

Duprat's garden leans sumptuously over a swimming pool lined in soapstone.

covered in cheap terra-cotta slabs slicked with shiny black paint, and a small interior patio was enclosed like a terrarium behind glass panels that opened only at the top. The downstairs bedrooms were damp and dark, and the spiral staircase—the only flourish reminiscent of Niemeyer's famous love for curves—had been wrapped in tall glass panels, turning it into a pneumatic tube. The room at the top, its windows broken, had been all but abandoned.

By the time Varejão and Buarque saw the house, it had been on the market for several years. Previous potential buyers had proposed turning the bedrooms into a garage and adding a second story, a plan that would have obliterated Niemeyer's subtle, if imperfect, plans. Others had wanted to demolish the house completely. Despite its lofty provenance, the house, like so many modernist works around the world, enjoyed no heritage protections. "It's very common in Brazil to buy something like this and tear it down," says Varejão, whose diverse work often deals with the cruelties and erasures of Brazilian history. "The owner was desperate to sell to people who understood its value."

Both natives of Rio, Varejão and Buarque understood that value well. "The landscape is such an important part of living in Rio," Varejão says. "When I was a teenager, I would count the days that I didn't go to the beach." When she and Buarque decided to buy a house, "we preferred to live in a city house that was also a weekend house, rather than do what people have to do in São Paulo"—Brazil's biggest city, with a population of more than twenty million—"and battle your way out of the city on a Friday just to get some air," she says. "In Rio, you have all of that within the city." In the Niemeyer house, which, unlike its bulky, terra-cotta-roofed neighbors, deferred so gracefully to its surroundings, they would have that nature quite literally in their backyard. "We saw how much we could improve

on what was there," Buarque says, "because, ultimately, the project is amazing."

Over the course of five years, Varejão and Buarque dramatically restructured the house without visibly transforming Niemeyer's original project. In the first stage, conceived and executed with architect Rodrigo Cerviño López and landscape architect Isabel Duprat, they excavated a garage beneath the structure and turned the driveway into a staircase paved in gray Brazilian soapstone laced with white veins, a herculean effort that allowed them to transform the carport into a garden and to open windows across the house's rear. Inside, they replaced the static windows around the patio with sliding doors that connect the living and dining areas through a tropical tableau of ferns, palms, and philodendrons.

About eighteen months into the project, the couple bought the lot next door in order to demolish the hulking four-story mansion that loomed over their property. Working from this point on with Duprat and Rio-based architect Lia Siqueira, they opened the second lot to create a garden, a pool lined with the same dramatic Brazilian soapstone, and a partially enclosed living area, the roof of which doubled as a paved terrace at the house's entry level. That terrace offered an entirely new perspective on the house's simple, rationalist form and onto the soaring granite altar of Corcovado Hill, far beyond.

To bring all that greenery inside, they cut a circular porthole window into the living room—a detail borrowed from another Niemeyer house, farther down the Atlantic coast. They stripped the glass panels from the spiral staircase and wrapped it in a ribbon of whitewashed metal. Sunlight and nature now filter in from all sides. "Almost all the changes we made were removing things," says Varejão. "All we added was transparency."

