

Wallpaper*

6 aprile 2022

Wallpaper

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Step inside J Balvin's mountain retreat in Medellín

Reggaeton superstar J Balvin's villa, by architects 5 Sólidos, is a minimalist frame for Medellín's mountainous vistas. *This is the cover story of the May 2022 Design Issue of Wallpaper*, on newsstands from 7 April.*



In the living room, 'Osaka' sofas, designed by Pierre Paulin in 1967 for Italian manufacturer La Cividina, are complemented by a pair of solid travertine coffee tables

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Iscrizione Registro Imprese: UD 02697580302 Iscrizione Rea: CCIAA UD-281143 Capitale sociale: € 10.000,00 i.v.

When visiting Casa Aire, it's easy to drift through the house like a breeze, as you're pulled almost irresistibly, lemming-like, towards an overhanging balcony that puts you front and centre of a lush, verdant view of apparently endless mountains. The striking three-bedroom residence floats graciously in a hypnotic vista that could be anywhere in the Swiss Alps, a zen islet in an infinite sea of green. It takes time to pull your eyeballs back from the brink, to begin to appreciate the structure that holds you aloft, elegantly elevating your experience in this magnificent natural setting.

There's little in the house that points to the owner J Balvin's exalted status as a kingmaker and serial collaborator on the global music scene. It's difficult, for that matter, to even guess which part of the world he hails from. Perched high up in the clouds, an hour outside his hometown of Medellín, Casa Aire is designed to keep guests guessing, while providing a perfectly balanced home for the five natural elements once associated with the Platonic solids – earth, water, fire, air and aether (or heavenly bodies).



The five Platonic solids also inspired the name of the Colombian architecture and interior design studio, 5 Sólidos, who created this minimalist home. Led by Daniel Correa, Maria José Fernandez and Elisa Ortega, the youthful, Medellín-based trio have been propelled into the architectural stratosphere by their stylish collaborations with their most illustrious client at home and, more recently, abroad.



Ancient bonsai and Spanish olive trees, arranged according to the principles of feng shui, sit next to refined exterior concrete cladding that brings to mind the perfection of Tadao Ando's works. Japanese water features play with the earthy hues of steel girders, painted in light olive green to match the bespoke lighting crafted from steel laminas. The lighting, in turn, acts as a foil to the living room showpiece,

a trio of curvaceous 'Osaka' sofas, designed by Pierre Paulin in 1967 for Italian manufacturer La Cividina. Fifteen men were needed to position two tonnes of travertine in the living room, to make two geometric coffee tables that bring the celestial decor down to earth.

Defying the stereotype of capricious carbuncles built for cocaine cowboys, this is no soliloquy to success. Instead the 500 sq m Casa Aire is the epitome of self-restraint, a delicately balanced homage to yin and yang. Only the colourful artworks by Takashi Murakami and Californian art collaborative FriendsWithYou that hang in each of the bedrooms, and the pink and blue basketball court, hint at the owner's polychromatic stage persona and playful collaborations with, among others, SpongeBob SquarePants and Murakami himself.

Casa Aire is 'zero flex', to put it in the reggaeton lexicon of its owner. J Balvin, born José Álvaro Osorio Balvín, is famous for his ability to cross borders and persuade superstars such as Pharrell Williams, Beyoncé and Ed Sheeran to sing with him in Spanish, as well as regular team-ups with fellow Latino superstars Benito 'Bad Bunny' Martinez, Nicky Jam and Daddy Yankee.

The advertising revenues, sold-out concerts, streaming and seemingly endless co-branding opportunities that come from more than a billion views of some of his most popular YouTube hits and 51 million followers on Instagram have swelled his bank balance, but his architectural inspiration couldn't be further from his pink hair, diamond-studded grillz and extravagant fashion collaborations with Louis Vuitton, Supreme and Prada.

'It's really, really subtle, because one thing is the way I express myself as an artist, the other one is the way my soul expresses itself,' says Balvin, as we meet at Casa Aire in late February. 'This is my soul here. I'm not about flexing. When I come back home, my soul rests. It's not about showing off, it's about creating something with nature.'

Like everything in life, the simple things are the most amazing.’ Cutting out the relentless pressure that comes with his fame is key for Balvin, who has plans to unleash his creativity on designs for a hotel and for other celebrities.

Built on a steeply inclined plot, Casa Aire features three bedrooms, each opening out fully onto an expansive, cantilevered deck, which offers up uninterrupted views of the lush Andean terrain that separates Balvin’s hometown from the Colombian capital, Bogotá. ‘Everything has to be a cool spirit,’ he says. ‘I respect the people who have the money and just do whatever they want. But it’s my space; it has to be really like a sanctuary. It’s balance, peace and inspiration. I think those three help with the way we are as humans, how we can become better people. The places you live influence how you feel inside. So, if you were living in such a mess, it’s not easy to be really clear.’

Casa Aire is Balvin’s third foray into residential architecture with 5 Sólidos. The trusted collaborators were also called on to build his first property, Casa Dos Aguas; decorate the Medellín offices of his production company, Vibras; and transform his three-storey penthouse in Zaha Hadid’s New York landmark, 520 West 28th Street. 5 Sólidos’ vision of minimalist design with a haptic hue resonates with Balvin. ‘They definitely know how to read me,’ he says. ‘It’s about finding someone that can really materialise the energy and the thoughts that you have, and make them a reality.’

After forging such a close relationship with their celebrity client, Correa says Casa Aire was relatively simple to execute, drawing largely on the principles enshrined in earlier projects. The architects continue to deepen their understanding of Balvin with every project, incorporating similar design elements while giving much of the spotlight over to Colombia’s stunning scenery. ‘We try to connect everything with nature,’ says Ortega. ‘We believe in the positive energy that comes from collaborating with others who share our humanist vision, and the uplifting spirit that comes with the quest for constant improvement.’



Despite his peripatetic life, there's no question about where home lies for Balvin and his newborn son, Rio. The latest house, in part, was built to celebrate his recent arrival, and serves as a sanctuary for his family and friends. 'I want to come here to connect with myself, to really connect with my roots,' says Balvin. 'When you look at that view, you can see how beautiful my country is, and the biodiversity that we have. It's basically my getaway, a place where I can meet myself again.'

The troubled past of his hometown, the most dangerous city on Earth at the time of his birth in 1985, has been a constant in his rapid rise to the top table of the international music business. ‘We have a really dark past, you know. There was no other way to go than up,’ he says. ‘I think that helped the mindset of people to say, “How can we make this place better? How can we elevate everything?” Like I did with my chosen form of expression, music.’

It’s also inspired him to look optimistically to the future: ‘I respect the past, because it taught us how not to fuck things up in the future, but my views are always in the future,’ he concludes. ‘When you create something, whether that’s architecture, art, design, music or fashion, it’s like Kanye West said, “You’ve got to think about 100 years before and 100 years after.” So that’s how you create a fucking cool place, going and taking that energy from the past and taking it into the future.’



