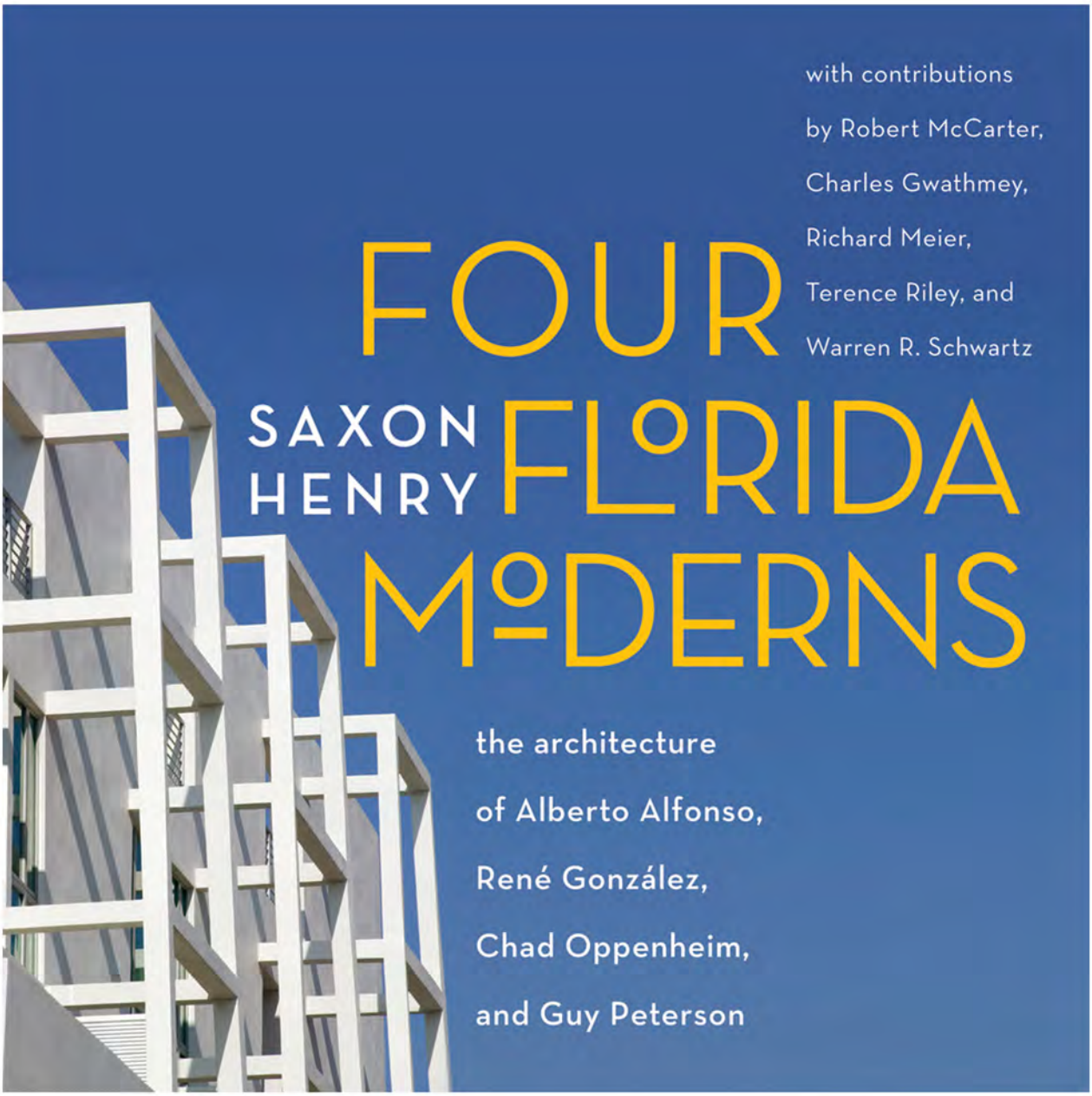
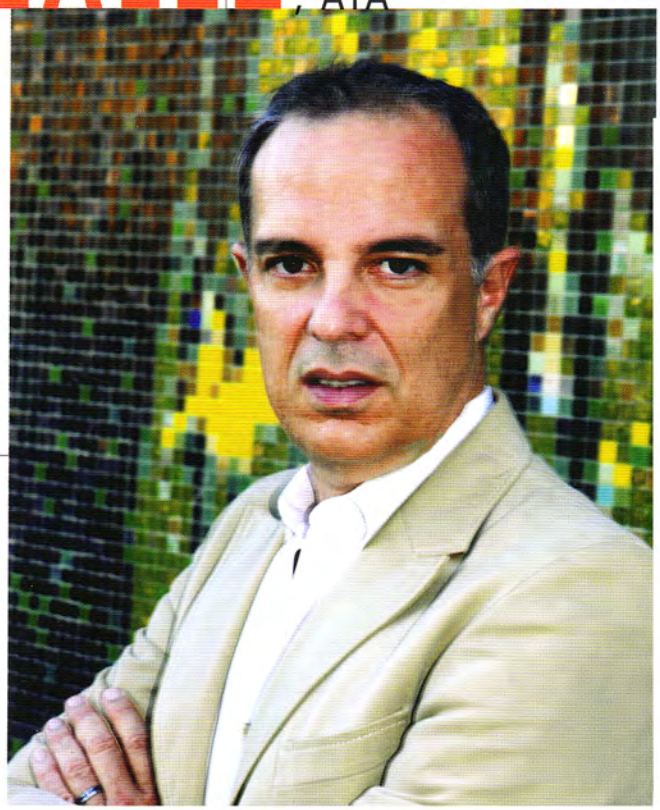
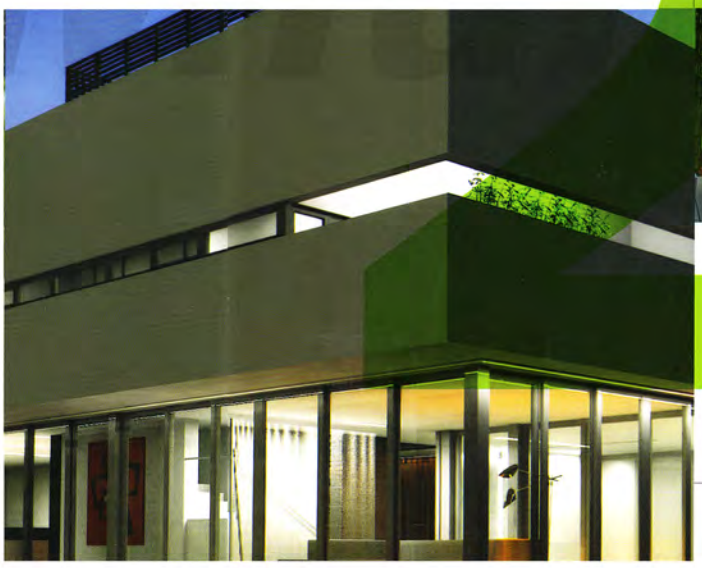

with contributions
by Robert McCarter,
Charles Gwathmey,
Richard Meier,
Terence Riley, and
Warren R. Schwartz
FOUR
SAXON
HENRY
FLORIDA
MODERNS
the architecture
of Alberto Alfonso,
René González,
Chad Oppenheim,
and Guy Peterson

RENÉ GONZÁLEZ, AIA





René González Architect | Miami, Florida

René González Architect | Miami, Florida

René González was born in Cuba. His family migrated to South Florida when he was three years old, and he grew up in the tropical surroundings that would come to have a significant influence on his design sensibilities.

González attended the University of Florida School of Architecture during his undergraduate years, studying under Martin Gundersen, for whom he served as a teaching assistant. "Martin's system of diagramming has stayed with me during my career," he says. "This rigor helped me tremendously in graduate school and it's something that I think about constantly when we're developing projects because these principles inform everything involved in organizing a program."

González left Florida to earn a Master of Architecture degree from UCLA. During his coursework, he attended studios led by Frank Israel and Richard Meier, and he would become a project designer for Meier on the Getty Center. He also collaborated with Israel during a time of extreme experimentation with materials and form, returning to Florida to oversee the construction of a residence on Jupiter Island that Israel had designed.

Once he returned to South Florida, González participated in another significant early collaboration, designing Wolfsonian Museum in Miami Beach with architect Mark Hampton, a member of the Sarasota School. As González hit his stride in his career, he began teaching and lecturing at various universities, including UCLA, the University of Virginia, Florida International University, and a variety of institutions in South America.

In 1997, González opened his eponymous firm, creating a vehicle for the further exploration of materials and of the connection between the landscape and interiors. "Our approach is always holistic, meaning that we engage interiors and landscape, as well as architecture," he explains. "For each project, we research innovative materials, many from aeronautics and science."

Designing museums and gallery spaces has been a constant in González's career since the early days, and he continues to explore exhibition design for both public and private collections. His ability to create refined spaces for displaying art is the result of a rigorous distillation process. "How we think as architects is related to a process of questioning, a willingness to consistently ask about what we

→ THE ETHEREAL QUALITY OF THIS SPACE WITHIN KARLA ACCENTUATES RENÉ GONZÁLEZ'S PASSION FOR USING LIGHT AND MATERIALS TO CREATE THE EXPERIENTIAL.

↑ THE LAYERING OF SQUARE AND RECTANGULAR FORMS IN GONZÁLEZ'S DESIGN OF THIS PALM BEACH HOUSE IS EVIDENT EVEN IN THE SIMPLEST DETAILS.

see—filtering, distilling, adjusting focus on various aspects of the work," he remarks. "This process of inquiry leads to a quality of connection, whether it's with a site, a landscape, a client, a characteristic of light, an existing structure, or simply a concept. In turn, this connection is transformed into spatial realities."

The instinctual vocabulary that González employs to create architecture, which is at once powerful and serene, is likely the result of a collision of influences: the intuitive way of designing he was exposed to during his years in Los Angeles and the trajectory of modernism that flows through the sensibilities of his mentors, Meier among them.

ANALYSIS **by Richard Meier, FAIA, Principal of Richard Meier & Partners Architects, LLP, in New York and Los Angeles, Pritzker Prize winner**

Modern architecture is a progression. It is an ongoing dialogue between what was and what can be, and I am glad to see young architects like René González forging ahead with a vitality and discipline that keeps the continuum moving forward. As a modernist in South Florida, González faces a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Within Miami and its neighboring areas, the atmosphere seems charged with the connection between the old and the new, between the urban and the bucolic.

The tropical culture and climate offer a fertile context for expression, yet these same natural elements present a series of constraints for the architect. Melding the history and culture of South Florida and the principles of tropical design with the manipulation of light, geometry, and land-

scape as practiced in modernism requires a delicate act of balance. René González, refreshingly, seizes on the challenge articulated by Paul Ricoeur when he wrote that in pursuit of modernization we must "take root . . . in order to ceaselessly invent."[1]

Perhaps his early association with my friend, the Los Angeles architect Frank Israel, informed González's sensitivity to light, materials, and the individual nature of each site. Critical to the strong sense of space evinced by his work is the formation of light. The wood lattice system in his design for the Miami Museum of Contemporary Art lobby filters the light from the outside, casting a layer of illumination on the interior and framing the space in harmony with the entry plaza and courtyard. Beyond that, the materials and palette establish this point of entry as a portal to a museum of Miami and for Miami.

↓ THE WOOD LOUVERS IN THIS INDIAN CREEK HOME FILTER THE SUN'S RAYS, CREATING PATTERNS WITHIN ITS INDOOR AND OUTDOOR SPACES.

Similarly, González implements translucent panels to identify the space in his design for KARLA, a floral and event-planning company, which is housed in a converted warehouse. The shadow and light composing the backdrop of the space and its contents make the movement through the building a sensory experience. This connection between the human experience and the building is stirring in González's residential work as well. Indian Creek incorporates a series of pavilions enclosed with wood louvers and glass that not only filter the sun's rays but also dictate the light's composition and the patterns created within. The wood louvers bind the living spaces with light and the spirit of the tropics, while stone walls and reflecting pools inside the house harness the light by day and encourage movement and circulation.

The González program for a retreat in the Florida Keys makes the most of the connection between land and sea, elevating the building from the water with pilotis and incorporating a freely designed facade, which energizes the tension

between opacity and transparency. These elements combine with enclosed walkways and ramps to create a confluence and celebration of land, air, and water.

The order of geometry in architecture is a captivating enterprise in South Florida in that the landscape holds such sway over the building. The invocation of primary geometric forms, "beautiful forms because they are clearly legible," as Le Corbusier phrased it, to shape the dialogue between program and site yields affecting compositions when set against the backdrop of lush, and occasionally volatile, South Florida.[2]

The linear theme of René González's redesign of and addition to Maurice Fatio's 1936 Streamline Moderne house on the Atlantic Ocean in Palm Beach is informed entirely by the properties of the site. The layering of square and rectangular forms on the sprawling two-acre parcel of land, even in the vegetation, satisfies the obligation to order while drawing the inhabitant toward the ocean and points east. González's reorganization of the existing plan explores the relationship between vertical and horizontal spaces, in both the layout and the use of materials in the wall panels, windows, and pillars, creating areas of compression that clearly define the space within its tropical context. The efficacy of this plan is carried out to lyrical effect in a compact guesthouse in the Sunshine Ranches, whose simple layout is framed by rectangular wooden forms in the rafters and windows.

The most salient component of Florida architecture to enrich the modernist approach is the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces. The balance between the two is where the intimacy of the region is most lucidly expressed. Consistent in González's work are flexible thresholds, which designate both garden and building as spaces for living. Interior spaces connect with, and at times dissolve into, the verdant lawns, bamboo, weeping ficus, and palm trees that are the timeless features of the region. In cultural spaces such as the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, the vegetation and landscape direct the architecture, and the manmade elements of concrete, metal, tile, and stone are embedded within the jungle context.

In González's residential work, garden and pool are often enveloped within the house's boundaries. Most notably, in the open interior plan of his Key Biscayne house, there is a meditative pool in the center. The covered terraces, breezeways, cascading garden stairs, and fountains of the Palm Beach house pay tribute to the ideal of the tropical paradise, as do the gardens and reflecting pools of Indian Creek, which flow to the dissolving walls of the interior spaces. Here, too, the roof garden and roof lawn restore the land covered by the building. Without nostalgia, González is able to connect with the essence of the South Florida landscape and to create a sense of place for our time.

The configuration of volumes brought together in radiant light; the use of raw materials and geometric principles to bring spirit, harmony, and order to a space within a unique setting: these were the challenges and opportunities we had in the design of the Getty Center in Los Angeles. Modern architecture is a sensory pursuit as well as an intellectual one, rooted in the land and history of the places we inhabit. Just as the photosensitive glass in the roof of his Key Biscayne house shifts the hue and the intensity of the light in accordance with the time of day, so too does the work of René González evolve in its natural pattern.

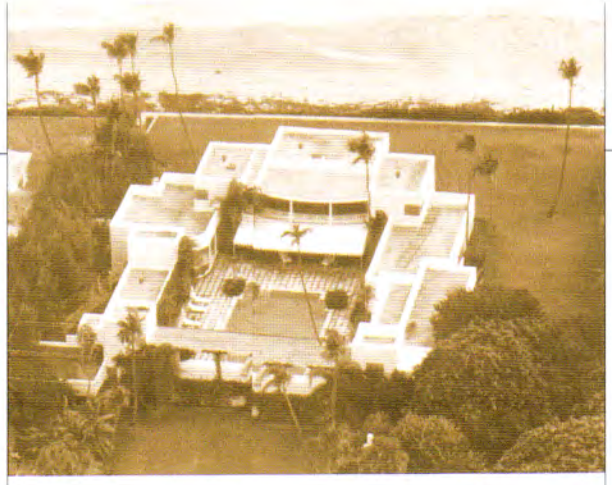
↑ THE DESIGN OF THE CISNEROS FONTANALS ART FOUNDATION IS COMPOSED OF MANIPULATED NATURAL PATTERNS THAT DEPICT A TROPICAL JUNGLE.

↓ A MEDITATIVE POOL IS ENVELOPED WITHIN THE BOUNDARY OF THE KEY BISCAYNE HOUSE.

PALM BEACH HOUSE, 1997

Palm Beach, Florida

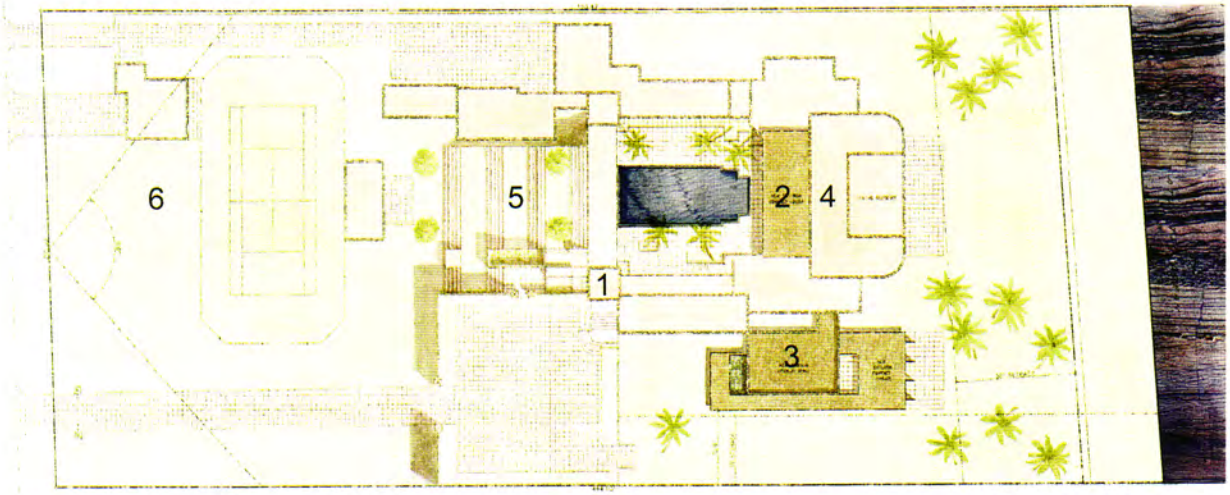
González updated and reconfigured the interiors of this landmarked 18,000-square-foot Streamline Moderne house, originally designed by Maurice Fatio in 1936. He also designed a beachside living pavilion, a covered poolside terrace, and a series of cascading garden stairs and fountains for the property—all inspired by the site, which is a two-acre parcel of land on the Atlantic Ocean.



↑ UTOPIAN FLORIDIAN LIVING CONDITIONS, WHICH FATIO REFERENCED FOR THE ORIGINAL DESIGN, WERE REINTERPRETED BY GONZÁLEZ TO BRING THE NATURAL BEACH ENVIRONMENT INTO A MODERN CONTEXT.

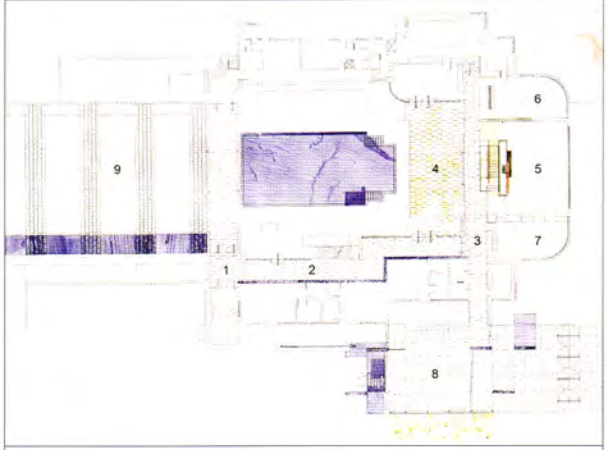
→ THE HORIZONTAL PATTERNING OF OPAQUE, SEMITRANSPARENT, AND TRANSPARENT GLASS COMBINES WITH A STRONG ROOF PLANE TO ORIENT THE EYE TOWARD THE OCEAN.

↓ SITE PLAN [INDEX OF SPACES: 1 ENTRY 2 POOLSIDE PAVILION 3 BEACHSIDE PAVILION 4 EXISTING HOUSE 5 CASCADING GARDENS 6 GARDEN].



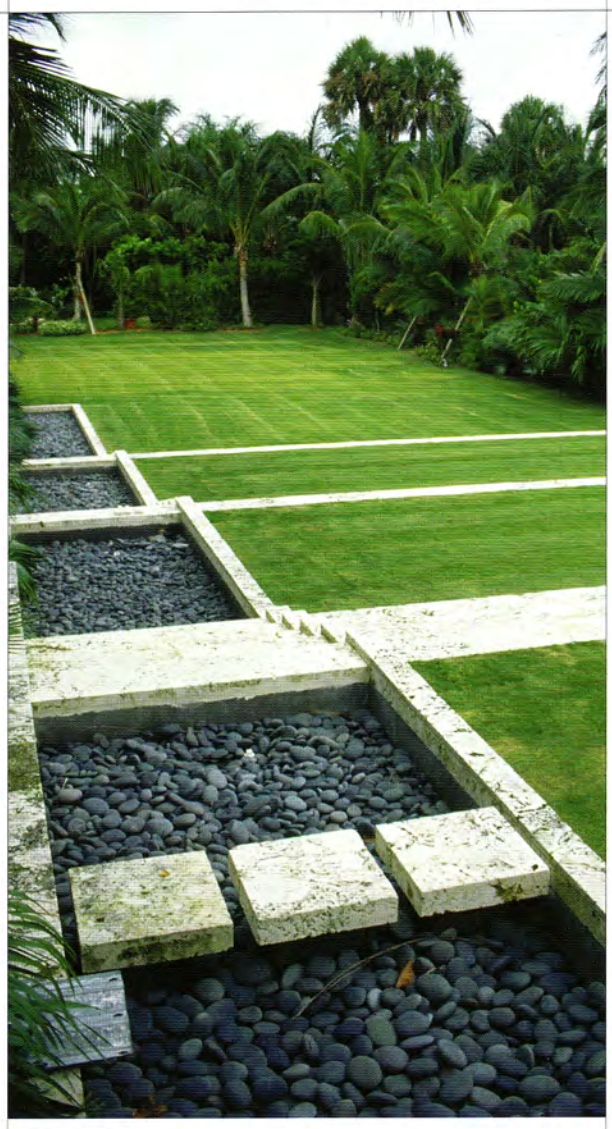
PROJECTS

↑ THE SCALE OF THE ARCHITECTURE READS SERENE, A FEELING FURTHERED BY THE REGAL STEPPED-DOWN PARTI PROJECTING TOWARD THE WATER.



↑ FLOOR PLAN [INDEX OF SPACES: 1 ENTRY TO POOL COURT \ 2 BREEZEWAY \ 3 ENTRY TO HOUSE \ 4 POOLSIDE PAVILION \ 5 LIVING ROOM \ 6 DINING ROOM \ 7 LIBRARY \ 8 BEACHSIDE PAVILION \ 9 CASCADING GARDENS].

← BECAUSE THE ELEMENTAL HOLDS SWAY OVER THE SITE—EXPANSIVE OCEAN VIEWS, A CENTRALLY PLACED POOL, AND AN ABUNDANCE OF SKY—GONZÁLEZ COHESIVELY WOVE THE INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR ROOMS TO ACCENTUATE THE PROPERTY'S NATURAL ATTRIBUTES, AN EXAMPLE OF HIS ABILITY TO CREATE HOLISTIC ARCHITECTURE.



↑ A LINEAR THEME REPEATS AT DIFFERENT SCALES ON THE SITE, AND A VARIETY OF PATTERNS AND HIGHLY TACTILE MATERIALS WERE USED TO DEFINE THE PROJECT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS SETTING.