

# aspire<sup>home</sup>

## OBSESSIONS

### *Seeking the Sublime*

John Lyle. Barnaba Fornasetti.  
James Thomas. Morag Myerscough.  
Phillip Thomas. Killy Scheer.





CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Architect Alexander McGee of Cape Town – based Urbain McGee recalls when he first walked into the ASSEMBLY ROOM of Mutual Heights, a prewar Art Deco landmark building. “It felt as if someone had packed up their things in 1960 and walked out,” he expresses.

Considered to be the finest example of Art Deco in Africa, Mutual Heights was built in the 1930s. “It has an almost Utopian quality,” notes McGee. With its classic ziggurat design and slim, prism-shaped windows running vertically along its facade, it looks like it belongs in New York, Los Angeles or even Paris.

ART DECO AFRICA

The arrival lobby has timber-paneled walls by Versfeld.  
The Techno Loafer chair, made from waxed steel and rubber from a conveyor belt, is by Xandre Kriel, available from Southern Guild.



TEXT GRAHAM WOOD PHOTOGRAPHY GREG COX  
INTERIOR DESIGN ADRI AND VINCENT CLERY OF ATELIER INTERIORS  
ARCHITECT ALEXANDER MCGEE OF URBAIN MCGEE

In the gallery directly outside the Assembly Room (to the right, through the steel doors), the decorative marble floor pattern is new. It was designed by architects Urbain McGee and Atelier Interiors in collaboration, and was inspired by the prism-shaped windows on the exterior of the building. The artwork is by Morné Visagie and is made from wine-bottle foil.





The sculptural hand-carved wooden bench made from Eucalyptus cladocalyx is by Adam Birch. Atelier Interiors custom-designed the soft furniture and the black slate side table. The Caliza B Side Table in travertine is by Tonic Design. The hand-forged metal side tables by Alon Fainstein were also specially commissioned for the room. The vintage surgery/theatre standing lamp was sourced from antique dealers.

## “IT’S BOTH CAPTIVATING AND DAUNTING, WALKING INTO A SPACE THIS STEEPED IN HISTORY.”

– ADRI CLERY OF ATELIER INTERIORS

The landmark structure was abandoned in the latter 1900s, standing empty until being redeveloped in the early 2000s and converted into residential units. However, the Assembly Room – the dazzling jewel in the crown – remained untouched. Hand-painted frescoes on its walls predated World War II and were protected by strict heritage laws, so no one knew quite what to do with it – that is, until Urbain McGee’s clients found it was for sale and snapped it up.

Adri and Vincent Clery of Atelier Interiors were soon working closely with Urbain McGee to envision the odd cluster of spaces as a home. “It’s both captivating and daunting, walking into a space this steeped in history,” pronounces Adri.

Adri and the Atelier team mined Art Deco designs around the world for useful references, but they kept coming back to the regional details that had been incorporated in the building’s construction, such as the Paarl granite cladding, mined locally, and the unique 115-meter-long, carved frieze around the base of the building. Given the recent renaissance of South African art and design, they were able to tap into a rich vein of local bespoke design, picking up the thread and continuing a dialogue with the architecture in a different key, as it were, without devolving into pastiche or stylistic imitation.

One of the crucial challenges facing both architects and interior designers involved a balancing act between preserving the grandeur of the Assembly Room and scaling it down. “How could we reimagine the three sections that were bought alongside the Assembly Room?” Alexander asks. After all, they not only needed to make the Assembly Room habitable but also to create three bedrooms, a kitchen and other living spaces.

The additional spaces – originally intended “to facilitate the movement of large numbers of people” – were wide, but not wide enough to make rooms. Luckily, their clients were art lovers; Alexander transformed these in-between areas into a series of galleries, adding decorative “nib walls” that created a sense of human proportion. The tall bedrooms were cleverly given human scale with split levels – mezzanines for en suite bathrooms, for example.

Nooks and odd spaces created opportunities for some quirky delights, in particular, the “cabinet of curiosity” in a repurposed former stairwell filled with an eclectic collection of items from the owner’s travels – taxidermy, whale’s teeth, voodoo dolls, bottled specimens, apothecary tannins and powders, as well as precious stones and antique cameras, all of which provided a contemporary take on Art Deco exoticism.

The color palette throughout the apartment was taken from the frescoes in the Assembly Room and the pleated blue drapery on the walls, replaced to match the originals. This, and other details such as the paneling and dado rails, which they reprised in the gallery, also helped unify the various parts of the apartment.

While the Assembly Room remains open-plan, Adri and Vincent divided it into distinct areas – a raised platform at one end became a podium for music recitals; a lounge and dining area occupy the center; and a sleek, modern kitchen fills the far end.

None of the furniture, whether in the bedrooms or in the Assembly Room, was “off the shelf.” Other than items already owned by the clients, what wasn’t found in antique stores and at auctions was either designed by Adri and Vincent and manufactured by local artisans or commissioned from local designers, makers and artists.

The palpable presence of handcrafted, contemporary design using local materials, together with antique furniture, builds a bridge to the past. In fact, you could go so far as to say the reinvention of the Assembly Room is a sophisticated reframing of the building’s history for the present, utterly contemporary and forward-looking once again, but deeply rooted in its historical setting.







The reflective circular sculpture, titled *The Tale of Two*, is by Cape Town-based sculptor Rodan Kane Hart. The handwoven mohair rug was commissioned by Atelier Interiors and custom-made by local weavers Coral & Hive. The pattern was inspired by a fine art weaving design by British textile designer and weaver Susie Gillespie, who takes inspiration from prehistoric textiles. "We wanted to incorporate some historic relevance, weaving the history of the old into the new space, and her designs speak of this so clearly," adds Adri. Coral & Hive also wove the multifiber (karakul, mohair, merino, curly mohair) tapestry pattern on the custom-made ottomans by Atelier Interiors. Atelier Interiors commissioned sculptor and ceramicist Ben Orkin, represented by WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery, to make the ceramic lamp base specially for the room. Its shape mimics the Art Deco pattern on the steel doors, and its color was taken from the murals.



THE ASSEMBLY ROOM  
OPEN-PLAN IS DIVIDED  
INTO SEVERAL DISTINCT  
AREAS – A RAISED  
PLATFORM AT ONE END  
BECAME A PODIUM  
FOR MUSIC RECITALS; A  
LOUNGE AND DINING  
AREA OCCUPY THE  
CENTER; AND A SLEEK,  
MODERN KITCHEN FILLS  
THE FAR END.

The huge frescoes by artist Le Roux Smith Le Roux, dating back to the 1940s, provided the basis of the color palette used throughout the apartment. The deep-blue pleated fabric panelling was replaced to match the originals (added some decades after the room was completed), which had faded and begun to disintegrate. A front-of-house kitchen with hand-routed walnut panelling and Neolith countertops was added at one end. The ebony-stained kitchen stools are by Adam Birch. The dining table was designed by Xandre Kriel, represented by Southern Guild, and is made from raw mild steel with a sea water patina. The upholstered dining chairs were designed by Atelier Interiors.