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Chandeliers and Zulu spears

By Margaret O'Connor

South Africa's socio-economic trajectory is defining its eclectic decor

Investing in prime property and interior design has become a rite of passage for South Africa's new economic elite. International and high-end local brands selling everything from living room furnishings to high-tech appliances are now targeting the country's millionaires and growing middle class.

Intense social mobility accompanied the economic reforms following the country's first democratic elections in 1994. The expansion of economic opportunity for previously disadvantaged South Africans, a sustained commodities boom, and a decade of GDP growth averaging 3.2 per cent has created a significant number of homeowners who have migrated from simple properties to historic estates, new architect-designed homes and secure suburban townhouses.

International business and leisure travel, as well as stints studying abroad, have fuelled desire for clean, contemporary interiors inspired by homes in London and New York City. But wealthy homeowners achieve a distinct sense of place by layering South African art, antiques and family memorabilia in their carefully selected interiors. South Africans' penchant for year-round outdoor living has also triggered imaginative ways to incorporate the outdoors inside.

The interest in interiors is trickling down to middle-class consumers who look to the media, local design stores and interior decorators for cues about decorating their homes. A boom in design publications such as *Visi*, *House and Leisure*, *Elle Decoration* and *House & Garden* – promoting international brands such as B&B Italia, Patricia Urquiola and Kartell as well as local designers such as Tonic, Egg Design and Okha – are testament to local spending on home decor. Weylandts, a furniture shop offering quality pieces at affordable prices, and Mr Price Home, a discount homeware chain, are among the most popular retailers catering to South Africans' desire to redecorate their homes.

Several different urban consumer groups have emerged, each with their own value systems. In 2005, for example, the Unilever Institute at the University of Cape Town coined the term Black Diamond to explain how the beneficiaries of the government's black economic empowerment policy were spending their new-found riches. Nowadays consumer affiliations have less to do with the racial and ethnic categories that once defined how and where South

Africans could live, and more to do with personal choices.

The surge in national pride that South Africans experienced following Nelson Mandela's election in 1994 gave rise to a vibrant interior design style. People of all races and economic classes proclaimed their South African identity by incorporating bright textured walls inspired by traditional tribal patterns, woven baskets created by community co-operatives, and screed floors reminiscent of the cow dung floors found in rural huts.

This sense of a common national identity waned in the late 1990s, however, when high expectations for social change weren't met. The severe income disparity that has plagued the country throughout its history continues today. The CIA World Factbook ranked South Africa the world's second-most inequitable society in terms of income distribution. But the most striking thing that has changed is the diversity of the elite among South Africa's population of 50m people. South Africans of all races now constitute those who can be found shopping at Milan furniture showrooms, London auction houses and Cape Town art galleries.

Middle-class South Africans are also travelling in record numbers. Holidays in neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Namibia and Botswana are growing in popularity as infrastructure improves and more South Africans travel on the continent for business. People in the creative industries are among those looking to the rest of the African continent for inspiration and to cultivate new business markets. The formation of Design Network Africa is an example of the growing interest in cross-border collaboration. Over time, Design Network Africa, which brings together 30 furniture, craft and textile designers from 15 countries, is expected to have a major impact on South African interior styles.

The Johannesburg home of Elisabeth and James Hersov illustrates the eclectic style favoured by the rich. The dining room of the 1920s heritage home has a collaborative mixed media work by Zwelethu Mthethwa and Jansen van Vuuren hanging on the wall opposite a collection of assegai spears. Legend has it that a victorious Zulu warrior removed one of the spears from the skull of a fallen British soldier, a friend of the family's English ancestors, during the 1879 Isandlwana Battle in Zululand. Crystal chandeliers light the open space and sliding glass doors open on to a mature garden bordering the two-acre property near the city centre.

Stephen Falcke, a South African interior designer who has worked around the world, says he is pleased with his clients' growing confidence in self-expression and his suppliers' ability to deliver unusual and unexpected products.

"Clients, whether they are based in Johannesburg, Monaco or Provence, want to star in a show of their own making" says Falcke. "I try to mix shiny with matt, big-scale with small-scale, organic shapes with sharp-edged pieces."

According to Lisebo Mokhesi, co-founder of Ink Design Lab, the willingness to pay for good ideas is greater than it was 10 years ago. "Interior budgets are no longer just about buying stuff, they're about investing in the creative process," she says.

Interior designers are hard-pressed to pinpoint the precise rate of growth in residential budgets during the past decade, but cite spikes in the cost of fuel, South African labour and international shipping as key contributors to the escalation. They estimate that R7,000-R15,000 (£530-£1,140) per sq metre constitutes a reasonable starting point for a high-end interior project.

“The biggest difference in the fine furniture market now as compared to 2002 is that even wealthy clients are driven by practicality,” says Jo-Marie Rabe, an expert on Cape Dutch furniture styles and the co-founder of the Piér Rabe antique gallery in Stellenbosch. “They are still willing to pay a premium for rarity but an item must be functional as well as beautiful.”

Rabe says antique galleries have not been able to capture the nouveau riche surge in spending because of the preference for instantly recognisable brands. “The newly wealthy are likely to buy Louis Vuitton or Prada when shopping for a handbag just as they are likely to buy the designer couch instead of a 19th-century neoclassical stinkwood when shopping for furniture.” But, she adds, “these shoppers start buying antiques once they gain confidence.”

The Design Indaba, an annual conference and trade show in Cape Town, is an important educational forum. Attendance at the event has quintupled from 8,000 to 40,000 visitors during its eight-year history. “Local is lekker (cool)” is a catchphrase of the event.

Indeed, local designers are hoping to capitalise on the international attention they expect from Cape Town winning the World Design Capital designation for 2014. South African designers are gearing up to go global.

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