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PERFECTION

Simplicity, authenticity, and practical magic define the traditional Cape Dutch homestead at South Africa's Babylonstoren





THE AIR, heavy in the late afternoon South African sunshine, hums with the work of countless bees in the garden of Babylonstoren, a family-owned and run inn and restaurant. Here owners Karen Roos and Koos Bekker grow over three hundred varieties of edible or medicinal plants in the extraordinary gardens inspired by the farms that resupplied ships passing the Cape of Good Hope in 1692, which was when the farm was first granted to *burgher* (citizen) Pieter van der Byl. Today, the *werf* (farmyard) and its structures remain among the finest unspoiled examples of traditional Cape Dutch architecture.

In this positively utopian setting in South Africa's Cape Winelands, the Owners' House is irresistible. Roos' deft touch and nuanced appreciation of tradition are unmistakable in the simplicity and honesty of her traditional-style homestead, which has been not so much restored as reinvigorated.

The farmhouse itself dates back to 1777. When the couple first bought Babylonstoren as their weekend retreat, one of its many attractions for Roos was the fact that the house had never been officially restored. In fact, the most recent work dated back to 1931 when a Victorian renovation that had included removing the gables was undone and the roof elements subsequently replaced.

Surely one of the clearest signs of her commitment to authenticity is in the central sitting room. Here Roos supervised the painstaking removal of twenty-three layers of paint to reveal the original ochre-hued wall paint finely edged with stripes of teal, cream, and dark brown. This color was matched exactly and the room carefully repainted in its original hues. "The hue has the benefit of downplaying the heaviness of the dark wood built-in cupboards the Dutch loved so much," says Roos. "They have the potential to be overwhelming if the walls are whitewashed but here they just melt in with the original wall color."

The home's traditional H-shape layout has been honored and original fittings throughout have been reconditioned to their original splendor—worn flagstones polished to a



high gloss, wide yellowwood floorboards and ceiling beams, wooden windows and sills set deep into the thick clays walls built by the Dutch to beat the African heat. Despite the grand

Opening pages: Built in 1777, the homestead at Babylonstoren in South Africa is an example of Cape Dutch architecture, with its symmetry, whitewashed walls, and pitched reed-thatch roof. **Left:** The original flagstones leading from the front door to the sitting room are polished to a high gloss. **This page:** The sitting room is furnished with cream sofas by Philippe Starck for Driade.

In addition to the Starck sofas, the sitting room is furnished with leather armchairs by Antonio Citterio for Flexform and an Artemide floor lamp. The ornate built-in teak wall cabinets are original. This room forms the crossbar of the home's traditional H-structure; as such, it has doors linking to the two perpendicular rear wings of the house.







This page: One of the home's bedrooms is an exemplar of restrained luxury, from the king-size bed to the deep-pile Aubusson carpet. The handpainted Chinese room divider conceals the deep Victorian-style bathtub in the corner of the bedroom. Right: The sitting room features a deep-buttoned, antique French sofa. The wide wood floor beams are typical of an era in which massive trees were still plentiful.





This page: The farmhouse-style kitchen is furnished with a contemporary Smeg refrigerator and a wood-burning Aga stove. The room serves as both a cooking and gathering space for family and friends. In front of the huge open hearth is an outsized refectory table. Right: The pergola-topped courtyard, situated off the kitchen, is a frequent dining spot.









Left: A bedroom in a wing off the front entrance hall is noted for its careful restraint. A locally made sheepskin floor rug is positioned beside the bed. This page: An Agape Ufo circular bath is both sculptural and practical. A retro brass-and-glass drinks trolley has been repurposed for storage. The duck is a cheeky reference to the brace of ducks that keeps the extensive gardens free of slugs and snails.

heritage of Babylonstoren, this is unmistakably a farmhouse: fittingly, much of the action takes place in the kitchen, which serves as a cooking space and gathering place. In front of the huge open hearth is an enormous refectory table where the family reconnects and refuels and *kuier* (friends) visit. Cooking takes place at the Aga gas hob, or cookplate, and wood-burning stove. In true Roos style, the kitchen chandelier—made from an antique wine-bottle drier—is rustic yet with a contemporary air. But the home is no museum: the sensibility is authentic but unfailingly modern.

Roos herself is as cosmopolitan as the Cape was in the days it was first settled—when the Dutch made it a halfway point between the West and the Orient. The historical layering in the interiors also says as much about her as it does about the home. The South African-born style maven has spent many years living abroad, and her appreciation for cultural diversity can be seen in cosmopolitan historical references, as well as contemporary touches that add a freshness that defines Babylonstoren.

Whereas the sitting room and bedrooms are the essence of comfortable, traditional minimalism, the library/study is a room of wonders. Cabinets of curiosities are filled with

fascinating collections and objets, from shards of pottery dug up on the farm and original VOC Delftware to massive ammonites and an encyclopedic collection of butterflies. Where the sitting room—with its contemporary linen, leather, and steel furnishings that meld seamlessly with the centuries-old structure—is cool and calm, the library is stimulating and invigorating. That said, a scarlet-covered couch is the perfect place for an afternoon nap in front of the fireplace lined with narrow *klompjes* (bricks).

It is fitting that this home, which has been continuously occupied for 240 years, is no stiff museum piece. Its interiors pay tribute to its traditional heritage, but it is Roos' appreciation for contemporary aesthetics that brings the Owners' House to life. The en-suite bathrooms are a perfect example of this. Individual in style, they evoke a grand era of Edwardian spas and the lavish luxury of indoor plumbing, in this case, spaces fitted with massive circular baths and rain showers that issue water akin to waterfalls.

The Babylonstoren Manor House is a living, fresh celebration of the Cape Dutch style. Karen Roos' interpretation connects the past to the future in the most gracious and subtle of styles, truly making it feel like home. ■



“As a designer, I love the tension
of making the old sit alongside the new.
A dash of drama is required.”

—Karen Roos



Left: The werf (farmyard) at Babylonstoren is considered one of the best preserved nineteenth-century Cape Dutch examples still in existence; the Drakenstein mountains loom. This page: Karen Roos walks her property.