

PLACES

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Design & Living

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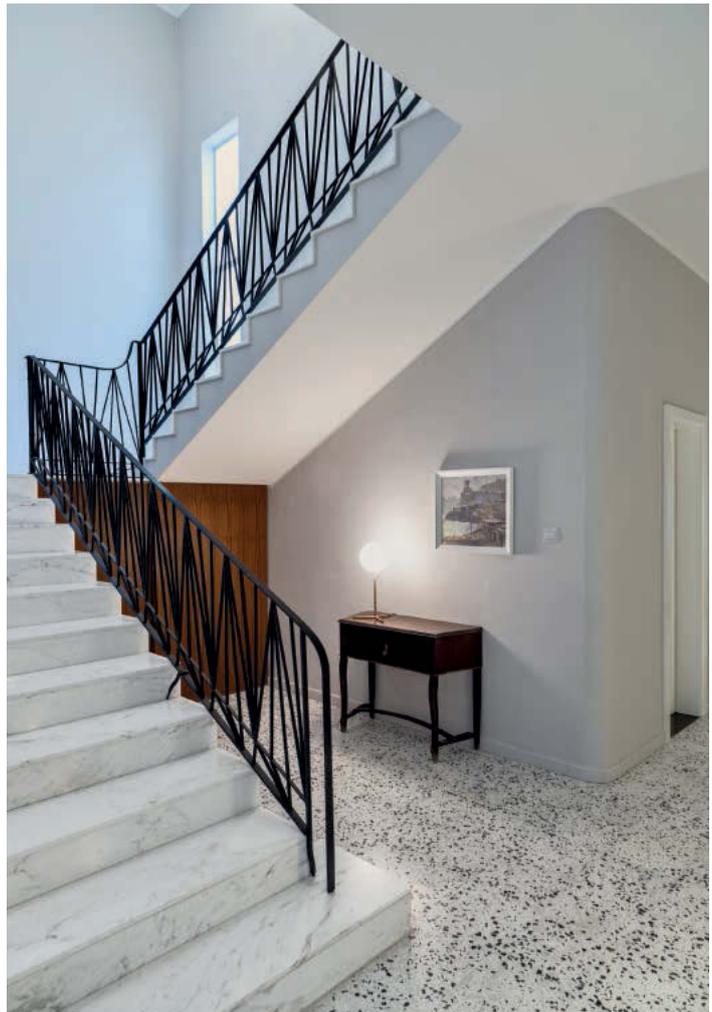
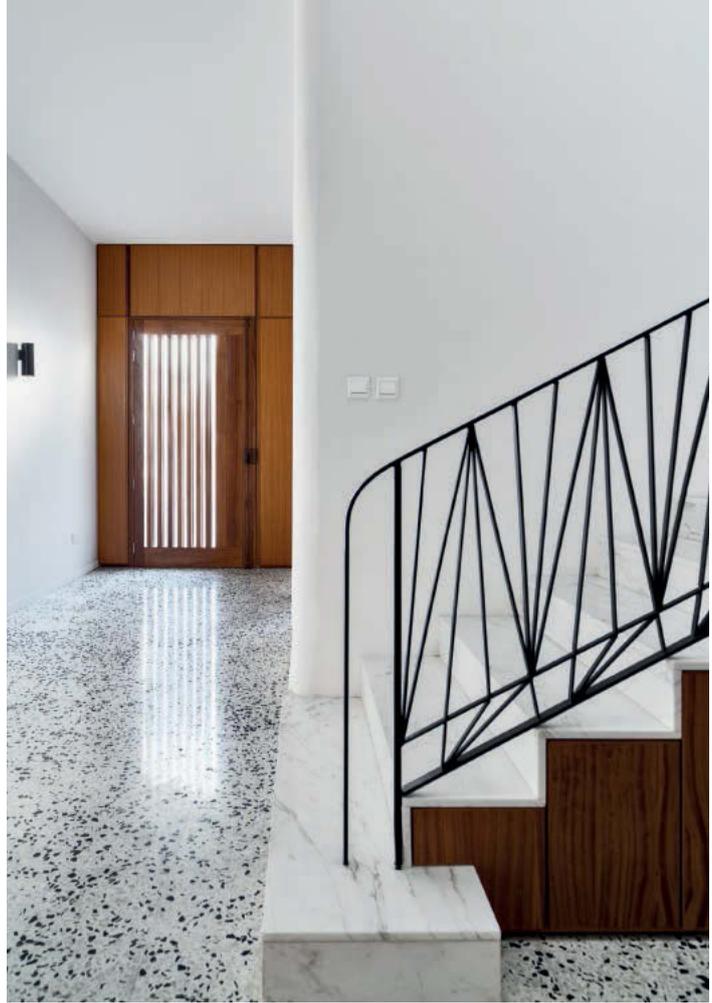
THE TYPICAL
MODERNIST
TOWNHOUSE

UNDERAPPRECIATED
DESTINED FOR
DEMOLITION
& UPDATED

Bike design
is alive and
kicking

*[Up]cycling is trendy
healthy and eco-friendly*





PHOTOS: ALEX ATTARD

SAVING GRACE

This was one of those underappreciated typical modernist townhouses, which seem destined for extinction due to demolition for redevelopment. Luckily, the owners wanted to keep it as a single dwelling and the architects did a great job preserving and exploiting its intrinsic qualities, while adapting it to accommodate the contemporary lifestyle of its new tenants. Architecture firm Acollective talks us through the project in the hope that modernist architecture could be viewed in a different light.

Location: Birkirkara

Size: 370 square metres

Status: complete

Acollective project team: Steven Risiott; Patricia Grech

“Replace the apertures, gut out the floors, uproot the trees... Demolish, construct apartments and a penthouse!”

These are the automatic reactions to modernist buildings in Malta, which are significantly undervalued and increasingly unavailable. Once littered with modernist townhouses, Malta is, not so slowly, making way to mass development. There’s a general stance that post-WWII architecture is not historical and, therefore, not worthy of retention.

The potential for redevelopment attributed to these properties further exacerbates the mentality that more can be squeezed out of the land, giving little hope to the survival of modernist townhouses.

We were, therefore, surprised at our client's request to keep their newly purchased 1970's townhouse as a single dwelling and excited to embark on this rare opportunity to convert the property into a family home.

Although the house needed to be adapted to accommodate the contemporary lifestyle of its new tenants, the approach was simple and straightforward, involving the removal of any accretions, de-cluttering the space, emphasising the architectural proportions and breathing life back into the abandoned property.

The house is set back on both ends by means of a front and back garden, defining a green buffer zone both between the street as well as abutting properties.

But the most stunning characteristic of this property, as is typical of modernist architecture, is the distinct puncturing of light, its resulting play of shadows and the carefully studied spatial proportions. Besides having significantly large apertures on the facades, the property has a skylight above the double-height staircase and a courtyard providing natural light to the internal rooms.

Retaining, albeit polishing, the original terrazzo floors meant carefully routing the services through a combination of suspended ceilings and false walls in such a way as to avoid altering the proportions of the space.

BUT THE MOST STUNNING CHARACTERISTIC OF THIS PROPERTY, AS IS TYPICAL OF MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE, IS THE DISTINCT PUNCTURING OF LIGHT, ITS RESULTING PLAY OF SHADOWS AND THE CAREFULLY STUDIED SPATIAL PROPORTIONS







Since the flooring varied from one room to the next, a monolithic, solid black, quartz sill was installed to serve as a threshold beneath each internal door, further emphasising the length and width of the corridors.

A rather significant architectural intervention entailed lowering the entire garden, previously subdivided into two raised platforms, while retaining the trees. This allowed the open plan to extend into the garden, while providing a continuous green backdrop to all apertures at the back end of the property.

The staircase connecting the public areas at ground floor to the private sleeping quarters at first floor was originally furnished with a steel railing, composed of triangular elements enclosing undulating, serpentine motifs. These were carefully removed and replaced by linear steel bars, assembled in a bespoke geometric pattern reminiscent of the traditional modernist railings found on the front and back facades of the property.

THE MINIMALISTIC APPROACH WAS CARRIED THROUGH AS A GUIDING PRINCIPAL IN THE DESIGN OF A NUMBER OF OTHER BESPOKE FURNITURE ELEMENTS DISPLACED THROUGHOUT THE PROPERTY. THIS WAS DONE THROUGH THE USE OF NATURAL MATERIALS, THE REFLECTION OF EXISTING PROPORTIONS, CLEAN LINES AND DEFLECTED LIGHT

Additionally, the black and white flooring was stripped and clad in a clean white marble with minimal vein, serving as a neutral backdrop to the railing design as well as a canvas for the natural daylight coming through the overlying skylight.

The entrance to the property is clearly defined as an architectural volume, or rather as a negative space within the front facade, thereby framing the doorway. The original door was in desperate need of replacement, being a weak focal point to the facade.

This gave rise to another intervention: the design of the door draws its inspiration from concrete louvers typical of this period of construction, allowing the linear puncturing of natural light throughout the day and the inverse outflow of artificial light from within the property at night.

Naturally, security and privacy were an element of concern, resulting in the vertical slats being installed at an angle to the street, restricting thorough vision, but enhancing the effect of the light penetrating the main entrance and ground floor corridor.

Once inside, what appears to be a simple door from the street forms an integral part of a wall cladding system used to conceal a series of infrastructural requirements, including those of an en-suite bathroom introduced at first floor.

The minimalistic approach was carried through as a guiding principal in the design of a number of other bespoke furniture elements displaced throughout the property. This was done through the use of natural materials, the reflection of existing proportions, clean lines and deflected light.

The architectural approach to this conversion was simple, yet the result is unexpected. By exposing the potential and inherent characteristics of this building, we hope that the public will perceive modernist architecture in a different light.

WWW.AC collective.COM.MT



THERE IS VERY LITTLE BY WAY OF PHOTOGRAPHY THAT RECORDS THE MODERNIST TOWNHOUSE IN MALTA, PARTICULARLY ITS INTERIOR SPACES



THROUGH THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S LENS

Alex Attard grabs the opportunity to shoot a revived 1970s townhouse... the likes of which are fast disappearing from Malta's streets.

There is very little by way of photography that records the modernist townhouse in Malta, particularly its interior spaces.

These underappreciated buildings, built around the 1970s and 1980s, are very much taken for granted and, unfortunately, they seem to be destined for extinction.

I recently met up with the architectural firm Acollective, which had just concluded work on such a house, and got the opportunity to view their conversion and photograph the [not always discernible] play of light that delineates the particular shapes and forms accentuating the spaces in modernist architecture.

The photography aspires to emphasise the inherent – and often overlooked – beauty of these residences, create awareness and showcase the architects' minimalist intervention. ■

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