

PLACES

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Design & Living



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PHOTOS: RAMON PORTELLI

FROM THE 1990s TO NOW

A Collective architects Steven Risiott and Patricia Grech turned this once nondescript 1990s Sliema apartment into a bright home as a result of the palette of materials used: from wood to textured plastered walls, light and reflective surfaces, copper details and bold colours.

THIS 1990s apartment, once composed of small, isolated rooms with arched openings, has been converted to create a larger open-plan living space, allowing natural light to filter deeper inside.

Since in this case, the apartment lacked character, the focus was on converting it to adapt to the client's brief, rather than an exercise in conservation. As a studio, A Collective approaches conversion projects by primarily identifying what elements in the building and its interior are of value and worthy of retention.

"It is never our departure point to eradicate and replace," says Steven Risiott from A Collective, who undertook the project together with Patricia Grech. "Having said that, one must also keep in mind that conversion of existing buildings is also about adaptation of a property to new uses, or new clients, whose lifestyles have somewhat changed even in the last couple of decades."

Locally, the architecture of the 1990s is eclectic and borrows from different styles, so it is hard to define particular characteristics of this period. But there appears to have been no general holistic direction and more of a hodgepodge of mass development, where quantity took priority over

quality. That said, it would be unjust to say that no property built in the 1990s is worthy of retention, Steven points out.

The structural intervention that took place in this apartment allows for a better flow and interaction of the kitchen, dining and living room, while creating clear sight lines from the main entrance through to the living quarters.

It's a common layout these days, with almost every apartment being opened up. Built on plots of similar dimensions, these blocks are replacing terraced houses. Maximising on the number of units implies that most are long and narrow, so unless the living spaces are combined into one larger area, the resulting rooms will be dark and gloomy, says Steven.

But does that mean we are risking creating more of the same and can a return to closed-off and cosy rooms be envisaged? For Steven, open-plan layouts may still be cosy spaces through the use of warm light at varying levels, soft furnishings and natural materials.

"We actually do have a number of clients who opt for closed-off rooms, however, enclosing these spaces with walls is not necessarily the only answer;



IF THE PLACE YOU LIVE IN IS NOT COMPATIBLE WITH YOUR LIFESTYLE, THEN THIS WILL INVARIABLY HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE AND WELL-BEING

movable partitions and screens could be a flexible alternative, allowing for privacy while still letting light penetrate the space," he explains.

"It is important to keep in mind that the way spaces are shaped will have an impact on their occupants. If the place you live in is not compatible with your lifestyle, then this will invariably have a negative effect on your quality of life and well-being."

Flow, interaction between spaces and good sight lines are all intrinsic to the experience of space and the well-being of those experiencing them. If one is able to create a positive space through the consideration of these parameters, this will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the end user's quality of life, Steven says.

Admittedly, some of these concepts tend to feel somewhat abstract at first, particularly to those clients who find it hard to visualise space, he acknowledges. This is why they are generally helped to understand such proposals through sketches and 3D modelling.

Steven believes that by focusing on site context and analysing parameters such as orientation, natural light, sight lines, views and flow as opposed to stylistic trends, each and every project will be unique and not yet another carbon copy of the typical apartment layout.

"Moreover, since most of our residential projects are small-scale developments for private clients, rather than large developments for resale purposes, there is a lot of emphasis on the client's brief," Steven adds.

"We believe it is fundamental to understand our clients' lifestyles and habits to be able to design a space on their behalf. This also helps to achieve original design solutions that distinguish the end project from other similar ones."

The overall look and feel of this space is warm and bright, resulting from the material palette selection: wood, textured plastered walls, light and reflective surfaces, copper details and bold colours.

One of the apartment's stand-out features, ironically, in all its inconspicuousness, is a vertical timber slat wall cladding structure that was designed to define the hallway, while integrating a concealed door, thereby hiding the main bathroom from the main entrance, which lies directly opposite.

Despite various attempts to relocate the door, it was decided to face the challenge and integrate it into the design approach.

"We wanted the entrance hall to be a statement space, so it was imperative the bathroom door was not the focal point on the wall. We opted for a cladding



system composed of a series of natural timber slats mounted on a bold coloured backdrop with a concealed door that not only blends in seamlessly, but also ensures that the bathroom is always closed off," Steven explains.

The apartment is littered with other bespoke joinery elements, so it's hard to pick just one main stand-out feature that makes the architects proud.

The space is conceptually intertwined through a series of displaced rectangular elements reflected in both the bespoke furniture as well as the paving, says Steven, adding that the extent of bespoke joinery allowed for the apartment to take on a holistic design, with seamless interconnected areas also maximising on the amount of storage space created.

The project team is also "obsessed" with proportions and alignment. The one-is-to-two ratio is repeated throughout all the elements in the living spaces: the shelving system above the TV unit, the door panelling and the timber wine rack, which is reflected in the hanging steel shelving and closed storage that, in turn, mirrors the kitchen cupboards.

With space at a premium, every nook and cranny of the apartment is utilised to the best of its potential, with integrated storage throughout.



Joining the dots...

Alan Debattista from ChillisChilli, entrusted with manufacturing the joinery designed by A Collective for this Sliema apartment, lets us in on some trade secrets when it comes to bespoke furniture and interiors.

Cladding and concealed doors are an established trend. What did you do different here? In many cases, the purpose of cladding a wall and concealing doors within a unit is to complement what would otherwise be a sparse wall space and to tie in random doors running across it. Cladding and wall panelling provide a luxurious feel and concealed doors keep the space minimalist. In this case, the architects designed a layer of vertical fins in solid American walnut over a bold, blue background. The door was incorporated within the cladding, lining up exactly with the fins and was thus hidden in the feature wall.

WE ARE EXPERIENCING AN INCREASING DEMAND FOR CLASSIC CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE AND WALL CLADDING WITH TRADITIONAL MOULDING AND PANELLING

Do you think there comes a point where these features can become run-of-the-mill? We always ensure that each installation is specifically tailored for the client. Materials, colours, style and layout are some of the factors that are considered to determine the final design, making each project totally bespoke and unique.

What do you envisage to be the upcoming trends in joinery? Currently, we are experiencing an increasing demand for classic contemporary furniture and wall cladding with traditional moulding and panelling.

Can minimalism get to be too much, ironically? And do you sometimes wish clients and designers would come up with more elaborate ideas to really show off your skills? The minimalist design might not always seem like the most practical style, although clean lines and lack of clutter are pleasing to many. Some might argue that a carpenter's skill is highlighted through the manufacture of increasingly ornate and more elaborate pieces. But one must not fail to recognise, however, the level of craftsmanship required to translate the minimalistic eye-pleasing design into actual functional and practical pieces.



THROUGH THE USE OF MODERN MECHANISMS AND CLEVER DESIGN,
ONE CAN NOWADAYS GAIN A LOT OF SPACE WITHIN A PARTICULAR AREA.

What materials did you use to create the desired look and feel of the apartment? In this particular project, our scope of works was limited to the translation of A Collective's designs and details into full-scale furniture pieces. The bespoke joinery includes elements in walnut and white sprayed wood, together with a variety of metal and glass to complement a number of pieces.

What did the bespoke furniture add to a space that loose, off-the-shelf items would not have? Customising pieces relevant to a particular space serves to fit each unit more precisely within the area, tying them in – and consequently each room – with consistent patterns and materials that loose, off-the-shelf items would not satisfy.

What would you say is your proudest piece in this project? We are proud of all our pieces. But if we had to single out one particular item, it would be the feature wall with concealed door.

What role does the carpentry play in creating the seamless feel of this space? In the case of custom

design, the pieces are actually made for the space. It follows that they fit the particular space and thus create a flow within the area. The role of the skilled carpenter includes the ability to translate the initial concept, or in this case A Collective's designs and details, into a functional piece of furniture that works well in the relevant space.

Storage is an important factor as apartments get tighter. What did you come up with here? Let us into some secrets on how to save space and make the most of it? Apart from the fact that spaces are becoming increasingly smaller, their proper use is important to maintain a minimalist feel throughout an area and reduce clutter. Through the use of modern mechanisms and clever design, one can nowadays gain a lot of space within a particular area. A case in point, with respect to this particular project, was the architects' proposal to introduce a storage unit along the shallow section running through the length of the kitchen. This served to maximise storage space in an otherwise redundant space and created a feature with the design. Sliding pocket doors are also a great way of saving space. ■
