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Ninimalist charm

By ELAINE DONG
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This prolific Portuguese designer believes in touching lives with her creativity and giving back to the communities in which she works.

SHE greets us with a cool smile, wearing a stylish black dress with a gold scarf draped graphically across her shoulders. In fact, the shape and texture of the scarf conjures up the word "architectural". On her arms clank a set of gold bangles and on a finger is a striking pebble ring.

"My workshop made this for me," says Nini Andrade Silva, designer extraordinaire. "It's a pebble, one among many we used for a hotel project."

The hotel in question is the award-winning Vine Hotel in Funchal on the Portuguese island of Madeira. Funchal is also where Nini, as she is known in the design world, was born and where she grew up.

"There are pebbles everywhere on the beaches of Madeira Island," she says fondly. She loves the pebbles of her childhood, and even named her charity, Girl of the Pebble. More on that later.



Nini in demand: Nini Andrade Silva has made her mark in the design world with her award-winning designs for hotel interiors.

To label Nini, 49 would be difficult; she is an acclaimed interior designer, a painter, an artist, a furniture designer, a sought-after speaker, and more.

"I don't have one job. I have a career. And it revolves around creation and creativity," she says.

While she is most prolific in Portugal, Nini has designed the interiors for countless buildings and spaces around the world, many of which have won design awards. As she designs, she reaches out to the communities where she is working.

"Whenever I am working on a project, I will try to channel funds from my charity (the aforementioned Girl of the Pebble) to the local community. In

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the time that I spend in a place, I would go out and see it. I talk to people and find out from the locals where the needs are. If it's within my abilities, I'll set up a fund and channel it where it's needed most," she says.

The Girl of the Pebble foundation was initially set up to help children in need in Funchal, but as Nini's work took her around the world, so to have the funds from the charity gone global as well. For example, in Brazil, she has helped to set up a school for little kids.



The serene, posh bar of the Aquapura Douro Valley Hotel (Portugal). —Villas & Golfe magazine

"I'm very sure this is what I'm meant to be doing in life. I came into the world to design and help people," she says.

Nini was in Kuala Lumpur recently to plan for the opening of her atelier, which will contain exclusive pieces of her creations, every piece as compelling and unique as its designer. She is also working on several projects in town. These include the private homes of clients and a space at Taylor's University.

She started designing furniture for her hotel projects, as she found it difficult to source for the pieces she had in mind. As her projects grew, and with it, the pool of artisans she worked with around the world, she decided to put out a range of furniture as well.

"Why not? To me, anything is possible. Firsts are not a problem for me. I always dare to be the first to do anything," she quips, her eyes lighting up.

She grew up defying convention and her mother always told her she was more than a handful.

"When I finished school, I started designing. The thing with new styles is that they are not always very well accepted. People don't get something that is new; they want familiarity.

"But as a young designer, I had unwavering faith and belief in my designs. I think all young designers need to have that. You need to believe in what you do, understand why you do it, and be able to explain it. You don't just design something yet remain unable to communicate your idea to others," she says.

Nini's style has been given its very own label in the industry: Nini minimalist. It is minimalist, but with soul, according to her.

"Design is not what you see, but what you feel. Before I start on a project, I would walk around the town. I want to feel the pulse of the place, talk to the people, feel the energy. Then I will incorporate all that into the design," she says.

For the stunning Vine Hotel on Madeira, Nini brought the spirit of winemaking and the beauty of the vineyards into the place. She emulated the beach pebbles that she loves so much in the cushions and sofas; she evoked the harvest of grapes in the grand dining hall, with full-scale murals of the vineyard and structures in the ceiling that reminds one of hanging vines ripe with fruit; she brought the four seasons into the intimate bedrooms with visuals and colour; the cascades that the island is famous for are forever immortalised in the beautiful bathrooms.

These and many more are Nini's trademarks – the marriage of design and landscape, or aesthetics and feelings. This hotel garnered four nominations at the European Property Awards in London in 2009, and won in the category of best suite. It was also shortlisted for the World

Architecture Festival 2009 in Barcelona.

Another project of hers, Hotel Teatro which opened in May 2010 in Porto, Portugal, won in the the Best Interior Design of Europe category at the International Property Awards 2010 in London. In this project, Nini evoked the magic of the theatre, with words from scripts adorning the lobby, film reels as the bases of seats and counters, luxurious remakes of old-worlde film screening rooms, and cosy alcoves for suites.



The lobby of Hotel Teatro (Porto, Portugal) bathed in warm, inviting lighting. — Nickolas Bayntun

When asked what it is that moved her during her brief time in Kuala Lumpur, she immediately answers, "The green! I would love to bring all these greens into a design. Have the outside, inside!"

When she designs, Nini thinks about how people want to feel in a space.

"I look at their life, needs and functions. Whether it's a home or a hotel I am designing, it comes down to feelings. I want people to feel happy when they walk in, when they're staying there. A lot of people may not know the technicalities of design, but they know how they want to feel. I listen to them."

She says the important qualities of a designer is honesty and being able to make people trust you.

"When a client has trust and confidence in you, you can really design something fantastic. If a client doesn't trust you, no matter how good you are, he won't be happy. The most important thing is to be honest with yourself first, and to know your own style," she says.

"When you're a new designer out in the world, there will be many people offering you their advice, opinions, criticisms. Listen only to what is important, and ignore the rest," she says.

She tells us the story of the three frogs in a race. Everyone was flabbergasted; no frogs had ever raced before. But the three started hopping. The first one dropped out after a while, followed by the second. But the third kept on, and eventually won the race! How did he do it?

With a straight face, Nini delivers the punch line: "The third frog was deaf!" And she breaks into a big smile. "So, be like the frog. Don't listen to people who tell you, you can't do it. Just go ahead and do what is in your heart."

Part of Nini's work includes giving talks to design students at universities. She talks of a particular lecture in the United Arab Emirates' capital, Abu Dhabi, where three students came to see her before her speech, "We talked for a while, and they went back to their seats when it was time for me to go on. In the middle of my speech, I invited the three of them to come on stage and talk about design. They were so surprised! They resisted, but finally, each one came up to talk. After that, they told me that it changed their lives! Someone believed in them enough to ask them to go on stage. I was very happy."

This is what Nini strives to do every day, to touch someone's life through

her work and her design.

"People understand when something is honest and authentic. It's the only way to create. If you listen to everyone, you can't create. So first listen to yourself, and in doing that, your work will touch others."

- he Nini ndrade ilva telier in ala mp r is still in the planning stages. er e site is niniandradesilva.com she can also e reached thro gh a s iving oncepts at 0 - 28 000 or has.com.my.

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