

# THE COMMERCIAL <sup>/71</sup> COURIER

THE OFFICIAL BUSINESS MAGAZINE OF THE MALTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, ENTERPRISE AND INDUSTRY SINCE 1947  
APRIL / MAY 2017

**A unique  
office space**  
Marrying function,  
simplicity and  
aesthetic appeal

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## An eclectic functionality

Situated between West Street and Old Theatre Street, the recently completed offices of translation company GTS, is the latest project by promising young architecture firm, **A Collective**. Adorned with five Maltese balconies and enjoying views of the Anglican Cathedral, Carmelite Church dome, Marsamxett harbour and Valletta rooftops, the Valletta property provided a characterful, albeit challenging backdrop for architects responsible, **Steven Risiott** and **Patricia Grech**. They tell **Sarah Micallef** how they went about it.





The brief presented to A Collective's Steven Risiott and Patricia Grech for this office building was to provide a space which moves away from a typical office structure to provide a flexible, interactive environment which caters to a translation company's growing needs. "We were lucky that our client was very open-minded and trusted us fully. They wanted to create a flexible, adaptable and inspiring space, in which staff could feel happy and comfortable," the architects explain.

The first step was creating a plan detailing how best the brief could work with the space. This proved to be a challenge - mainly stemming from the fact that the property was previously a residence, and one which was uninhabited for several years at that. They consider the main challenge to have been converting what was once a residence into an office that could cater for up to 25 people. "Firstly, we had to figure out a way of fitting the services needed for a contemporary workspace," they explain, while taking the building and its context into account. Admitting that they don't have a set style, Steven and Patricia maintain, "we prefer to listen to the building and the site. Our approach mainly deals with bringing in light and maximising the potential of the site."

"Our clients wanted as much openness as possible, but the building was anything but open. In terms of design, there wasn't need to seek out many sources of inspiration. The building itself already posed a challenge. As architects, we like to keep things quite simple and minimal. We had this contextual site and challenging brief, so we let it flow naturally," they explain.

Within the resulting conversion, the first structural alteration combined two front rooms on the first floor to create a large, open-plan area which would house the majority of the staff. "Before, you would come up the stairs from the reception area and find a wall in front of you, with a door that was offset from the centre of the staircase. We demolished this wall and a perpendicular wall, joining what were previously two rooms - now, as you come up, you see the entire translation office. In place of the wall, we put in an acoustic screen composed of timber slats and upholstered modules. It was designed to follow the pattern of the steel column in the middle, creating a rhythm."

"The reception desk appears to float above the floor, thanks to a mirrored panel which reflects the pattern, creating a perfect symmetry, rendering the desk practically invisible."



To allow for more flexibility, comfort and increased motivation, a series of alternative working environments were created so as to encourage employees to move around and work from different areas, reflecting a more contemporary mentality. The five traditional Maltese balconies were consequently put to good use, doing just that. "Since the building has so many balconies, we placed a relaxation spot in each room in the balcony. They also double up as meeting rooms or casual workspaces - in the first balcony, for example, there are three planks of wood aligned with each window bay, which swing up to form a desk." In the spirit of letting more light in, the architects also opened up one of the balconies' doorways, which was previously boarded up.

And when it comes to achieving that delicate balance between aesthetic appeal and practical usage of space, the pièce de résistance has got to be the subtlety with which the services were concealed -

effectively turning an old residence with its own history into a fully functioning, contemporary workspace. "Before designing the space, we organised the services - we wanted to conceal the services in such a way that the office can function while still respecting the building. In the open plan area, one of the biggest challenges was the fact that, since it was going to have a high occupancy of people, it needed quite a few ACs and a lot of lighting, so we designed a series of gypsum islands that are suspended from the ceiling, which conceal the ACs above them. The lights, meanwhile, are in line with the gaps, suspended between these islands," they explain. Finally, in keeping with the building's period of construction, they introduced classical motifs framing the islands, adding a decorative element."

Throughout the space, the architects utilised quirky details and elements as a nod to the building's history, which, according to a plaque on the façade, dates back to the





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1900s. This involves a strong use of colour and pattern with an intended purpose. "The work involved in translation features a lot of black and white surfaces... be it a dictionary, computer screen or printed material. In contrast, we wanted the space to be bright, colourful and bold," they explain, making reference to the yellow light fittings, colourful bathroom tiles and the patterned tiles in each room which feature the same pattern in different colours.

Other bespoke elements serve to personalise the space, differentiating it from the serious office spaces Valletta has come to be associated with. One such feature is shelving comprising of steel bars and timber

planks, and a series of builders' steel mesh sheets which were sprayed white and clamped to the wall behind the desks. "They feature a series of steel hooks, so that employees can hang corkboards and other belongings, personalising the space without making it look shabby. It's very flexible - you can have as many hooks as you like and hang whatever you please."

Meanwhile, a third room on the same floor was converted into the boardroom. "Here, we wanted to make a statement when it came to the design - we chose a herringbone patterned floor and wall panelling which features a concealed door providing access to the corridor," they explain.



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In the boardroom, the services are also concealed above the ceiling, via grilles hidden in shadow gaps, and the ceiling light, which is reminiscent of a chandelier, adds some quirky character to the room.

Downstairs, the ground floor comprises a single room which serves as the reception area. However, what is undoubtedly the talking point is a bespoke marble patterned floor and its exquisite reflection, mirrored in the reception desk. The reception desk mirror and mirror-clad doorways create an illusion that the small reception looks far larger than it is. "The reception desk appears to float above the floor, thanks to a mirrored panel which reflects the pattern, creating a perfect symmetry, rendering the desk practically invisible," Steven and Patricia explain, noting that each triangular element of the floor here was numbered and laid, piece by piece, according to a pattern they designed.

"We didn't want the traditional marble floor for the entrance hall - rather, we



wanted to create a marble carpet. And since the reception is on a different level altogether, we could afford to have an aesthetic which was a bit different to the rest of the rooms. We also applied microcement on the walls downstairs - we actually integrated the company's logo in this way, by engraving it into a PVC panel and covering it with microcement."

Speaking of the primary materials and finishes used, Steven and Patricia affirm that the common feature when it comes to materials resonates with a common feature that is shared among their projects: "every material looks like what it is - it's honest. There are no ceramic tiles that look like cement, or tiles that look like wood. We strive for material honesty."

As for the overall design style achieved, the pair believe that in its eclecticism, it is consistent with its home, Valletta. "Valletta is not just a Baroque city. If you walk around, there are lots of beautiful wrought-iron or Industrial-era details, and so much else. It is this blend of styles that make it so unique. The design marries well with Valletta's image," they explain.

Indeed, the sometimes quirky, sometimes contemporary and sometimes minimal aesthetic of the GTS offices is one so unique to the fabric of the building and area itself, that it would be impossible to pluck it out and apply it elsewhere. It wouldn't work in another building, another area, another European city, but here, work it certainly does. **cc**