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ART

Welcome to the House That Jorge Built

Building in scenic Mount Washington, Jorge Pardo takes his cue from such designers as Wright and Schindler. MOCA lets you take a look.

October 11, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

A cacophony of pounding hammers and buzzing table saws disrupts the quiet Mount Washington neighborhood. Artist Jorge Pardo surveys the handiwork of carpenters, painters, electricians and technicians bustling to complete the angular redwood house at 4166 Sea View Lane. This is no ordinary house; it is actually intended as a functional artwork and opens to the public today as an off-site exhibition, part of the Museum of Contemporary Art's Focus Series. A shuttle bus will transport viewers from the museum to Pardo's sculpture-cum-house.

Over the last decade, Pardo has established an international reputation for his sculpture fabricated to look like modern-style furniture, lighting systems and cabinets. It seemed, therefore, a logical extension to build a house that would be viewed as a sculpture, which he could also live in.

Pardo describes the immodest proposal he put forth in 1993, when MOCA invited him to participate in their Focus exhibition series: "I have a sloped lot and an idea for a house. How can I take those ingredients and make them do something you wouldn't expect?"

MOCA has an impressive track record for its architecture exhibitions, and this show was conceived by curator Ann Goldstein (with exhibition coordinator Staccia Payne) as a way of addressing Pardo's unique interest in dissecting and integrating ideas about what constitutes art and architecture. As Goldstein puts it: "The sculpture is also a house, which puts it in the context of artist-designed houses and furniture. In the past, when artists have made architecture or architects have made sculpture, it has been seen as a crossover. Jorge obliterates the distinctions between the disciplines, between art, architecture and design. I think his work comes out of a broader context."

Citing the work of Minimalist or Conceptual artists like Donald Judd, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci and Michael Asher, Goldstein says: "They used architecture as sculpture to address the social context in their work. But younger artists like Jorge make assumptions that those boundaries are not important, and the work can have meaning as a sofa or chair but also have sculptural meaning."

Pardo, 35, agrees that such categories are "pretty stretched."

"That crossover is about the least interesting part of what I'm doing," he says. "Generally speaking, most architects are bad artists, and most artists are not good architects. But it's not the category that is doing the limiting. Tony Smith was a wonderful architect before he became a sculptor."

Soft-spoken but articulate, Pardo guides a visitor up the entry of railroad-tie steps shaded by a eucalyptus tree and onto a patch of dirt that will become a landscaped U-shaped courtyard surrounded by linked redwood pavilions with floor-to-ceiling windows. "There are no windows to the street. All the glass looks into the courtyard," he explains. Through the opening between pavilions, there is a vista across the arroyo.

"During the winter, you can see sailboats out on the ocean," says Pardo, noting that his Sea View address is more than wishful thinking. "The thing about the house is the site. I am trying to maximize something pastoral," he says.

Pardo bought the 9,000-square-foot lot after touring architect-designed homes in the neighborhood, such as the nearby Usonian-influenced house built in 1942 by Harwell H. Harris, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. Before preparing his drawings for the house, Pardo considered Mount Washington's architectural history, which includes postwar homes built by such Modern architects as John Lautner, Richard Neutra and Gregory Ain. The artist sought to pursue their groundbreaking discoveries in orienting residential construction to the natural environment and prepared elevations that follow the bowl-shaped site.

"I wanted the rooms within the house to reflect the sloping of the lot," he says. "I was conscious of wanting as many different spaces as would be available."

Architect Mark McManus contributed technical expertise and dealt with getting permits from the city, and contractor Robert Gero translated the unconventional shapes into functional rooms. Pardo, however, specified everything from doorknobs to window sizes to the choice of siding. Referencing the many redwood houses in the neighborhood, he ordered 5 1/2-inch redwood boards with a half-inch reveal to underscore the striations of the wood grain. Instead of sealing the redwood, as do most builders, he will let it gray with age like the bark of a tree. The roof is made of corrugated, galvanized steel and oriented so the grooves funnel rain away from the house so he could avoid gutters.

Inside, the pavilions are connected by a ceiling, running as a continuous angled plane from the living room through the kitchen to the master bedroom and bath. In some rooms, ceiling heights are 7 feet, others are 14. "The idea behind the house was to make it go up and down like [Frank Lloyd] Wright's houses, but in a much more reserved way," he explains. A grand staircase leads from the living room down to the garage-studio. One side is lined with bookcases, so the stairwell doubles as a library with windows and a doorway to the courtyard. The white walls, concrete floors and the built-in conversation pit in front of the kitchen fireplace further reveal his debt to postwar Modern architecture.

The house will be open Fridays through Sundays during the month it serves as an exhibition, and for the event, Pardo's sculpture of 100 lights will be borrowed from the collection of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam and installed in his studio at the residence.

MOCA contributed around \$10,000, the approximate budget for other Focus series exhibitions, but Pardo said he paid for the rest of the \$350,000 cost of the home. In January, when the house no longer is a public piece, he will move in.

So how is this to be considered as sculpture? Critic Kate Bush explained in an article for Frieze magazine, "The work grew out of Pardo's desire to create a sculpture that would test the institution's ability to contain it as art--'How' he asks, 'do you make a work of art that a museum can't handle?'"

In addition to institutional critique, Pardo explains that his idea grew out of the very condition of being an artist in L.A. "We have domestic architecture, but we don't have the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For me, what formed my understanding of space was experiencing rooms, places, houses."

Pardo is particularly moved by the architecture of Rudolph Schindler, including the 1922 Schindler House in West Hollywood, now a museum. "Schindler

understood context in a much deeper sense. The guy was trying to make something that wasn't just about being refined, wasn't just about dealing with Modernism, or fetishizing the newness of materials. Through domestic architecture, I became interested in space and how that can dictate what an object can be. The primary consideration of sculpture is space."

Pardo was born in Havana, Cuba, and at age 6 immigrated with his family to Chicago. Although his parents worked blue-collar jobs, Pardo went to the University of Illinois in Chicago to study biology as a premed student. Bored, he took an art class and discovered his true talents. In 1984, he transferred to Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1988. "The dominant education program of that time at Art Center was how to make works of art with a high level of difficulty, so that it always challenges the viewer. As I learned how to make things, I wondered, 'How do you make something wrong? How do you take something, make it turn and do a poetic of some sort?' "

Pardo felt that the thinking of the Modernist architects held unfulfilled potential. "I wondered, 'What if I take this methodology and translate it into what I can use? How can I extend that kind of thinking?' When you talk about Modernism, you have to talk about why it doesn't work. Not as a failure but as an incomplete model for looking at the art objects it represents. I'd much rather be considered a Modernist. What people did at the beginning of the century is pretty potent stuff. I don't think anything is closed yet."

He began by simply making a piece of plywood from scratch. The turning point came in 1990 when he re-created at a slightly different scale a cove table by artist-designer Roy McMakin. By the early '90s, Pardo was producing the Modernist-influenced furniture, lighting and household elements for which he is now well-known and widely exhibited in Europe. In 1994, a series of his kitchen cabinets was shown in MOCA's exhibition of young L.A. artists, "Pure Beauty." Currently on view at Patrick Painter Gallery in Santa Monica (through Wednesday) is a suite of five bedroom sets, painted in appealing decorator shades like pale blue or peach, accompanied by paintings by Laura Owens, his companion.

Similarly, he has tried to create a house that challenges some convention. "It's a complete consideration of context," he says. "I don't know what kind of house to expect from me because I'm not an architect. I hope that translates into why someone would do a presentation like this. That's part of the context of the work. It's not the same question you'd think if the house were designed by an architect. It's a slight difference, but that's the art in the work."

Why, one might ask, doesn't Pardo simply reverse Tony Smith's direction and go into architecture? He has been asked to build a house in Puerto Rico for art collector Cesar Reyes. "I don't have a problem with that. I'm interested in what this process makes me. I'm not carrying the torch for art. I'm an artist because that's all I've ever done, but I don't have anything against architecture. I'm an ambitious person with my work. I want to keep the ante going."

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"JORGE PARDO," 4166 Sea View Lane. Complimentary shuttle service will run continuously on Sundays from the Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., to the house. Dates: Today through Nov. 15. Hours: Noon-5 p.m., Fri.-Sun. Prices: Free. Phone: (213) 621-2766.