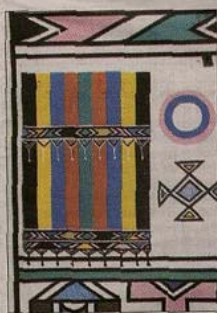


The many facets of South African style (clockwise from top left): Sculptures in artist Bezy Bailey's house; an electric socket in a Cape Town township; still-life in bamboo at Malcolm Kluk's house in Cape Town; an art work by Esther Mahlangu. Opposite page: A varnished iron bed in the home of Jonathan Green and Marina Pretorius; and Shahn and Alice Rowe's favourite items from Africa



African

MATTHEW KROUSE interviews a German photographer about

Much has been said, and written, about what might comprise a "South African style". This hotly contested term appears with regularity in magazines and picture books devoted to the interiors of the country. The first title to hit post-apartheid publishing was Pamela Strauss's 1994 *Africa Style in South Africa* (Jonathan Ball). Strauss and photographer John Curtis took the first tentative steps into township and rural homes where, predictably, they found "colour was the only luxury".

Almost a decade later, in *Life - Soweto Style* (Struik), Mark Lanning, Neil Roake and Glynnis Horning wrote about Soweto homeowners' "ingenuity and attention to detail". Inside the characteristic matchbox houses they found "overpowering charm" and in the informal settlements they found "no end to enterprise".

Authors about decor have been uniform in their praise of the style prowess of South Africa's poor. In Craig Fraser's groundbreaking and much criticised *Shack Chic* (Quivertree), poet and journalist Sandile Dikeni called the surplus packaging materials used as wallpaper "almost Warholian - terminally modern".



Photographer Deidi von Schaeuwen

With this, the opposing camp stepped in. In design forums Fraser and his ilk were criticised for portraying poverty as an aesthetic choice. The latest in this growing library of decor publications devoted to the way moneyed South Africans take inspiration from the poor is *South African Style* (Taschen). It is an offshoot of the fabric-wrapped, double volume *Inside Africa* in which author Angelika Taschen and photographer Deidi von Schaeuwen travelled the continent picturing the anomalies from the European style that they found along the way.

In her introduction to Taschen's new look at South Africa, Christiane Reiter tells us that local designers "have had to achieve a balancing act between art and nature, tradition and modern-

eclectic

her new book on local style

ism, knowledge and intuition".

Paris-based photographer Von Schaeuwen answered five questions put to her this week.

Tell us about your career background and your previous projects.

I studied painting in Berlin, worked as an art director in Spain, New York and Paris. I have been an architectural photographer for many years and have photographed interiors since my arrival in Paris in 1974. The first was the house of designer Andrée Putman. Of the books I have done, the most important are the Taschen books *Fantasy Worlds*, *Interiors of India*, *Gardens of France* and *Inside Africa*. I work for most of the important international decoration magazines. I have also worked as a camerawoman in film since 1972. These have included a documentary on Man Ray and 18 short films for the Vitra Museum for several of their exhibitions on the subjects of life in Arab countries and industrial designers Ingo Maurer and Joe Colombo.

How was the book *South African Style* made? Did you just travel around South Africa looking at interesting locations? Did you have a researcher scouting for houses? What did you learn about the country on your journey?

The first interiors were shot while I



was doing the book *Fantasy Worlds*, which included the Owl House, the fish/helicopter of Punch Mbhele and the painted stones in revolver Creek - all in South Africa. I had met a group of friends in Cape Town, most of whom also had very interesting interiors, so I did some of them at that time already.

I returned to South Africa in 2000 for the *Inside Africa* project. Some of my friends had changed their decor, and I made new friends. Other interiors I had researched from Europe; however, there was no researcher as such involved in the project. I have been back

to South Africa twice since then. I was fortunate to see many different sides of your fascinating country: the cities, the countryside and the vast game reserves. I have seen the lifestyles of very different communities.

I have almost always stayed with friends so I got a good inside view, and not the view from a hotel room. I have seen the positive and also the shadows.

The book treats the homes of the wealthy as equal to the homes of the country's poor. Is this a case of glamourising poverty? Is it fair to take the



homes of poverty-stricken people, made out of factory scraps and to class this as an aesthetic lifestyle choice?

In all my projects I try to show the houses I personally like. This can be the houses of the rich (not all rich people have "good" taste), and I am always drawn to the houses of the poorer population - it can be mudhuts or, in the case of South Africa, the townships and Ndebele houses. It is not glamourising them, they don't need that; for me they are very beautiful and often more exciting than other decorated houses. I have had that same experience in many

other countries in Africa, in India, in Indonesia, et cetera. I went back to the townships near Cape Town on my last trip to South Africa a month ago. There are fewer houses left with this special "wallpaper"; it seems that they cannot get these papers anymore and a large part of the township had burned down. The reconstruction was very fascinating; this time it was more the exteriors.

Do you think the South African aesthetic is integrating or are we still divided along cultural lines that reflect racial division?

The cultural and racial divisions are still very profound; it seems it will take quite some time to change this. Generally I don't think that the aesthetic has to be integrated; I love aesthetic differences - there is nothing worse than a globalised aesthetic.

Now that you have had the experience of making the book, how would you define a "South African style"? Is there something distinct about the way South Africans adorn their homes?

I don't think there is a "South African style" as such. There is fusion of a variety of styles, of different historical styles, mixed with international styles and a lot of African elements in most of them. There are many individuals that incorporate more or less "African" elements. I think it is the African elements that make it different from the rest of the world. And nowhere else, even on the African continent, do you have a mixed culture where so many people decorate their houses with African elements. There is a real will to be different and, with the integration of the African elements, they are creating a "style"; maybe it is an "African style", not only a "South African style".