



I HAVE READ THAT OWNING A HOME ON THE WATER'S  
EDGE IS AN ALMOST UNIVERSAL DESIRE. I PINCH MYSELF  
DAILY TO BE REMINDED OF MY GOOD FORTUNE

# THE LIGHT HOUSE

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ISLAND HOUSE









WE  
WANTED  
A SMALL  
HOME  
WITH  
LOTS OF  
OPEN  
SPACE  
AND  
GOOD  
NATURAL  
LIGHT

IN AN AGE OF INTERCONTINENTAL AND EVEN INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL, A MOVE FROM CAPE TOWN TO KNYSNA IS HARDLY WORTH A MENTION, BUT FOR MY PARTNER, IAN, AND ME, IT WAS A HUGE DECISION. We were both born and bred in Sea Point – we practically took out our passports to go beyond the city centre. So when we found ourselves in Knysna on St Valentine's Day 2000, faced with the opportunity to invest in a unique residential development that was still in the planning stage, we agreed that we owed ourselves an adventure.

Ian has a layman's interest in urban planning, particularly in the concept of 'traditional neighbourhood development' (TND). He saw an ad for Thesen Islands in Knysna, a proposed development on an island in the Knysna Lagoon which, in many respects, would embrace the characteristics of TND. The island would be carved up into 19 individual islands separated by waterways and connected by simple, arched bridges. We drove to Knysna to find out more. It's hard to not be mesmerised by the physical beauty of Knysna. This, coupled with a growing frustration at the increasing crime and grime of Sea Point, convinced us that a move to Knysna would be a good one. We chose a wedge-shaped plot with about 30 metres of water frontage.

We weren't in a huge hurry to leave Cape Town. Work and family commitments would keep us there for a while, but we wanted to plan to the last possible detail so that we would be up and running when we finally made the move. We had struck up an excellent relationship with the architect, Steff Mulder. The design guidelines for the 'Cape colonial maritime' style on Thesen Islands are very specific and externally the houses are harmoniously consistent. Our challenge lay in creating a highly personalised home while adhering to these guidelines.

A trip to Seaside, a beach town on Florida's Gulf Coast in America and the 'ground zero' of TND, helped to formulate some of the ideas for our new home. Ian and I were pretty specific about our requirements. We wanted a small home with lots of open space and good natural light. It would be simple, with special attention paid to detail and energy efficiency. We also wanted to replicate the 'room in the roof' that we had created in our Victorian cottage in Sea Point. We anticipated hordes of friends and relatives coming to visit, so the plans had to incorporate a separate, self-contained guest apartment.

OVER THE YEARS, IAN AND I HAVE COLLECTED CLASSIC FURNITURE AND LIGHTS BY SOME OF THE GREAT DESIGNERS AND ARCHITECTS OF THE 20th CENTURY. I reckon that if a chair such as the Hill House ladder-back chair by Charles Rennie Mackintosh looks good after 100 years, it's hardly likely to suddenly 'go out of fashion'. We were also setting up a Weylandts Homestore in Thesen Harbour Town and didn't subscribe to the notion that island living necessitated a 'beachy' look. We were intent on bringing some slick city style to our island home!

We built the garage and apartment while still living in Cape Town. This gave us a place to stay when we visited Knysna and later after we had left Cape Town. It was great to be on site to watch every stage of the transformation of raw land into our home. The house is a timber-frame construction, so the basic structure went up in a matter of days. I don't know why South Africans still shy away from building timber-frame houses. Our builders, Cape Island Homes, draw on the expertise of countries where timber frame is the rule. The process is clean and precise, you gain more internal space and insulation is generally better than in a brick home.

We moved into the house six months ago. The months of creative energy have resulted in a very pleasing space. On a practical level, the house works in a way that satisfies all our living requirements. On a more spiritual level, the house seems to touch the earth lightly, without disrupting the natural beauty that surrounds it.

Slowly but surely our friends and relatives are coming to visit. It's a privilege to share our bit of paradise. ▼

• Steff Mulder of Chris Mulder Associates 044 382 6732 • Cape Island Homes 044 382 1330 • Michael Suttan Design 021 448 0521

PREVIOUS DOUBLE PAGE (LEFT): At dusk, the house seems to float on the water. RIGHT: Spike the Siamese complements two timeless Mackintosh chairs. THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The spiral stainless-steel and African-rosewood staircase is by Michael Suttan Design. Whimsical touches for the table, by Stefano Giovannoni for Alessi. The observation tower perforates the roofline of the main house. The tower on the left gives access to the guest apartment. The Sweet Dreams flex light is by Gabby Raaff at Bread and Butter. The bed bearing Alex the borzoi is from Weylandts Homestore and the Berenice lamp is from Luceplan.









LEFT: Winter on the water can be chilly. The double-volume living area is warmed by a wood-burning stove. The One from the Heart lamp is by renowned German lighting designer Ingo Maurer. The Wu mobile side table from Weylandts Homestore complements modern classics such as Eileen Gray's chrome and glass table, displaying the Maurer lamp, and the leather sofa, modelled on Le Corbusier's club chair. The tan leather chairs are Scandinavian and were bought at the defunct Plaut furniture store. ABOVE (LEFT): The mezzanine level houses the office/TV room and second bedroom. Access to the bedroom is via a "bridge of light", manufactured by Michael Suttén Design. Two plates of punched stainless steel hold strip lights sandwiched between sheets of translucent Lexan polycarbonate. At night the bridge resembles a band of stars. The Italian Loft couch is from Soluzioni. The stainless-steel ladder in the background leads to the observation tower. RIGHT: The open-plan kitchen, with its metallic, white Chinese-lacquer and cherry-wood finishes, blends seamlessly with the rest of the house. The Cico bar stools are from Petersen's and the kettle is by Richard Sapper for Alessi. The Titania suspension lamp by Luceplan comes with interchangeable colour filters – swap the colours and the mood of the room is altered instantly.



## ISLAND HOUSE



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ian, Elaine and Alex on the catwalk to the guest apartment. Access is via a spiral staircase enclosed in the tower, which was inspired by Italian architect Aldo Rossi. Tea tastes better in a light-as-air glass by Ritzenhoff. A simple path of concrete pavers set in white quartzite pebbles leads to the front door. The glass doors create a portal to the waterway beyond. The house has a warm heart: the One for the Recession lamp is another Maurer design. RIGHT: Mackintosh designed this chair in 1904 to visually separate the front and rear of Miss Cranston's Willow Tea Rooms in Glasgow. Here it creates a visual and psychological barrier between the entrance and dining areas.

### THE PROS AND CONS OF LIVING ON THESE ISLANDS

#### PROS

1. The sense of security engendered by living on an island.
2. The simple pleasure of catching up with your neighbours across a low picket fence.
3. The convenience of being able to walk to the village centre.
4. The architectural guidelines dictate that houses are simply designed and harmonious.
5. The unique pleasure of living in absolute proximity to your own beaches, waterways and parklands.

#### CONS

1. The urban density requires reasonably stringent rules and regulations, which might not suit everyone.
2. A high degree of autonomy means that association levies combined with municipal service fees are higher than they would be for a comparable free-standing suburban home.
3. Living in such a tight-knit community can be something of a fishbowl experience.



