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AClassical Creation

Fernando Menoyo and Maricris Longo's love for classical design inspired a new vernacular for the South Florida townhouse and a passionate commitment to revive a once-passe style of architecture

Story by Violet Collins
Photography by Carlos Morales



Environmental chaos is disquieting, and regular patterns in architecture are reassuring, says author J. Francois Gabriel in his book *Classical Architecture for the Twenty-First Century*, which makes an argument for a return to classical design in contemporary construction. Few people are more familiar with that argument, or bigger proponents of the movement, than Fernando Menoyo and Maricris Longo.

The couple's Almeria Row townhouse project, a cluster of seven townhouses within walking distance of downtown Coral Gables, redefines the townhouse concept typically found in South Florida, where driveways replace front lawns, cave-like rooms make up the interior spaces and backyards are both condensed and defined by lifeless, wooden fences.

At Almeria Row, you step up to the front door from a pedestrian-friendly sidewalk lined with mahogany trees. Spacious, bright rooms with large windows consistently remind you of the region's sunny disposition; and an interior courtyard acts as a secluded space accompanied by Raffis palms, guava trees and bamboo. Behind the courtyard hides a spacious two-car garage, accessed through a back alley. Above the garage rest two bedrooms, each with their own bathroom and accessible only by crossing the courtyard.

It's from the courtyard that Fernando and Maricris' love of classical architecture is most apparent. The basic princi-

ples of classical design are present everywhere you turn: the emphasis on light, water and air; the perfect symmetry of the two bedrooms; the expansive proportions of the portico.

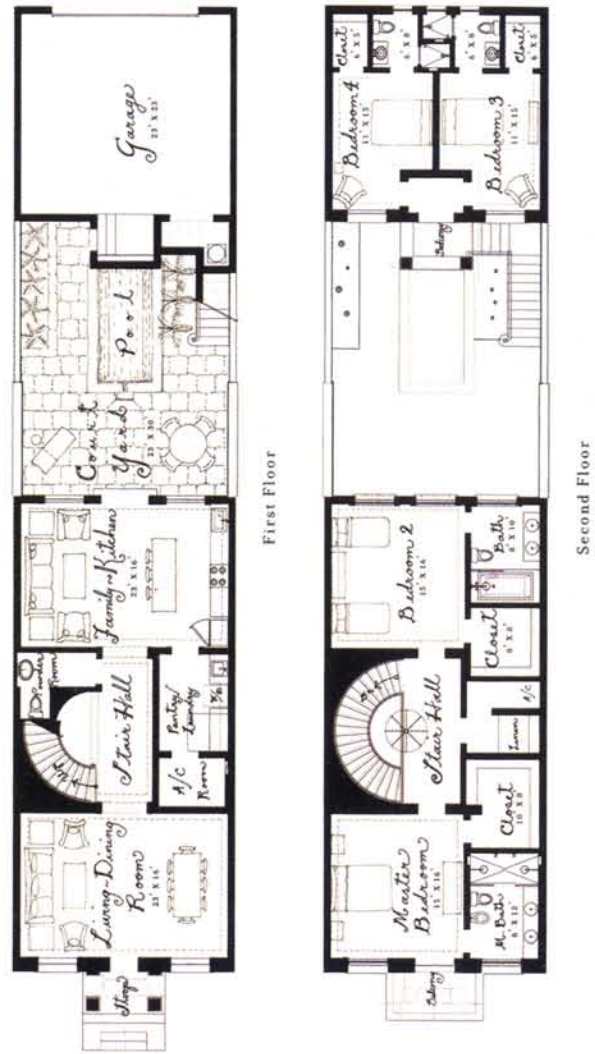
"When we began planning this project we started with wanting to create great architecture," says Maricris.

Architecture has always mattered to Fernando and Maricris. In the real-estate business since 1979, Fernando got a taste for property ownership when he purchased a small apartment building in Coral Gables' historical Biltmore section, near the Venetian Pool. He continued acquiring smaller, older buildings and restoring them to their original design and adding distinctive tropical landscaping.

His holdings eventually would include several properties on Almeria Avenue, including the property that eventually would become Almeria Row. But about four years ago, knowing that they wanted to build a new project and not simply renovate an existing building, they had plans to develop a small, multi-family building on land they owned in the area. They would end up selling the land and not building the project, but the exercise proved beneficial in another sense. While interviewing architects for that project, they got to work with Maria de la Guardia and Teofilo Victoria, a professor at the University of Miami School of architecture.

Maricris and Fernando already were somewhat familiar with their work. Fernando had gone to school with Teofilo's brother and had seen some of his designs over the years.

"We knew the quality of their work," says Maricris, "but



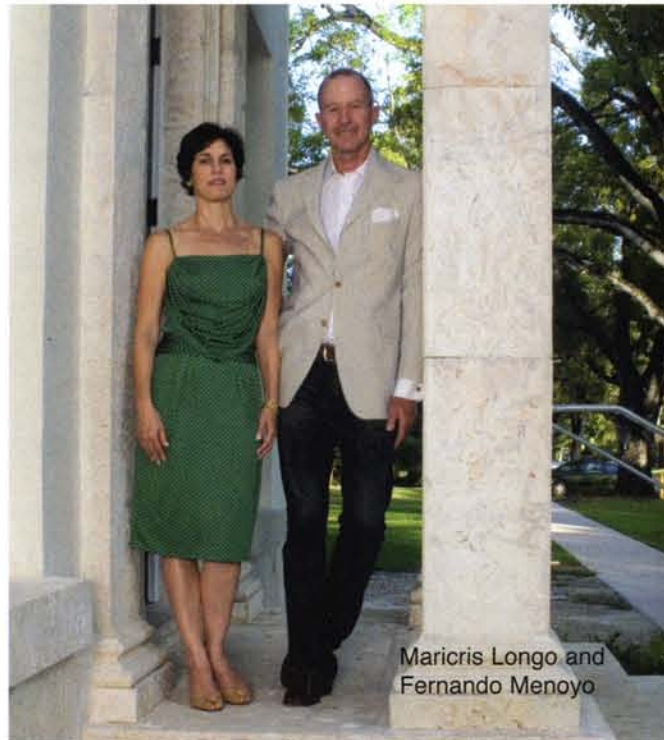
at that time we didn't understand why they were so good. We only knew the architecture was so beautiful."

That's when they dove into learning about classical architecture. They would learn that UM is one of only two universities in the country (the other is the University of Notre Dame) with a program geared toward classical architecture. They began attending seminars and reading books on classical design.

Along the way, they also had to convince officials that rezoning the property to allow this new kind of townhouse, modeled after the row houses of Boston, would be a step toward building a pedestrian-friendly community. Each unit, and the land it sits on, is individually owned. There are no association fees.

Maricris even proposed having the city of Coral Gables offer classes on classical design, hoping to better educate the public. Contrary to what some might believe, she says, implementing classical architecture isn't about having columned facades but about understanding proportions and following certain principles of design.

As they learned about classical architecture, they became more involved in the design process during the project's



Maricris Longo and Fernando Menoyo





conception. Fernando, for example, wanted to make sure the design took the subtropical setting into account. The result is a distinct vernacular with classical proportions and subtropical touches, a blend of British colonial and Floridian style.

Upstairs, louvered transoms—to better allow the passage of light and air throughout the house—crown exceptionally tall, white doors. In the master bedroom, which is also upstairs, a grand window overlooks Almeria Avenue while a 16-foot-tall tray ceiling encourages natural airflow and cool breezes.

Known for his attention to detail, Fernando even had air-vent grills custom made. During a recent tour of one of the units, which also will serve as Fernando's home, he noted that the small logos on two of the kitchen appliances were different colors: one had a small, black metal plate with the logo, the other a white metal plate. "The white definitely looks better," he said, taking note to fix the discrepancy.

Fernando and Maricris envision a day when Almeria Row will extend further down the avenue. Plans call for other, similar row houses on bordering property they own. "We have a vision," she says, noting they own a total of 37 lots in the area. "This is a five- to 10-year plan."

For now, however, their passion remains with the existing project and the style of architecture it promotes. Although a few units still remain unsold, they don't seem worried about the project's prospects. In fact, they even seem relieved that the real-estate boom has subsided.

"During the boom so many bad projects were being created because buyers were mainly speculators and they didn't really care about quality," Maricris says. "Now quality matters again." ■

More information about Fernando Menoyo and Almeria Row is available at almeriarow.com and by calling 305-798-0156

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Landscape: Douglas Duany, Duany Plater-Zyberk, dpz.com, 305-644-1023