

SOUTH AFRICA HABITAT MAGAZINE - DNF INTERVIEW

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OPINION

London-based furniture/interior designer Derek Frost is no stranger to Southern Africa having completed work both here and in Swaziland. His most recent visit was on a vacation over last Christmas and Colin Sharp interviewed him in Johannesburg in early January. Some of Frost's work was published in issue 82 (October/November 1987) under the title 'Pieces de resistance'.



Frost's apprenticeship with David Hicks and Mary Fox-Linton has engendered in him a good understanding of furniture design which is the 'most-favoured' part of his day to day design work. However, Derek Frost is very much a practising interior designer and Colin Sharp talked to him 'about trends in the UK and the direction in which the interior design industry is going.

Like Trish Guild, also interviewed in issue 82, Frost maintains that although he personally is not a mainstream designer, the English penchant for interior design is still essentially traditional.

Says the designer: 'The standard English look: Colefax & Fowler, with all its thousands of variations, is very strong. Designers Guild however, is now doing interesting things. They started with their own type of traditional English floral interpretation - with modern overtones - but they've now moved into even more stimulating, and essentially more contemporary directions.

'Laura Ashley is another case in point. They were always a traditional house and yet recently, possibly because of their very serious financial planners and mar-

keting staff and the popularity of the English look in America, they've established a new rather chic image.

'What they're actually trying to promote is a new grand style of design, elaborate use of curtains, tassels, fringes. This is a look which is internationally very popular at the moment but it is the impact of the vast American market demand which has created it.'

Frost maintains that whilst this particular look is not his own personal choice it is a very successful solution which can be equally well applied to large country houses or suburban maisonettes. He adds: 'It always surprises me how adaptable this style is and how well it works in countries which have climates fundamentally very different from England's.

'But it is an English statement, the English are crazy about gardening and such fabrics as Colefax and Ashley's typify this predilection; the bringing of gardens into the house. This could stem from the English relationship with India where I think chintzes originally came from. This sort of look is very appropriate in the UK where one is usually trying to jolly up grey days with fresh garden colour, lots of fabric and softness.'

Derek Frost thinks that strong light seems to encourage the use of stronger colours, he comments: 'I'm not actually sure why this is because, for me, strong colour can work as well in London as in Johannesburg or Los Angeles. Conversely, lighter or more muted schemes can succeed equally well in regions of strong sunlight. There is no rule

of thumb here, the use of softer colours is perhaps something of an old-established tradition in Europe.

'On my three visits to South Africa I've seen some very contemporary interior design techniques and good use of colour in both basic finishes and fabrics. I find South African interior design very eclectic; it also seems to be essentially personal and expresses succinctly the individual character of the owners.

'This is very much my sort of style because I'm interested in creating good architectural volumes and it doesn't matter to me whether these are modern, traditional or indeed a mix of both styles. I need to see the architecture expressed clearly and to the highest quality possible.

'The next step is to fill the interior with pieces, objects and artworks which are of the right scale and proportion. The end result should therefore be an expression of the owner's tastes in a variety of subjects be it a family or a single individual.

'This is undoubtedly happening in South Africa where there are many incredibly interesting things



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to collect, some excellent local artworks included. The people that I've been lucky enough to meet seem to have had experience out of this country which further encourages eclectic interior design.

'I've spent a little time looking at antique shops and galleries here in South Africa and there are clearly a lot of interesting things going on which are very worth collecting. One of my particular passions and interests is to seek out people who are doing interesting work, to patronise them and give them the opportunity to develop their talents. In some of the homes I've seen here, this is definitely being done and I find it very exciting.'

Derek Frost's attitude towards his own furniture design typifies this point of view. He says: 'This is undoubtedly my most individual work, it is also the most difficult. I'm treading unknown ground, trying to put together a handful of craftsmen and attempting to make something which is a totally unique object.'

'Interior design on the other hand is more of a service industry, to a degree more mechanical and certainly more transient. Personally I'm a nest builder. I like the idea of working slowly and carefully on a series of rooms which are my spaces. It may sound pretentious but this, for me, means a development of my own little poem in my own little

space.

'I'm not really interested in what other people think about it, whether I use expensive fabrics or cheap ones, a grand object or an inexpensive memento. I want to surround myself with things which strike a personal cord.'

Frost's furniture designs are at this stage one-offs. They are all hand crafted and feature different wood veneers, semi-precious materials like mother of pearl, marble and stone inlays and varying surfaces which might include steel and timber used together. This designer's forte is in the mixing of these as well as the actual line and form of the piece.

Says Frost: 'It is the interest that is generated by putting contrasting materials together that fascinates me. Hopefully this should express an orderliness and an aesthetic co-ordination. It is much the same as placing a period piece in a very modern room or vice versa; the vibration created by such techniques is for me exciting. If one does it with a single object, it is actual tightening the impression, making it more intense.'

Derek Frost's ideal scenario would be to design a range of furniture for a manufacturer. He is currently involved in negotiations with a company based in Hong Kong which works with craftsmen all over the Far East on hand-made objects and furniture which is marketed internationally. This would create a far wider market and the result would be that Frost's designs would therefore be more affordable to the young people who appreciate them.

He comments: 'These are incredibly expensive pieces on a one-off basis but once economies of scale are taken into account they would become much more realistic. I don't have any elitist thoughts on this subject and would like my furniture to be seen in as many homes as pos-

sible.'

On the subject of English design Frost says that there are quite a number of people involved in the modern area. 'Having said that the traditional look is still very big, there is a dramatic change among the younger generation, the 25-35 year old group who are perhaps into their second home. These people don't want to necessarily spend lots of money but there is a big new slice of this market group who certainly don't want anything to do with traditional interior design or furniture.'

'London has become much more international as a city, there is a great deal of money around and much of this is in the hands of people who aren't British. Furthermore, some of this money is controlled by younger, yuppie types who are recognising the new contemporary movement, particularly in the craft world.'

'I would like to think that there is a Bauhaus-type movement developing, it would be wonderful if this is the case. But one really doesn't know until a couple of decades have passed and we can look back. I think that a new international style of work has evolved with the Italian joke-artists, namely Memphis. They successfully shocked the market, which is probably what they set out to do.'

'The whole of that Memphis-Post Modern movement has jolted people out of the contemporary classical/international, Mies van der Rohe/Corbusier look. It is thus, an important happening, a return to detail albeit a brutal, even angry one in many respects. But this new contemporary classicism is exactly where I feel my head is. I hope it will evolve into something pure and good, and of today. Perhaps we can look back in a decade or so and recognise a moment, a short era of lasting beauty. □