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Welcome to the Jungle House

How a 1950s Miami box was transformed into an Edenic retreat worthy of Gauguin

By ALASTAIR GORDON



Steven Brooke

THE TERRACE | The master bedroom was extended with a grid-like overhang and raised terrace that can be closed off for privacy with sliding panels. The hanging basket seat and a massive Hugo Franca chair made from a gnarly species of Brazilian hardwood serve as sculptural accent pieces. The terrace was further delineated with a narrow fire pit of river stones and a slit waterfall that pours into the infinity swimming pool below.

Landscape architects are usually the last ones called into a building project, brought in only after a house is completed. When the owners of an island property on Miami's Biscayne Bay dreamed of giving their 1950s home a treehouse effect, they took an unlikely route. They consulted local landscape architect Raymond Jungles first, before the structural remodeling.

The aptly named Mr. Jungles—

working with a boxy 5,000-square-foot house situated on a nondescript 14,240-square-foot corner plot—began with the idea of an adult-size aerie that was tethered to the ground. And, in the process, he went on to transform the space into a tropical paradise. "I wanted to unify the exterior and interior and make it feel like a single environment," said Mr. Jungles, who has become one of the most celebrated landscape architects in the United States.

Photos: Tropical Paradise in Miami



Some of his recent projects include a swamp-like environment for a pedestrian concourse in front of a Herzog & de Meuron building on Miami Beach's Lincoln Road; the Miami Beach Botanical Garden; and the "Brazilian Modern" exhibition at the New York Botanical Garden's 2009 Orchid Show.

For the Biscayne house, architectural consultants and interior designers were summoned at a later stage, while Mr. Jungles was the lead designer throughout the project—an unusual backward approach. In a sense, it's an "inside-out" house that started outdoors and worked its way in.



Steven Brooke

The living room

THE LIVING ROOM

The entryway leads into a long living room that hardly feels like an "interior" space at all. The eye is immediately drawn outside again through floor-to-ceiling glass that spills out toward the central courtyard. Wall panels by Joaquim Tenreiro, reclaimed from a midcentury house in São Paulo, Brazil, dominate one end of the room.



Steven Brooke

The garden

THE GARDEN

Mr. Jungles combined an exotic mix of native and nonnative plants into a wraparound diorama of subtropical nature. Prehistoric-looking Coontie, gumbo-limbo, Jamaican Caper, Crabwood, Wart Fern, Bay Rum and dwarf mondo grass provide a painterly backdrop of textures and natural hues. This mini wilderness has been choreographed for maximum effect in filtering the Florida sun, creating dappled areas of shade and, even more importantly, infusing the interior spaces with "green" décor. A winding jungle pathway that surrounds the periphery of the property creates picture-like vignettes through all side windows, while new corner windows were added to increase the intimate

connection between inside and outside.

THE COURTYARD

The most magical part of the house is the central courtyard, a kind of castaway setting with Spanish moss hanging from Simpson



Steven Brooke

The courtyard

Stoppers and Senna trees. Rainforest air plants, orchids and bromeliads sprout mysteriously from forks in the branches. Thick clusters of mondo grass and Liriope are offset by bordering beds of white river stones imported from Chile. It's like being inside a living jungle terrarium. A sculptural settee and table were carved by Hugo Franca from giant hunks of wood rescued from the Amazon Basin. They provide a shady respite at one side of the courtyard.



Steven Brooke

The entrance

THE ENTRANCE

The entry was transformed from a standard suburban driveway and front stoop into an elegant arrival sequence. Two columns rise like sentinels from a garden pool that contains silver Juncus grass, Nymphaea (water lily) and an array of exotic fish, all shaded by the flickering leaves of silver buttonwoods. (The stone columns—called Testigos, "silent witnesses" in English—were carved by Colombian sculptor Hugo Zapata.) The outer shell of the original house—a bland Miami box built in the 1950s with a low-pitched roof—was preserved but transformed to feel as if it had been lifted above a shallow river that flows underneath and cascades into the entry pool. (It's a clever illusion created by hidden pumps and drainage

systems.)

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