

# THE ROUND HOUSE

HOME TO AN ARTIST AND HER *OEUVRE*, THIS IDIOSYNCRATIC 1960S PRETORIA PROPERTY CONTINUES TO MAKE WAVES EVEN TODAY

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Contrary to the carefree bohemian home that might typically be expected of an artist, the Arcadia, Pretoria, residence of South African painter Margaret Nel is calm, orderly, with an unerring sense of style.

Situated on top of a steep koppie and gazing boldly out over the Moot, a valley south of the Magaliesberg range, it stands like a beacon against the surrounding landscape, instantly recognisable from afar by its characteristic radial footprint. The Round House, as it's referred to, is an exceptional home. A rare example of late modernist architecture, it was designed by German architect May von Langenau in 1961 for Margaret's late husband Willem van Heerden.

Coinciding with the completion of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, its influence on the Round House is evident by way of its stripped back form, floating structure and lack of ornament, while a barrel-like diversion from the style's typically elongated buildings offers 360-degree views of a sweeping landscape from atop the ridge. 'The initial plan was for a more modernist house, but my husband preferred the idea of a round shape on stilts,' Margaret explains.

Her interior takes its cue from a more industrial-meets-institutional aesthetic. Throughout the house she pairs old hospital, army, office and school furniture with mid-century modern pieces – for which she has a weakness. Acquired over the years, Margaret's anthology has been procured largely from auctions and second-hand stores. 'The latest acquisition usually becomes my favourite,' she laughs, adding that she has only over the past 14 years become interested in products, in particular those made by local designers such as Dokter and Misses, Joe Paine, and Anatomy Design.'

Margaret's art collection consists of work by local artists, both known and emerging, some of which were bought from the Fried Contemporary Art Gallery and Bernardi Auctioneers. The influence of Pop artist Thiebaud can be seen in her own outsized work in which she explores and comments on the human condition, with particular emphasis on the place of the female in contemporary society.

Works by the likes of Claudette Schreuders, Hanneke Benade, Diane Victor and Louis Olivier all have their place within this

triple-storied icon of architecture, but she cites a sculpture by Andries Botha – the first piece she collected – as one of her favourites.

Margaret has a penchant for the details. She can innately pick up on what's needed to complete the picture, what works or doesn't, and where best to place an item of furniture or art. She creates visual stories intuitively, crafting a space that's rich in artistic expression. For example, a Nicolene van der Merwe soap sculpture of a piglet is coupled with a plastic toy store version and a copy of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, resulting in a layered narrative and referencing her knack for quirky combinations.

'My whole colour scheme began with this old steel office file cabinet,' she says of the industrial shade of grey/green that pervades her home and works as a canvas for her artworks. Over the past 14 years Margaret has worked on changing elements of the space, including a renovation to the kitchen and TV room as well as introducing furniture that serves to complement the home's 1960s heritage. 'It's challenging trying to retain the character of the period but still contemporising it,' she comments of her on-going efforts.▷

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM LEFT Looking at the Pretoria building, belonging to artist Margaret Nel, from a distance, it's not hard to see why it has become an icon on the local architectural landscape; a few old photographs and the original house plans by May von Langenau form part of Margaret's archive.

FROM FAR LEFT In the entrance hall, just beyond the stairs down which Margaret descends, a Tintin statue stands guard alongside a server from Bernardi Auctioneers (bernardi.co.za); the bandaged figure next to the breakfast table is by Louis Minnaar; the leather lounge chairs in the living room were brought back from Brazil by Margaret's late husband and the reupholstered day bed was part of a set purchased for R800 at Bernardi.

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There's virtuosity in displaying what you have amassed over time – some have it and some don't. It requires an eye and a yearning to continually revise what you're seeing. Margaret undoubtedly has it. Her skill lies in harmonising furniture from the same period as the architecture, all the while producing a result that's fresh and contemporary. In doing so she has managed to preserve an icon, moulding its contents to suit her own taste. ◻  
[art.co.za/margaretnel](http://art.co.za/margaretnel), 012-430-2466, 083-489-7010

FROM FAR LEFT One of Margaret's favourite features, the terrazzo floors were poured in situ when the house was built. Margaret and Kelda stand in the dining area with her renovated kitchen in the background; 'The cushion is one of the first products ever made by Design Team,' says Margaret ([designteamfabrics.co.za](http://designteamfabrics.co.za)). It's teamed with a chair found at a junk store; the treads in the elegant spiral staircase are made from teak.



The vintage bed tray table came with a batch of second-hand goods from the old Pretoria General Hospital. Margaret's bed was custom made by A & E Furniture ([aefurniture.co.za](http://aefurniture.co.za)) and the painting above it, entitled 'Intact', is one of her own. The mannequin hung on the wall was originally used to display ties in a shop window, alongside it is a Claudette Schreuders' work on paper.



#### MARGARET'S HOME TRUTHS

**My favourite artist** is the contemporary British artist Jenny Saville, whose latest drawings are reminiscent of Diane Victor's work. **I also admire the work of** Jane Alexander, Karin Preller, Walter Oltmann, the late Peter Schutz, Claudette Schreuders, Judy Woodborne, Wilma Cruise and Diane Victor. **Francis Bacon** influenced my early work as did the work of the Pop artists who came to prominence in the 1960s. **My first major purchase** was a bronze by Andries Botha. **When displaying works of art in your home** be judicious, and don't have too many pieces on the walls. When buying prints make sure the mounting is acid free. **In seeking artwork** I go to student exhibitions; exhibitions such as the Sasol New Signatures for work from up-coming artists; and auctions where I've picked up a few bargains. **Style is very difficult to define.** You can recognise good style and identify bad style, but ironically you have to have a sense of style in order to do so. **The living area**, with its original grey and white terrazzo floor fanning out from a central column is probably my favourite room. **My day bed** from the early 1970s is my current favourite piece of furniture. Other favourites are my Alessi kettle, Smeg gas stove, my collection of old plastic and tin toys, and my hospital lockers. **I love Italian food** and childhood favourites such as bread pudding, baked custard and *melkkos*.

FROM LEFT Margaret is gifted at creating stories such as this one which teams a Nicolene van der Walt soap pig sculpture with a toy store pig and a copy of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*; 'Close Up' - a painting by Margaret - hangs in one of the spare bedrooms. OPPOSITE Kelda in the downstairs study. Work by Hanneke Benade hangs in close proximity to Margaret's 'Cold 1', while an assemblage of dog-related *objets*, including a photo of her childhood pet, hints at Margaret's bent for quirky combinations.