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IRON FIST IN THE VELVET GLOVE

SOUTH AFRICAN EXPORT HUBERT ZANDBERG CREATES AN INTERIOR IN LONDON THAT MARRIES THE BEST OF CONTEMPORARY MODERNISM AND PERSONAL TOUCHES OF AFRICAN FORM AND TEXTURE

TEXT KAREN HOWES PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON UPTON

OPPOSITE The main reception is divided into three distinct areas: reading and television, dining and sitting. The walls are stuccoed by Richard Clark. The 'retro' design is influenced by the Jean-Michel Frank-inspired sofa, made by HZ Design and upholstered in Rubelli houndstooth fabric, an Eames chair and side tables by Saarinen. The armchair is by Christian Liaigre and the chaise longue is by Pierre Frey. Four paintings by an unknown artist from the 1950s hang above the sofa and the chandelier is 1970s Murano ABOVE The reading and television area is dominated by a Hubert Zandberg-designed cupboard inspired by a cabinet by Paul Evans from his 'skyscraper' range, also in the apartment. The striped design is made up of dark wenge wood softened with stripes of cracked gesso like sunbleached ivory. A 1940s day bed, relacquered in black is upholstered in vintage Chanel suiting, and accessorised with African textiles and cushions

The brainchild of one of Britain's greatest living architects, Richard Rogers, the Montevetro Building was designed to encourage the return of many Londoners who have been steadily leaving the city over the last 30 years, by offering a modern answer to urban living. Completed in September 1999, Montevetro was built on the site of an old Hovis flourmill on the south bank of the Thames in Old Battersea, a historic area of beautiful 18th-century townhouses and its famous Grade I-listed Georgian church, built over two centuries before Rogers' design hit the drawing board.

A 'vertical village' of laminated glass containing over 100 apartments, Montevetro, or the 'glass mountain', as its name translates, is built on the water's edge and has westerly views up the Thames. The design and construction of the Montevetro Building created a great deal of excitement and with its floor-to-ceiling glass walls presented a number of interesting challenges for an interior designer, so it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that London designer Hubert Zandberg accepted the commission to create an interior from scratch in one of the penthouses.

'When presented with a very specific architectural style, it is impossible not to be influenced by it,' Zandberg concedes. 'Montevetro is slick and quite ▶

industrial-looking, which works well in its setting up river from Battersea Power Station and overlooking Chelsea Harbour and the docks. I was lucky, because the client, a South African couple, really wanted to work with the style of the building.'

While the husband wanted the penthouse to reflect his taste for Modernism, his wife preferred to retain an African theme. Zandberg's final interpretation, which met with joint approval, was to design an interior in keeping with contemporary London, yet punctuated with personal touches of ethnic South Africa. 'I believe that African art overlaps with Modernism,' Zandberg explains. 'There is a whole Modernism-Cubism-Primitivism connection, so the two work well together.'

Zandberg refers to the design of the finished apartment as a 'soft industrial' style, which reflects the location of the building, both in London and by the river, as well as the use of elements in its construction, such as metal and glass. Zandberg has not only incorporated complementary industrial materials into his interior, but has also chosen monochrome colour schemes, luxurious textures and pieces of furniture which have defined shapes.

The interior is decidedly 'retro', mixing antiques from the 1920s and '30s with other items from the '70s, chosen for their form and simplicity. The main reception room was a vast open space with a relatively low ceiling, which Zandberg decided to divide visually into three areas – a reading/work space with television, a dining space in the centre and a sitting space at the far end. He accentuated the divisions using rugs and stripes, while in the centre of the vast window he has added curtains instead of the slatted wooden blinds which define the window in the other two sections of the room. ▶

OPPOSITE PAGE In the entrance hall, a custom-made console table bearing amongst other things a Moooi lamp and a portrait by South African artist, John Murray. The circular mirror has a frame hand-painted to enhance the wooden grain LEFT Zandberg uses chrome and polished steel for many of his accessories which lend an additional sparkle to the interior of the apartment. The mahogany floor runs throughout the apartment and adds to the high-luxury feel BOTTOM LEFT A detail of the sitting room revealing the highly successful dialogue between ethnic and modern pieces BELOW The kitchen was installed by the developers and the clients opted to keep the basics and to add a few free-standing elements and some industrial flea-market pieces

RIGHT The Jonathan Baring desk in rosewood-and-polished-steel, with Modernist lamps and an Eames chair is in the main reception room. The vintage model cranes on the desk were found in Paris BOTTOM LEFT View from the small balcony to Battersea Power Station BOTTOM RIGHT The 18th-century simplicity of St Mary's Church is reflected in the laminated glass walls of Richard Rogers' Montevetro Building, while tall cranes, testimony to London's ever-changing skyline, dot the horizon OPPOSITE PAGE The Brancusi-inspired master bed's hard shape is softened by a luxurious pleated throw, mohair-silk bedcover and the plaited fabric on the Helon Melon bolster. The addition of suede cushions with cowrie-shell belts from Mali and the Dogon ladder completes an African touch. Richard Clark painted the walls to resemble raw linen

Zandberg plays with vertical and horizontal lines, soft furnishings and hard materials. He loves contrast and feels that in the penthouse, the juxtaposition of muted colours and a variety of natural textures with mirrors and hard surfaces in steel and chrome, creates a good energy. 'Call it the iron fist in the velvet glove,' says Zandberg. The lines and forms of the apartment are strict and tailored, softened with luxury fabrics in layered textures – silk, mohair, cashmere, boiled wools and handwoven materials appear in pleats and flocks. The feeling of 1930s and '40s opulence is carried through even into the paint effects given to the walls, made to look like raw parchment or linen.

Lighting is another important element of design and one on which Zandberg places great emphasis. His answer to the wall of glass, which dominates the reception room, is slatted wooden blinds in a deep chocolate brown instead of curtains. The slats control the angle of light and act as natural dimmer switches, preventing the harsh midday light from damaging the furniture and artwork.

Having grown up in the Karoo, Zandberg has an awareness of light often lacking in his fellow designers, and he has always been fascinated by how the light changes the colours of the landscape around him. 'High contrasting bright colours do not often work in London,' says Zandberg. 'Which is why I choose plain or monochromatic colours without losing that element of essential luxury in the soft furnishings and accessories. Montevetro was particularly interesting – with the grey of the sky, grey water, a grey industrial wasteland – which is why I've kept the design muted yet sophisticated, with highlights of a brighter colour, like red, yellow and green to introduce a bit of cheerfulness.'

The 'punchy' areas of the apartment where there is more than a splash of colour, are created by mixing objects, artwork and other personal accessories and collections. A collector himself, Zandberg likes nothing better than to start a client off on a collection of their own. On shopping expeditions with clients, he travels with a tape measure and floor plans to be certain that a coveted object or piece of furniture will fit into a particular room to avoid any disappointment. ■

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