

STONE, METAL & LIGHT

These three words summed up Atelier Maison's presentation of this design project to their client.

Architects Paula Agius-Vadalà and Katja Cassar proceeded to make these elements work together, while the homeowners remained in their house of character, adding to the exciting challenge of intervening on an already inhabited space.

PHOTOS: SEAN MALLIA





THE BRIEF: To design the entrance of an old house of character, a bar/drinks cabinet in the living room and to restyle the home office, where a desk was also created for the space.

Q: How does it work when you are asked to intervene on a space that already has its own design? Is this limiting, challenging in a positive and creative way, or is it actually easier because the direction is already set?

A: When we are asked to intervene on a space that already has its own design, there are cases where the space would still be a blank canvas. It would need that professional touch for it to look more finished; more polished.

Obviously, if the style is very clear, we would take inspiration from it and put our spin on it in the most respectful way possible, but at the same time adding a different dimension to the space.

With all our projects, we start with a positive outlook, no matter how many limiting aspects we face. More often than not, limiting factors push us to create the best design possible.

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Q: What sort of space were you working in and how did it inspire the design on the entrance, which is the first stop, but actually came later in the design order? Was it like writing the introduction after the story had been concluded and does that give you a better picture of where to start from and how?

A: The space was made up of stone walls, a combination of wooden floors and ceramic tiles, together with some contemporary pieces of furniture. The colour scheme and material palette were very neutral, so that left us flexible with adding touches of colour and different textures, while working with the existing scheme.

The entrance was just an empty space, which was an extension of the kitchen, where, automatically, the client stored various items like shopping, jackets, bags and keys. It was a space that really needed some organisation and definitely deserved to become a welcoming area upon entering the house.

The story of the house was never even 'concluded'; it hadn't actually ended. So, we were appointed to sort of edit, round up and give it a proper ending.

In such scenarios, since the clients had been living there for so many years, they truly understood the workings of the spaces. So, we really

had to listen to them to achieve what they wanted while introducing interventions that would improve their everyday lives.

The clients wanted to close off the kitchen from the entrance, as there was an alternative access to it through the living room. But at the same time, loads of natural light flooded in through glass apertures between the kitchen and the internal courtyard. So, we had to screen off the kitchen from the entrance while retaining the natural light spilling into it. We introduced a large door - which was made up of a blackened steel frame and translucent glass. The tops keeping the glass in place are a series



of Xs, introducing a pattern within the screen. The door was fixed within the existing archway and can be opened with a handle made out of a brass bar.

Upon entering, opposite the blackened steel door we clad the stone wall with light grey panelling, which was engraved with a chevron

pattern. A floating marble shelf was mounted onto the panelling, within which we made a round cut-out to make way for a brass bowl for keys. At the end of the panelling and shelf, there is a storage cupboard. Any exposed stone walls and the ceilings were painted in a deep blue.

With these interventions, the entrance became a more usable and organised space, while giving it the dramatic aesthetic it deserves.

Q: What was the look and feel of the existing living room and how did it influence your drinks cabinet/bar creation? Did you choose to stand out, or to merge and blend?

A: When designing, we like to look at the project as a holistic space of different elements working together in sync. We looked at the existing materials and had to come up with a concept that would allow the spaces to flow and almost speak to each other using the same language.

In fact, when we presented the proposal to the client, we called the presentation 'Stone, Metal and Light' - and these were three elements we made work together.

We knew where we wanted the bar to be located, but since the room was surrounded by fair-faced walls, roofed with arches and finished with a dark wooden floor, we wanted to design something that was lifted off the ground on legs. So, we decided to design a marble bench that would be mounted on slender brass legs. The bench acts like a pedestal, on which the bar sits within its designated space.

Rather than using boxy shapes, which may look a bit bulky, we gave the actual cabinet a shape reminiscent of a bay window. The inspiration came from a picture of a vintage dressing table with its side mirrors at an angle.

When we fitted in the pieces, they looked like they were meant to be in those spaces. And that is what we set out to achieve.

Q: The home office was another area you worked on. How do you approach a restyling job i.e. essentially working with what you've got in a creative and innovative way? And what does it say about the possibility of creating different looks and layouts with fundamentally the same tools?

A: Styling is a large part of our job too. We find that when you get used to living in a space, you may find it difficult to figure out how small changes can make a big difference.



Sometimes, roaming around the house and picking up items that would normally be situated in another room entirely could also trigger off inspiration for an otherwise 'boring' space

A set of fresh eyes is sometimes all you need. So, restyling a space and working with what you have can bring about a fresh look to a room you once felt uninspired by.

Styling is more personal. So, you need to understand how the space is going to work and the taste of the client. It is what makes the space more 'home-y'.

Sometimes, roaming around the house and picking up items that would normally be situated in another room entirely could also trigger off inspiration for an otherwise 'boring' space.

There is a fine line between a room looking over decorated and looking well styled. It is important to be selective with the items you chose to place in a room. A lot of small items will make it look cluttered. It is all about quality, not quantity. Less is more...

Q: Talk us through the desk design; and the makeover of the old sideboard and what the thought process behind it was.

A: We wanted to design a long and sleek desk, which would be placed against a stone wall and illuminated with directional white porcelain wall lights. We designed a metal desk and incorporated a brass bar that runs below the desktop. We chose to use the same materials as the blackened steel door in the entrance, but also add a splash of colour. So, we introduced a glass top, sprayed in a blue hue.

The old sideboard was a piece that both the clients and we wanted to utilise. There was already a lot of wood going on with the existing finishes. We opted to paint it using black board paint. Like that, the finish was super matt black, and the children could also use it to draw on!

The matt black finish of the sideboard exceeded our expectations and turned out looking really contemporary.

Q: You also proposed lighting in the entrance, living space and home office. How important is that in the overall effect you wanted to achieve in these areas? What exactly did you propose and why?

A: Lighting can make or break a project. So, we opted for light fittings that would give the old setting of the house a more contemporary ambience.

In the entrance we used three lights: a soft recessed light concealed in the bulkhead; a white wall light mounted onto the chevron pattern; and a matt gold ceiling mounted spot. All these lights can be used together, or individually, giving the client maximum flexibility depending on the use, feel and purpose.

Over the dining area, we introduced a set of five glass pendants, spaced out equally over the dining table. Custom-made metal brackets were produced to suspend the pendant lights from the arches above so as not to touch the 'xorok' above.

In the living area, wall lights were placed in the space between the arches, giving a soft glow to the old stone walls.

The home office was illuminated with a combination of wall lights. Glow balls were positioned in the space between the arches, while directional task lighting was used to illuminate the desk.

Q: All works were carried out while the clients had already been living in the house for a number of years. How did you go about this, adapting the spaces and works while they were living there? What was the most challenging aspect of this?

A: The clients were very open to changes, they knew what they wanted, and everyone was in agreement with the design. So, in that respect, everything moved forward quite smoothly.

We were lucky that the clients worked in a similar industry, so they could bring tradespeople who they already knew into their home. This was definitely a plus.

However, it is always a major challenge doing works in a house while the clients are living there. The greatest challenge was to stick to time frames. The pressure to complete the works is even greater, since the client would be seeing small changes every day, but would be anxious for the works to be finished. When certain tradespeople either don't show up, or can't turn up, the client feels it more, and so do we.

In any project, each party involved needs to be part of the team to achieve the best result possible in the shortest period of time. And this is even more so when working in a place where the family is still living on site.

Q: A project of the sort, where only parts of the interior design are being tackled, inevitably entails the juxtaposition of the old with the new. How did you go about this?

A: The new was addressed in a very contemporary way, where we tried our best to design pieces that were timeless. Using a combination of timeless materials, soft lighting and





geometric patterns all helped to contribute to this. The colour choices of light grey, black and rich, dark blue, together with the brass details and mirrored surfaces made all the new pieces complement what we found the first time we visited the project.

Sometimes, an old setting would be crying out for something more contemporary for it to feel more up to date and relevant to today's lifestyle. But what makes such a project a success would be a mix of open-mindedness on the part

of the clients, teamwork and a clear vision.

All the 'limitations' that were faced throughout the course of works resulted in a very successful interior design project for a much-loved family home. ■