

LEVEL BEST
Above, a mezzanine floor helps define living areas in the open-plan space
Left, the view is not for the faint-hearted
Opposite, the 30m body of the house was nailed in place using techniques more common in bridge construction

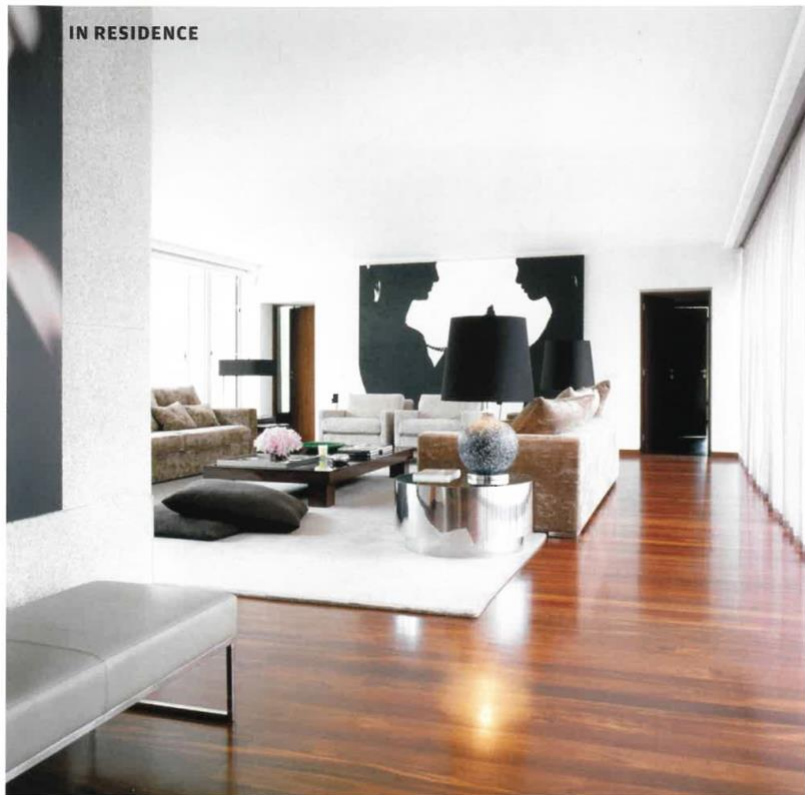
IN RESIDENCE



Balancing act

It's made from a single piece of concrete, is supported by 'loose' rocks and juts out into the void. Local firm Art' Città's house near Porto defies all sense of gravity
Writer Claudia Saraiva. Photographer Carlos Cezanne

IN RESIDENCE



CASA BLANCA
Left, the interior design, by Porto-based company Oitoemponto, relies on a colour palette that reflects that of the outside environment
Below, the straight lines and hard angles of the house are intended to contrast with the rolling terrain

Perched close to the precipitous Vizela cliffs, an hour from Porto, in the north of Portugal, the Casa Jorge Varela is a spectacular example of balance.

Partially cantilevered far out over the valley, the house is the result of an unusually accommodating brief by the owners: a young couple with two children. 'We simply wanted something different,' says Cândida Varela. She handed the project to innovative Guimarães-based practice Art' Citta, while charging up-and-coming Portuguese designers and furniture manufacturers Oitoemponto to plan the interior.

The architects, Augusto Vasconcelos and Gonçalo Araújo came first, introduced by a mutual friend. 'We loved the site, mostly because it seemed such an impossibly challenging place to build a family house,' says Araújo. The steep slope and huge rocks that now provide the context of the finished structure led the architects to the solution. 'We wanted to take a linear house and contrast its straight lines with the strong but irregular texture of the terrain.' The hardest part was getting the Varelas' agreement that their house be based round a 30m body that merely rested on the rocks and jutted precariously into the void.

'We are almost never given complete freedom by clients. But Jorge and Cândida were the ones >>



IN RESIDENCE

ON THE ROCKS
Right, at the rear of the house, the rounded granite rocks function as both supports and garden sculptures
Below, an Isamu Noguchi table sits easily with Oitoemponto's vintage-look chairs



pushing us forward,' says Araújo. The structure of the house 'is a complicated engineering solution. That overhanging body is supported only by a couple of granite rocks. They aren't about to roll down the hill, but they are technically loose rocks. It's safe, though, as the house is made of a single block of reinforced concrete, and the nailing techniques used to fasten it into place are the same as those used on bridges.'

Inside, Vasconcelos specified a mezzanine floor to separate different living areas, as the Varelas insisted on an open-plan space with no doors. Artur Miranda and Jacques Bec, the Porto-based Oitoemponto team, focused on the furniture and furnishings. 'As the house is part of a very monochromatic landscape, its inner theme became equally monochromatic. We used the narrow colour palette around us, based on greys and greens,' says Miranda.

Known for their passion for 1940s and 1950s design, the pair produce quality furniture that looks vintage and familiar; almost all the items in the house carry their own label. A few classics, such as a couple of Isamu Noguchi tables, are the exception. The boldness of their statement didn't, however, break the continuity and coherence that better defines this project. Miranda sums it up in a nutshell: 'The best projects are those where all the parties agree, and that is reflected in the harmony of the final result.' ★

Art' Citta, tel: 35.1 253 580 010;
e-mail: artcitta@mail.telepac.pt
Oitoemponto, tel: 35.1 226 151 724;
e-mail: oitoemponto@oitoemponto.com