

At Home in the Modern World

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In the 265-square-mile megalopolis that comprises the Republic of Singapore, carving out an oasis of your own can be a challenge. It's an even bigger one when you're halfway around the world from the city you're used to calling home.

In December 2007, Nicolette de Waart, her husband, Joost Dop, and their four children moved from Heemstede, the Netherlands, to Singapore. While Dop began his new job, De Waart set out to find someplace for them to live. In the process of turning a house into their home, she also found a footing for her interior design business, Design Doctors, an extension of her well-established Dutch company, De Stijlfabriek. De Waart tells her tale of procuring (and piecing together) a place for her family in the big city. »



Story by Miyoko Ohtake
Photos by Jasper James

Singaporeans tend to keep their homes airtight, but Nicolette de Waart prefers to bring the outdoors—and her Dutch design aesthetic—in.

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We moved to Singapore for my husband's job. We worried about being far away from family, but there are always reasons why you shouldn't do something. We decided to look at it as a big adventure and just do it.

When we first moved here, we lived in a 24th-floor apartment. It was quite shocking for us, because in Heemstede, a suburb of Amsterdam, we lived in a house with a nice garden and an outdoor kitchen. Looking out the windows of our apartment in Singapore, we could only see concrete. There was always construction noise, as we were living close to Orchard Road, the main shopping street. For Singaporeans, it was really great, but for us, it wasn't ideal.

Finding a place to rent was hard. We were used to living in a green environment, and that was really important to us. Singaporeans, however, are less focused on their gardens than on their houses, which seemingly should be

as big as possible and completely air-conditioned. Our first real estate agent showed me properties with closed, dark rooms. When I switched to an agent who understood what I wanted, we found the right home in two weeks.

The house is on a street with what were originally seven other similarly designed residences, all built in the 1970s. Our home is the only one that remains unchanged. All the others were renovated to enclose the balconies and add more interior rooms.

The house has three floors. The lowest floor is where you enter and where I have my atelier. The main space has a living room, dining room, kitchen, office, and guest room. Go up one more level and there are four bedrooms and a big family room. There are balconies and a garden all around the house, so it's nice and green. There's a weird place cut out of the back where, in the past, a chauffeur could have waited. Most people would have closed it up



"Every house we looked at had curtains over all the windows," De Waart says. "Our first real estate agent thought it was strange that I wanted to remove them, but Dutch people

like to have very open spaces." Now, light pours in through the living room (bottom left) and the kitchen (top). The family—Wieger, Nicolette, Tammo, Joost, Teuntje,

and Pip—eats most of their meals on the lush, sunlit terrace off the main floor (bottom right). Only the bedrooms are occasionally shaded—and then, only for privacy.



and added it as another room, but we turned it into an outdoor play space.

The house had sat empty for nine months before we moved in. Here, it's tropical and always in the high 80s, so everything falls into disrepair twice as fast. The kitchen was horrible, but we were lucky because the landlord let us renovate it. We kept it simple and stuck to white to make it look bigger. We almost always cook at home and eat outdoors. The kids like to draw in the living room and play in the family room. We really use the whole house; I try to make every room somewhere you'd like to be.

We brought all of our furniture with us from Holland. We're attached to our stuff—not in a materialistic way but because everything has a story behind it. I wanted to surround myself with pieces that would be recognizable. It made the kids feel immediately at home.

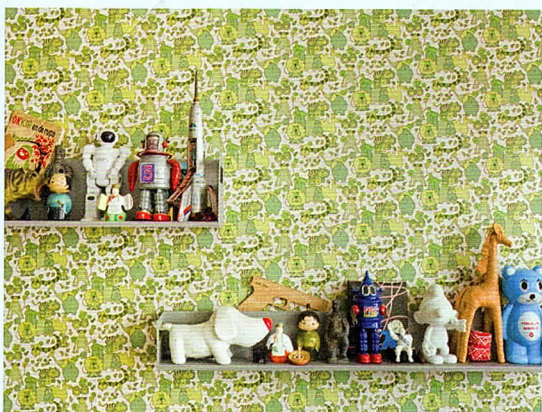
Missing, though, were bookcases. I designed some myself and had a local carpenter build them as a trial run for whether he'd be able to execute my other designs, which have since included work for a restaurant and many homes here. In Holland, I'm accustomed to working together with a carpenter to create a design. Here, the individual tasks are managed by different shops, so fabricating an item requires many players. I did a lot of research to find tradespeople and suppliers, and I went to many shops and factories. Everyone was shocked that I, a white woman and a stranger, came to the stores myself and didn't just send a messenger. They found it funny, but in the end, a lot of people have asked if they can work with me.

We love living here. Singapore has a lot of development and there is construction 24 hours a day, but there's so much natural beauty too. We cycle and hike. There's an eco-farm where you can see where a banana comes from and what kind of tree a papaya grows on. The kids love to swim in the lake there, and they have a nice restaurant for lunch. Singapore might seem like one big shopping mall from the outside, but there's so much to do and see when you peel back the layers. That's what I love about it. ■

The house lacked significant storage space when the family moved in, so De Waart designed bookcases (top) to custom-fit their favorite display items. She worked with local

fabricators as a trial run to find artisans who could manufacture products for her design business. Creativity is encouraged: De Waart designed the playful shapes in the craft

room (middle) and added a chalkboard to the kitchen (bottom) for writing memos and for drawing, as Tammo does here. ❶



Wall the Wild Things Are

Because their home is a rental, De Waart was limited in the changes she could make. In the boys' room, she added vintage wallpaper. "From a distance it appears to be all shades of green but when you have a closer look, it turns out to be one big jungle," De Waart says. She covered just a single wall with the paper to keep the room from feeling overrun with color.

Let There Be Lights

One of the first things De Waart did when they moved in was to remove all the curtains—save those on the bedroom windows—and change the lighting fixtures. "A nice lamp can add so much extra to a room," she says. De Waart favors organic shapes, like the Evolute by Matali Crasset for Danese Milano in the family room, Arco by the Castiglioni brothers for Flos in the living room, or the ping-pong-ball pendant light of her own design on one of the balconies.

daneseemilano.com



Shag on Marble

"Normally I'm not that fond of marble," De Waart says, "but in the tropics, it really works, because it stays cool." To warm up the space aesthetically, she added rugs throughout the home, including a Turkish goat-hair rug purchased at Ottomania in Haarlem, the Netherlands, and her own Autumn felt rug, which features cut-out felt leaves on a white background.

ottomania.nl

So You've Decided to Move...

De Waart encourages her clients to live in their houses for a while before settling on permanent furniture arrangements. "When people move to a new place," she says, "they tend to put all their furniture in the same place as they did in their former house. But it's not their former house." For De Waart, it took a year before she found the perfect place for each table, couch, and chair. ■■■



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