Merilen Mentaal meets Florida-based landscape architect Raymond Jungles to discuss form, inspiration and Roberto Burle Marx’s admired and awarded, with more than 100 residential and municipal commissions in the United States, the Caribbean and Europe, Raymond Jungles is a Florida-based landscape architect who currently lives in a high-rise building with no garden of his own.

Happily, Raymond is content to bask in the emotions that the gardens he has created reflect back at him. Sunny, open and friendly, I met him at his riverside studio to talk about his gardens and landscapes, many of which show a subtle influence of his Brazilian mentor Roberto Burle Marx.

Roberto Burle Marx called himself an artist, a poet foremost. Would you call yourself an artist or a landscape designer?

Actually Burle Marx, depending on what he was doing, would call himself a gardener. I would say that I am someone who makes gardens. I’m not a gardener because I don’t get to get my hands dirty as much as I used to, but I’m a lover of nature, the natural environment and plants. I am also influenced by art and architecture.

I don’t like to think that I have any style other than where I am at as a designer, a combination of my principles and what I have determined as being my sense of aesthetics, what appeals to me, what is right and what is wrong as far as man’s intervention in the environment.

Artist, or poet? Designing a garden is a rare art form that not everybody can do. It involves working with living things rather than inanimate objects. It is about space, light, habitat, architecture. It is about solving problems, enriching laws and giving people the best of what’s available on this planet.

What do you think makes someone a great designer?

It’s the same thing that makes someone a great artist, a great politician or a great businessman. It’s a passion for what you do and being good at what you do but it is also being true to what you feel should be done. I have a special ability to design gardens because I see three dimensionally. I have always been very perceptive about my surroundings. When I was camping or fishing, I knew the names of the birds, the names of the trees and the Indian tribes that lived in that area.

I think the difference between someone who is really good at what they do and someone who is ok, is having a confident sense of what it is that you like and don’t like. If you can’t see your environment, you can’t make those kinds of judgments. You can’t make a decision because you don’t have a foundation to make a decision on and so you can wallow around and get nothing accomplished. You have to fight for what you believe in and what you do. You have to show it. You need to keep progressing to expand your horizons by being aggressive.

It also helps to be a salesman to some degree, so you can convince someone of your vision and what you want to do.

What inspires you?

The work, the individual projects, the challenge of finding the right solution. Only a small part of my time, perhaps ten percent, is spent designing. That doesn’t mean I am not using my brain when I’m driving around, doing this or that.

I love the time I spend designing. I can’t believe people pay me to do it. In fact, they probably don’t pay me for designing, they pay me for all that other stuff that I have to do to run a functioning business. Designing is what really appeals to me.

How do you work? Is there a process?

I have to spend time on the site. If I could make it work, I would design all my projects on site, taking the time and do them over an extended period... but that’s not reality. A lot of my work is overseas, the fees are not large enough to live off one project over the course of a year. So we have 20 to 30 projects at different stages.

I have a photographic memory when it comes to places. I can come on to a space and absorb it all. I have been doing this for so long, I know what triggers my attention and is critical for the design process. I try to stay very open-minded when the project is starting to formulate. I like to procrastinate.
I like natural water systems, then you will have birds, fish, even turtles, bringing a whole new dimension to the garden.

Above right: Miami Florida

Describe one of your projects where you managed to create something extra special, a place where the atmosphere is magical. My favourite garden is not mine but Roberto’s. It is the Sitio garden outside Rio de Janeiro where he lived, and which he constructed over a period of more than 40 years. Natural settings create magic for me all the time; a stream, a mountain, a lake, a river, a field. Of my own gardens, the Ward garden at Coral Gables in Florida is one that I love. I feel so comfortable there. Every time I go there I saw something that excites me. Another is the one that I built for myself in Key West. It is very casual. I didn’t do any maintenance and I had a lot of animals there all the time. But the pool is very sculptural, pleasing to look at and it is filled with natural sounds that awaken the space I have created, I really love that space.

About the Designer
Raymond Jungles studied Landscape Architecture at the University of Florida and went on to become an award winning garden and landscape designer, working on domestic gardens and commercial projects in Florida, USA. His most recent projects include new designs for the Naples Botanical Gardens in Italy and a roof terrace for the Frank Gehry New World Symphony building in Miami. Raymond became a Fellow of the ASLA in 2006. The Colors of Nature: Subtropical Gardens by Raymond Jungles was published in 2004. www.raymondjungles.com