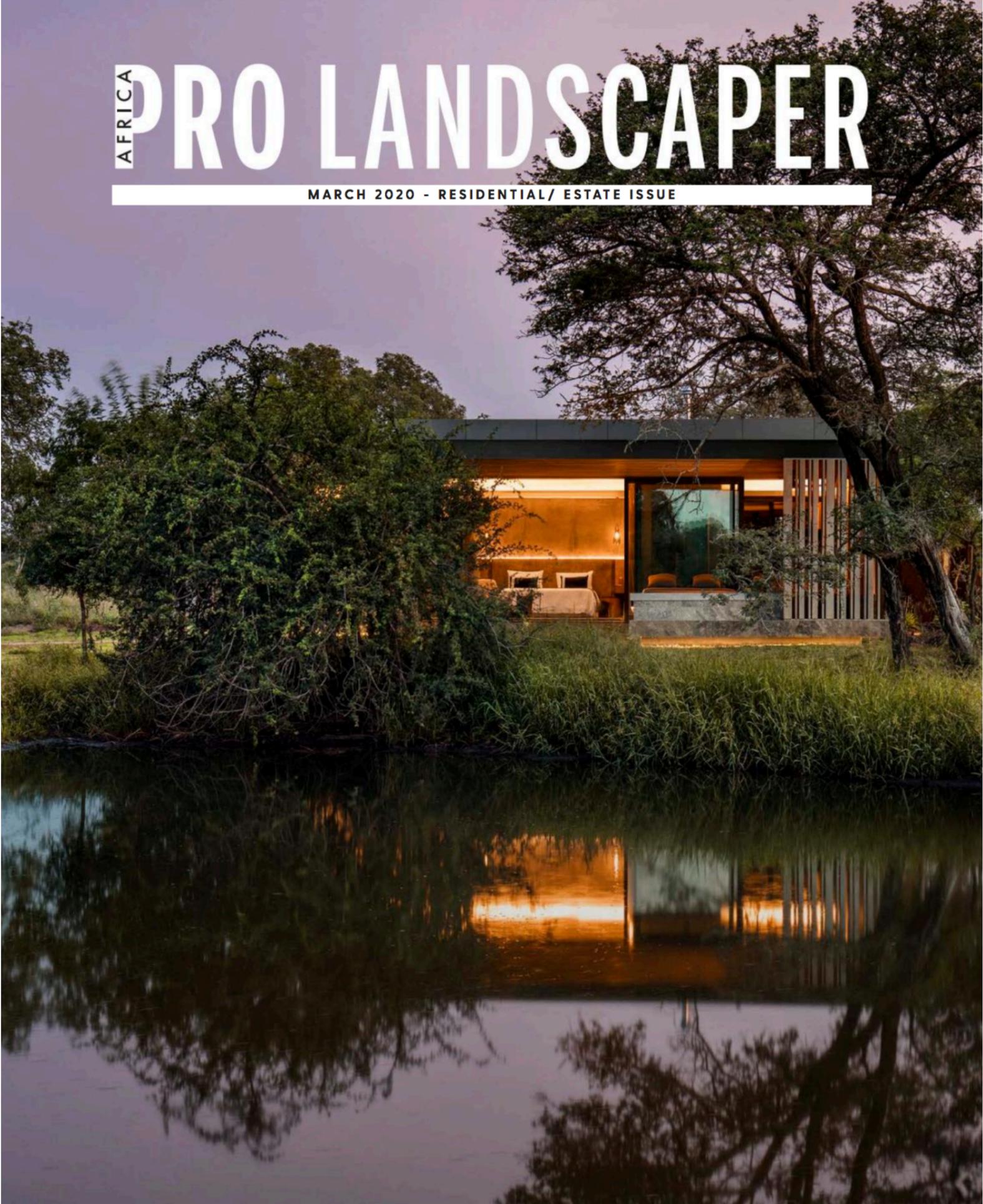


AFRICA PRO LANDSCAPER

MARCH 2020 - RESIDENTIAL/ ESTATE ISSUE



AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCA WATSON

Renowned for her cool sophisticated design and stylish planting schemes, Francesca's gardens have a certain intangible glamour and have become incredibly well known by industry professionals and the public alike. We catch up with the renowned designer to gain insight into her inspiring gardens.



Q: What would you describe as your 'eureka' moment – the moment you knew you wanted to make a career out of your passion for landscape design?

A: I came to landscape design in a roundabout way – I was trained in the performing arts, but an accident restricted my potential, so I realised that I needed to change direction and retrain. At that time, I came across Patrick Watson working on the gardens at Sun City, and realized that gardens would be the perfect way forward for me.

Q: How would you describe your overall aesthetic as a garden designer? How did you arrive at this aesthetic?

A: I am interested in architecture, and have always striven to design gardens that reinforce and compliment the style of the house – so I design gardens in many styles. As I get older, however, I notice that my personal preferences are for simpler solutions where the plants themselves are important, and I also love a garden that looks like amplified nature with a building inserted into it. True sustainability is vital – this means designing within the parameters available (ie. water, sun, soil and maintenance scope).

Q: Looking at garden design over the past 20 years, what shifts have you noticed between what was a necessity in gardens of the past versus garden trends now?

A: I think that gardens are becoming more relaxed and less obvious. We no longer want gimmicky over-designed gardens, we are looking rather for sacred spaces that feel like retreats, with the luxury of greenness.

Q: What makes a successful garden?

A: I really dislike stiff gardens – I like them to flow and I try for a sort of natural grace. I find that this quality can be achieved even with formal gardens



AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCA WATSON

Renowned for her cool sophisticated design and stylish planting schemes, Francesca's gardens have a certain intangible glamour and have become incredibly well known by industry professionals and the public alike. We catch up with the renowned designer to gain insight into her inspiring gardens.



Q: What would you describe as your 'eureka' moment – the moment you knew you wanted to make a career out of your passion for landscape design?

A: I came to landscape design in a roundabout way – I was trained in the performing arts, but an accident restricted my potential, so I realised that I needed to change direction and retrain. At that time, I came across Patrick Watson working on the gardens at Sun City, and realized that gardens would be the perfect way forward for me.

Q: How would you describe your overall aesthetic as a garden designer? How did you arrive at this aesthetic?

A: I am interested in architecture, and have always striven to design gardens that reinforce and compliment the style of the house – so I design gardens in many styles. As I get older, however, I notice that my personal preferences are for simpler solutions where the plants themselves are important, and I also love a garden that looks like amplified nature with a building inserted into it. True sustainability is vital – this means designing within the parameters available (ie. water, sun, soil and maintenance scope).

Q: Looking at garden design over the past 20 years, what shifts have you noticed between what was a necessity in gardens of the past versus garden trends now?

A: I think that gardens are becoming more relaxed and less obvious. We no longer want gimmicky over-designed gardens, we are looking rather for sacred spaces that feel like retreats, with the luxury of greenness.

Q: What makes a successful garden?

A: I really dislike stiff gardens – I like them to flow and I try for a sort of natural grace. I find that this quality can be achieved even with formal gardens





if the proportions are good. Successful gardens always have a brain behind them, observing, understanding and adjusting as the seasons and years progress. It is not a static thing.

My philosophy is that to be truly sustainable, a garden needs to be right first time, and so I design to suit the architecture, climate and particular client's regime.

Q: What are you more at home designing – large, undulating gardens with open spaces or smaller, more urban-type spaces?

A: I enjoy a challenge and enjoy turning any space into something pleasing. I don't care about the size – if the client has the desire for a lovely green space, something wonderful can be done.

Q: Is there an interior designer or architect you wish to work with that you have not yet?

A: I would love to design the landscape around a Jean Nouvel building, particularly if it was in the Middle East where it seems that reality can come close to one's fantasy. Locally, I'm hoping to work with Durban-based Designworkshop soon.

Q: Likewise, is there any person whose garden you wish to design?

A: Thuli Madonsela is someone I would be fascinated to design a garden for. She seems to me a force of nature herself, so brave and persistent and true. I would try to make the garden reflect that.

Q: As your work has taken you across the globe, what has been your favourite area or climate to work in?

A: I am loving working in Melbourne at the moment. The climate and lifestyle are easy to identify with and the Australian plants are gob-smackingly stunning. I'm also enjoying Florence, where the cultural landscape is so strong and one can work within a limited range of plants to great effect.

Q: Do you have any new exciting projects we should look out for?

A: I am working on a number of farm properties currently, one or two of which will have a guest component. I really enjoy projects where there is a part of the space that can be wild.

Q: Do you prefer working on your own or collaborating with others on projects?

A: Collaborations can be very rewarding. If all the players are confident and therefore not egotistical,



“Connecting people to nature is at the fore of every concept & combining beauty, architecture & art with ethical principles are what define Francesca’s work.”

INTERVIEW

the process is fascinating and enriching and the results are often surprisingly good.

Q: What is some advice you have for youth within the industry, wanting to pursue a career in the landscape design realm?

A: I personally don't believe that style and design can be taught. It's within a person: an instinct and a way of viewing the world. Good teachers merely encourage and channel a natural talent. However, to make gardens, you need to be practical and flexible, and you need to know plants very well – gardens are successful only if suitable plants are used.

Q: When you are not hard at work, where might we find you?

A: When I'm not working, I'm likely to be reading something non-fiction, or travelling anywhere that I can immerse myself in a natural landscape. And I do love a convivial meal with friends.

