

The continuous ceiling and floor add to the illusion of a flow between inside and out.

city living

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Concrete Plans

Cool concrete adds an industrial stamp to Joburg's suburbs

Concrete is tough. It's industrial stuff that's made to last. It's what engineers build bridges and dam walls from. It's grey and rough – not characteristics you'd immediately associate with home comforts. But that's what Gregory Katz, a Joburg-based architect who lives in a concrete house, likes about it.

"I like to celebrate its defects and coarseness," he says. "It shows the scars of its making. It's a truthful, real product. People are forever covering their walls with stone cladding or putting down screed to create a similar quality, but concrete has it naturally." ▶



"We dyed batches of the concrete with pigment to give the stairs a darker colour," says architect Gregory Katz. The design is a feat of engineering: it's entirely self supporting. The wall does not carry any load.



"I like the contrast between the bright colours and the concrete. Bright colours lift the place," says Gregory. He's also used texture to create contrast, offsetting the rougher aspects of the construction with slick surfaces. Its smoothness and geometric perfection complement the concrete.



support is all on the outside. It allowed us to make a bold statement by using big openings, letting in more light."

The doors that make up the front of the house fold away entirely, blurring the distinction between inside and out. The open-plan dining and living areas lead out onto a stoep, which is a good place to entertain. You can always tell you're in the house of a prolific entertainer by the long dining-room table. Gregory's is a dead giveaway. You

could seat 12 people without having to squeeze up.

He took his inspiration for the interior from New York-style lofts, which suit the open-plan structure and industrial associations of concrete. "New Yorkers are famous for taking warehouses and old factory buildings, adding some colour and furniture and transforming them into living spaces," he says. "Concrete has a neutral, natural colour, so you can use any decor style with it; antique works as well as eclectic." ▶



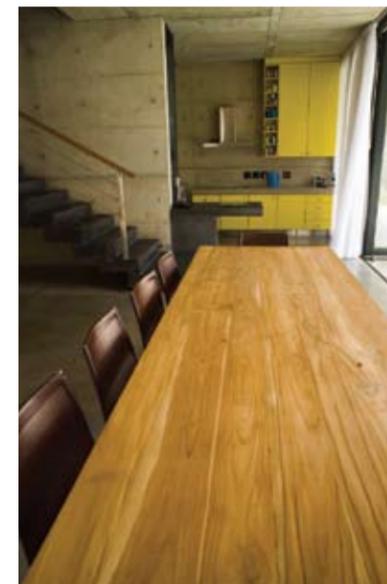
One of Gregory's paintings reveals his preoccupation with pure colour. "Colours create frequencies, and sequences of colour create different moods," he explains.

In Gregory's house, every surface, inside and out, is concrete: floors, ceilings, walls, stairs, counters and worktops. The rooms are unusually bright, open and airy because concrete is so strong that it can be used to create wide spans and long cantilevers, which you can't build with other materials.

Gregory actually designed the mini-complex of three houses in Norwood where he and his wife live. When the development was complete, he liked the result so much he bought one himself.

For the construction, Gregory opted for a technique used in large-scale concrete building: using moulds or shutters to cast the concrete blocks that act as basic building units on site. "The constraints contributed to the architecture and informed the minimalism of the design," he says.

"There's no need for columns and supports," he explains. "We used steel trusses across the span of the whole structure. It adds to the industrial look of the place, but also means that the



The underfloor heating is embedded in the slab, about halfway in. Although it takes longer to heat up, it retains the heat for much longer than regular under-tile mats and the thermostat is better regulated. It uses half the amount of electricity of regular heating, and doesn't crack from the fluctuations in temperature as cement screed would.



Gregory works from home. The office is a deliberately undefined, multifunctional room. "It's like that because of the way I work. My office is a very inspirational room," he says.



"The cupboard doors and shoe rack display their own inauthenticity," says Gregory of the cupboard doors that have different veneers.



Gregory designs furniture and jewellery as well as houses (see www.olivegreencat.com and www.situ.co.za), and he paints too. You can find some of his artworks in the Fuel Café in Newtown, which he refurbished. His paintings are all about colour, a theme carried throughout his house, which has plenty of bold primaries and sleek textures to contrast with the concrete and bring the interior to life. "Contrast is the key when decorating with concrete," he says. "While the concrete might be rough, you can add all the smooth, sleek elements you want with cabinets."

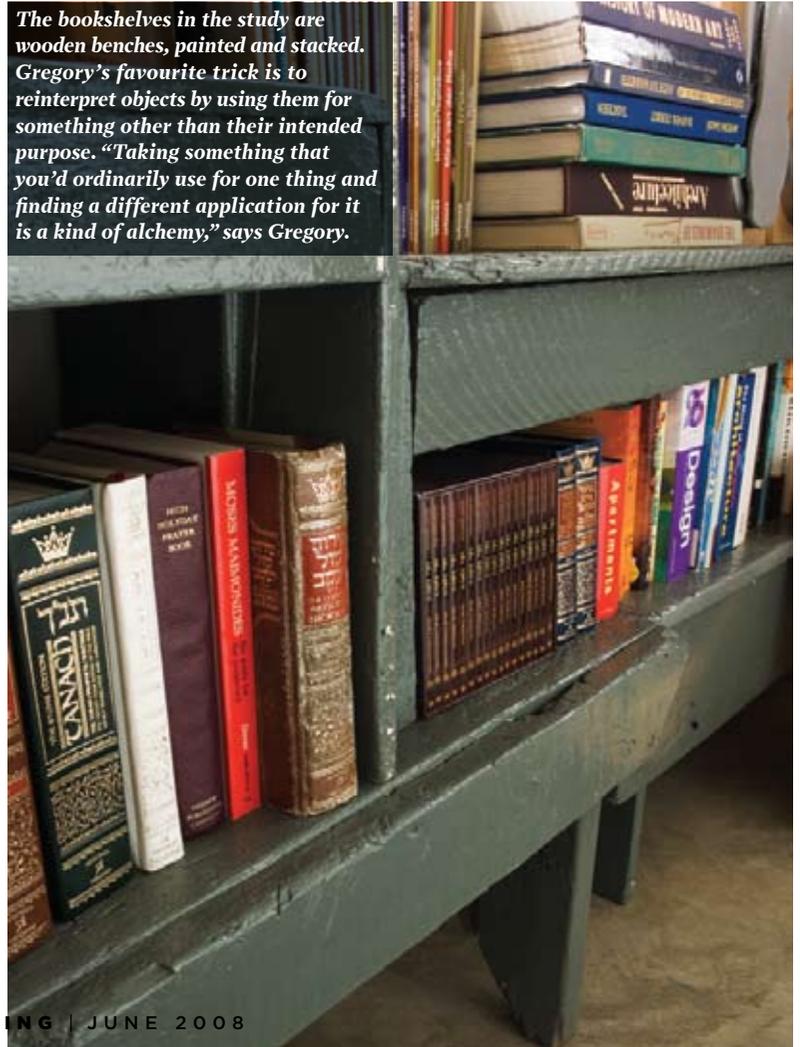
The central tenet of his creative philosophy is to use existing objects in new and



The spacious bathroom off the main bedroom is Gregory's favourite room.



The bookshelves in the study are wooden benches, painted and stacked. Gregory's favourite trick is to reinterpret objects by using them for something other than their intended purpose. "Taking something that you'd ordinarily use for one thing and finding a different application for it is a kind of alchemy," says Gregory.



different ways. In the past, he's used polycarbonate sheeting, usually used for roofs, for walls, and bent mattresses to make chairs. In his study, the bookshelves are made from stacked wooden benches.

True to his ideal of reusing objects, buildings and materials in new ways, Gregory has the next life of his house in mind, too. None of the interior walls are load-bearing, so you could take them all out and reconfigure the space however you please.

That's why he's put plugs and TV points all over.

"I like creating flexible spaces. That's my interpretation of sustainability. People don't always live in a house the way architects expect them to. They find different ways of using space, and discover a rhythm over time," he says. "You could use this place for anything... a restaurant or even a nursery school. I don't know why, but I have a hunch that this place will be something like that one day." ▲