



JULIAN & TREVYN MCGOWAN

At Source

‘We have a mixed background. Julian was a theatre and opera designer; I had an interiors and architectural practice in London called Site Specific, undertaking renovations and redevelopments for clients with nice budgets and good imaginations, like Clive Owen, Rachel Weisz, Gerard Butler and Sir Ian McKellen. When we returned to South Africa about six years ago, we established the company Source, working from our home in the Wilderness.

We came home to rediscover what South African design was all about. We had utilised it in our work in London, importing products for clients, and what began as an interest, grew into an absolute passion for local design. Now one of the primary functions of Source is providing South African products to the international marketplace. We started with the Conran Shop in London and then Anthropologie in the United States. Other clients include Urban Outfitters, Jamie Oliver, ABC Carpet & Home, Bergdorf Goodman, the Soho House Group and Firma Casa in Brazil. We have also collaborated on international exhibitions of South African design with Sir Terence Conran, Keith Johnson and Li Edelkoort.

As an extension, we established Southern Guild, which serves as a platform for leading local designers, artists and craftsmen to exhibit new work at the very top end of the market – limited edition, one-off, collectable designs. We launch a new collection each year at the Joburg Art Fair and invite 45 people to participate, the only remit being that they exhibit brand-new work. As so much of the design in South Africa is bespoke and handmade, Southern Guild provides recognition that our pieces are unique and deserve to be perceived that way. We encourage collaboration, discourse and mentorship. Using international exhibitions as a platform, we aim to stimulate and provoke the industry, which is critical if South African design is to have a true global voice.

This has had interesting offshoots. For example, the CEO of a South African retailer saw Southern Guild, loved the product and wondered where in South Africa he could buy it. Excluding localised boutique stores, at that time there wasn't anywhere, so we put together a proposal for him, curated 188 different products, including furniture and textiles, and launched a collection for the retailer in 2010. What's great about this is that the general public now has easy access to South African design nationwide, whereas formerly people may not even have known anything about it. For us, it's the perfect journey really.

Are we designers? Yes, but not of one particular thing. We design houses and interiors as well as products, and we design collections around products and do magazine and promotional work. I would say that Source is a small design house, involved in all aspects of local design and aesthetics and their marketing here and globally. Sourcing products is just a part of it – although it is our main role. We're really passionate about what we do and we're actively involved in every aspect of it. And because we understand designers and how they think, we know how to help them, and that's one of the reasons why things have worked out so well.

We started Source when South African design was really finding its feet. Many new young designers were emerging and established ones were getting into their stride; it was fortuitous timing, because we already had relationships with the international marketplace and understood what

it required. So the way we present products is with an understanding of how they will be received. The infrastructure that we put in place to develop, promote and export them bridges what before had been a giant chasm preventing anybody really interested in South African designers from doing any business with them. Things have changed considerably since then and Source has helped. It's found new opportunities for people and without a doubt there are some who've increased their capacity because of this, who've bought new kilns, hired new staff, sorted out their business propositions and their packaging strategies – all because of the orders that have been put through. There's a greater sense of identity now as well. It's a collective thing and, without diminishing anybody's individual position, it's a movement we've helped vocalise and represent.

When Sir Terence Conran launched his book *Inspirations*, out of the 12 designers he collaborated with, four were South African – Design Africa, Wonki Ware, Ceramic Matters and Mick Haigh. Theirs were the first pieces to sell; that was a big hit. South African work is very attractive to outsiders. Our instinctive approach to design is free and many different influences infuse it. Our designers don't follow international trends. Sometimes they don't even want to know what's happening 'over there'. All of the top designers are exploring their own personal visions and telling their own stories.

Our architectural focus is a little different. Neither of us has any formal training, but we're very passionate about houses and lifestyle, as well as the environment. We work things out in 3D first – Julian will make a physical model. Architects tend to do it for form, but we do it to see how the interiors will work, to open up the plan and find links between spaces. We love space and light. To have both is a luxury and together they single out the uniqueness of South African architecture. At Pear Tree Farm, we opened the whole thing up inside, trying to get as much light in as possible and keeping the base white so that its interiors are like a gallery. That's exciting; we're both obsessive collectors and we really should stop, because we have enough things, but we get so personally involved with the products we work with and with their makers, and we like to live with the results. Pear Tree Farm has family pieces in it, but Black House is about Source. It's where we work, it's the place we bring clients to, and it's where we showcase what we're up to.

In a way, Black House was the model for Cliff House. Black House had been built on an old footprint, which restricted what we could do, but many of the principles are the same, and with this project we had a double plot and the freedom to use the space. So it has a cinema, a wine cellar, 36 000 litres of rain- and grey-water storage, and, unlike many of the houses along this coast, which are incredibly cold, damp and dark in winter because the sun is at the back, we pushed the land forward, and put the house at the front and the pool at the back in the sun. It has this wonderful transparency; you can see right through it to the sea.

Everything we do is bespoke. Every single thing in all our projects is designed or put there because it was what we would personally want. Every choice we make is governed by a single question: could we have it in our own space, enjoy it, love it and live with it? So it's never about what's commercial or easy or most financially rewarding. It's about doing what we love, what we're passionate about and what keeps us up, talking.







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