

A SENSE OF SPACE

The Gardens of Jan Blok



Text Lindsay Gray

Photography Kim Thunder



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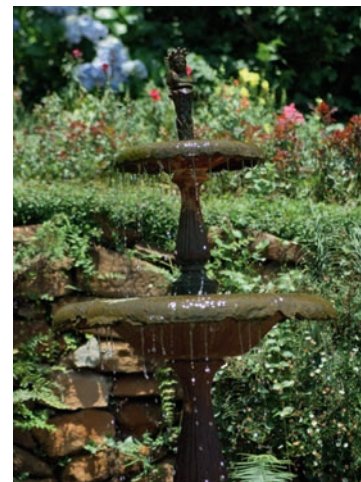
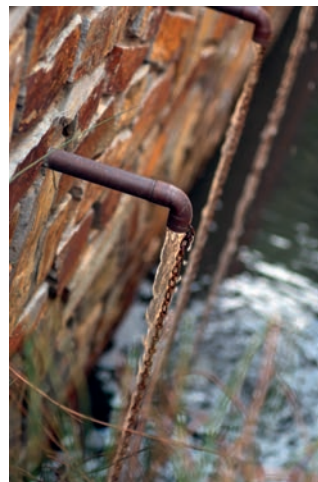


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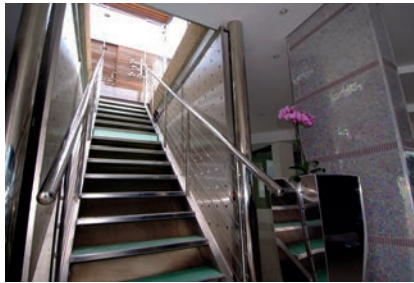
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Introduction

I have always had a passion for design, not only in gardens, but any form of design. I was first introduced to landscaping as a young student when I attended a presentation on the landscaped gardens of the then brand-new Cascades Hotel at Sun City. This was one of the first hotels of its kind with the largest landscaping project undertaken in South Africa. Inspired by what I saw, I knew what career I wanted to follow.

You will find that the gardens showcased in this book have been divided up into ‘spaces’. One of my garden philosophies is that ‘if you can see the entire garden from one point, you won’t walk in it’. Good design isn’t a mere fashion statement or a following of current fads; it is timeless.

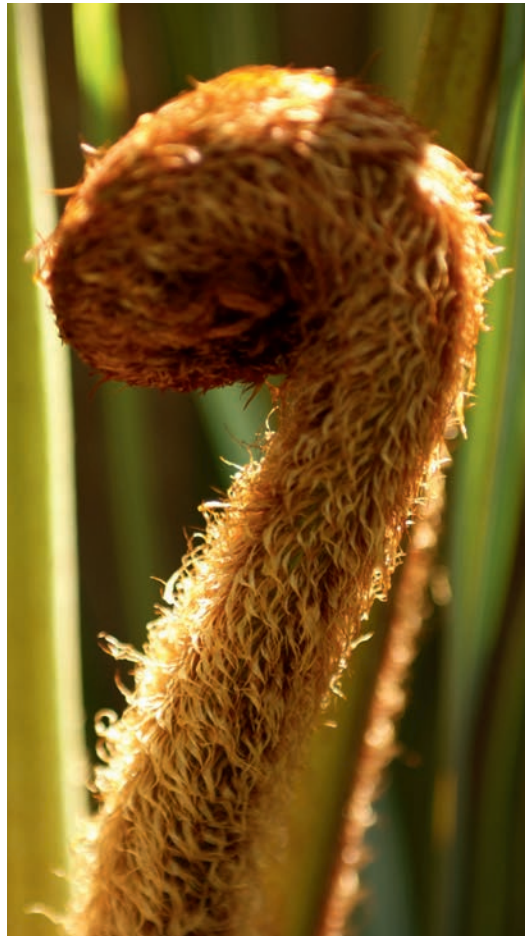
My gardens are all about geometry and symmetry. The structure of a garden, in relation to the architecture of the home, is important to me. It is not an element that you would necessarily find in nature. Often, when art tries to imitate nature, it falls short because no one can ever truly simulate God’s creation and His attention to detail. All of the gardens in this book have a similar design thread and ethos, whether the focus is more on the traditional or the contemporary, or even a small or large space. The prevailing sense of symmetry and geometry can be clearly seen in the gardens I create; this design trait has come to be known as my signature style.

A highlight for me during the process of this book were the visits to my older gardens, some of which were designed more than ten years ago. I now realise, more than ever, just how much gardening is a discipline in patience. Seeing how essential plants had matured and materials had softened into the landscape was a very rewarding experience. It also emphasises the point that gardens, unlike interior décor, actually improve with age. To me, plants are merely accessories to the garden’s overall layout. By changing other aspects such as ornamentation, construction materials and specific plant species, a traditional garden can become contemporary.

I met Lindsay Gray while I was landscaping Camp Orchards at the beginning of my career. Lindsay approached me to do a series of talks at her garden design school. Our relationship evolved, as did our careers, and, at various stages, the topic of a book arose. It was not until years later, while working on a project in Switzerland, where I had been commissioned by my client to do the garden as well as the interior of the home, that the idea resurfaced. I had asked a close family friend, Kim Thunder, for an image to use in the main entrance area of the interior, which he duly provided. I then came up with a panelled wall design featuring my client’s beloved car collection in black and white photography, for his office wall. Kim flew out to take the photos of the car collection, in front of centuries-old churches, in black pine forests and down cobbled streets. The shoot was a success and that evening, while musing over the images, the discussion of doing a book re-emerged. The timing was right, and so *A Sense of Space* was born.

I would like to thank my whole family, especially my wife, Susan, who is often a sounding-board for many of my designs; Ethan, my son, and Hannah-Rayne, my daughter; Greg Thompson for the extra hours you put into the book; along with my entire team at Blok Designs for interpreting my visions and bringing them to life. I acknowledge the excellent workmanship of my sub-contractors whose work is also demonstrated here. Finally, to all of my clients who have trusted and allowed me to transform their gardens, I thank you.

Jan Blok



I first became acquainted with Jan Blok when the formal, European-style garden he had designed for Camp Orchards in Durban was opened to the public. I was blown away by this man's talent and was also thrilled to have such design expertise on my doorstep. Jan graciously accepted my invitation to address my students on a regular basis regarding the importance of designing gardens on paper. This relationship continued for some years until his busy schedule put paid to his visits. During that time, I mentioned that I would like to write a book about his gardens, to which he consented and so, when Random House Struik approached me to work with them, the project was born.

Jan has a deep understanding of outside space and an innate ability to create a magical and wondrous garden for his clients, which is evidenced by the beautiful photographs taken by equally talented photographer, Kim Thunder.

It has been a delight working on this project, despite the frustrations of unseasonal rain and mist that put paid to many a photo shoot. My sincere thanks go firstly to Random House Struik for giving me this wonderful opportunity to convey in words the talents of Jan Blok; to Jan for entrusting your beautiful gardens to my 'pen'; to Greg Thompson, designer/project manager at Blok Designs, for all the assistance, fun and friendship; to Evan, my English professor, for his honest criticism; and to my beautiful daughter, Erin, for putting many a meal on the table so that I could work uninterrupted.

Lindsay Gray





A Spectacular *Ocean View*

*T*he Bluff in KwaZulu-Natal is an imposing headland that forms the south-eastern arm of the Durban harbour. Once covered with uninterrupted natural coastal vegetation, it is now prized residential land for those who hanker after a magnificent view of the Indian Ocean.

This home, with its spectacular one-hundred-and-eighty degree view of the sea, was built in 1949 by Frederick Augustus George Love, a builder by trade. Love travelled from England through Africa with the intention of settling in the Cape, but was so captivated by the Bluff's unspoilt beauty on his arrival in Durban in 1947 that he chose to settle in Durban instead. This is just one of the many houses he built in the area, but its distinguishing feature is that it stretches across two plots of land to enable all the bedrooms to face true east.

The new owners recently renovated the entire home to suit the needs of their young family, after which they turned their attention to the garden. There was no entertainment area to speak of on the sea-facing side, and the narrow, uneven strip of lawn spanning the width of the house fell away steeply to the natural bush below.

CLIENT BRIEF To create a stylish entertainment area on the east-facing side of the home with its expansive sea view. The owners also commissioned a private viewing deck, as the garden is exposed to their neighbours.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Custom-made, sandblasted concrete pavers alongside the decking provide an interesting textural change around the pool.

The swimming pool was a major engineering feat, requiring nine piles, each sunk to a depth of twelve metres, to stabilise the structure in the soft sand that occurs along the coastline.

BELOW The deck surround is constructed from Balau wood. This hard wood is similar to teak in character. It withstands the elements, even enjoying the humidity, and can remain untreated as it bleaches well in the sun.

The design intention for the entertainment area was to create the illusion of space. A rim-flow pool and wooden deck surround were placed on the diagonal, to complement the lines of the house. The linear perspective of the decking has the effect of pulling the eye out towards the horizon, while the almost-perfect match in colour of the pool and the ocean further enhances the illusion.

Key architectural plants provide the structure to this modern garden. Succulents and aloes with their waxy leaves are the perfect choice for a seaside garden, as they cope well with the strong, salt-laden wind.









TOP LEFT *Aloe ferox* and *A. arborescens* are underplanted with *A. chabaudii* (Ground Aloe) and *Sanseveria cylindrica*. *Strelitzia nicolii* (Wild Banana) with their dramatic, wind-torn leaves, are positioned along the southern boundary wall to provide screening.

BOTTOM LEFT Stylish *chaises longue* dress the private viewing deck below the pool.

TOP Water spills gently over an eastern water jar with its delightful frog detail.

ABOVE Natural stone cladding on the boundary walls provides the perfect backdrop for the sculptural plant material selected for the garden. This particular stone contains fossilised iron deposits that age to a beautiful orange-brown hue, and is hand-split for a less contrived finish.

RIGHT A fringe of the lime-green, indigenous ornamental grass, *Aristida junciformus*, creates a beautiful contrast against the deep blue of the ocean in summer, but in winter its golden-brown tones (as pictured here) are reminiscent of a rugged Wild Coast landscape.



So as not to detract from the magnificent view, the garden is a blend of subtle hues of the green foliage, bleached-grey decking and the earthy tones of natural stone. In winter, however, the cheerful orange spires of aloes are contrasted against crisp blue skies.

The garden is transformed into an intimate space at night, where discreet lighting enhances the structure and textures of the garden.

RIGHT The raised timber edge completes the deck surround and creates a visual barrier.

OPPOSITE A wooden walkway leads to the viewing deck. The owners relish their private 'getaway' spot where they can relax and enjoy the view.





