



From concept to design

Interjecting a bit of Nini's Minimalism into homes and hotels

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When one chances upon Maria Isabel Andrade Silva's works, one would invariably feel a connection to the things the designer holds closest to her heart; like the island where she comes from, the beaches that she would go to as a child and the pebbles that she collects everywhere she goes, even to this day.

On the day of the interview, she wore a synthetic smooth grey pebble latched on a thin black string around her neck, like how one would show off a priceless stone jewel. With her hair neatly tied back, this accessory is the centre of attention as everything else, like her dress, is kept deliberately simple.

Nini's nature

Nini, as she is fondly known, is a Funchal native, a postcard perfect seaside city in Madeira, Portugal. Growing up, the beach was never far away and the pebbles that she spotted along the coast soon became more than just inanimate objects. They became a core component, an inspiration of sorts throughout her career.

The 52-year-old is a design graduate from the Institute of Visual Arts, Design and Marketing in Lisbon. Since then, she has travelled around the world cultivating experience, while studying and working in New York, London, Paris, South Africa and Denmark.

"Some people think it's easy. It is simple but it's not easy. You have to work hard to achieve what you want in life. When I come across somebody famous, I think about how hard they had to work to enjoy that kind of fame. I've always wanted to be a designer with an international reach and this is something I have worked hard to achieve," she says.

She began her career by designing private homes. Before long, she was asked to design hotels. Designing, be it homes, hotels, furniture or even painting, is all that she has ever considered doing and something she considers herself born to do. "I like to create. At the end of the day, I'm an artist," she proudly declares.

To design is to go through a process, from conception to the realisation of a project, to give three-dimensional life to a concept. For Nini, this includes meeting her clients and getting to know them, especially their likes and dislikes, habits, and all the little

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details that would enable her to tailor the space to fit them.

"Normally, the clients know what they want. They just don't know what to do about it. It's like when you go to a dentist, you know you need to get a tooth extracted, but you don't know how to do it. So it is much better to explain to a designer how you want a space designed so that we can create it for you," she explains.

Nini recalls a recent incident where a local client wanted a design that would make people go 'wow', i.e. something fantastic without a hefty price tag attached to it. "Contrary to popular belief, you don't necessarily need to spend on expensive materials to create nice things. So I said to them, 'Tell me your budget and I will dream it for you'," she adds.

The dawn of Ninimalism

Nini describes her style as "Ninimalist", which she defines as "minimalist with soul". "I don't follow trends. I create because I like to be different," she says.

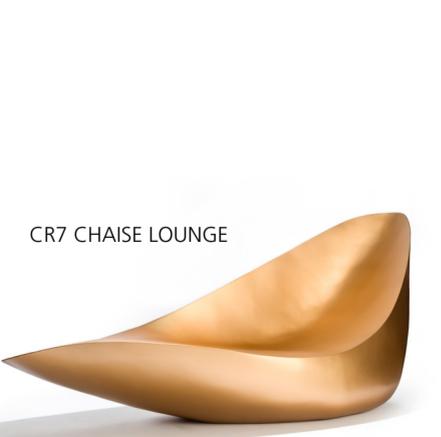
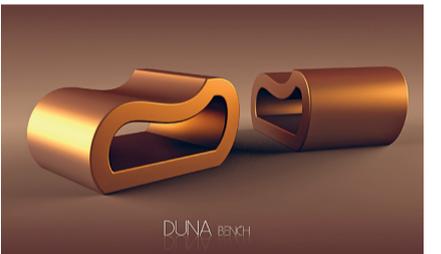
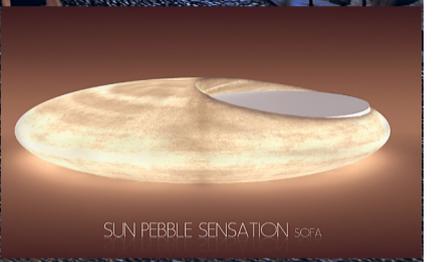
Achieving that wow factor is important because to her, being in a particular space has as much to do with the initial visual as it does with the feeling that it sparks in the viewer. How does she achieve that though? She laughs coyly, points upwards and says, "It's from within me. It comes from God."

Possessing what almost amounts to a Midas touch when it comes to design, Nini's hotel interior designs have consistently garnered nominations and won awards since 2000. One of her latest include the 2014 Europe's Leading Design Hotel by World Travel Awards for the 79-room The Vine Hotel, a project located in the centre of her hometown which took two years to complete.

The same project won numerous other awards in the preceding years including the 2013 World's Leading Design Hotel by World Travel Awards and Best Suites at the 2009 European Hotel Design Awards and Best Hotel Interior Design at the 2009 European Property Awards.



PICTURE COURTESY OF ATELIER NINI ANDRADE SILVA



In this project, her touch can be seen in the pebble-inspired furniture in the lobby, the clean lines leading to the reception area to the black pebbled flooring and strategically placed sofas within the restaurant lobby. Even the way the seating arrangement is positioned at the restaurant lobby loosely resembles pebble formations on the beach.

The same can be said of her other projects like The Beautique Hotel Figueira in Lisbon, Portugal (shortlisted for the European Hotel Design Awards in 2013 and INSIDE Festival during the World Architecture Festival in 2013) and the BOG Hotel in Bogota, Colombia (Best Interior Design of Americas at the International Hotel & Property Awards in 2012).

For The Beautique Hotel Figueira, the design revolved around the history of the area and the nature surrounding it, while the BOG Hotel is designed with a combination of exquisite textures and colours in mind, inspired by two of Colombia's greatest natural treasures – gold and emerald stones.

Given the recognition that she has received thus far for her work, she still feels humbled by the awards and titles bestowed upon her. In June 2011, she was honoured with the title of *Grau de Oficial da Ordem do Infante D. Henrique* by the Portuguese government for her achievements. She likens this to receiving the title of Datuk in Malaysia.

"It makes me feel proud that they recognise my work and now I want to do more for others." Nini has set up her own charity foundation that is run by her brother called the Girl of the Pebble which helps the poor in Portugal.



The pebble-inspired Vine Hotel lobby

She says the pivotal moment of every project is when it is completed. "The day the work is done, I look around and cry. It's what I do all the time. The work, the difficult moments, the best moments and the team you have been working with; by the last day, everybody's gone. It's an emotional moment for me because that day will never come back. You have to enjoy what you do because it is not only about the design, it's the people, the clients and the emotions involved," she says.

One pebble at a time

While she is no stranger to this side of the world, having travelled here for the past 25 years, Nini has yet to design a hotel in Malaysia. She, however, shares her desire of creating one for Kuala Lumpur as she marvels at its greenery, which she says is unique to this part of the world.

She says her idea would be to bring the outside in, like a reversal where nature gets to be admired inside instead of outdoors. She is also currently working on projects in Indonesia and Cambodia, with three private projects in Kuala Lumpur.

In Malaysia, her work has mostly revolved around furniture as her collection, the *Garota do Calhau* or the Girl of the Pebble in Portuguese, is manufactured here using her designs. Within the next year or so, the upmarket furniture line with her new designs will be going international.

One recent and recognisable furniture item is the chair she designed for Cristiano Ronaldo, the football star who also comes from Funchal. She has christened it CR7, a golden chair with a wave design, as she says that it represents the player's roots and his impact on the world. The chair was auctioned off with proceeds donated to The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

As for possibly designing larger scale projects, she projects that it will probably be three years from now. Nini's Atelier Nini Andrade Silva is now integrated with Saraiva + Associados, an international architecture, urban planning and interior design firm to form S+A Interior Design by Nini Andrade Silva.

The upcoming feather to her burgeoning colourful design cap would be a museum built in her honour. "I have been all over the world and I decided why not create a museum where everything is there to tell my story," she says, adding that this is her way of showing others that if they work hard, they can achieve what they want in life. The aptly named Design Centre by Nini Andrade Silva at Madeira is scheduled to open in May. ▣