



LIGHT & SPACE IN DINGLI



Katja Cassar, a young architect who has just started her own practice with fellow architect **Paula Agius** (Atelier Maison), restyled this rooftop flat in Dingli to give it a superbly contemporary young look that's full of brilliant sunlight. Now it's a new first home for Katja and her husband George.

Photography: George Scintilla - Styling accessories: Camilleri Paris Mode, Fabulous, The Rug Gallery, Manor House

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George and I were getting married but we didn't have a home. We just couldn't find one. Round and round we went, from one estate agent to another, visiting one house and flat after another and finding nothing suitable. We couldn't afford what we liked and we didn't like what we could afford. I suppose that happens to most people. Maybe when you're an architect it's worse, because you notice the faults and flaws that others might not, like trained seamstresses who inspect the seams of shop-bought clothes and find them wanting.

When we had almost given up trying to find something we both liked and could pay for without putting a noose of debt around our necks for the rest of our lives, and also with a good bit of outdoor space (we didn't want much, did we), my mother suddenly stopped her reading of the newspaper and called me over. There were flats in Dingli, she said, that were being sold on plan. I wasn't overly enthusiastic, but I liked the sound of Dingli because it held out the promise of some kind of space. That was the only thing that persuaded us we should go and have a look.

So on Sunday afternoon we drove to Dingli with a couple of friends. We said to ourselves that if the flat was yet another let-down, we could always go and have tea somewhere and think about something else. The flat we eventually bought didn't even exist then because the building was still going up and ours is the rooftop eyrie. But we could see the views well enough from the flat below, and that is what piqued our interest.



The front door leads on to a brief but wide hallway that immediately gives a sense of space because there's a glass wall on the left. The low bench that runs the length of the glass serves as seating and shelving and is decorated with ornaments and plants. The teal blue of the kitchen island draws you in. The fin walls are finished in rough plaster and painted in a light grey from Crown Paints, and the shuttered concrete of the ceiling is left as is and painted over. The same ceramic tiling in a slate shade is used throughout, and kilims look particularly good on it. We got ours from The Rug Gallery.

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Actually, the fact that the flat wasn't there yet made it even more interesting and not less so. In general, people have difficulties imagining what furniture will look like in a flat, let alone trying to picture the flat itself when it isn't even there. That's one advantage of being an architect: you can look at some lines on paper and project the plan into reality. This was the perfect chance, we could see, to redesign the layout just as we wanted it, before it was built. And even more exciting, I could do it myself. For the first time, I would be working on my own home instead of somebody else's.

Some of our ideas were cramped or rendered impossible altogether by our limited budget, but the food thing about having lots of fresh ideas is that when some are out of the question, you can always move on to the next. And we were doing it for ourselves – though that of course can make for quite a difficult client...

The clincher for us was the extent of the terrace – a wonderful size. After months and months of visiting places described as having terraces only to turn up and find a narrow balcony wrapped round in aluminium, we were really excited about this space that seemed to us so vast. It's almost the size of the flat itself. This meant that on fine days, and there are lots of them in Malta, our living area would double – and it has.

We haven't got down to doing all we would like to do with this outdoor space – in fact, we haven't done very much at all yet in terms of decoration but we haven't been living here long and it will come with time. I think I want that rooftop-garden look, and after all, this is a rooftop. Right now, it's a great place for our two small dogs to run around. We'll need to create some shade because it gets blazing hot out there in the summer, lots of plants, some more furniture and that's it. I'd also like to screen off part of it, and that will give us an unobtrusive place to hang out the laundry. You have to think of these mundane practicalities, too.

The large sliding doors and windows leading to the open terrace all sit on wide thresholds clad in slate. At the entrance, a low bench is used as a convenient place to put everyday things and some ornaments. In the kitchen, the wide threshold acts as a platform for the indoor/outdoor workbench, where you can also sit and eat.



The large deep teal kitchen island is the centre of the living space, a sort of 'congregational' area. The butcher's block on casters gives the space a mobile flexibility, acting as an additional workspace when cooking. When designing the interior layout, we avoided corridors; they would have made the place too dark. To get to the living room, you walk through the kitchen area.



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The kitchen units and some open shelving seem to be a block of natural oak but they are actually wrapped around the central services shaft that serves all the flats. The open shelving is used for practical storage and not just display. There is more open shelving around the kitchen island. The highly polished black marble top is a durable surface for cooking and the sink and draining surface were formed out of the same marble for a seamless look.



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What did it were the views, really. The building looks out over open fields; there's nothing on the other side of the street. So we have all this lovely natural light pouring in, and the sun is so bright that we have hung bamboo curtains at every one of the large windows. I like the quality of the patterned shade they cast across the floor, and I like the texture of the bamboo too, its contrast with the dark kitchen counter and the sleek wood of our cupboards.

Outside it's all rural, with fields of vegetables and really quiet village streets just round the corner. And inside, the look is very much the city flat. I love that contrast. It's very calm outside, really tranquil, sometimes no movement at all. I wanted that calmness within the walls too, a relaxed feel. Because we got to redesign the flat before it was built, George and I agreed that it would be an excellent idea to replace most of the exterior walls with large double-glazed windows and doors, bringing the outside in and having all that mood-boosting light. And light shapes the design of the interior.

Our budget was modest (it still is) because we are both in our 20s and haven't been working for that long. When you have to pay for the building itself you can't spend too much on decorating it. That's the reason for the bamboo curtains: I had to come up with an economic solution to the very bright direct sunlight that pours in at certain times of day. But at the same time I did not want to block out the light completely. I wanted to achieve a kind of raw, semi-vintage look, and that's what propelled to Hamrun to get my bamboo curtains made. They were meant to be a temporary solution, but we like them so much that they're going to stay.

When the doors and windows were installed, we got to work on the walls. They were roughly plastered and painted in cool greys. White, with all this blinding light, would have been too stark. The ceilings haven't been plastered. The paint was applied directly to the shutter concrete and that effect incorporated into the style of the space, defects and all.

All windows and doors have been taken to the ceiling without a beam above, allowing the terrace area to become an extension of the indoor space when they're thrown open. The architecture is a series of fin wall, voids and volumes, rather than walls and windows/doors. I like this holistic way of doing it, where the fin walls are not only supporting structures but also play a part in creating the interior.



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The living/dining space continues on from the kitchen. Gres riven slate tiling is used throughout, making the area one continuous whole. A floor to ceiling fixed opening separates the two fin walls and provides the living space with ample natural light. This area is decorated with 1930s pieces passed on by family members and with a set of 1940s chairs found in an antique shop in Sicily. The bamboo-effect weatherproof chair is from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat and sells at €708, as is the Vincent Shepherd basket chair in which Katja is sitting, which sells for €1215. The affordable large kilims are from The Rug Gallery in Sliema.

The study area is still a very temporary arrangement. A 1940s vitrine from passed on by a grandmother is filled with books and papers. A white-painted table serves as a desk. The 1930s cupboard that looks like a commode is actually an old sewing-machine. The table set against the wall is from Manor House in Balzan and sells at €259. The beautiful large blue and white jar is from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat; it sells at €645. This is a quiet space, a corner away from the main thoroughfare, so to speak, making it easier to work and concentrate.



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We stayed away from corridors. They only make sense in very large spaces with many rooms, anyway. Beyond a brief entrance hall, the kitchen is central to the space. I designed a four-metre island of cupboards with a black worktop, and found a patient carpenter who built it. When we have guests over, it makes for a more relaxed environment: they can move through the kitchen and around the terrace and into the living-room as it is all just the one space, really. Anybody who is in the kitchen doesn't feel cut off from the action, because you can't actually be 'in' the kitchen as it is where the through-space to the living-room would ordinarily be.

We've built a breakfast bench against the glass overlooking the terrace. In warm weather, when the glass doors are open, this becomes a work surface for meals eaten outside.

We didn't have the luxury of so much space that we could waste any, so we fitted a bathroom that serves only our bedroom into the surplus space over a lift shaft. As you would imagine, it's a long and narrow space but then that's just the perfect shape for a shower. And it's been clad in white Carrara marble which makes for instant luxury. The plan is to enclose it with teak louvres.

We've used vintage pieces of furniture given to me by my grandmother or found in markets, and some chairs we bought in an antique shop in Sicily and had sent over. I really like this look; it has a homely feel, softening the grey of the walls and the contemporary lines of the space itself. Because we are on the roof – the penthouse – we have had to deal with the central service shaft to the whole block, running up through the middle of our flat. I camouflaged it by cladding it in oak panelling with a matt texture, shelving and kitchen cupboards.

Now this is our home – George and me, and Ralph and Fred, our cocker spaniel and miniature Schnauzer. It is still a work in progress, but yes, it certainly feels like home.



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Katja planned to move these out of shot for the photo-shoot. They looked too drab, she thought, and 1970s in a bad way. But instead we had them hand-painted in Zuber paint by Camilleri Paris Mode's resident hand-painter. It's a service they offer, and they have a wide range of paint shades for furniture. The cane pieces got several coats including a top layer of varnish which allows them to be used outdoors. The assorted cotton cushions in vintage fabrics were made to order. The kilim is from The Rug Gallery.

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With storage for clothes and clutter elsewhere, the bedroom is a no-fuss affair, with a low bed placed just beneath a bamboo curtain that throws a dappled shade onto the covers. The Afghan tribal bed-throw is from a shop on the Portobello Road in London. The red reading lamp is from Camilleri Paris Mode.

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GET THE LOOK



Large white pineapple-inspired ceramic table-lamp - €340 from Fabulous in Msida



Green ceramic ginger jar in an 'apple' shape, €140 from Camilleri Paris Mode, Rabat



Chinese ceramic stool in traditional willow design, from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat



Red ceramic tea jar, €90 from Fabulous, Msida



Golden horse ornament from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat



Blue and white speckle-pattern flower-pot, €25.90 from Manor House in Balzan



Blue and white hand-painted ceramic pot, €90 from Fabulous in Msida



These blue and white tea jars with a contemporary pattern are very fashionable right now. This one is €69 from Manor House in Balzan



Glass jar in a wicker container - €35.90 from Manor House in Balzan



This looks like a Chinese stool, but it is actually a shelf-sized one used as an ornament - €120 from Fabulous in Msida



The acanthus leaf is a time-honoured design for these wooden bookends - €65.95 from Manor House in Balzan

LIGHT & GET SPACE IN DINGLI THE LOOK

Maymana is the capital of Farryab in northern Afghanistan on the border with Turkestan. It is known historically for the artisan tradition of kilims made on vertical looms. The Kilim Kaudani traditional colours are recognisable by the intense tones of reds, orange, blue and rusty brown. They are made from fine and durable wool. The Rug Gallery has a good stock of Kilim Kaudani made using the traditional artisan methods in new designs that blend with contemporary interior decoration, in tones of lilac, green, rose and other shades and colours – a collection of some exceptional pieces. The Rug Gallery, Qui-Si-Sana Seafront, Sliema. 21 334 191 or info@rugs.com.mt



Red and white Chinese vase, from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat



Chinese horses never go out of style. Durable ones like this can be used in and out of the house and look good everywhere – from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat and Sliema

This large turquoise jar makes a striking statement – from Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat

Brilliant blue vase at €22.90 from Manor House in Balzan



This is a very special jar – tall and elegant, and beautifully painted - €645 at Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat

