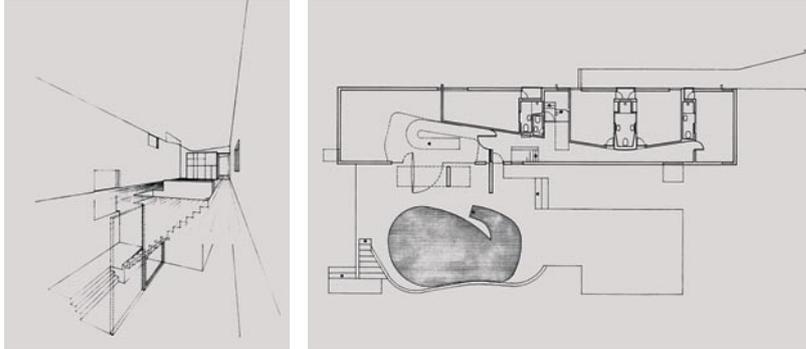


The area of the city bordering the lake - the *lago sul* [South Lake] and *lago norte* [North Lake] - was originally designated for the political class - ministers, diplomats and other officials - but has since expanded exponentially to include the middle class. The ubiquitous 'executive homes', euphemistically described as 'colonial', take their inspiration from the incredibly influential TV *novelas* [soap operas], which depict the fantastically exaggerated fictional lives of the super-rich in São Paulo. These houses, really more like sets, are without exception badly planned, dark and stuffy.

The projects for the Magalhães Houses were unusually protracted both before and during construction. First, client and architect became aware that they did not share a common language of design. The Niemeyer palaces, of course, were ceremonial buildings at a monumental scale and totally unsuitable as typological solutions. The clients made several cultural expeditions to Europe, while the architect began to explore Brazil, not only the famous beaches but also the more inaccessible treasures of the interior. It took several years before we felt ready to embark on this project together.



Project for the first Magalhães House, Brasília  
Thomas Decker Architect

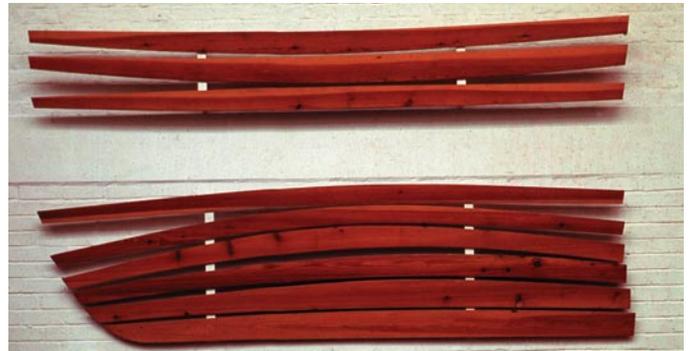
# REVISITING BRAZIL

## Magalhães House, Brasília

### Thomas Decker Architect 1997-2001

The Magalhães House occupies a long, narrow, very suburban, site in the *lago sul* close to one of the bridges which links this district to the centre. The commission followed a study for another site, steeply sloping but with a fantastic view, which the client eventually thought too far away for commuting.

The starting point for the Magalhães family was their discomfort with the claustrophobic corridors of the neighbouring 'colonial' houses, which was happily in accord with my own desire to make the centre of the house a space of shifting definition - from entrance hall, to central circulation space, to part of the living room, and to open all rooms off it. This gave a wonderful opportunity to introduce a vertical space into what was necessarily, due to the size of the accommodation required, a horizontal plan. It also gave space and reason to a feature which lifted the house from being an anonymous white box: a wall clad with boards of frejo wood rising to a skylight. This wall reminded me of a disassembled boat I had seen in the National Maritime Museum, in which the 3-dimensional form of the boat was implicit in the spaces between the strakes. In the Magalhães House the wall is cut and folded to provide almost a map of the house.



Disassembled boat, National Maritime Museum, London  
Photo © Thomas Decker



Magalhães House, Brasília  
Thomas Decker Architect

The second reason for the long gestation of the Magalhães House was that there is almost no construction industry in Brasília. Most materials came by lorry from Belo Horizonte (600km) or São Paulo (1000km). The construction of the house was unusual and items such as windows and doors were fabricated from scratch. While this was liberating, it meant a great deal of uncertainty as to what materials could be found and even what tools were available. After long searches for materials and intensive negotiations over craftsmanship the results were superb.

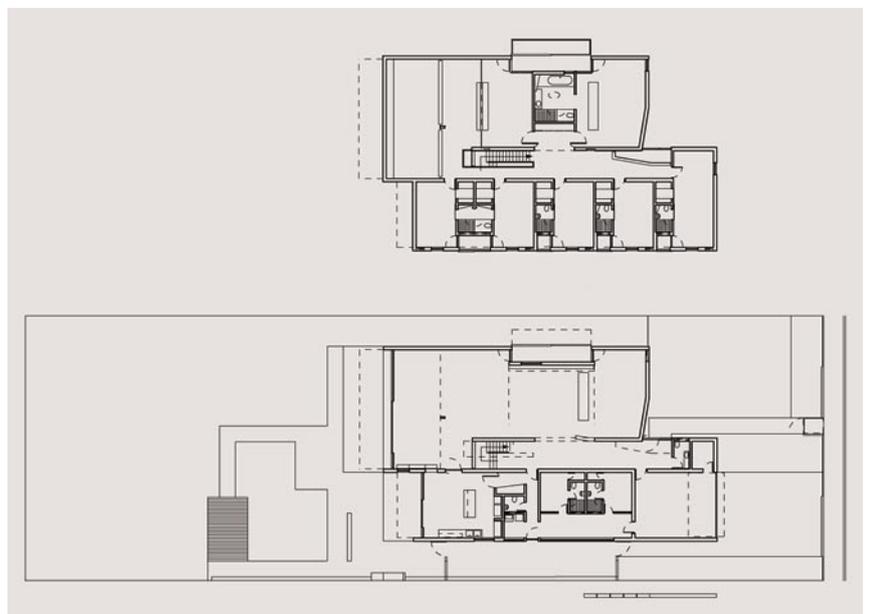
To make this house environmentally responsive, virtually all the technologies used in its construction had to be invented or rediscovered. Heavy insulated construction makes the house cool and calm. Unusually for Brasília, the house has running hot water from a solar heating system, and the air-conditioning is restricted to the master bedroom and study. In the other bedrooms, cross-ventilation is facilitated by the traditional *bandeiras* (louvered panels) over the doors. Balconies are protected (against both sun and burglars) by sliding steel louvered *brise-soleils*.

At the final party the clients declared that 'it had been worth it'. A fitting end, I thought, to my Brazilian adventure.

Thomas Decker  
London 2003

Two systems of organising spaces were used to maintain some difference between the large living rooms and the smaller bedrooms. The first, used in the open-plan spaces, is a series of very large cupboard units used to separate different areas in the living room, study and master bedroom. The second is a sequence of cupboard / bathroom / balcony which gives each bedroom a secure outdoor space. In fact security was a constant and very serious concern and there was a constant tension between the desire for openness and the necessity for enclosure. Great attention had to be paid to light and view on the narrow suburban site, which the client came to appreciate:

*There is an integration, almost a continuity, between the interior of the house and the garden. From the study I can see the children playing outside. From any space it is possible to have a view of the sky, stars, moon, sun and garden. It is a wonderful feeling of freedom and well-being... In the morning the sun scintillates in the skylight and the house lightens as if we were outdoors. At certain times we simply encounter a full moon, exhibiting itself gratuitously.*



Magalhães House, Brasília  
Thomas Decker Architect