

Photography
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HOME TOUR:

Words
AGNISH RAY



VILL'ALCINA



For nearly 50 years,
architect SERGIO FERNANDEZ
has found political purpose and
refuge at his vacation home.

Drive an hour north from Porto and the landscape becomes hilly. As I head toward the town of Caminha, the road winds into the valleys, while waves crash onto the shores of the vast ocean stretching out to the left. We're by Portugal's border with the Spanish region of Galicia, whose Santa Tecla mountain rises tall across the bay.

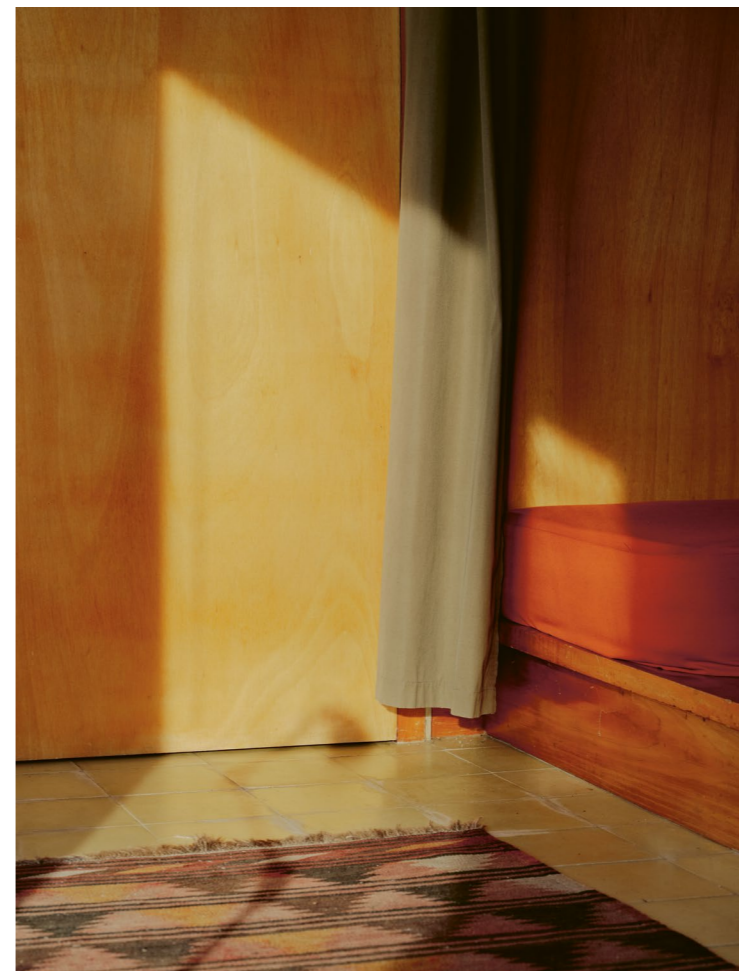
When the architect Sergio Fernandez acquired a patch of land here, on a hillside overlooking the mouth of the Minho river, there were no homes nearby. It was the early 1970s, and he built two identical houses side by side, one for himself and another for the friend with whom he had purchased the plot. "I wanted it to be similar to the land," explains Fernandez, who has driven me from Porto to his mountain retreat. At 85, he is nimble of form, sharp of mind and energetic of spirit. He is also as clear as ever on the building principles that have driven his six-decade practice: "Made for people. No high technics. A sense of being real."

The house reveals itself from the road, its red cement roof peeking out from among the foliage above. The air is fragrant with eucalyptus and pine. Creepers climb up the concrete and granite structure and a blue and white sign by the entrance announces the name of the abode: Vill'Alcina. A single sloping roof unifies the whole construction, its angle mimicking the incline of the hill.

Architecture students are often brought to this rural refuge—it is celebrated as an example of how a home's design can be determined by its natural environments—but its owner never imagined his personal venture would become such a case study. Instead, this creation was guided by modesty, comfort and a carefree spirit that delights in quirky touches, whether in composition or decoration. "The important thing is the quality of the space," Fernandez says. "I don't mind if things seem slightly careless—I wanted the house to have a spirit."

On descending the steps into the house, the first thing I notice is how few hard separations there are at Vill'Alcina. "The idea was to allow everyone to share it all the time," the architect explains. Cooking, dining and lounge areas are spread across two levels, but the space is open and free, designed around a chimney that acts as its focal point. The bedrooms' layout is similarly relaxed, with a dormitory-like feeling that children adore. Wooden walls and floors in the sleeping areas keep the temperature down in summer.

"No clients want this kind of solution," says Fernandez, who delighted at having free rein over the spatial arrangement. "This isn't a house to live [in every day]—it's for holidays and free time. So I thought it would be more interesting to have common, continuous space." For nearly 50 years now he's spent weekends and vacations here, sharing the space with loved ones who come to stay. He opens red wooden shutters to reveal the



(below) Vill'Alcina combines classic mid-century furniture with more eclectic designs, such as the vintage dumbwaiter pictured by the window.
(opposite) Born in 1937, Fernandez grew up under the autocratic Estado Novo government. The architecture encouraged by the regime was grand concrete structures with classical ornamentation, a world away from the naturalism that Fernandez and his contemporaries pursued.



property's dramatic Atlantic view, which is dappled by the wild trees—oak, cork, bay, holly—that populate the grounds.

Fernandez's humility conceals the magnitude of his experience. Once a student of Fernando Távora and professor to Eduardo Souto de Moura, both Pritzker Prize winners from Porto, he is among the generation of architects who witnessed the formation of a new architectural identity in Portugal amid radical political change.

Fernandez's youth was spent in fear of the authoritarian Estado Novo's political police. "It was impossible to have a conversation like this in a café," he says. "We were limited—but this gave us strength and imagination."

Back then, practices like art and architecture became synonymous with the resistance. While the country's dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar, fantasized about the awesome and intimidating architectural visions of fascist Germany and Italy, the modern reality of Portugal proved totally opposite, characterized by comfort, functionality and a sense of place. "We were all engaged in the revolution," Fernandez explains. "Being a good professional meant being against the regime." After 48 years, Salazar's rule was overthrown on April 25, 1974—incidentally, Fernandez's birthday. Vill'Alcina was completed that same year: the perfect retreat for his first summer holidays in the newly liberated Portugal that he had longed for.

For the nation's architects, the change opened new channels for influences, from Le Corbusier to Alvar Aalto. It also inspired new ways of thinking about buildings—modern, but respectful of local tradition. "We gave much more value to our natural things, a notion of scale, the right use of local materials,"

says Fernandez. "We discovered the country that we knew existed but couldn't feel."

His worldly interests have been intrinsic to his development as a practitioner. He's traveled extensively with Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza (the latter is considered by many to be Portugal's greatest living architect and has been Fernandez's friend since his teenage years), devouring the architec-



Wooden walls help to naturally regulate the temperature of the house. Wood has low thermal conductivity, meaning it both gains and loses heat slowly.

tural delights of places like Greece, Egypt and Brazil. In the mid-1960s he even traveled to Brasilia with its architect, Oscar Niemeyer, when the city was just four or five years old. The two drove all the way from Rio de Janeiro because Niemeyer hated flying.

Fernandez had more reason than most to be interested in the meeting points of different cultures. The architect's mother

(named Alcina; she is the home's namesake) was from Porto, while his father was from Barcelona, so he grew up speaking a mix of Portuguese, Catalan and Spanish. The consumption of food and culture at home was similarly multicultural, equipping him with a thirst for travel. The eclectic decor at Vill'Alcina reflects this adventurous spirit, with pieces from India, Brazil, Morocco, Macao, Cuba and beyond. A blue ceramic Hand of Fatima amulet, a figurine traditional of Bengali craft and several North African rugs sit alongside wooden birds, bowls of pine cones, bouquets of dried flowers and an old corn mill.

Today, Fernandez enjoys his leisure time but hasn't abandoned his career. He continues work with his studio, Atelier 15, whose projects range from private residences to heritage restorations across the country, from the Santa Clara church in Coimbra to ancient gems in the Roman town of Idanha-a-Velha. They recently finished work on the Batalha theater in Porto, an art deco building from 1947, where they reinstated communist symbols on the theater's facade that were removed during Salazar's dictatorship. They also uncovered murals that had been painted over by authorities.

These are powerful acts for Fernandez and his peers, who have spent recent decades reevaluating Portugal's architectural and political legacy. Vill'Alcina may be one of his more humble, experimental projects but it's marked by history, both personal and public. The open, free-flowing layout of the rustic getaway also embodies the spirit of freedom and divergence from established structures that energized his radical generation. "The house was conceived exactly before the revolution," he explains. "It was linked with our desire for liberty."



“We were all engaged in the revolution. Being a good professional meant being against the regime.”

(opposite) Vill'Alcina looks down over the Minho river, an estuary that separates Portugal from Spain.



