

PHOTOS: RAMON PORTELLI

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

THE PLAN OF THIS 1930S SEAFRONT RESIDENCE BY PRETTY BAY IN BIRZEBBUĠA ADAPTED TO ITS FAÇADE - ITS SHOWPIECE - RATHER THAN THE OTHER WAY AROUND, CONTRIBUTING TO THE UNIQUENESS OF THE CONTEXT AND SENDING A CLEAR MESSAGE ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING A CONTEMPORARY HOME WHILE VALUING THE PAST.

STUDJURBAN, the architectural firm behind this Birzebbuga project, together with conservation architect Edward Said, first established that the house was a restrained example of Maltese Art Deco, likely dating to the mid-1930s.

Internally, it had undergone significant alterations over the decades and consisted of two separate properties that shared the corner façade. A small one-bedroom maisonette overlaid the larger residence at first and second floors, extending over into a more recently constructed adjoining property.

Both, but in particular the main house, had a far-from-ideal layout, with awkwardly shaped rooms and a high degree of wasted circulation space.

"We were approached by the young family, who lived in the larger, two-bedroom house and intended to purchase the neighbouring property to form one residence," said Studjurban founding architect and urban designer Antoine Zammit.

"The properties had the potential to be optimised and, naturally, aspects such as the formation of a singular vertical access and a better disposition of internal spaces that exploited the property's corner presence became key design elements early on in the process," he explained.

ON THE FACE OF IT

"Its striking façade was, indeed, something else! I fell in love with its imposing presence, in all its, at once, simplicity and richness; the rhythm created by its repeated, regimented series of openings; and the legibility it provided to the neighbourhood," Zammit said.

In 1996, the property's façade was listed as a Grade 2 monument for its architectural and cultural heritage significance, and therefore, had to be retained.

Zammit said it was refreshing to see proud homeowners recognising the façade was a unique asset

and keen to incorporate it into the design of their new home, rather than considering it a constraint and trying to radically change that.

Importantly, therefore, although façade alterations could have potentially been entertained, Studjurban ensured it would be retained in its original configuration to maintain its presence and legibility, with the plan adapting to the façade, rather than the opposite.

It was in good condition overall, having been maintained along the years. But it did have its fair share of unsympathetic elements, such as gold aluminium-framed apertures and a black undulating aluminium railing with chunky vertical stays affixed to it.

Considering it lies in a saline environment, however, it was good to see it was structurally sound and did not require significant stonework replacement.

Under the watchful guide of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, the façade was meticulously restored. This involved the careful removal of cementitious renders,



metal fixtures and biological growth, cleaning of surface deposits and deeper-set stains, as well as repointing using a hydraulic lime-based mortar with limestone dust.

"Great care was taken not to remove the patina of the stone," Zammit pointed out, adding that the rough plaster finish at the upper levels was repainted with a darker tone, complementing the masonry.

External apertures were replaced with a contemporary take on Georgian windows, whereas a better proportioned wrought-iron railing was introduced along the balconies.

The main volume of the residence was retained as a two-storey property, while the neighbouring commitment had an additional floor, in continuity with the rest of the streetscape.

"This subsequently suggested to us that we could create a significantly setback floor, in continuity with the adjoining second floor and simultaneously transitioning the two volumes.

"It was important to make the neighbouring property as simple as possible. This, we thought, could be best achieved if we had a very restrained aesthetic."

The owners wanted a street-level garage, which was best accommodated in this part - not to intervene on the older façade and due to the existing higher volume.

On the upper levels, however, the idea was to make up for this by having a high solid-to-void ratio, limiting the apertures to the minimum required. The new volume wraps around the older façade and is purposely slightly recessed to give more value and strength to it, also increasing the ability to 'read' the older, original fabric from the newer one.



FREEPORT ASSET OR EYESORE?

Renovating a seafront property, located close to Pretty Bay, clearly enriches it, according to Zammit. It contributes to the uniqueness of the context and sends a clear message about the possibility of still having a contemporary home while valuing the past.

"Sadly, the seafront is now a collection of various built typologies, some of which are three and four storeys high," he pointed out. "We could have taken advantage of this and tried to get in a whole new floor, but we did not want to and, thankfully, our clients were on board with actually inverting the living-bedroom spatial configuration to use the setback floor as a living area that spilled out into the terrace space."

Having travelled to different port cities worldwide, where views similar to the Freeport are commonplace and happily coexisting with other uses, Zammit did not look at the vista negatively.

While acknowledging that it may not be everyone's ideal sea view, "frankly, I much prefer this to the over-developed, speculative seafronts, where nondescript apartment blocks have compromised their visual integrity and enjoyment".

In line with the clients' brief, Studjurban was "happy to relate to this sea view" and capitalise on it by ensuring that the main rooms fronted it and a well-sized terrace at setback floor level would be created.

INTERNAL ALTERATIONS

The shape of the property was almost triangular, proving to be a challenge in its own right, and adding to the challenges of restructuring the internal layout.

Eventually, it was decided that since the number of alterations would have been so significant [and costly], it actually made sense to rebuild the internal space in its entirety, with all the safeguards in place to work around the retained façade and ensure its stability and integrity.

"There is always a fine line with how many alterations can be done to a property, especially if it underwent notable changes to its configuration along the years," Zammit explained. "It then becomes about having a cost-efficient solution."

Studjurban was also entrusted with the dwelling's interiors and set out to marry a contemporary aesthetic with a more classical one.

Its clear objectives included exploiting the natural light and allowing it to bounce off specific surfaces; working with a restrained palette that did not, however, shy away from injecting some colour within specific elements; and introducing more classical touches in a subtle manner through specific materials and fixtures.

Some bespoke pieces were designed, including the kitchen/breakfast area on the setback floor, the multi-functional space at intermediate circulation level, the timber panelling at ground floor and along the stairwell,



supplemented by carefully chosen pieces and a lighting scheme.

"Some elements repeat themselves throughout the house in various shapes and forms to retain continuity," Zammit pointed out.

Studjurban has executed several projects that rethink the traditional bedroom/living configuration, and as the design concept of the Birżebbuġa property developed, it soon became obvious that the most had to be made out of the property's vantage position and potential to have a decent amount of external space that enjoyed high amenity. This could, undoubtedly, happen best at the uppermost level.

The clients wished to have a pool at roof level, which further consolidated Studjurban's thoughts that the traditional understanding of the townhouse had to be inverted.

The setback floor could afford to have a new aperture that would be larger than the ones along the retained façade, and the living area could, therefore, 'open up' to its exterior.

For the pool, Studjurban played with the levels of the property to ensure it would not be visually intrusive, while being secure and tying in with the rest of the living space.

The property is a permanent residence, so dark tones were introduced to complement an otherwise light-toned palette and provide a bold and more contemporary language.

Key elements include a mix of solid timber bespoke furniture pieces and a bold petrol blue panelling, as well as marble with a polished finish in the continuous kitchen surface that wraps around to reach the ground, along the stairs and at ground floor, and as a matte, honed finish in the living room and intermediate level walls.



DESIGN RESPONSIBILITY

"We like calling what we produce 'responsible architecture', meaning we undertake each project with an immense sense of design responsibility; with the objective to respect and enrich the context – a dual responsibility towards our clients and their brief and towards the surrounding neighbourhood," Zammit said about the project.

"As much as it is about well-executed restoration, it is also about what we feel is a well-balanced, sensitively studied, volumetric undertaking, where the additions complement and provide a subtle backdrop to the residence's showpiece – its façade – which led and guided the design process."

Studjurban's portfolio has been enriched by this "difficult but engaging project, moulded by various layers of complexity".

Ultimately, it is a dialogue between old and new. But it is also about designing a contemporary home for a young, energetic family, with the creation of meaningful spaces, based on a configuration that challenges the status quo... and responding to the façade that envelopes them. ■