

PURE AND SIMPLE

Words Anne Schaffer
Photographs Sally Chance

Shake the sand from your feet and stars from your eyes – this little gem is architect Joy Brasler's beach cottage.

It began as a simple shed. Well, that's what Joy Brasler calls it, and if you pare away the layers, its uncomplicated lines and shapes are there at its heart. It remained that simple shed for eight years, with all the carefree attributes and basic drawbacks of the old South Coast beach cottages: little '50s windows, one bathroom for all, sun-filter curtains, everybody's second-hand furniture and what Joy describes familiarly as 'boerewors' carpeting throughout. But there comes a time when this lifestyle needs to move up a few notches, when more privacy is needed, layers of comfort are required and amenities need to be introduced, or at least tailored. Realistically, our needs have

shifted quite substantially in the last decade, particularly in the realm of communications, security and sustainability, and these were important drivers for Joy's reinvention of 'the shed'.

The KZN South Coast is, above all, unpretentious, and there can't be many coastlines worldwide that offer kilometre after kilometre of perfect, tucked-away escapes such as this one.

Half an hour from Durban, light years from the city, when the gate of St Helier's cottage glides shut behind you, you're invisible to everyone other than those at sea. The ocean (and that includes world-renowned dive site, Aliwal Shoal) and all of

its moods are the permanent live theatre, and the curtain is always up.

Joy's design concepts were premised on the family's determination to retain the existing scale of the house: 'We didn't want a vast, double-storey mansion; we love the "bungalow" thing and the ease of it.' That meant she could stretch the shed, but not raise it. For Joy, the relationship of building to landscape and sea was a constant consideration.

Most properties fronting the coastline are set on sloping or undulating plots, so level land is limited. Dunes are telling features of the landscape, so while Joy reshaped the land to gain additional space, she retained these

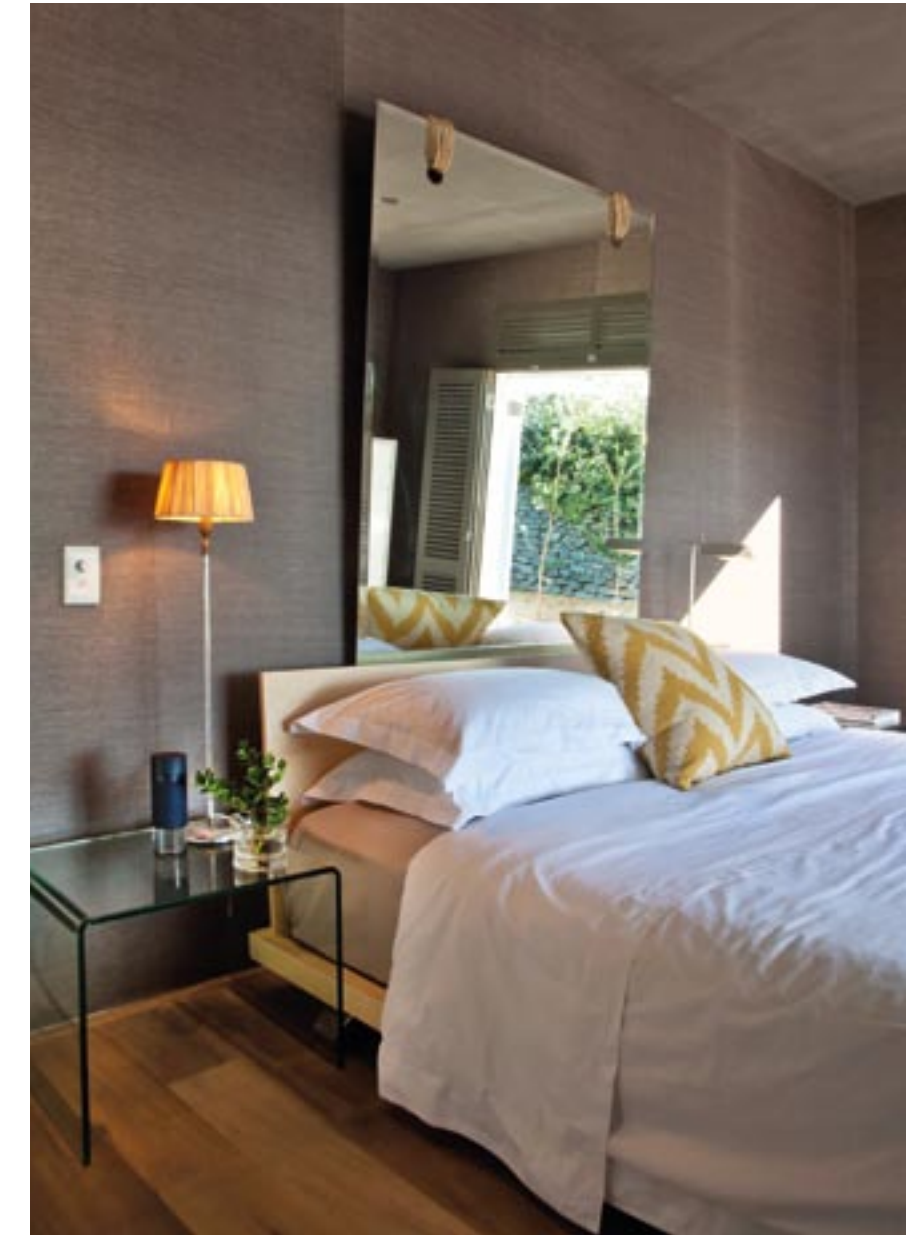
signature contours wherever possible. It felt important to collaborate with the landscape, so together with friend and passionate landscaper, Dennis Dyas, she created a dune. Joy says, 'I remember shaping that dune with our hands, and when had we finished, we asked each other how it looked. It looked as if it had always been here, as if nothing had happened.' Perfect.

Dune and local foliage were sourced tirelessly by Dennis – 'He even scoured the muti market for bulbs,' says Joy – and he replicated elements of the landscape with extreme attention to detail. The rear vegetation-covered dune not only creates privacy and a water-wise, wind-resistant

Opposite The wall on the far left is built from stone sourced from a local quarry and encloses a relaxed, feet-in-the-sand outdoor eating space. Alongside it is the deck, where multipurpose shutters provide filtered light for life on the outdoor deck, while the pool and sea beyond colour in the vista.



'The rear vegetation-covered dune not only creates privacy and a water-wise, wind-resistant environment, but has also become part of something bigger: plant material has become a living element of the architecture.'



Opposite, clockwise from top Sunrise to sunset, the house is wide open to the sea; the uniformity of the smoked-oak laminate flooring and panelling contributes to the calming lack of clutter; double bunks times two – always room for friends to overnight. **This page, left to right** The elemental indoor/outdoor bathroom; a vast mirror ensures this bedroom retains a sense of place.

environment, but has also become part of something bigger: plant material has become a living element of the architecture. The west side of the house is berthed into the dune, and where the new shower rooms extend out from the old structure, Joy has created towering cathedrals that will soon be covered in foliage. Effectively, with tactile wood decking and panelling, there's a joyful outdoor feel to the showers, and the foliage will provide green privacy.

One of the key features of the cottage's revival was the guest suite, and Joy chose to level the front garden and excavate beneath. From the rear of the property there's a particularly Japanese approach to the front, with grassed stairs leading up onto the perfectly flat lawn and defined incisions down to the lower level. The intention was for the guest suite to be 'another world', and it is – descend through the upper lawn and

there, bedded into the contour, is a private, self-contained haven with its own deck and glorious sea views.

Joy admits to a certain sense of freedom when it came to establishing a limited footprint: 'My own property, I could explore unproven technologies in a way I can't do with clients. I could question my design, ask myself whether things could be handled in a more minimalist way without losing amenities. The bigger things are, the more service, cleaning, moving is needed.' A shrug. 'Makes me wonder why the typical house is so big, because it feels so perfect here, and we can run it by ourselves.' Joy played with ideas and materials, installed solar panels, submerged rainwater tanks and concealed dumps in the deck for recycling glass, plastic and so on. The solar control (shutters) doubles as security, and there's maximum use of cross-ventilation in the home. Effectively,

when all the doors are open, the living room is another veranda.

Joy loves the Swiss-Army-knife analogy for the house, and it's clear why. With the shutters in particular, the cottage is designed to open up, unfold, discharge people, fun, all the elements needed for the day ... and then later, fold down compactly for security or when they're not there.

Inspired quite simply by the setting, the ocean, the interiors have a quiet, understated palette. The furniture inside and out is the same, and everything, bar small detail, is standardised and customised. Texture is as much a player as colour and shade, so surfaces include honed Carrara marble, beach pebble floors, grey oak, sandblasted timber and 'chunky carpets' for rolling around ... like a pebble beach', says Joy. 'The palette is deliberately subdued – everybody arrives with noisy cossies, children, mags, pool

toys and kikoi. It's a stage for all that.' It's true that we see these weekend hideaways as something outside of our real lives. Joy prefers the idea that this is their real life: 'It's where we play Monopoly with the kids, do some real parenting and treat each other well, as opposed to the rush and precision that defines our Monday-to-Friday lives. Coming here is a grounding experience, feet in the sand, a place where we pick mussels, cook together, entertain far more than at home, and relish the simpler elements, like fire, water and sunsets.'

And then, on cue, the hallmark South Coast train. It's kind of familiar and comforting, and although it's below the sight line, it's there, close, tucked into Dennis's wonderful world of indigenous plants, and marks time that otherwise would pass entirely unnoticed were it not for the changing light over the ocean. ☉

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With thanks to ...
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