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RAW POWER

Jean-Louis Deniot strips the walls of a Miami Beach penthouse to the bare cement, creating a muscular backdrop that marries European sophistication with oceanside sex appeal.

AS TOLD TO INGRID ABRAMOVITCH · PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON UPTON



I HAD AN IMPRESSION OF MIAMI long before I ever visited. I grew up in Paris and loved hearing about the South Beach scene: Gianni Versace and his mansion, Madonna hanging out at the clubs. When I first arrived here 10 years ago, I expected to find a sexy paradise with pastel-colored Art Deco buildings and convertibles cruising along the beach. And a lot of Miami Beach was exactly like that. But on that trip, I also discovered another side to the city at Vizcaya, the Renaissance-style estate built by the industrialist James Deering in 1916. Wandering through the villa and its gardens, I found that there was a link between European taste and American culture that was surprising to see in the midst of such an easygoing and cool vacation spot.

Since then, Miami has become one of my regular destinations (I mostly divide my time between Paris, where my firm is located, New York, and Los Angeles). I am currently renovating a house here, and I have several client projects in the area, including the interiors of the Elysee Miami, a 57-story luxury condo tower that is being designed by Arquitectonica.

I renovated this striking penthouse for a tech entrepreneur from Los Angeles. I had noticed the apartment—in the 1995 La Tour building—from the street even before it was for sale. Through the massive glass windows, you could see into the living room, with its 20-foot ceiling; it had the look of an artist's studio, which I thought was appropriate for the home of Art Basel Miami Beach. Its location in the Mid-Beach area known as Millionaire's Row, between the Faena and Soho Beach House hotels, is ideal. When the penthouse went on the market, I convinced my client to buy it.

On our first visit, we found the place done up like a Spanish castle: tapestries, terra-cotta walls, fountains, columns, and a massive wrought-iron candelabra. I am not kidding. My client was living in a painted-concrete loft in L.A.; I told him I could peel off the drywall here and create a similar kind of



The entry's French 1940s bronze-and-marble console is from Gallery Yves Gastou, and the artwork is by Stephenie Bergman.

Brutalist look. One of my inspirations was the Brancusi atelier in Paris. In photographs of the studio, a monochromatic blue canvas is surrounded by sculptures, some on rough-hewn pedestals. Miami's Art Deco scene was another influence; I gravitated toward the style of Gerrit Rietveld, a Dutch designer of the period, whose work was geometric and avant-garde.

In the living room, the walls were stripped to the bare concrete, which was never meant to be visible. But once exposed, it looked like beautiful stone, textured and vibrant, and I left it untouched. I lined the entry corridor with brass panels to reflect the light; it makes the space look bigger, and the effect is pure sunshine. The flooring is newly installed terrazzo—a nod to classic midcentury Miami.

Everything in the living room needed to be on a huge scale to balance the room's height. The sofa is giant, the concrete head on a pedestal is massive, and the 1920s Italian terrazzo fragment of a nose and mouth on the white shelf near the ceiling is much bigger than it appears—more than two feet tall.

If decorating a room is like creating a story (and to me, it always is), then this living room is a tale of the sea. I designed the cabinet in straw marquetry to hide the television set. It's the blue of the deepest ocean, and it rests on lacquered wooden balls shaped like beach balls (the shape also references both Art Deco and Memphis design). On top of the cabinet, a row of onyx cones reminds me of shark's teeth. The cocktail table has the form of a surfboard, and I designed the rug's pattern to resemble sand and water.

The ceiling in the master bedroom is just eight feet high. To make it look loftier, I commissioned an artist in Paris to paint a canvas of a storm or massive wave. We put the painting on a boat to Miami and glued it in place in the bedroom. The swirling pattern almost appears like a dome. In the master bath, which has a bird's-eye view of the Intracoastal Waterway, I wanted the marble to look like a landscape. I found a stone in Miami with beautiful veining—it looks very Art Deco—and covered every surface in it, along with the vanity, and even designed a matching marble waste bin.

In this penthouse, 26 stories above the ground, you feel as if you are floating above the beach, the neighboring buildings, and even the clouds. You can see birds flying by. It's a very poetic, serene, and some might say surrealistic way to live. ■



In the breakfast area, a custom table is framed by midcentury chairs in a Romo velvet; a custom glass-and-bronze bar cabinet is topped with a 1980s cement vase, a French 1940s carafe, and a 19th-century Nigerian helmet; the pendant is by FontanaArte.



The kitchen's custom stainless steel cabinetry has been laser-printed with an abstract pattern, the sink fittings are by Dornbracht and Franke, the bronze pendant is custom, and the flooring is terrazzo.