

## DOMESTICITY AND LANDSCAPE





# A SCREENWRITER'S RETREAT

By: Jason Temlett

*An architecture of heuristic exploration and tectonic response: House Slovo is expressed as a sensitively regionalist response and by a principally responsible design. Although initially perhaps perceived as “simple”, House Slovo’s layers of resolution are revealed rather as sophisticated simplicity.*



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Rising above the Highveld, House Slovo opens up to vast expanses of natural light and rolling untouched vistas. After decades of urban city living, a return home from London to South Africa naturally appealed to the client. As an exercise in the roles successful architecture can play, the design of Shawn Slovo's house goes in some way towards repairing the client's complicated relationship with the country of her birth.

The house and its function sit in direct dialogue with the landscape, reconnecting the nature of everyday living with the senses of belonging and place.

BAFTA award-winning screenwriter and daughter of freedom icons Joe Slovo and Ruth First, Shawn Slovo moved to London at the age of 14 when her family was forced into political exile in 1964. Despite having inherently complex and ambivalent feelings towards South Africa, Slovo expresses having always had a sense of loss and longing to return one day.

## **"THE LONGING TO BE BACK UNDER AFRICAN SKIES, NEVER WENT AWAY." — SHAWN SLOVO**

### **SHAWN SLOVO'S VISION**

Slovo wanted a welcome London respite, envisioned as a screenwriter's creative retreat; a home purposefully designed to recharge and reconnect with the freer spirit of our open African landscape, people and spirit of place. A home — an archetypal sense of belonging — conceived where space and atmosphere could visually and physically lead and flow into each other to create a peaceful, harmonious and creative living experience; a place of comfort and refuge from the world, reinterpreted within a contemporary context as immersive architecture that would imbue a sense of escaping to the bushveld. She yearned for unencumbered living, the fluidity of space and movement acting as a restorative relationship, a sanctuary of reconnection creating a fluidity of thought and being.

Seeking this, Slovo envisioned a peaceful refuge from the world, enjoyment of the splendour of natural beauty, a home archetypal of comfort, safety and belonging, and a retreat that would become a writer's sanctuary.

Although first seduced by the Cape, it was living in harmony with nature that won Slovo's heart, a peaceful escape imbued with bushveld beauty.

Drawn to the warm golden daylight, expansive vistas of the unspoilt rolling African landscape, dotted only by Nguni cows, towards the distance of the Magaliesburg Mountains, the eco-ideals and ethos of Monaghan Farm sealed the deal for Slovo and a site was snatched up. Identifying an appreciation of sensibility and aesthetic, the design process began, partnering with Johannesburg-based architects C76AD.

The sociopolitical implications of modern private estate living notwithstanding; Monaghan Farm is in many ways dialectically impressive. Setting itself apart from other housing developments, Monaghan Farm has espoused a mission of eco-ideals and an impressive respect and restraint to building on the land, only three per cent of the farm will ever be built on.

Designing for the complex client and place relationship, coupled with the almost unmissable opportunities the picturesque site presented; would require an architectural response formed by, and linked inextricably to both. Disregarding the influence of any architectural style or the temporality of trend, C76AD approached the design without any preconceptions.

Principal architect of C76AD Carl Jacobsz explained that the factors influencing the architecture were the implications arising from the environment and context, architectural responsibilities of sustainability, and the cultural experiences of a South African lifestyle. How can a building be naturally contained by its surroundings in a way that distils a meaningful response to place, architecture, nature and modernity?

### **ARCHITECTURAL APPROACH**

Time was invested in understanding the client's specific needs and defining the brief, researching the above-mentioned aspects to respond appropriately to them and to avoid forcing any predetermined aesthetics or gestures. Exploring the story of place rather than attempting to reinvent it, informed the critically regionalist and pragmatic approach: blending with site, careful selection and use of materials, the iterative process of discovery and craft, and the adaptation to flexible living comfort. Principled placemaking was articulated through this formal and programmatic response; the sensitive design concept resolved through insightful architectural detailing. >



1 View from the north-eastern deck from the natural pool. Sliding timber screens open to unveil views of the eastern valley from the main bedroom. 2 Section A-A through living room.



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Regionalism at a very local exploration, House Slovo is a design of contextualised intervention, built to be both adaptive and accommodating with clarity of materiality, space and form. A design focused on space, uncomplicated and where simplicity of structure meets the purity of its context; refusing design complication in order to bond the built with the natural, but also paring back the clutter of modern life. Form should follow function, the design signature being dictated by being at one with

land, location and planned programme, reinforcing the latent potential of site subtly.

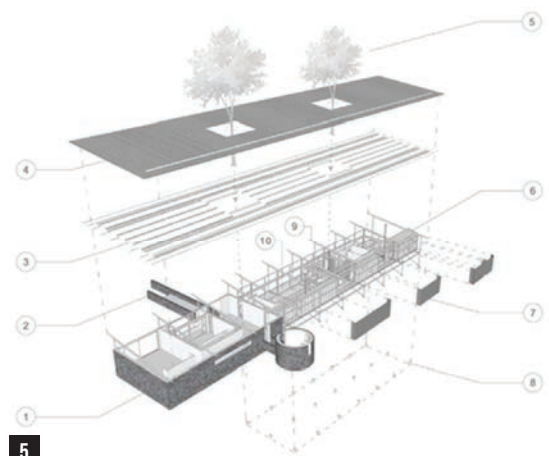
### THE DESIGN

Approaching from the north, the house lays unobtrusively low in the veld, the main entrance following a long stone walkway that reaches out into the tall grass, a strong journey of architectural promenade moving from the open undefined veld towards the striking view of the house sitting anchored into its site.

As object within, above and of the landscape, the house is optimally lifted and orientated to capitalise on the surrounding views, opening programmatically northwards to frame a focus on the contiguous natural setting. Exploring prototypical features of vernacular architecture, technical detailing is used to integrate efficiency and appeal; the simple form of House Slovo



**3** Western facade of the house which is clad in low-cost, recycled stone and submerged in the landscape to offer privacy from the street. **4** South-eastern view of the house "floating" over the landscape, illustrating the mono-pitch roof which is designed to enable passive cooling. **5** Exploded axonometric view illustrating the construction of the project. 1: Locally sourced stone walls. 2: Entrance walkway. 3: Steel roof structure. 4: Corrugated rood sheeting. 5: Indigenous trees in courtyards. 6: Cantilevered writing niche. 7: Corrugated sheet cladding. 8: Site anchored floating. 9: Steel framed structure. 10: Timber floors and timber decking.



belies its thoughtfulness. This is not an archetypal box with a pitched roof. At times reminiscent of the early Prairie works of Frank Lloyd Wright, or the architectural sleekness of the homes of Albert Frey, the house unfolds in a softer way to its context similarly to works by Neutra and other early modernist houses of California.

The house seems to grow out of the hills itself, touching the earth lightly and extending east to hover above the 6m sloping site, reducing the intervention's impact and disturbance. Formed as a linear mass, the outer materiality of the house becomes lighter along the west-east Axis, where the (seemingly) floating lightweight steel structure is anchored, almost organically, by heavy stone walls.

A relatively simple rectilinear form of sweepingly long horizontal parts, interior spaces are arranged intuitively yet inventively, aligned along the main datum, following the lay of the land. Two planted courtyards cut through the cubic volume to create glazed pockets of intimacy and light, a blurring of inside and out, vertical elements that reinforce continuity to site. Personal spaces of privacy and withdrawal, the bedrooms and bathrooms have been placed at either end of the building, the envelope connecting private thresholds to public as axes of circulation device — an organisational pattern flowing around the tree courtyards to the central, open plan living areas — a layered and varied experience of interconnectedness and assembly of spatial qualities. Each puzzle piece of the building fits neatly into place.

Handled with authority, the building presents a powerful presence on the hillside while also paying respect to it. A convincing architectural amalgamation perhaps representing the aspiration of the client externally, while the interior offers insights into her personality.

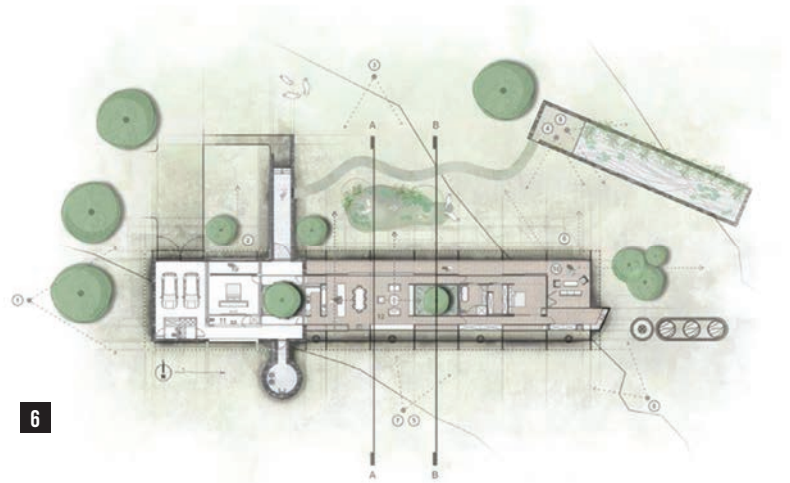
Tailored to fit the client's living, the interior is surprisingly compact and hardly any space is wasted. Efficiency in space use penetrates the whole house. Openings are placed along the south-north axis to provide passive ventilation and cooling, while clerestory windows and the monopitch roof provide plenty of natural light and sheltered overhangs. From within, the house spills out onto decked patios. Along this northern facade, flexible timber and glass sliding sections open to the undulating hills and towards the open sky, maximising spatial comfort while connecting interior and exterior space. This delineation of solid and void interweaves layers of transparency, reinforcing the idea of thresholds transitioning towards endless space, the remarkable vistas and presence of context optimised from almost every vantage point. The screens soften the long linear facade and break down the horizontal scale of the building; the rhythmic repetition of materiality and tones echoing the landscape.

## JACOBSZ IS ALSO INTERESTED IN THE CRAFTING OF AN ARCHITECTURE THAT IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS WHERE CONSTRUCTION AND MANIPULATION OF SPACE FUNCTIONS AT A HIGHER LEVEL BECOMING POETIC.

A private writing niche was specially designed — a peaceful workspace, positioned as a personal statement due to its importance in the client's lifestyle. This study area extends from the hovering east wing as a cantilevered box, floating above the ground with views down the eastern valley ... an invigorating space for inspired writing.

The client's culture of open-plan living shaped the programme organisation and hierarchy of function — a sequence of layered function and a visual deconstruction of materiality and weighting progressing along the length of the building that connects the house's activity outwards and the natural environment inwards. It is a synthesis of materiality conjoining the stereotomic solidity of stone to the gentle lightness of the steel frame.

Jacobsz achieves a design sophistication by way of a multileveled approach to space making, designing organisation in plan, while simultaneously conceiving space in section. Jacobsz is also interested in the crafting of an architecture that is more than the sum of its parts where construction and manipulation of space functions at a higher level becoming poetic. This tectonic praxis as a signature of C76AD's work is continuing here.



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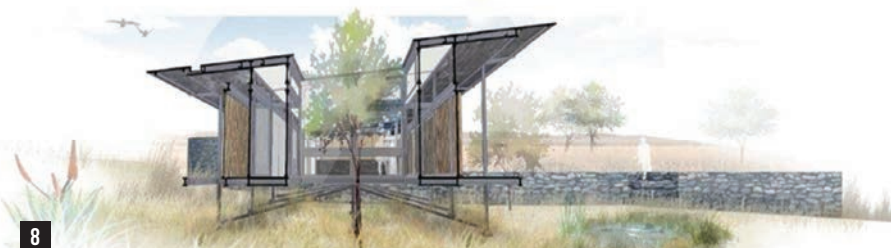


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### THE PASSIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The house has been designed with sustainable principles throughout, and a number of key “green” decisions have produced excellent architectural results. The centrally lined internal courtyard spaces wrap around trees from below to form tall volumes of external space that provide interconnecting greenery, as well as shaping ideally-timed light and shade throughout the year.

Almost all of House Slovo could be recycled and reused. Experienced in using reclaimed building materials, (2018 GIFA & SAIA Merit awarded for “138 Jan Smuts”) the architects saw steel — a traditional material already found elsewhere on the older farm >



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6 Floor plan and partial site plan. 7 Eastern views of the valley from the deck of the writer's box. 8 Section B-B through the light vault.





structures — to be an opportune structural approach that would also inform a suitable aesthetic language. The steel used could be easily disassembled and repurposed, while the stone is a low-costing waste product, locally sourced from mining dumps.

While London and the UK may often be stereotyped as cold, wet and dreary; South Africa has its own climatic challenges to address: Monaghan farm can hit summer highs of up to 40°C and can drop below 10°C in winter. Natural and passive solutions were designed and implemented to maximise the house's thermal performance throughout.

The roof, of course, plays an integral role in the house's overall design. Retaining its rectilinear geometry, it has a 3m-overhang angled towards the north, both cleverly shading the house and the outside living areas from the sun's heat; while later in the year, allowing the sun to heat the house throughout winter. The two courtyard openings act as atrium light wells, funnelling down the eastern morning sunlight to the living area and kitchen. Because of the site's natural opportunity and importance placed on the surrounding views, large openings run along the

north facade. Double glazing is used throughout, with light further moderated to meet comfort by the flexible use of timber screens. These sliding screens can be opened or closed at will, adjusting desired levels of light, enclosure, cooling and privacy. Similarly, the sliding screens act as a security barrier, allowing rooms to be left open during hot summer nights.

All rainwater falling on the roof is harvested and stored in tanks to the site's south, irrigating the garden and filling the pool. A dappling of sunlight permeates through the building layers, an interplay of light and shadow changing throughout the day moving through the house over the course of the day, as do the reflections of the nearby pool and natural pond's water.

Here another clever passive principle is in play, as the natural pond water in front of the house causes a refreshing breeze to the outside living areas by means of simple evaporative cooling.

Complementing the strong lines of the architecture, an informal approach is taken with the completely indigenous landscaping left to grow naturally and allowed to organically enhance the sense of surrounding wild nature — there are no manicured lawns or planted gardens. Fish and water lilies flourish in the pond, while cows are left to graze freely. The lifecycle of the design intervention has been carefully considered to cause minimal change; everything has been approached in a way that, in the future, all could potentially return to a preserved original state.

9 Image illustrating the low-tech nature of the screens opening and closing to reveal views on the southern side of the house. 10 Privacy screens in front of the guest bedroom's patio, which open up to views towards the north. 11 Natural pool, which circulates water through the pond in front of the house. The various plants along the wetland and inside the pool acts as a natural filtration system cleaning the water. 12 Northern facade of the house showing high-level windows and sliding timber screens which offer privacy, security and shading.





## “WE BORROW FROM NATURE THE SPACE UPON WHICH WE BUILD.” — TADAO ANDO

“We borrow from nature the space upon which we build” - Tadao Ando

In keeping with the natural feel of the design, simple and modest finishes were selected to enhance the interior/exterior relationship. A disciplined, pared-back approach creates a cohesive elegance. The raised timber decking and sliding screens are warmly complemented by the surrounding natural vegetation and the cool dark steel is reflected in the slate-coloured stone. Humble corrugated sheet roofing matches that of the old existing farm buildings.

### REGIONALISM AND EXPRESSION

The continued importance placed on authentic design expression and the connection to localised culture fuels the ongoing search for a regionally relevant and contextualised South African architectural identity. Regionalism responds to the above through reinterpreting the built environment in a self-conscious way, inherently formed by and inexplicably linked to its own context. Climate, topography, materiality, history and culture have all been grounded by the design approach taken by House Slovo’s architect and client.

Finding new and alternative approaches to contemporary living, House Slovo is a modern dwelling rooted in its locale that responds to self-critique and raw understanding, rather than naiveties of style or trend. Directly responding to place, the house finds itself pushing the boundaries of modernity and tradition, experimenting within the vocabularies of new expression and tectonic exploration. ➤



**13** Main living room and kitchen with a view towards the north. The high-level windows allow for passive cooling of the space. On the outside lower level, the natural pond allows for cooled air to flow into the house and it draws many varieties of wildlife for the observation of anyone using the living room. **14** View from the guest bathroom into the entrance courtyard, which separates the main house from the living room.

## “AFTER A LIFETIME AWAY, I HAVE COME HOME.” — SHAWN SLOVO

A moment of synchronicity, intention and execution stated through the language of architecture. Programmatically ordered and shaped in tune with the veld wildness, the house becomes a respectful mediator between living and landscape — an augmenting architectural expression evoking the enhanced spatial experience of a particular locality. Diluted with natural light and open space, the built intimacy of a permanent, private home is in a simple, honest, yet generous harmony with the natural atmosphere and presence of place.

It is the care and pragmatism of the design that has shaped the house's expression. Architectural aspects of the structure display the hallmarks of beautifully resolved design where contemporary architecture acts as both exploration and expressive identity.

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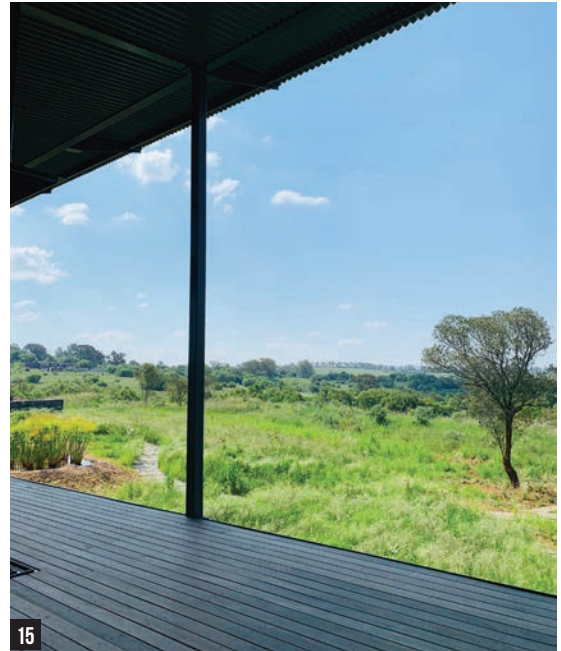
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15 Northern view from the deck showing the expansive Highveld landscape.

The discipline of technical detailing, coupled with the responsive, maturely styled expression comes from a deep insight into the culture and responsibility of architecture. This is where the beauty of House Slovo is celebrated.

An encouragingly holistic example of responsible design, principled approach and sensitive regionalism, House Slovo can be viewed as a confident expression of contemporary South African architecture.

Consciously crafted, House Slovo personifies a “homecoming”; best summed up by the client Shawn Slovo after settling in, who simply stated: “After a lifetime away, I have come home.” ■

## PROJECT TEAM: HOUSE SLOVO

**CLIENT:** Shawn Slovo

**ARCHITECTS:** C76 AD

**Principal architect:** Carl Jacobsz

**Project architect:** Dan de Kretser

**CONTRACTOR:** BLUE CUBE CONSTRUCTION

Conway McCreanor

**ENGINEERS:** C-PLAN ENGINEERS

Cassie Grobler

**STEEL CONTRACTOR:** ESTEE AUTOMATION

Jurie van der Westhuizen

**KITCHEN & CABINTRY:** OPTIMA KITCHENS

Adolf Conradie

**POOL & POND:** WETLAND POOLS

Anthony Philbrick

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Warren Wilson & Anna Bailey

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