

A concrete palace

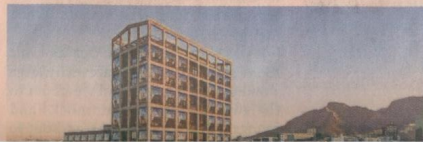
Hotel Insider | British designer Thomas Heatherwick has helped transform an old Cape Town grain silo into South Africa's most glamorous – and expensive – place to stay. *By Lucia van der Post*

If, like me, you were brought up in Cape Town in the bad old days of apartheid you would scarcely recognise the city today. In my childhood it was a bastion of all that was safe, comfortable, sedate and dull. Suburban values reigned. Though its beauty was incontestable and its climate beguilingly benign, to me it always seemed a provincial outpost. What I longed for as a teenager was some sophistication, some glamour, something far more cosmopolitan.

How my teenage self would have loved the Cape Town of today. It has it all in spades – the beauty, the beaches, the vineyards, the sun and the sea haven't gone away but on top of that it now has a buzzing restaurant culture and food that is world-class, design and art are flourishing, cross-cultural and cross-racial conversations and collaborations take place all the time.

Into this milieu at the start of this month came the latest and most extraordinary project from Liz Biden, a hotelier whose Royal Portfolio already boasts some of South Africa's most glamorous hotels, including La Residence in Franschhoek, Birkenhead House by the sea in Hermanus, and Royal Malewane in the Thornybush Game Reserve. It's called The Silo simply because it has been inserted into the six top floors of a 57-metre-high concrete grain silo that sits in the industrial heart of the dockyard and has long been a familiar part of Cape Town's skyline.

What makes it a particularly exciting venture is that on the floors below it and right beside it is being created the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, a not-for-profit partnership between the V&A Waterfront and Jochen Zeitz, the former chief executive of BMW and director of the Museum of



a washed pink carpet. Purple sofas and chairs are teamed with green or blue lacquered pieces of furniture. Sixty four extraordinary chandeliers made of glass and gold in Egypt hang in the grandest of the rooms. Fabrics from the contemporary South African company Ardmore

institution. This means that on the first Thursday of every month, not only do all the galleries have late night showings often offering drinks and canapés but all sorts of pop-up events happen and artists bring their wares to town on bicycles and in vans making

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British designer Thomas Heatherwick is in overall charge of transforming the whole structure — the elevator house and the adjacent six rows of seven silos. It is Heatherwick Studios that has added some huge glazing panels as windows to the hotel floors that make it look at night like a giant glowing lantern hovering above the harbour. There are just 28 rooms and suites, offering 34 beds in all, including one amazing penthouse taking up half a floor.

But it is Biden who has given the hotel interiors their visual identity, filling each room with an eclectic mix of artefacts and furniture, much of it sourced from a brilliant Cape Town store called Block and Chisel (way down in the Southern Suburbs but well worth a visit) and markets and antique stores around Africa. None of it was easy because there were two huge elevator shafts running through the building that couldn't be removed and Biden had to work with the strong industrial identity that permeates it.

There is vibrant art on almost every wall. African art is booming and the close link with the museum gives the hotel its particularity. Biden sees it as an "amazing opportunity to showcase the talent, mystery and perspectives of these young African artists to our overseas visitors."

Much of the work is by artists who will also be exhibited in the museum. There is, for instance, a large collection by Cyrus Kabiru, a Kenyan from Nairobi, whose vast photographic self-portraits show him wearing exquisite masks that he makes himself. Though they come in limited editions the buyer of the first print gets the mask itself — Zeitz bought the whole of Kabiru's first series (and so got all the masks), all of which will be on display in the museum.



Then there are pieces by Musa N Nxumalo, a young black photographer from Soweto whose work explores youth identity. Look out too for the work of Thania Petersen, a young Muslim Cape Townian, who has taken 25 photographs of herself in a beautiful red dress saying her prayers and compiled them all together.

Above all Biden wanted to give the hotel a very clear African identity — but a highly contemporary one, not the tribal, ethnic aesthetic so prevalent in safariland. The mood is set by the double volume entrance hall where a vast and colourful collage by Jodie Paulsen greets the eye. Flanking her is an intriguing portrait called "Blue Velvet" constructed by the artist Frances Goodman out of a myriad of differently coloured sequins so that, like the "Mona Lisa", whichever way you look at it the picture appears to shift and change.

The rooms themselves are filled with colour. Bright yellow floral sofas sit atop

From top: the study in the penthouse at The Silo hotel; exterior view of the hotel and art gallery; one of the hotel's bedrooms

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Lucia van der Post was a guest of Africa Travel (africatravel.co.uk), which offers a five-night stay at The Silo, including breakfast British Airways flights from London and transfers, and entrance to the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (when it opens in September) from £2,795 per person

feature glass doors in a rainbow of colours ranging from buttercup yellow to sky blue.

And then there are the views. Each room has a balcony and a variety of views — of the mountain, that looming presence in all Cape Townians' lives, of the buzz and activity of the harbour and Robben Island beyond, of the giant auditorium built like an ovoid spaceship for the 2010 World Cup.

Some of Biden's trusted aides from her existing properties are training staff at The Silo. When I visited shortly after its opening, the hotel was the talk of Cape Town with pressure to see it so great that some would-be customers had to be turned away — all this in spite of the fact that for the moment much of the area around it is still busy with construction work on other projects. It is above all a metropolitan, sophisticated, very glamorous, utterly contemporary hotel entirely different in mood and aesthetics from, say, the quiet grandeur of the Mount Nelson, the classic elegance of Ellerman House or the cute boutique-like hotels that are now to be found along the western seaboard. And, aside from safari camps whose rates include game drives, it is also South Africa's most expensive hotel (with the cheapest rooms from £795 per night).

As to what you might do at The Silo, a raft of enterprising companies have sprung up to help visitors make the most of the city. Visits to galleries, artists and township studios are, especially given the hotel's art connection, an obvious option. The hotel can arrange for guests to go straight through to the museum and can also arrange art tours to galleries around the city and to the homes of artists.

First Thursdays in both Cape Town and Johannesburg are a great newish

view private collections and sculpture gardens in Cape Town, Franschhoek and Stellenbosch.

On the docks just below the hotel are companies offering boat trips with picnics around the coast, as well as visits to Robben Island (fascinating — among other things we learned there that during apartheid days Indian prisoners were entitled to more jam than Africans, but on what kind of strange logic that

Huge glazing panels make The Silo look at night like a giant glowing lantern hovering above the harbour

was based is not divulged). Meanwhile, Coffeebeans Routes (coffeebeansroutesc.com) offers half or full-day tours to the townships, to artists workshops, to listen to local jazz or to explore the culinary world.

And finally Ingram Casey (escapeexplore.com) is an entrepreneurial Brit who moved to Cape Town and is the go-to man for those seeking physical adventure. He and his guides will arrive at the hotel with all the gear, then perhaps take you to where the surf is best that day, or lead you on a hike up the mountain, or take you paddle-boarding, snorkelling with seals, diving with sharks, ziplining or horse riding. He makes it easy and — more to the point — a lot of fun.

After any of that you should head back to The Silo, aim for the roof-top bar and pool, grab a glass of something cool and white and contemplate the universe as you gaze upon the 360-degree-panoramic view of the entire city. Cape Town is indeed not what it used to be.