 6965



Through to the morning room. The theme of white wooden or fibre textures is at its most potent here
BEFORE RIGHT The family room adjoins the morning room, where the kids – the Players have 18 grandchildren – watch television and play games on red five-seater sofas

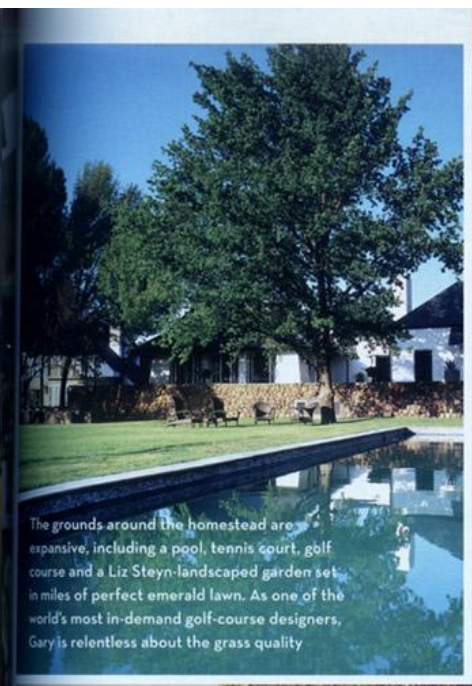


The domed roof of the morning room is silhouetted in the Karoo evening sky
LEFT Gary's desk in his pine-panelled study. Butterscotch leather wingback chairs amplify the toasted tones

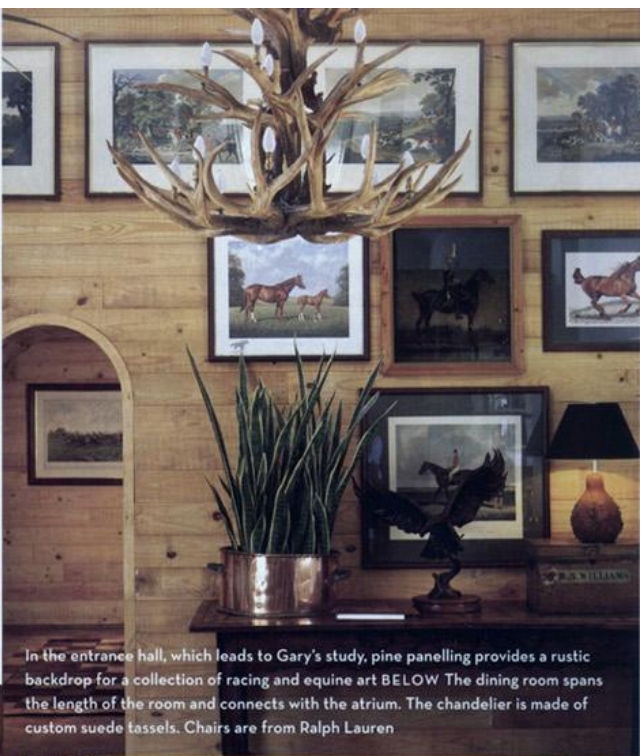


The kitchen is a dazzling example of rustic refinement. The joinery is state-of-the-art, and the under-counter cupboards in the enormous island house a series of fridges, vegetable drawers, and large cupboards for appliances and culinary misc cons. The butcher's rack spans the length of the island and adds a utilitarian touch.

‘I WANTED SLICK, MODERN FUNCTION IN A RUSTIC FARMHOUSE STYLE’

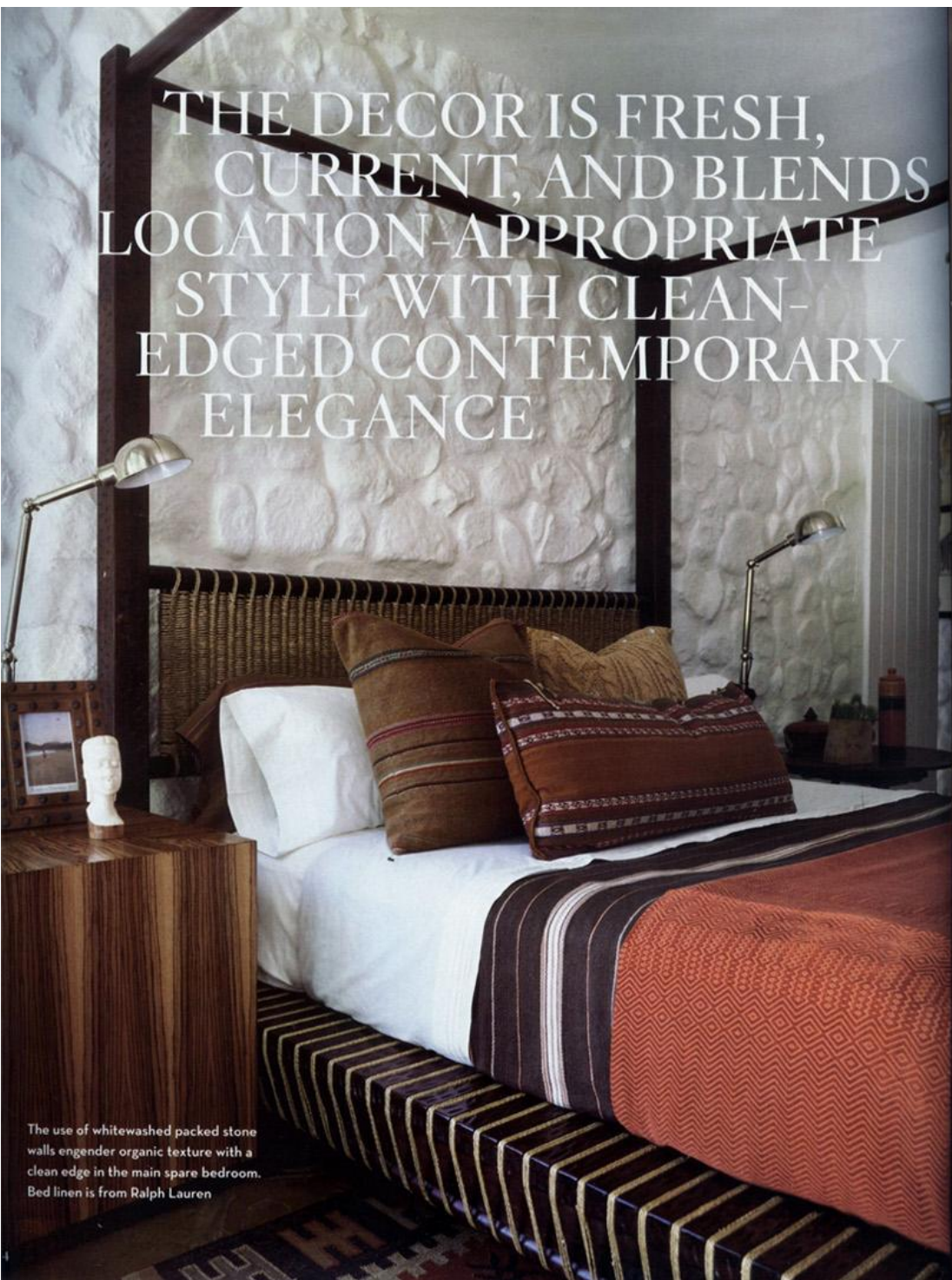


The grounds around the homestead are expansive, including a pool, tennis court, golf course and a Liz Steyn-landscaped garden set in miles of perfect emerald lawn. As one of the world's most in-demand golf-course designers, Gary is relentless about the grass quality.



In the entrance hall, which leads to Gary's study, pine panelling provides a rustic backdrop for a collection of racing and equine art BELOW. The dining room spans the length of the room and connects with the atrium. The chandelier is made of custom suede tassels. Chairs are from Ralph Lauren.

THE DECOR IS FRESH,
CURRENT, AND BLENDS
LOCATION-APPROPRIATE
STYLE WITH CLEAN-
EDGED CONTEMPORARY
ELEGANCE



The use of whitewashed packed stone walls engender organic texture with a clean edge in the main spare bedroom. Bed linen is from Ralph Lauren



The interconnecting on-suite bathroom of the main spare bedroom is compact but perfectly appointed ABOVE RIGHT The Player's main bedroom with the Ralph Lauren wingback leather bed and purple velvet sofa at the base. Cowhides and Persian rugs are lain over the wooden floor to eclectic effect



Chrome and upholstered leather beds in the second downstairs bedroom make a point of the modern/rustic contrast LEFT A loft room with a matching pair of leather beds with understated nickel studs on the headboard and base, which trundles out to provide further bed space for kids