

LIVING LEGENDS



# Miami's Best-Kept Architectural Secret

The tropical-Bauhaus wonders of Jorge Arango point the way to a design style that might have become a Florida signature

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*Miami is not a town known for honoring its past, but when we came across master architect Jorge Arango, who is alive and well at 90, and happily living in South Miami with his third wife, Penelope, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to celebrate this icon of architecture.—Ed.*

**I**f ever there was a man with the right idea at the right time in the wrong place, it was the brilliant Colombian architect Jorge Arango in 1960s Miami. Had fate decreed that he settle in a more sophisticated city, rather than one whose neck was distressingly red, his career might have followed a different trajectory, but Miami 40 or more years ago was synonymous with architectural kitsch, and after coping with huge waves of Cuban refugees, seriously prejudiced against Hispanics, as well. Arango himself was part of the problem, an exceedingly stiff-necked man, so convinced of his rightness in all things that potential clients may have been frightened away by his reputation for inflexibility. It's ironic that today, when even people with no interest in design are conversant with the tropical fantasies of Morris Lapidus, those familiar with the few tropical-Bauhaus creations of Arango are limited to a coterie of design cognoscenti.

Arango was born in Bogotá and went to university in Chile where, during WWII, he was one of the gifted students selected, as part of a program instituted by the U.S. State Department and New York's Museum of Modern Art, to spend a year in the United States. He chose to attend Harvard's Graduate School of Design, then under the aegis of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius. Arango was one of only six students in the class, and one of his classmates was I.M. Pei. It was during this period that Arango met many of the 20th century's world-class names of architecture and



This 7,000-square-foot home in Coconut Grove designed by Jorge Arango (right, in his South Miami library last summer) is the only one still intact as the designer envisioned it, boasting an open-style floor plan comprised of five bedrooms, five bathrooms and a number of free-flowing "living spaces."





Arango blurred the lines between outside and inside by opening all of the rooms into a central, screened atrium, above.



The second of three concrete steps that lead from the entry to the living room curves around itself to become the hearth of the sculptural fireplace and continues around the walls to serve as a platform for seating.

design. His formidable list of friends and mentors is beyond impressive: Philip Johnson, Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen, Charles and Ray Eames, Le Corbusier and a multitude of others. Arango was primed for a brilliant career, but instead of taking advantage of the opportunities he was offered and setting up an office in the United States, he opted to return to Bogotá with his new American wife, Elizabeth, the sister of Breuer's wife, whom he met at Cambridge. It was his mission to introduce modernism in design to his native country; in retrospect, it was a less than salubrious choice.

Arango set up an office in Bogotá and all seemed well. He designed several important buildings, including the Country Club of Bogotá, and set up a successful furniture factory. The Arangos had a son and built a house, but a great political upheaval sent Elizabeth and the child back to the States, while Arango chose to remain in Bogotá. A divorce followed and in the early 1950s he met and married Judith Wolpert, a native Miamian. Judith was a good-looking girl, a top-honors graduate of Wellesley, who was pursuing a career in the diplomatic corps and working at the Colombian-American Cultural Center in Bogotá. Arango's view of their marriage was pragmatic, to say the least. As he writes in his self-published autobiography, *Villa Sofia* (Athena Press), "I was divorced from Elizabeth, but the Catholic marriage was not annulled and, at that

time, no Colombian woman would have disregarded a Catholic marriage. The choice for me was not wide, so I took it."

After several years of shuttling between Bogotá, Caracas, California (as guest lecturer at Berkeley) and Florida, in 1958 the Arango family settled permanently in Miami. Arango set up an office and, for one of his projects, designed their home in Coconut Grove. It was the concrete realization of his design philosophy forged from the influences of Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe and the tenets of the Bauhaus, with Arango's own hand-crafted approach to humble materials such as concrete and stucco. He also designed the landscaping with a little help from a few friends: his visiting Brazilian buddy Roberto Burle Marx, one of the greatest landscape architects in the world, and Miami architect Lester Pancoast. According to Richard Arango, the son of Judith and Jorge, who is also a practicing architect devoted to modernism in Miami, the house was the epitome of cutting-edge modern living in a tropical climate. In fact, the difficulty of finding suitable furnishings for their home led them, in 1959, to open the Arango Design store, dedicated to bringing the best of modern household furnishing to Miami and educating the public about modern design. (The Arango Design Foundation was later formed and administered by Judith.)



A 1970 Coconut Grove house serves as a perfect illustration of Arango's great talent.

Each of the bedrooms, such as this one at left, have their own covered, screened terrace facing the side garden.

The exterior space surrounding the pool, below, mimics Arango's interior approach, using a partial wall and dense foliage to create a sense of privacy amid the large open space.

The store flourished, but Arango's architectural career did not. Although he was brilliantly talented, he was perhaps too rigid and difficult for his own good. His view that the Allies had treated Germany too harshly during WWII was not attractive, he was a Latin foreigner critical of American mores, and he simply refused to compromise his ideals in order to attract clients. Another problem was the apparent size of his ego. While still a young man, he visited Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin East, Wright's Wisconsin school. Although Wright was America's most famous and revered architect, Arango, steeped in European modernism, disliked his work, deeming it "antimodern" and Luddite, believing that Wright "resented the intrusion of the machine on the life of man." Wright, who was not present at the gathering when Arango delivered his opinions, nevertheless overheard his criticisms of his oeuvre. According to Arango's account, Wright was quite friendly toward him the next day, offering him a personal guided tour of the grounds, but that seems very doubtful. Wright was famed for his overweening ego and was not likely to forgive a young foreign upstart of equally overbearing ego for his blasphemous pronouncements about his work. But then, Arango also opined that Gropius was an "outstanding organizer" but "not an outstanding architect."

Arango saw no point in a client hiring an architect and telling him what to design—if you wanted Arango, he told you what he was going to build and that was the end of the discussion. One client laughingly recalls coming to Arango's office with a scrapbook of ideas that he and his wife had collected. Arango not only flatly refused to discuss it with them, he would not even glance at it. He did, however, allow for unusual circumstances. He was given the



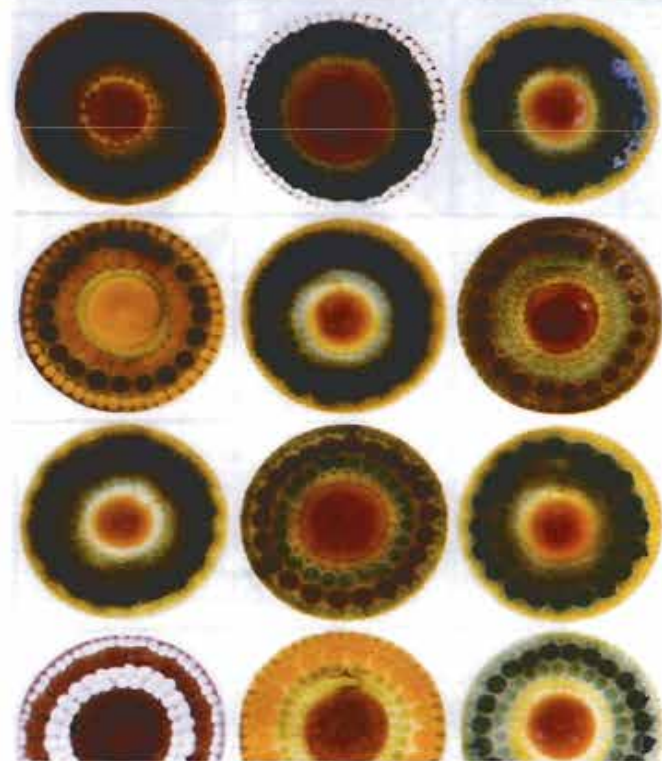
commission of designing a large home for an older couple, dependent upon his finding a way to protect them and their privacy from a particularly hellish neighbor. Their property abutted that of an infamous gentleman who was notorious for his never-ending wild parties and highly dubious circle of friends. The solution Arango devised, as recalled by his son, was to build a 15-to-20-foot berm between the properties as a sound barrier, using the earth dug out for the foundation, and it probably became the highest point above sea level in Coconut Grove.

As a result of his intransigence and the lack of

interest in modern architecture in a city awash in mock Mediterraneans and fake Spanish Colonials, Arango built only five residences in 18 years—three in the Grove, one in Miami Beach, and one in North Miami Beach—as well as a low-rise office building on Northeast Second Avenue that was later torn down. He also designed a number of HUD public-housing projects, but although they came in on budget, they were deemed too luxurious-looking and never completed. (The plans still look so fantastic they beg to be built. In fact, it appears that a cutout garden space high in the structure was originally Arango's inspira-



The English custom-made bull's-eye tiles in the Arango-designed kitchen in Coconut Grove, above and left, use pattern and color to visually separate the space, while the cabinets are fitted with special shelves for storage.



tion, although it later appeared in *Arquitectonica's* celebrated Atlantis building.) Of the five homes, only one is still perfectly intact exactly as the architect designed it, a 1970 Coconut Grove house built for a family of five, which somehow managed to escape the tear-down/add-on fate of so many of Miami's older homes. It serves as a perfect illustration of Arango's great talent.

The house sits on a quiet cul-de-sac and its owners consider themselves the caretakers of a cerebral masterpiece. While the house turns a serenely simple face to the street, reminiscent of Le Corbusier's famed modern expressionist structure *La Chapelle Notre-Dame du Haut à Ronchamp*, the interior is intellectual and complex. The 7,000-square-foot (that measurement probably includes the atrium, which is essentially an outside "room") U-shaped home has five bedrooms and five baths plus the living room, dining room, kitchen/pantry/breakfast area and den, but these are not conventional rooms in any

**The true genius of Arango's work is seen in his maniacal attention to detail.**

sense. Rather, they are "living spaces"—much like large niches—separated by double-sided freestanding storage cabinets. All of these public rooms open onto the central screened atrium that forms the core of the house, but, for privacy, the bedroom wing in the right leg of the "U" presents a blank wall that forms the back of the atrium. The blurring between outside and inside is carried into the more enclosed bedrooms; each has a covered, screened terrace on the side garden, while the master bath also has its own jungle-planted private atrium.

The true genius of Arango's work is seen in his maniacal attention to detail. The second of the three concrete steps that lead from the entry to the living room



An entry foyer to the master bedroom, above, is created by a storage wall cabinet and a niche for a built-in sitting area.

The bathrooms are amazingly large for the period and are fitted with myriad special touches. The master bath, right, even has a jungle-planted private atrium to bring the outside in.

curves around to become the hearth of the sculptural fireplace and continues around the walls to serve as a platform for seating. The outward thrust of the banquettes is balanced by long recessed niches in the walls above the seating. An entry foyer to the master bedroom is created by a storage wall cabinet and a niche for a built-in sitting area. The dormitory for the original owner's three children is placed at the opposite end of the house and divided by a three-quarter-wall to allow the opposite-sex child a private space. Ample storage for toys and clothes is provided by an entire wall of closets, and a pair of side-by-side, mirror-image bathrooms, in which the colors of the wall and floor tiles are reversed, serves both this bedroom and as a guest or pool bath.

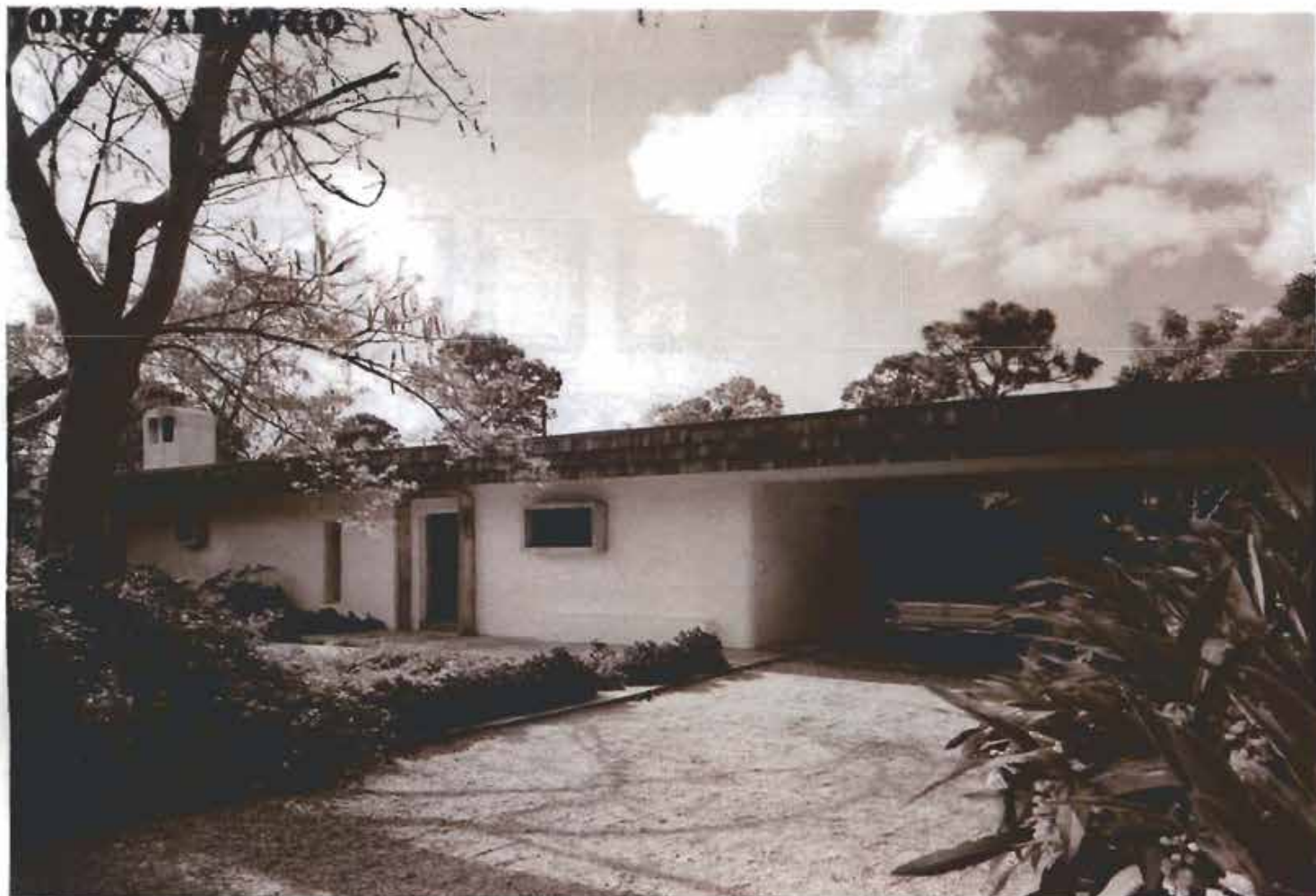
The exquisite English custom-made bull's-eye tiles of the kitchen use pattern and color to visually separate the space, and the cabinets are fitted with special shelves for storage, narrow for glassware and deeper for platters and serving pieces. The fixtures in all the baths, especially the large sunken oval tub in the master bath, are so modern that they look like they were made for today's market. The bathrooms are very spacious and, considering how unimportant



baths were to architects at that period, they are nothing less than amazingly prescient. Thoughtful touches, such as the small metal door in the master bath that drops down to reveal a scale, are not often found in even the largest of our new spa-style baths. Little grace notes like this are the reason that the owners believe the house is sentient: It's thinking of ways to make them comfortable and happy, and they have

returned the compliment by furnishing it with some of the great classics of modern design that they feel it deserves, furniture that Arango himself might have originally chosen, as well as the welded abstract sculptures of Zammy Migdal, one of the owners.

The other four residences are distinctive enough to be immediately identifiable as Arango's work. The Coconut Grove house he built for his family was



**The Coconut Grove house Arango designed for his family, above, was the closest he came to earning international fame. It was hailed in numerous articles in top design magazines around the world as a new approach to tropical design.**

expanded, from 2,290 square feet to 2,700 square feet, by its second owner, who bought the house contingent upon Arango drawing the plans for the expansion. The relatively recent third owners, who fell in love with the house even though it was too small for their needs, have made changes in the kitchen and bathrooms to increase

storage space but have kept those alterations as true as possible to the spirit of the architecture. This project was the closest Arango came to the international fame he deserved, with the house celebrated in numerous articles in top design magazines around the world as a new approach to tropical architecture.

The other Coconut Grove house, built in 1979, is currently in process of being rescued from the deprivations of its former owners, people of such surpassing tastelessness that they almost ruined it beyond reclamation. The new owners, a graphic designer and his family, have devoted a great deal of time and energy to research, and are carefully bringing the house back to Arango's vision, though the designer

has tears in his eyes when he tells of finding shattered bits of the same gorgeous English bull's-eye tiles that were used in the kitchen of the intact house buried in the dirt outside his. The sizable backyard has been leveled and a carefully designed pool area with restrained modern plantings brings the space into a closer relationship with the self-contained house.

The 1967 North Miami Beach house was built for a doctor and his wife, the couple who appeared at

only one elderly Cuban man is capable of doing this type of work. Fortunately, he was still around at that time, but they are still trying to figure out how to proceed in the event of future damage.

The saddest fate has been reserved for the grandest of them all, Arango's only waterfront property. The starkly modernistic Villa May, built in 1964 on Miami Beach, was Arango's largest and most imposing residence. It was built for members of the

May Department Stores dynasty, but today stands abandoned and decayed.

## Their home was the realization of his design philosophy.

Arango's office with their scrapbook of design ideas. Although they resigned themselves to Arango's refusal to discuss their clippings, they did insist vigorously that the pool area be screened. The obvious and easiest method to accomplish this would have been to build a framework roof to hold the screens, but Arango did it his way. He hired an engineer to determine the feasibility of stretching steel guy wires across the expanse and sewing huge sheets of screening between them. It looks great, but there are maintenance problems. The current owners, who bypassed waterfront property to buy this house, at one point needed to repair the hurricane-damaged screening. It took, they say, a year because apparently

The house and property, assessed at more than \$2 million, are currently owned by a private trust held by a bank. There seems to be, despite numerous inquiries over the years, no interest in selling, but the house has suffered such neglect for such a long period of time that it's difficult to determine how and if it might be restored.

The Arango Design Store still exists but is no longer connected to the family. Jorge and Judith divorced in 1975. Arango writes in *Villa Sofia*, "I gave the store, which was important to me professionally and affectionately, and was my most important investment and source of income, to Judith." The consensus of opinion among those who knew them



These vintage photographs show the type of modern furnishings Arango chose for the house.



is that Judith, who died in 2003, was the driving force behind the store and the one most responsible for its success, a success that kept the family solvent for years. However, there can be little doubt that Jorge's impeccable eye selected and placed the merchandise.

In his early 60s, Arango married Penelope, his third wife, a woman almost 30 years his junior. However authoritarian he was, he must also have been

**The difficulty of finding suitable furnishings for their home led them, in 1959, to open the Arango Design store.**

charming enough to attract and marry three beautiful and accomplished young women. The disappointments of his star-crossed life are his tragedy; ours is that we might have had a collection of world-class expressionist modern buildings to rival the celebrated art deco of South Beach, a tropical-Bauhaus style that could have become a unique signature of Miami architecture. But no matter how small his body of work, we still have five Jorge Arango residences, and they are brilliant and timeless enough to stand as his monument. 📍