

ARCHITECTURE |



The Visionary

AT ARQUITECTONICA, BERNARDO FORT-BRESCIA DEFIES CONVENTION BY EMBRACING DESIGN THAT'S INNOVATIVE, ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS, AND, ABOVE ALL, FEARLESS

TEXT: LUIS R. RIGUAL
 PORTRAIT: NICK GARCIA

A Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and recipient of the AIA Silver Medal, Bernardo Fort-Brescia has designed projects in 58 countries since Arquitectonica's founding in 1977.

When Bernardo Fort-Brescia founded Arquitectonica with his wife Laurinda Spear in 1977, this town was not quite ready for the studio's new-now-next thinking. Things have certainly changed since then. Today, the firm has offices in 11 cities around the world and is widely credited for giving Miami some of its most iconic structures. As the company nears a half century of operation, we spoke to Fort-Brescia about the organization's trajectory, its current projects, and what's next.

It's been 46 years since Arquitectonica was founded. Let's begin with the name. It's so unusual yet so appropriate. How did you come up with it? We've always had an admiration for the so-called architectonic drawings by the constructivists, the pioneers of architecture. We loved the sound and meaning [of "architectonic"], but the spelling with "chi" was already taken, so we changed to "qui" as in Spanish. For a long time it was a nightmare because people could not spell or pronounce it. But we survived.

After studying at Princeton, then Harvard, and graduating in 1975, you didn't go to New York or a more established city. What drew you to Miami? Laurinda and I graduated amidst a real recession with two-digit inflation and long lines for gasoline. No Ivy League pedigree mattered. But Andres Duany, a fellow Princetonian, offered us teaching positions at the University of Miami. We discovered a city that was open to new ideas, seeking to define itself as a city of the future, as a global city, a city of experimentation with no barriers, open to newcomers eager to explore. It was, and still is, magic.

The firm made a splash quite early on with the Atlantis building, which was then immortalized in the opening credits of Miami Vice. That structure was ahead of its time to say the least. How did you convince the developers to agree to a building with a big opening near the middle? Two amazing persons, Don Luger and Sam Greenberg, believed in us and made our drawings a reality. Yes, the building was controversial, but Miami needed the wake-up call and attention. It told the world that something was happening here.

Over the years you must have had some interesting meetings explaining your vision to owners and developers. Do any come to mind? Early on, Laurinda and I had a meeting with New York developer Harry Helmsley for The Palace on Brickell. We were 27 and just getting started; this was before Atlantis. We had presented him with some sketches in which we had turned the building parallel to the water and had inserted multiple cores to create see-through units with private lobbies, all of which was novel at the time. At the meeting, he turned to his wife Leona and asked her what she thought, and she responded, in her very Mae West style, "Honey, the kids have done their homework." That doesn't happen anymore.

The firm has been committed to sustainability when that word was hardly used. What's your approach? Our philosophy is based on the principle of preserving a location's geographic character. We feel strongly that the combination of natural and human attributes makes one place more distinct from another. Together with ArquitectonicaGEO, our landscape architecture division, we seamlessly integrate the sustainability aspects of the physical building with the natural environment of the site.

What's next for you and the firm? [Arquitectonica is 46], but frankly I have not noticed. We did not have grand plans [when we started], yet we now have a footprint in 58 countries. I love what I do. There is no pressure. arquitectonica.com

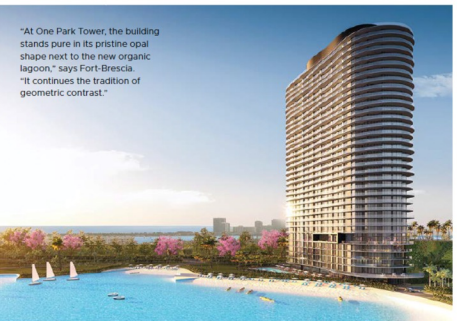
"If Atlantis was a painting of a map, the St. Regis Residences is a three-dimensional painting of two abstracted vessels racing to the sea," says Bernardo Fort-Brescia. "The elliptical towers make a profile to be seen from land and sea, telling the story of our nautical city."



BELOW: Completed in 1982, the Atlantis building put Arquitectonica on the map. "We saw the high-rise like a town turned on its side," says Fort-Brescia. "That opening also happens to reduce the wind pressure on the building."



"At One Park Tower, the building stands pure in its pristine oval shape next to the new organic lagoon," says Fort-Brescia. "It continues the tradition of geometric contrast."



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