

urban sanctuary

This tucked-away Victorian home in Cape Town is suffused with eclectic glamour

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'I can't bear anything girly,' says Sandra Vandermerwe of her home in Gardens, Cape Town, 'and I wanted my bedroom to look like an art gallery, so I have my Douglas Portway collection here.' The bed is custom made from two brass balustrades that she fell in love with. **OPPOSITE** In the living room, Johann Louw's 'Groot Portret', brings in some of the green of the front garden.



Sandra's cosy kitchen with the Victorian fireplace burning, gleaming copper splashback and candelabras lit beneath David Hockney's 'Potted Daffodils'. The chandelier is from Murano and on either side of the old clock, Gabriel Clark-Brown's 'Mother and Me' and 'Angel above Piet Retief'. The heart sculpture is by Barend de Wet.

Walking down a private lane and stepping through the Indian carved wooden gateway – originally from a synagogue in an old Jewish Quarter – that leads into a tropical jungle of a front garden, is like being transported to another world: a secret hideaway with a distinctly European feel to it, but firmly rooted at the foot of Table Mountain. Beyond the flowering jacaranda and a tall avocado tree is the home of Sandra Vandermerwe, who moved back to Cape Town two years ago after three decades spent living in Europe.

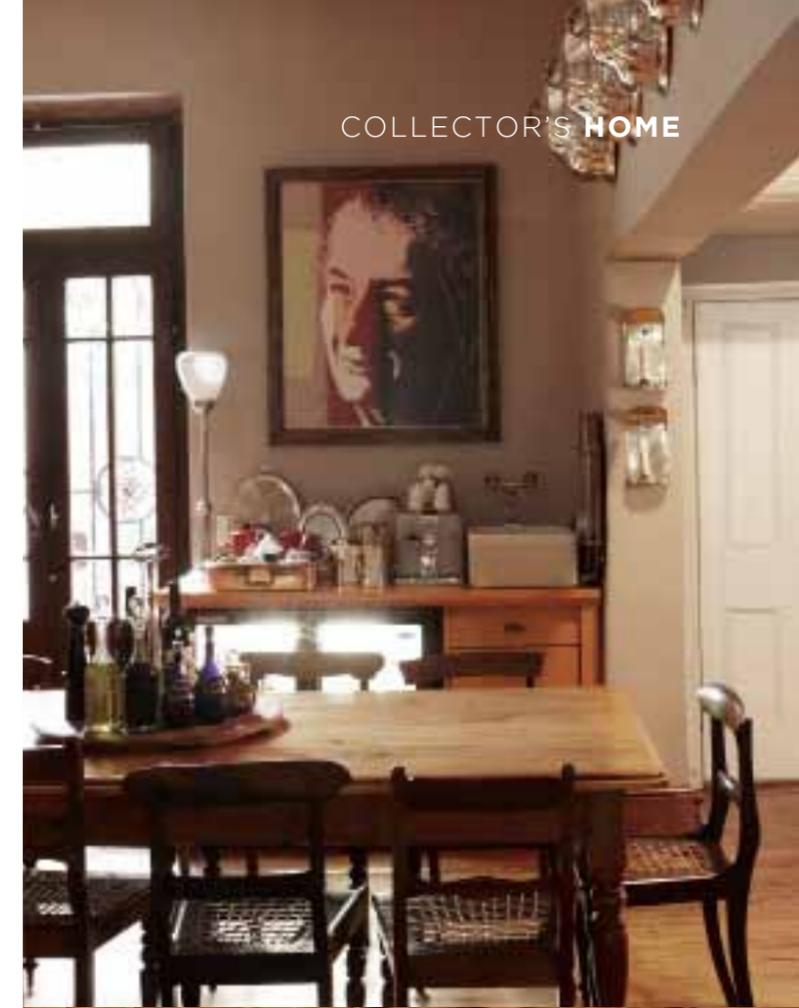
'I always tried to recreate the Cape, no matter where we lived – Provence, London, Geneva, Lausanne – constantly bashing out walls and opening them up to bring in the light,' says Sandra. When she first saw the then dilapidated double-storey Victorian in Gardens ('it was very Oxford don') she knew it was just what she was after. Sandra's biggest challenge has been to bring together a lifetime of collections from all of her various homes. And with four generations of her family having been in the furniture business, she has 'a thing about old things – the older the better'.

With renovation a keen hobby, Sandra set about transforming virtually every inch of her house. In the opened-up reception area on the ground floor, she installed two wooden church columns and, throughout, a collection of intricate South American wrought-metal gates, which give the house an almost deconstructed elegance. A passage sweeps past the slightly wonky staircase to reveal an open-plan kitchen and dining area, leading onto a pretty, private courtyard with a perfectly sized plunge pool and outdoor shower. Sandra uses the space beneath the staircase – lit with a dainty crystal wall sconce – to store her carefully selected wine collection, beside which a vintage Vuitton trunk houses the recycled newspapers.

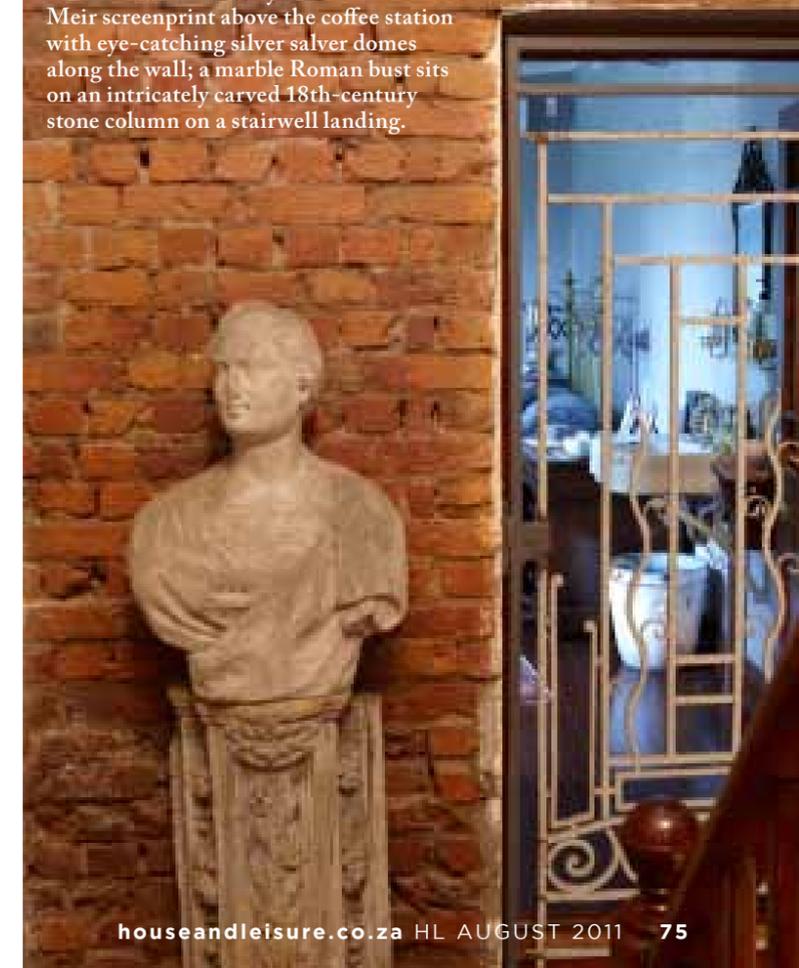
For Sandra, an astute businesswoman and professor who has spent her life consulting and focusing on transformation and growth for businesses around the world, absolutely nothing is impossible. So, the plumbing moved to the front of the house, creating a light and gracious upstairs bathroom that stretches across the entire width of the house. Leading off her bedroom, and filled with antique cabinets, crystal bottles of scented oils, candles and orchids, this perfectly styled sanctuary comes complete with a Victorian standing mirror and a 25-door storage cabinet that needed to be winched in through the upstairs windows to fit. 'I cannot live with anything new,' she says resolutely, 'but I never thought I'd end up with two red leather cinema chairs in my bathroom!'

Sandra's bedroom is ruled over by her two adored cats, who love surveying the leafy garden from the high bed, the bed ends of which were crafted from old Argentinian balustrades. As with the rest of the house, the walls are hung with eye-catching artworks, including a Walter Battiss that Sandra 'kept in a book for years until a friend suggested I frame it'.

Her favourite piece is the famous photograph of District Six's ironic graffiti, 'You are now in Fairyland', by Cloete Breytenbach. 'I go through stages when I need art,' she says, and with an unerring eye for contemporary artists who then make a name for themselves, her collection is an eclectic one. On the landing between floors is a white marble Roman bust on an 18th-century carved stone column set against an exposed-brick wall ('I never realised it was so old,' says Sandra of when she bought it). At the foot of the stairs, Selwyn Pekeur's 'Rainbow President Mandela' and Jurgen Schadeberg's 'Miriam Makeba' bring us firmly back to Africa. ▷ (Continued on page 79)



FROM ABOVE Andy Warhol's Golda Meir screenprint above the coffee station with eye-catching silver salver domes along the wall; a marble Roman bust sits on an intricately carved 18th-century stone column on a stairwell landing.



SANDRA'S HOME TRUTHS

I love being at home and use the time to look after me. In the evenings I light the fire, put on a good movie and do my exercises – my own routine. I also enjoy walking Nelson and Vuvuzela, my chocolate poodles, on the beach. **My one extravagance is...** One? I have many! A bar of nougat in bed and my La Prairie night cream. **To me, luxury is free time. When it comes to collecting art,** my advice is buy works that provoke thought. **I found many of the old fixtures in my home** at the Milnerton market, one of my favourite haunts, but I've also sourced some light switches from as far away as London. **I regret** not buying the partner to the curved French cupboard that I've schlepped with me all over the world – it was part of a pair. **I'm reading...** *The Politics of Happiness* by Derek Bok, Greg Mills' *Why Africa is Poor*, and *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. **I'm listening to...** anything from Freddie Mercury to Nina Simone, depending on my mood and the time of day. **Coming home to South Africa** was like a wave, a pull that I couldn't fight.

The effortlessly glamorous bathroom is an ode to luxury, with French beauty potions, crystal decanters filled with oils, scented candles and all the accessories that Sandra loves, stored in an antique display cabinet. OPPOSITE A bronze poodle crafted from vegetable shapes by London artist Stuart Pearson-Wright stands guard on a table found at L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue antique market in France.



The stoep is wide enough to become an outdoor living room – a peaceful spot for breakfast or to laze away the afternoon on the comfy sofa or day bed.

COLLECTOR'S HOME

On cooler days you'll find both original Victorian fireplaces blazing, and in the cosy lounge, coffee is served on a wooden table heaped with bowls of Chuckles and Smarties, tucked between silver teapots massed with roses in old-world pinks. 'I like my home to have surprises – and then some serious and sentimental bits – a bit like life, I guess,' Sandra smiles.

But it's the warmth of the kitchen with its copper splashback and collection of Swiss copper pans and silver salver domes on the wall that draws everyone to the long central table, with its cluster of decanters and an antique blue bottle of truffle oil. Beside the wall clock is Gabriel Clark-Brown's 'Angel above Piet Retief'. 'It resonated with me because for a moment when I thought I would retire, I felt like I was either flying or falling. This is what art is about for me.'

But she hasn't retired. Sandra holds board meetings here too, just as Golda Meir – whose portrait, by Andy Warhol, overlooks this casual dining area – held her 'kitchen cabinet' meetings. This is the heart of Sandra's home and her new life – the Cape Town she'd been longing for all those years. 'Anyway, I carry all my previous lives with me!' she says happily. ☺

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Sandra with Vuvuzela and Nelson, on the daybed she found in a Copenhagen cellar and had restored; the guest bedroom with a large, contemporary work by British artist Mark Thompson (little known when Sandra bought it), overlooking a bed that she's moved around the world; a bedside table that tells a story: many novels on the go, precious memories and more beautiful roses.

