



HOUSE OF DRAGONS

In that exquisite moment between day and night, the sky deepened into a magnetic blue –something richer and more elusive than twilight, yet softer and subtler than dusk.

Words Diane Tipping-Woods Photos Karl Rogers



We had climbed through a hobbit door – a whimsical portal – emerging onto a fragrant living roof as though stepping quietly into another realm. Now, we watched as a deliberate moon climbed into view. My feet were bare, and the earth was warm. I could sense the planet's gentle curve, hear the rivers murmuring, and almost forgot I was sitting on someone's home.

Below us, the house was quiet but alive. Earlier, I had run my hands along the rammed earth walls. They were cool to the touch, dense with mineral memory, yet freshly formed and precisely crafted from almost nothing but soil.

"We like the idea that the house could dissolve, return to the earth," said Simon Morgan, an ecologist with decades of experience blending scientific research with practical conservation.

"Just not any time soon," quipped Jordana Meyer, a molecular ecologist whose work is transforming how we understand biodiversity through environmental DNA or eDNA.

The conservation power couple have lived and worked across Africa but recently built their home on Wild Rivers Private Nature Reserve near Hoedspruit. The house is tucked into a slope, arranged around rocky outcrops that lead down to the confluence of



Abrie Visagie of the JNA Group served as the structural engineer, ensuring the walls could support the weight of the living roof. The JNA Group also designed and came up from the Cape to build the roof structure, including the intricate wooden trusses that define its character. (seen above)

Get The Look

Architecture – Andy Horn, Eco Design Architects & Consultants, ecodesignarchitects.co.za
Building Contractor – Justin Poggenpoel, Assegai Projects, assegaiprojects.co.za
Engineer and Roofing team – Abrie Visagie, JNA Group, jnagroup.co.za
Kitchen – Billy Smook, Bushveld Kitchens, [FB@bushveldkitchens/](https://www.facebook.com/bushveldkitchens/)

the Olifants and Blyde rivers.

Here, where rivers meet, and boundaries blur, their house seems to rise organically from the land. That's thanks to architect Andy Horn, who worked with the geology and topography of their stand to conjure a structure that feels grounded and light, with a touch of Middle-earth magic.

"This was the last plot sold by the developers in Wild Rivers Reserve. Nobody wanted it," Jordana said. Away from the river's edge, it lacked the leafy shade and waterfront views of other stands they had considered. But for Jordana and Simon, that was the appeal.

Climbing onto the rocks, they

found a sweeping view, which offered a sense of space and freedom that resonated with Jordana, who grew up on the flat Midwestern plains of the United States. Planning a family, she envisioned a little boy playing by the river. When I arrived, their son, Archer, was trying to convince her to go down there – it's his favourite place.

They had never built a house before, and the project unfolded alongside major life changes: Jordana finishing her PhD, Simon running a startup, the arrival of a longed-for baby, and Covid: they bought the plot in January 2020. Some might have called their timing crazy or their approach impractical. But for them,

grounded in a shared ethos of living lightly and aligning their actions with their values, there was no other path they could have taken. It's not just a house; it's their house.

Simon threw himself into research. They wanted to keep their carbon footprint light and build from local or reclaimed materials. They wanted a home that wasn't just aesthetically pleasing or environmentally conscious but also free from the toxins often found in modern materials such as certain paints, CCA treated wood, and cement. And they wanted a family base they would love living in and returning to.

Having seen rammed earth

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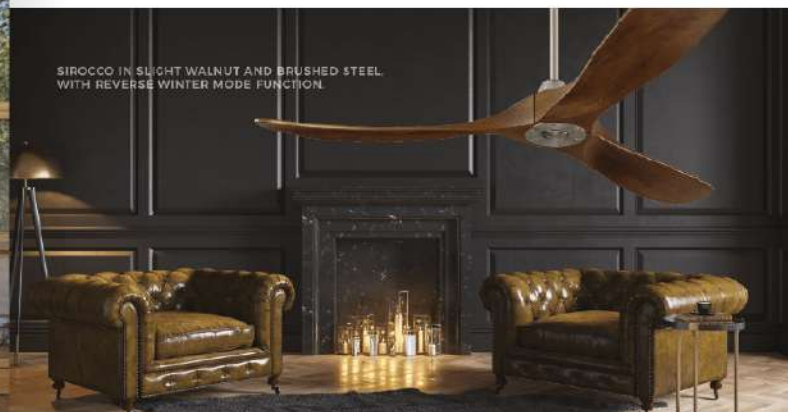
structures before, like a meditation centre at Stanford University that blended ancient techniques (rammed earth features in the Great Wall of China) with modern engineering. Simon and Jordana knew a sustainable house could look and feel contemporary while embracing traditional methods.

With a beautiful design in hand in collaboration with architect Andy Horn of Eco Design Architects & Consultants, they got their hands dirty. Working with builder and project manager Justin Poggenpoel from Assegai Services, they began experimenting with recipes and ratios for the walls, using richly coloured local soils. They sourced timber locally from plantation tree species for everything from decking, window frames and square beams. Rocks excavated or exposed during construction were treated like they belonged. They mixed earth and cow dung for earthen floors that echoed both Simon and Jordana's ancestral histories in Africa and America.

Simon described it as initially "like having another job" as they figured out the right techniques, approaches and service providers with the Assegai team. Rammed earth should be an easy and relatively inexpensive way to build, but because it's uncommon in the area, "every single thing was different for the builders, too." The first walls proved too slow to dry, leaving



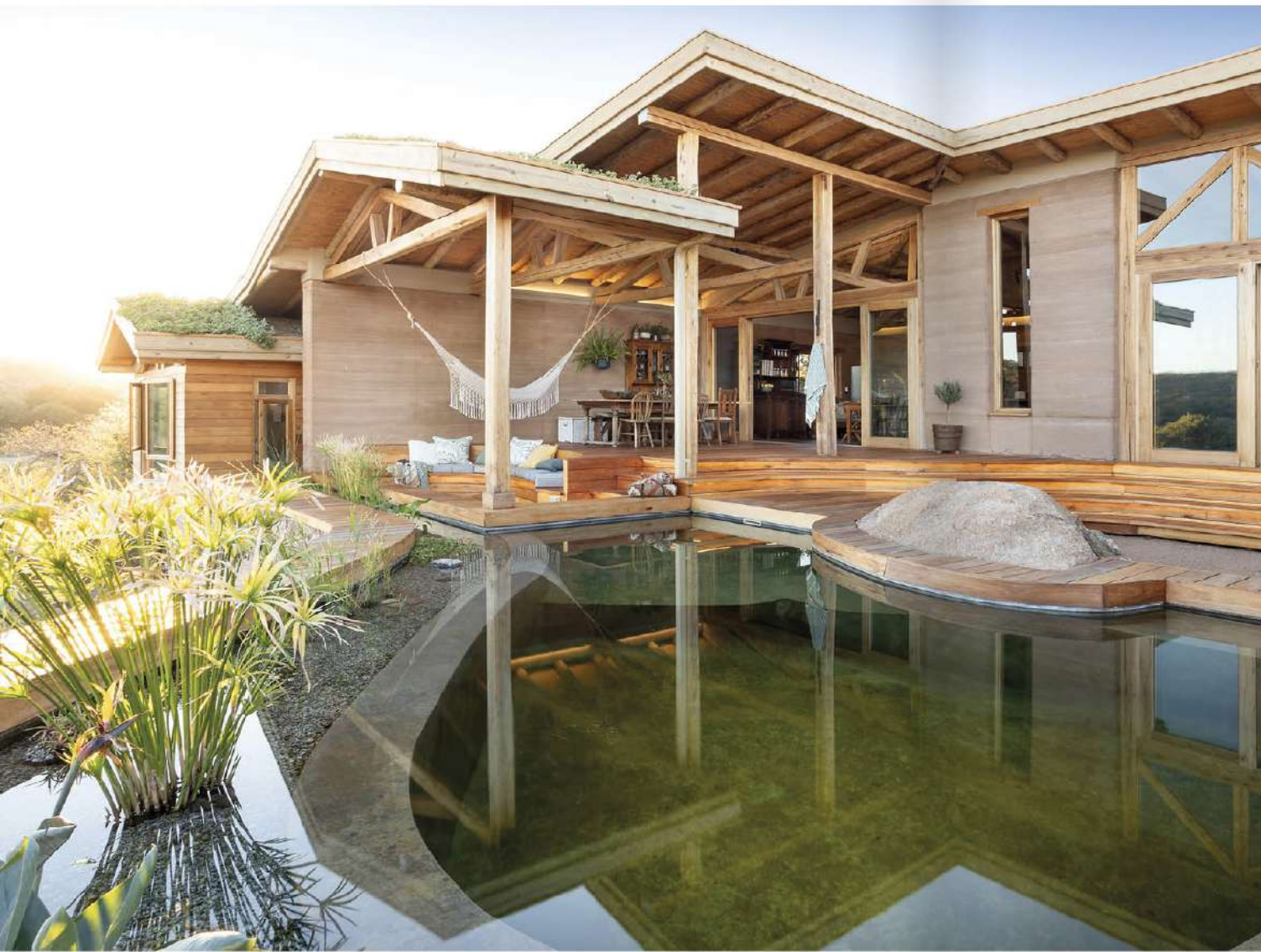
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them vulnerable to rain. A small compromise was necessary: adding about 5-6% cement to achieve stability and protect the walls once the shutters came off.

Slowly, their vision began to take shape, bending to the land's contours. Paths flowed between rocks, walls followed the terrain, and layered levels exploited the natural drop in elevation. When a dragonfly species from the from the genus *Bradynopyga* – the Horned Rockdweller (*Bradynopyga cornuta*) – indicators of healthy ecosystems – began to gather on the newly rammed earth walls, it felt like nature's quiet approval, a subtle nod that the house belonged.

Today, it's a home in constant conversation with the world around it. The walls breathe, insulating against heat or holding warmth like

stone with a high thermal mass. Sun-warmed rocks extend beyond the foundations, playing havoc with the wine cellar (sometimes used as a Halloween cave). When it's not full of splashing kids, the natural swimming pool reflects the plants that help filter its water, allowing it to be chemical-free. The living roof adds significant weight, especially when it rains, but helps regulate temperature and lets the structure blend into the landscape like a clever secret. The result is enchanting.

And it lives beautifully, too. As you step through the elaborate blue doors – a lucky symbol in some African cultures – a vertical window draws your eye to the Manutsa peak on the Drakensberg Escarpment that orients the space. Golden sunlight pours through the windows and




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large sliding glass doors that front the house, turning the earthen walls into warm embers. Exposed square, wooden trusses, styled after the family Midwestern barn from Jordana's American childhood, are buttery yellow, and the floors glow a rich red ochre. Blues and greens accent the warm earth tones, from the statement doors to the ceramic fireplace.

There are three bedrooms. The main suite overlooks the merging of the Olifants and Blyde rivers. Now, in early May, the water is warm, and the air is cold, and Simon and Jordana wake to mist over the water. The rivers can be furious and brown in the wet months, and just before the rains, more murmur than roar. Their bed is set low so you can see the stars when you lie in it. An outdoor bath under the star chestnut, was a romantic surprise from Jordana that invites slow soaks.

Details like the bath, the hobbit door, but also the hammock on the deck from their work in Mexico, Archer's zip line, and a large oil

portrait of an ancestor, make the house a home. Aligned with their ethos, the furniture is reclaimed and repurposed. There's the mokoro Simon and Jordana used when living in Botswana's Okavango Delta that's now part of the guest bedroom headboard. Drawer and cupboard handles come from second hand stores around the world – none match, but they all have a story. Jordana, "obsessed" with okapis, has one guarding her bathroom door. The lights strung along the path to their bedroom recall nights spent under lanterns in India. An elaborately embossed heirloom riding saddle and the antique chairs bearing the Morgan coat of arms are a tribute to where they come from, while the view from their kitchen towards the river confluence and mountains constantly reminds them where they are. They picnic on the banks of the river. Greet the giraffes. Hang out on the rocks with the dragonflies. Listen to the fiery-necked night jays, and when they're lucky, spot a wandering leopard.

We sat on the deck by the pool as the sun set, talking more about the build while the house settled into an evening of cricket chirps and frog song, with just the first chill of autumn in the air. Creating this home has been fun, challenging, and deeply rewarding, even though Jordana jokes that it sometimes feels like they've just built a big tree house, "like we were two kids messing around with a dream." There have been moments of frustration, filling cracks in the floors and worrying about the walls, but giving up was never an option. "Sometimes, you just have to believe deeply in what you're doing and take the leap," she said. They had faith in their architect and engineer. And their vision, their materials and themselves.

Later, sitting on their roof, surrounded by spurflovers (*Plectranthus*) in *l'heure bleue*, the blue hour, I knew we should all live this way. Lightly. Intentionally. Accepted by dragonflies. In reverence of the earth, our first and only home. 🌿



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