

MELVIN VILLARROEL

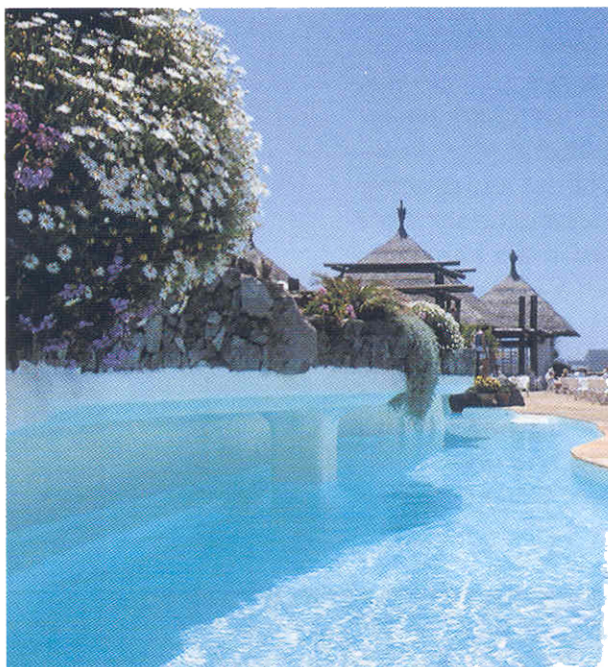
No one has beautified Marbella more than award-winning architect, Melvin Villarroel. Report: **Vivion O'Kelly**. Photos: **Wayne Chasan & Tullio Gatti**, courtesy of **Melvin Villarroel**.

Marbella has become justly famous all over the world for the incredible quality and originality of its architecture. Few places can boast so many beautiful residential developments, the range of top-category hotels in a variety of styles or such magnificent private homes as this privileged corner of Europe. Marbella has set the standard for environmental architecture everywhere and created its very own style that is the envy of many established luxury resorts in other countries and one that is already being copied in other parts of the world, even as far as China. The truly amazing thing about all this is that one man is largely responsible for it. His name is Melvin Villarroel.

An Elegant Architect

The Bolivian-born architect arrived in Marbella 30 years ago and in those three decades his name has

become internationally synonymous with style, originality and creative energy. Ask him about his chosen profession - he studied architecture in Santiago de Chile, engineering in Bolivia and later validated his degrees at Seville University - and he defines it in simple terms. "I believe an architect must also be an engineer. Engineering is the essence of construction, but it is not always poetic which an architect must be. One complements the other." Certainly his accomplishments bear this out and they read like a *Who's Who* of architectural elegance and beauty: Hotel Puente Romano, Marbella Club, Marina del Este in Almuñecar, Alcazabar Beach in Estepona, Ventura del Mar, Alhambra del Mar, the Kempinski Resort Hotel in Estepona, Almena Beach, Cabo Bermejo, the Menara Beach complex, the Mansion Club and, of course, the 1995 Marina Puente Romano, for which Melvin Villarroel was awarded the International



Prize for the Best Tourist Complex in the World. He has, along his distinguished way, collected a large number of prizes and awards, including the National Gold Medal for Architectural Design in 2003.

Work has taken him all across Europe and to the Far East, but Melvin Villarroel was already one of the biggest and brightest names in international architecture before he arrived in Marbella in 1973, mainly due to his having designed the then-shocking Caracol Shopping Centre in Santiago. This was the first spiral design in all of Chile and it quickly became the inspiration for subsequent generations of artists and architects all over

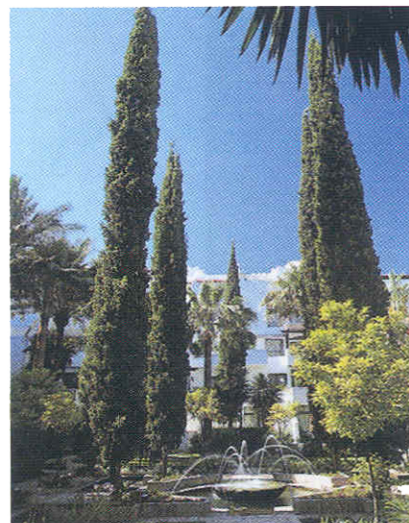
South America. "My architecture is based on what we call the *vacio*, the empty space. We have a unique climate here in Andalucia, where the sun shines for more than 300 days of the year with enough rainfall to make this one of the most naturally beautiful places in the world. We must not cut nature out of our lives. Buildings should be designed to take this into account, rather than shutting it out with doors and walls. Nature plays an essential part in my architecture."

This philosophy became the cornerstone of Villarroel's work, and when he designed the Puente Romano Hotel, he used it to change the basic concept of luxury resort architecture. Its

enormous success led to other emblematic developments and over the subsequent three decades, the Villarroel name became the hallmark of architectural excellence, as can be seen from the plans for the Abama Hotel & Resort GL complex in Tenerife, a huge affair Melvin refers to as The Citadel that will house many thousands of people, blending into a landscape that would be the envy of many a large resort town. And Melvin Villarroel is building it from scratch.

Paradise on Earth

The hotel has 308 rooms, all facing the sea, with different types of suites, luxurious areas with terraces and private swimming



Architecture

pools. As an independent feature, a Congress and Conference Centre with full services and capacity for up to 500 people has been planned. Entry to the Citadel will be by drawbridge over the golf course, passing through four magnificent tall quadrilateral towers that would not be out of place in Marrakesh. With top-class restaurants and bars, fitness and sporting facilities, the project will certainly become the standard by which all others are to be judged in the future.

Situated close to San Juan Beach and the town of Guía de Isora, on the southwest of the island of Tenerife, 20 kilometres from the Reina Sofía International Airport, the land sits on a downward sloping plateau overlooking the sea, providing views of the Atlantic Ocean from all 18 holes on the new golf course. The course designer, Dave Thomas, worked closely



An overall feeling of harmony



Wooden beams add a sense of space



Nature and natural elements

with Melvin to create a spectacular design that includes 22 lakes joined by waterfalls. Pathways for electric buggies meander past centuries' old palm trees (there are 200 different species of trees here, many of which have grown on the estate for hundreds of years). A marina, to be built in the large cove at the base of the low cliffs, is another attractive feature. "The development of the region is quite similar to that of the Costa del Sol. They started building out from the airport, and this complex is the furthest they have gone so far. It will be like the new Marbella," Villarroel says.

The project forms part of the third generation of the architect's work. As he puts it: "The first generation was, coincidentally, best exemplified by another Tenerife project I did in the Eighties, which was the

400-room Jardin Tropical, the first hotel on the island ever to have won a government Design and Tourism Excellence Award. The second generation would be the Kempinski Hotel in Estepona, the Marina Puente Romano and other projects built in the Nineties, and now the Abama Hotel & Resort Grande Luxe complex." The latter particularly reflect a Moorish influence, a strong feature of Villarroel's work. "Don't forget," he said, "the Moors were in Andalucia for many centuries and a third of our language comes from Arabic. Geometry and mathematics were brought by the Moors to Europe, Córdoba was the centre of the greatest civilization of that period, it is inevitable that we are all influenced by this history."

Style that Travels

Speaking of styles and cultures travelling to other countries, we touch on Villarroel's work in The Far East and the invitation to Shanghai that came after the Chinese saw his architecture in a book. "Shanghai is a city of 18 million people, with the usual high-rise buildings surrounding it. Then there is a residential belt around that, and together with the Chinese government, we are planning low-density developments with buildings not more than five storeys high. That's the concept behind this project," Melvin states, commenting that with Shanghai's climate being not very different from Southern Spain, he was pleased to find

that his work would fit perfectly into an Asian landscape without losing its essentially Mediterranean essence. The Fair Lake project in Shanghai is thus proof of the universality of good architecture: it has certain features that define it as Chinese, but it is still recognisable as pure Melvin Villarroel.

Particularly interesting is the fact that through this project, the Chinese construction industry is recuperating some of its lost skills. "They do not use the same materials as we do these days. Everything is done at an industrial level, they had lost the skills needed to work by hand. Now they are going back to artesanal craftsmanship," Melvin states. So is there a project in China with a certain Moroccan influence? He smiles "We bring a little of ourselves wherever we go, don't you think?"

The Chinese certainly noticed Melvin Villarroel's work in Europe and published a beautiful coffee-table book on him. But the photographs of these mainly Spanish buildings, as Villarroel himself points out, have a distinctly Chinese flavour to them. The photographer had seen what no European had noticed, focussing on the details of what could almost have been the work of a Chinese architect. Villarroel seems to be amused by this, and perhaps a little flattered. After all, health for the body, peace for the mind and harmony with the environment are universal values too. ■



Marina del Este, Almuñécar, Granada