

The New Stone Age



Stuck between a rock and a hard place? Landscape designer Franchesca Watson discovers nature-friendly applications for natural stone formations in the garden



'We are using stone pieces for retaining walls in the garden that will be planted with special plants in the earthy spaces between the rocks' FRANCHESCA WATSON



HERE, NATURAL ROCK IS USED TO FORM A EARTHY LINK BETWEEN THE HOUSE AND GARDEN TOP RIGHT IN THIS SLOPED KZN GARDEN, NATURAL ROCKERY IS SOFTENED BY GROUNDCOVERS WITH AN ALOE ADDING ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST

I am working on an urban garden where the entire design team is making a conscious effort to be environmentally sane about the materials that are used. The existing trees were to be conserved and protected, the ugly 1950s-style bungalow was to be removed and a small, surprisingly pod-shaped single-storey house was to take its place.

The site had a large rock shelf running through it—a small cliff was apparent across one corner near where we proposed to site the pool and there was also the obvious protruberance of Table Mountain popping up behind the old garage. We suspected that this was just the tip of an iceberg, and so it proved. The site sloped

considerably from one side to the other and a decision was therefore made to cut from one side to fill the other, during which process we would uncover the extent of the rock.

We took great care not to damage the rock with machinery and, when we were finished, were left with our cliff and a little space at its base. Next to that we now had a huge spreading boulder, of which a piece about 15m long and 9m wide was exposed, a part of which the footprint of the proposed house overran. It was decided to excavate the pool between the cliff and the massive boulder and, with much lateral engineering thinking, thus created the most extraordinary natural rock pool, with shelves

of local stone forming the sides, as well as a natural filtering system.

Although the aim was to leave the boulder in place as a beautiful natural feature, there was a portion of rock that had to be blasted away in order to fit the building onto the site. Rather than truck this shattered stone away, we are using it to create the pathways from the parking area to the front door and the pathway around the indigenous garden. Laid down in single pieces with groundcover growing between, all that is needed is minor bush-hammering to flatten the stones that are uneven and, voilà—a graceful, local, permeable and practical surface. We are also using the stone pieces for retaining walls within the garden that will be planted with special plants in the earthy spaces between the rocks.

In the process of creating the flatter levels desired on the site overall, we wanted to recycle the bricks from the old house. The decision was made to retain the new levels along the boundaries with retaining gabions and to fill these gabions with the old bricks.

All the levels have been carefully thought through so that no rainwater leaves the site. There are no acres of concrete or bricks and surfaces are permeable so that the rainwater can move down into the subsoil. It thus replenishes groundwater, does not cause erosion and is not wasted through the stormwater system. The roof is also planted to create more green urban space for other living things.

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