

NATURAL 'NINIMALISM'

Meet one of Portugal's most famous daughters – renowned celebrity designer Nini Andrade whose unique design style has created waves worldwide.

By YVONNE YOONG

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She's probably one of Portugal's most famous exports.

Besides being a celebrity designer to the stars and having designed award-winning hotels in America, Europe and Asia (Cambodia and Timor, Indonesia), houses and offices worldwide – she's also the face behind the NGO (non-governmental organisation) headed by her architect brother called Girl of the Pebbles.

This NGO was founded to ensure that the children of Madeira are able to pursue their studies and have holidays besides taking care of the elderly.

Having launched her own range of custom-made furniture, jewellery and her unique series of paintings on stones as well as her own design centre – and not necessarily in that order – the free-spirited Nini Andrade Silva, who also founded S+A, Design by Nini Andrade Silva, has a natural affinity for pebbles that knows no bounds.

"They call me *Garota Do Calhao* – which means the 'Girl of the pebbles'. At the association, everyone wears a visual of a pebble on their t-shirts," she mused.

"Everything around my life revolves around pebbles so I design around this theme," she said laughingly, her blue eyes twinkling with delight, attributing her fascination to the fact that she grew up on the island of Madeira where pebbles are found in abundance.

Designing with pebbles

Her love for pebbles flowed naturally into the design work she undertook for a specialty hotel in her hometown.

"The hotel I designed on Madeira Island

where I live resonates with the story of the 'Boys of the Pebbles'. The pebbles to me represent the little kids who used to play freely by the beach. My collection and life revolve around the pebbles and I've used them in my designs as part of the whole story of Madeira," she said during our interview session one rainy day when she was in town to give a presentation for TEDxKL.

"I also paint stones that form one of the biggest collections of modern art in the world at the Berardo Collection Museum of modern and contemporary art in Belem, a district of Lisbon in Portugal."

Borrowing more than a leaf of inspiration from the beauty of nature surrounding the site on which she designs, Nini draws ideas from the natural resources enveloping the site where each of the hotel projects she undertakes are available in abundance which shapes the story and concept of her designs.

Figment of her imagination

The *Beautique Hotels Figueira* project which she undertook saw her partaking inspiration from the fig trees surrounding the site – using their shapes, roots and leaves as part of the overall design story.

Walking through the corridors of the hotel, guests will distinctively notice various stylised interpretation of trees spreading out – with the overlapping tables joined from the walls as it were – to indicate the extension of trees overflowing to form tables.

The bar area, meanwhile, represents the roots spreading outwards. Spilling over to the common areas and interrupting in-between spaces with creative overtones resembling branches, roots and the shape of leaves – a specially created spa area upstairs made out of laminated wood designed to

around this plant in the interiors.

"The sugar cane is planted, grown and cut to be made into things like the honey cake, honey brown sugar and rum as well. Everything comes from the sugar cane and the whole story of the hotel is about the sugar cane," she shared.

Being the creative interior architect, her other hotel creations such as the *Bogota Colombia* done in representations of gold and emerald as the site is famous for gems and the *Victoria Stone Hotel* in Evora – a Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage site – using the concept of *cromleques* – stones heralding back thousands of years which are important in the area known as the largest spa town in Portugal – speak volumes about her passion.

She has also conceptualised a chair in a collaboration with Cristiano Ronaldo for the United Nations in aid of refugees whereby he lent his

image. She designed the chaise lounge like a golden wave that comes out of Madeira island where Ronaldo – the "golden footballer" was also born.

"We did an auction at Christie's in England. Interestingly, the inside of the chair was designed like a football net while the exterior looks like a golden wave," she commented on the CR7 Chaise Lounge.

The *Dune* is another interesting sofa that was named the best sofa in the world three years ago in London. "It's like a dune at the beach, and everything relates back to the beach," she enthused.

As the rain picked up pace during the course of our interview and then descended down in an almost light-hearted aligned dance delicately landing on the huge transparent windows looking out to the manicured greenery of the hotel's

landscaped gardens, she gazed admiringly out into the lush greenery, and almost wistfully expressed her desire to "design a hotel in Malaysia".

"You know, I really love this greenery. The green here is darker and thicker than anywhere in the world. It's like having lungs in the city. All these trees are fantastic. Malaysia has fantastic gardens that are dense. I want to design a very nice project, a special hotel in KL working with the greenery of the trees and a large garden inside. I love KL because of the people and their smiles, its trees and food. The people here are very nice. I would also love to have my own furniture shop in KL."

"Design can contribute a lot to the world. I came into the world to design and want to finish my life helping people to design," expressed Nini with a disarming smile. No wonder, with her vivacious personality and passionate drive, she's truly one of Portugal's personal ambassadors of design. ♀



1 The *Beautique Hotels Figueira* is huge on figs as seen in this restroom with a huge fig fruit representation as its wash basin.

2 Inspired by nature, Nini has created her own 'Ninimalist' style, borrowing more than a leaf of inspiration from nature - be it from the pebbles or trees. - Photo by JULIO CASTRO

3 One can lie down at the spa area at the *Beautique Hotels Figueira* to appreciate an outstanding view of Lisbon, Portugal.

4 The extension of trees as it were overlaps and spills over to form the table of the restaurant at the *Beautique Hotels Figueira*.



resemble the roots of the tree with windows representing the inside of the tree looks especially intriguing.

"You can lie inside the spa area to appreciate a view of Lisbon outside," she said.

Offering a breathtaking view overlooking the *Castelo de São Jorge* medieval castle, the spa area literally whisks guests to another era.

"This spa area was made out of wood. We had to cut all the wood, piece by piece. It was like building a sculpture," she recalled.

Even the rest area adjacent to the restaurant and bar boasts a sight to behold. An imposing symbolism of a fig tree translated into a stylised and vibrantly coloured fig fruit takes pride of place in the centre of the restroom where one can wash his or her hands while basking in the striking beauty of the design.

"This hotel is located in a square in Lisbon called the Square of Figs. *Figueira* is hence named after the fig tree. That's why we've built the entire hotel to resemble the tree which starts downstairs and rises up to the last floor."

➔ Going back to her roots

"I LOVE natural elements. We always have to go back to our roots. I like to tell stories. I'm a story teller for hotels. That's why they call me 'Ninimalist' because I'm a minimalist in the way I design while being a story teller as well. I always say, it's not what we see, but what we feel that is important," she mused.

Indeed. This distinction of being one with nature is apparent in the hotel designs undertaken by Nini, 52. So much so that her natural affinity in using inspiration borrowed from nature is evident in the way she designs the hotels – giving rise to the expression of her unique style dubbed "Ninimalism".

It's evident that this talented Portuguese interior designer's ability to incorporate her creative interpretation in her designs knows no bounds, just like designing for the *Saccharum Hotel* which is a tribute to the eponymous plant translated to mean sugar cane in Latin that sees her weaving a story