

GAGOSIAN

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Oscar Niemeyer Defined Modern Brazil. Now, an Artist Is Rethinking One of His Houses.

Set against the dramatic hills of Rio de Janeiro, Adriana Varejão's recently renovated home brings the architect's vision to startling new life.

Thessaly La Force



Adriana Varejão and Pedro Buarque's concrete house in the Jardim Botânico neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro was designed by Oscar Niemeyer in 1969. © Stefan Ruiz

DRIVING UP THE STREET — which, this being a nice residential neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, is a fortress of fences and high-level security gates — you nearly miss it. Nestled in the verdant Jardim Botânico district — where toucans fly from tree to tree and monkeys can be heard laughing in the afternoon — sits an elegant house designed in 1969 by the great Modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer. It is a stack of white boxes along a hilltop, all right angles against the lush green flora of Brazil, with a spiral staircase to reach the highest box, which stands like a turret overlooking the city. The cliffs that encircle Rio tower dramatically above, beyond which rise the outstretched arms of the city's Christ the Redeemer statue.

Niemeyer originally designed the property for his wife's sister, Carmen Baldo. Seven years ago, Baldo's children sold it to the artist Adriana Varejão and her partner, the film producer Pedro Buarque. Despite its Modernist allure, the house was not an easy sell. The glass walls between the terrace and the living room no longer opened. The ceramic steps and floors that blanketed the property looked dingy. The concrete railing — concrete is cheap, and Niemeyer's sister-in-law wasn't wealthy — had failed to acquire a patina. The narrow driveway alongside the house leading to the garage was impossible to navigate because there was no room to turn around. Downstairs, where the bedrooms had been placed along a looming corridor, was dark and gloomy. To fix these problems, the couple embarked on an ambitious five-year renovation that honors the legacy of Niemeyer and the promise of Brazilian Modernism perhaps even better than his original design. In recent decades, Modernism has become solely an aesthetic, divorced from its original intentions. And so, more unusual than the fact of Varejão and Buarque's restoration is how well it pays homage to Niemeyer's heritage and architectural philosophy — his lyrical and idiosyncratic sensibilities, scaled perfectly to the mountainous terrain, with large open spaces where the indoors blends seamlessly with the outside.



“Colloquium” (2013), a sculpture by the artist Pedro Reyes, stands at the center of the soapstone terrace. The tiled bench is an artwork by Varejão. The city’s famous Christ the Redeemer statue rises in the background. © Stefan Ruiz



The soapstone-lined pool is surrounded by tropical flora, as envisioned by the landscape designer Isabel Duprat. © Stefan Ruiz



Inspired by other Niemeyer buildings, Varejão cut a circular window into a living room wall to better marry the house's landscape with its interior. © Stefan Ruiz

OSCAR RIBEIRO DE Almeida Niemeyer Soares Filho, born in 1907 in Rio de Janeiro, was one of Brazil's greatest architects, and certainly its most famous. No other hand has done as much as his to shape the dimensions of the country, reflecting back its primitive beauty — the roiling depths of the sea, the undulating curves of the shoreline, the dense jungle — in its buildings. Along with his teacher-mentor, the architect and urban planner Lúcio Costa, and the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, Niemeyer was part of a group of Brazilian Modernists who believed in constructing a nation that would usher itself into a new era of equality and prosperity. All three, but especially Niemeyer, were deeply influenced by the French architect Le Corbusier. Like Le Corbusier, Niemeyer was partial to working with reinforced concrete, the flexibility and sturdiness of which helped his structures achieve the poetic, biomorphic forms that came to define his work. Just look at the hovering saucer of the Niterói Contemporary Art Museum (1996), perched at the edge of Rio's Guanabara Bay, or the Cathedral of Brasília's (1970) brilliant white crown of spears, which seems to sprout from the earth. As Niemeyer famously wrote in 1998, "I am not attracted to straight angles or to the straight line, hard and inflexible, created by man. I am attracted to free-flowing, sensual curves. The curves that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuousness of its rivers, in the waves of the ocean and on the body of the beloved woman."

Niemeyer's legacy rests largely in his creation of the city of Brasília in the late 1950s, which he conceived with Costa, at the behest of Brazil's president at the time, Juscelino Kubitschek, who had campaigned with the slogan "Fifty years' progress in five." Kubitschek was an ambitious leader who believed Brazil could industrialize at lightning speed, shed its colonial past and compete in the global economy. Located hundreds of miles inland, Brasília was erected in just three and a half years at an exorbitant cost (estimates put it at the tens of billions in today's dollars), replacing Rio as the country's capital in 1960. Niemeyer, who found inspiration in Le Corbusier's unrealized Radiant City, a utopian concept where life was ordered by design, wrote: "The seat of government must be established in the heart of Brazil's vast territory, so that it surveys the whole national panorama, so that it will be within reach of all the classes and all the regions." But once made, the large plazas meant to stimulate civic life remained empty. The thousands of workers who had traveled from the less industrialized parts of the country were left

stranded in the low-income housing, or favelas, that had been hastily erected during construction. In 1964, a military coup supported by the United States government changed the course of the nation forever. Politically to the left of the new military regime, Niemeyer moved to Paris in 1967. His career suffered. Over the decades, architectural Modernism became less popular, perceived as too dogmatic — but Niemeyer continued to work, finding newfound appreciation in the years before his death at the age of 104 in 2012. Some of his most stunning works are in Brasília, including the Supreme Court (1958-60), whose columns of concrete clad in white marble echo the fluttering of a sheet in the wind. Ultimately, though, Brasília's failure overshadows its monumental promise.

Brasília is also where Varejão spent the beginning of her childhood. The artist was born in Rio, but her parents moved to the city when she was 2 years old. Her father was a pilot in the air force. Her mother worked in public health as a nutritionist in Sobradinho, one of the several satellite cities ringing Brasília's perimeter. Accompanying her on hospital visits, Varejão witnessed firsthand the inequality Brasília created. "The future never happened," Varejão tells me, "Brasília left us with some very nice buildings — I'm not saying they aren't important — but it was at a very high cost."



Large doors pivot to open an entire wall of Varejão's studio, which is a five-minute drive away from her house. Two of her tile paintings are on the floor. © Stefan Ruiz

ONE MAY AFTERNOON, Varejão, 53, welcomes me to her studio, located five minutes from her home. It is autumn in Rio, though it feels like spring until I sense the sun hastily setting over the horizon. Varejão is preparing for a summer show with the Victoria Miro gallery in Venice, as well as her largest and most significant show to date with Gagosian Gallery, to be held in New York City in early 2020.

She is at work on some large-scale paintings inspired by Mexican ceramic tiles (talaveras) as well as a series of sculptures made from polyurethane, painted to resemble tiled walls but whose insides are revealed as bloody innards. Her process for the former involves pouring a mixture of glue and plaster into a flat, lipped canvas, which is then left to dry over several days. The plaster cracks naturally, and Varejão paints them in a monochromatic white, coloring the edges a claylike shade to lend them the appearance of cracked terra cotta. In previous work, Varejão has created abstract, vaguely discomfiting images on the cracked canvases — on others, the distinctive blue patterns of traditional Portuguese tiles (azulejos). To Varejão, the azulejo is a

metaphor for the complicated history that defines Brazil; it is hers to manipulate in various formations and with various patterns, at once beautiful and familiar, but also deeply disquieting.



The artist stands in front of a work in progress from her tile series.
© Stefan Ruiz

Varejão is one of Brazil's most important living artists. She is primarily a painter, but she has worked in other mediums such as photography, video and sculpture. Her work is, in many ways, in dialogue with that of last century's Italian painter Lucio Fontana, who famously took the scalpel to the canvas and slashed it — "Art dies but is saved by gesture," he wrote in 1948. If Fontana alluded to pain with his holes and cuts, then Varejão takes the symbolism one step further, illustrating violence through literal renderings of blood and gore.

At Varejão's urging, I visit the São Bento Monastery, a Benedictine abbey completed in 1671, located across the city in downtown Rio. Inside, its Baroque details — ornate gold-leaf gilding and Rococo painted tiles — are transportive, delivering one to a much older Brazil. But after witnessing the violence rendered by Varejão's brush, I cannot help but see this other Brazil as tainted with the complicity of colonialism's brutality. The strange geometry of Brasília is a world apart. Niemeyer's idealism — his belief that architecture could create a world that was post-race and post-class — was naïve, perhaps, but understandable. How else can a nation propel itself forward after having been so carelessly used — stripped and mined, bought and sold, without any consideration for anything but profit? The clean lines and syncopated curves of Niemeyer's architecture seem necessary compared to Baroque's dense hierarchy.



Furniture from the '50s, designed by Niemeyer's contemporary, Sergio Rodrigues, in one of the three living rooms, this one located at the top of the property. © Stefan Ruiz



In the main living room, an armchair by Lina Bo Bardi and a sculpture by the Brazilian artist Manuel Galdino sit next to a fireplace that hovers over the soapstone floors. © Stefan Ruiz



The downstairs bathroom in the master bedroom uses Portuguese tiles, which are a big influence in Varejão's work. © Stefan Ruiz

TODAY, THE CARMEN Baldo house is no longer a relic. In a dramatic reconfiguration, Varejão and Buarque decided to move the garage underground, which required digging deep into the hill. Even more flamboyantly, they purchased the property next door and demolished it, which allowed them to build a pool, a lush outdoor living space, a patio and a larger garden. They cut a large circular window into the living room so that it would overlook the pool, providing a sense of continuity between the two spaces. There are smaller touches as well: Though they kept the original color of the marigold yellow Formica in the kitchen, they knocked down the back wall, echoing the fluidity between the living room and the front terrace. Niemeyer understood the beauty of Modernism in Brazil's climate, and his open-air plans integrated perfectly with the textured scenery of the tropical outdoors. Lastly, all of the ceramic flooring as well as the terrace railing was replaced with Brazilian soapstone, its dark mossy green jagged with electric white stripes.

That night, I am invited to dinner by Varejão and Buarque. I'm curious to see the house as it was intended: full of people, made imperfect by a kind of kinetic carelessness. When I arrive, open bottles of wine sweat in an ice bucket beneath a Lygia Clark painting. I sag into a leather chair by Lina Bo Bardi. Varejão serves a traditional meal that we eat on a large dining table made by Sergio Rodrigues — picadinho (beef stew) and baked fish, rice and beans, a banana purée, fried quail's eggs, and chopped cabbage from the countryside garden of Varejão's friends, the filmmaker Walter Salles and his wife, the artist Maria Klabin. Varejão and Buarque's friends are artists, singers, musicians, writers — we discuss everything from João Guimarães Rosa's Joycean novel "The Devil to Pay in the Backlands" (1956) to the pessimism that surrounds Brazilian politics today. Modernism may have become an empty expression of bourgeoisie taste,

but here it feels reinvigorated, charged. I'm told many times that I must visit Brasília, which is less than two hours away by plane.

Instead, the next day, I go to the house Niemeyer built for himself in Rio in 1953. It is past Leblon, the wealthy beachside neighborhood, in Barra de Tijuca, another wealthy beachside neighborhood. On my winding drive there, I glimpse the favelas. This is Rio, too, where immense poverty abuts immense wealth. Niemeyer was disdainful of money, even if he worked with those who had it. He rarely wrote about the private residences he designed, and he allowed only a handful to be illustrated or listed — as is the case with many prominent architects, he largely considered these designs exceptions, favors or one-offs. But his own house, with its views of both the mountains and the ocean, is canonical for its elegant curves and its cloudlike roof that sweeps across the horizon. To Niemeyer, light was a form of pleasure.

The house now sits unused but open to visitors; two volunteers from the Oscar Niemeyer Foundation inform me that the furniture is contemporary. That Niemeyer couch was his. But the fabric is soiled. The books downstairs belong to his personal library. But the pages have warped from the humidity. The pool, less a kidney and more of a chickpea, is filled with leaves. I feel like someone discovering a bronze Roman statue at the bottom of the Aegean Sea, its beauty disguised by oxidization, its form marred by barnacles and tangled seaweed. As I flip through a pamphlet laid out for visitors, I see pictures of the house sometime in the 1950s, filled with guests at a party. They are nattily dressed, laughing, with cocktails and cigarettes in their hands. They look as if they are still waiting for the future to arrive.