



Miami MODERNS

If there was any question as to modernism's longevity and influence on today's generation of architects, the array of architectural styles coming out of Florida from its best practitioners puts the matter to rest. Chad Oppenheim and René González are making a mark for themselves in contemporary architectural circles infusing modern traditions with their own flair. Practitioners of modernism in Florida, or more accurately, Tropical Modernism, are producing noteworthy works that display their commitment to distinctive regionalism.

BY SAXON HENRY

ALLA ALLEGRA IS THE PERFECT
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Two of Miami's maestros of modern architecture, Chad Oppenheim and René González, featured in the book "Four Florida Moderns" published earlier this year, share a common denominator, and its trajectory extends as far afield as Germany during the early twentieth century when modernism began in a Berlin architectural practice owned by Peter Behrens. Between 1907 and 1911, three of early modernism's greats—Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier—worked for Behrens, putting their cutting-edge ideas into drawings. Le Corbusier called their level of passion for architecture creating "drama out of inert stone." It is this same devotion to modernism that bonds Oppenheim and González.

Chad Oppenheim's fascination with architecture began early. Born in New York and raised in the suburbs of New Jersey, he was seven years old when he sat in on his first charette—a collaborative session in which an architect drafts a solution to a design problem. When an architect came to present his plans to Oppenheim's parents, who were building a house, the boy was awestruck by his unfurled plans, yellow trays, and colored pencils. "We sketched with him," Oppenheim remembers. "That's when I first thought I knew something about architecture!"

The fascination continued unabated during his young life. When other boys were perusing *Sports Illustrated*, Oppenheim read *Architectural Digest*. He took architecture classes at a local community college and enrolled in a summer exploration course at Cornell University during the summer of his junior year; then returned to Cornell for his undergraduate work. Here he was influenced by the teachings of several Texas Rangers, a group of architecture professors at the University of Texas School of Architecture who championed a melding of modernism and classicism.

Afterwards, Oppenheim traveled, soaking in the influences of other cultures like a sponge. A position with the famed architectural firm Arquitectonica drew him to Miami, and a desire to make his mark led him to found his own firm. "I had always been fascinated with the city I saw while watching 'Miami Vice' with my father when I was young," says Oppenheim. "The other extreme I knew of Florida was my grandmother's retirement community in West Palm Beach. In fact, my image of the state was somewhere between Disney World, 'Miami Vice' and God's waiting room, which turned out to be imprecise!"

Oppenheim's work is surveyed in *Four Florida Moderns* by Terence Riley, the former Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the former Director of the Miami Art Museum. In his essay, Riley states, "While virtually all of



RENÉ GONZÁLEZ
BISCAY

Oppenheim's projects include lush vegetation—within and without the structure—his architecture presents two distinct modalities; the first being that of the city and the second being that of a natural or exurban condition. This formal duality is clearly evident in the work of the early moderns as well, but has roots in far earlier times.”

Riley is referencing Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, and the melding of the urban and the natural is evident in Oppenheim's architecture—from condominium complexes on Miami Beach like Ilona, Ilona Bay and the Montclair to his own residence Villa Allegra and 2228 Park Avenue, a modern riff on the classical brownstone. “When I’m designing a project in a potent natural environment, I want to respect that environment as much as possible,” Oppenheim says. “I’m always in awe of nature’s beauty so I like to let the surroundings become the star of the show.”

A hallmark of modernism is referencing the surroundings of a project, so his projects on the beach include subtle nods to waves and ships’ prows, for example; while in downtown Miami, the hip grandeur of a sophisticated city by the sea influenced his Ten Museum Park and 3Midtown (not yet built).

Rene González is as profoundly influenced as Oppenheim by the modernists who came before him. Born in Cuba, he migrated with his parents

La obra de Oppenheim se examina en el libro *Four Florida* de Terence Riley, antiguo jefe de encargados de arquitectura y Museo de Arte Moderno de Nueva York, y antiguo director de Arte de Miami. En su ensayo, Riley afirma: “Si bien virtualmente todos los proyectos de Oppenheim incluyen una vegetación frondosa, la de la estructura, su arquitectura presenta dos modalidades: la primera es la de la ciudad, y la segunda, la de una condición exurbana. Esta dualidad formal también se evidencia claramente en la obra de los primeros modernistas, pero tiene sus raíces en épocas anteriores”.

Riley se refiere al arquitecto del Renacimiento italiano Andrea Palladio. La combinación de lo urbano y lo natural se evidencia en la obra de Oppenheim—desde complejos de condominios en Miami como el Ilona, el Ilona Bay y el Montclair, hasta su propia residencia en la casa de 2228 Park Avenue, una versión moderna del clásico (edificio adosado revestido de piedra arenisca). “Cuando estoy en un proyecto en un entorno natural formidable, deseo respetar el medio en la mayor medida posible”, dice Oppenheim.

Un detalle característico del modernismo consiste en utilizar en un proyecto referencias al medio que lo rodea. Por eso sus proyectos



THE DESIGN OF THE CISNEROS FONTANALS FOUNDATION IS COMPOSED OF MANIPULATED PATTERNS IN TILE THAT DEPICT A TROPICAL

to South Florida when he was three years old, and grew up in the tropical surroundings that would significantly influence his design sensibilities. During his undergraduate years at the University of Florida School of Architecture he became enamored with modernism, but it was a series of studios led by Frank Israel and Richard Meier during his graduate work at the University of California Los Angeles that cemented his modernist sensibilities.

In his work, the influences of modernism's standard bearers are telling, a penchant for using materials in surprising ways one of the most obvious. The wood lattice he designed that undulates within the entry of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in North Miami and the Bisazza tile with which he clad the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation's headquarters in the Wynwood Art District in Miami.

"It's beautiful to be able to make something that feels like it belongs in a place but that has no literal references," González says. He also believes that architecture must be vital. "For architecture to be poetic, it has to have a soul, which means it has to have a strong idea behind it," he explains.

One example of the poetics of his oeuvre is the Key Biscayne house he designed, which is enveloped by and reflective of its watery surroundings. Into the center of the home is nestled a meditative pool, above which a chamber of light-sensitive, dichroic glass shifts in hue and intensity as it reflects the progression of natural sunlight throughout the day. This brings the experience of nature indoors and offers the home's inhabitants the ability to enjoy its surroundings without being inundated by the elements: a mark of tropical modernism at its best.

Though the work of these two talents is deemed a regional modernism due to its tropical characteristics, it will likely be seen as a globally significant contribution to the vernacular as a whole when this moment in history is surveyed a century from now.

dos en la playa incluyen, por ejemplo, referencias sutiles a olas y barcos; entretanto, en el centro urbano de Miami, la grandiosidad de una ciudad sofisticada junto al mar influyó en sus proyectos como Ten Museum Park y 3Midtown (aún por construir).

René González ha experimentado profundamente la misma que ha tenido Oppenheim de los modernistas que le precedieron en Cuba, emigró con sus padres al sur de la Florida cuando tenía y se crió en un medio tropical que influyó significativamente a su habilidad como diseñador. Se enamoró del modernismo durante su pregrado en la facultad de arquitectura de la Universidad de la Florida, lo que afianzó su sensibilidad modernista fue su participación en estudios dirigidos por Frank Israel y Richard Meier durante su posgrado en la Universidad de California en Los Angeles.

Se pueden notar en su obra las influencias de los máximos exponentes del modernismo. Una de las más evidentes es la tendencia a utilizar los materiales en formas sorprendentes. Su celosía de metal que se encuentra a la entrada del Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (MOCA) en North Miami y la losa de cristal Bisazza que utilizó para la Fundación de Arte de Cisneros Fontanals en el distrito de Wynwood en Miami.

Uno de los ejemplos del carácter poético de su obra es la casa diseñada en Key Biscayne, que parece envuelta por el agua que la rodea, al mismo tiempo, la refleja. En el centro de la casa se encuentra una sala de meditación, sobre la que hay una cámara de vidrio dichroico que cambia de matiz e intensidad al reflejar la progresión natural del sol a lo largo del día.

Aunque la obra de estos dos talentos se describe como un regionalismo debido a sus características tropicales, es muy probable que cuando este momento de la historia se examine dentro de un contexto global, se considerará una contribución de importancia mundial a la arquitectura.