

# The making of Valletta's newest luxury hotel

**Sarah Micallef** speaks with the creative minds behind the design of the elegant AX Rosselli Privilege **Michael Pace**, partner at Forward Architects, and **Nikki Muscat**, leading architect for the project, to find out what went into the making of Valletta's first five-star hotel.





Photos by Jeremy Debattista

A little over three years ago, local architecture practice Forward Architects was approached to create the design of a new luxury hotel in Valletta. "The client's ambition was to open the first five-star hotel in the heart of our capital," Michael Pace, partner at Forward Architects and Nikki Muscat, leading architect for the project, explain. The client also wanted to step away from conventional hotels and move towards the new trend in 'lifestyle' hotels, with visitor experience at its core.

"With self-catering and self-check-in apartments growing in popularity, our clients wanted to bring hospitality and the 'butler' experience back into the everyday running of the hotel," the architects tell me, revealing

that the selected site consisted of a palazzo at 167, Merchants Street, Valletta.

"We knew that converting an existing building to fit a new brief would be a challenge. The numerous operational intricacies and standards to be met to achieve five-star classification made the task at hand even more testing than we had forecast," they share, though this didn't stop them from achieving their brief, and then some.

The result is the elegant AX Rosselli Privilege, which went on to scoop the Interior Spaces Special Commendation at the recent Premju Emanuele Luigi Galizia by Malta's Kamra tal-Periti. Speaking of the initial brief, the architects explain that the aim was to

convert this baroque palazzo into a five-star hotel comprising 25 spacious, unique suites.

"Our target was to enhance all of its spaces, both the interior and exterior, and to stir emotion through a bold and uncompromised design approach," they say, affirming that in designing Rosselli, the team was adamant in exposing and celebrating the original architecture of the building by removing any accretions and alterations that had been implemented over the years. "The courtyard for example, which had been reduced in size, was restored to its original three arch symmetry, and a full-span mezzanine built within the *piano nobile* was removed to re-expose its original double height."



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Naturally, all of this had to be done whilst accommodating the complex operational and technical requirements of a five-star hotel. Fire safety standards had to be met, and heating and cooling needed to be incorporated without compromising or hiding the original ceilings of the spaces, the architects reveal, adding that the hotel also needed to be accessible for persons with disability and provide different forms of access for staff and guests. "Apart from that, back-of-house, front-of-house and operations all came with their own detailed lists of requirements. Our job was to merge these

requirements into a cohesive design solution, without compromising the intended look and feel of the space," they explain.

Looking back on the design stage, Michael and Nikki maintain that their point of departure was the "grandeur and unapologetic boldness of baroque architecture, and the emotion it provokes." While they admit that boldness is of course risky, they also knew that if implemented with care, the approach could provoke emotion on a similar level and leave its mark with visitors.

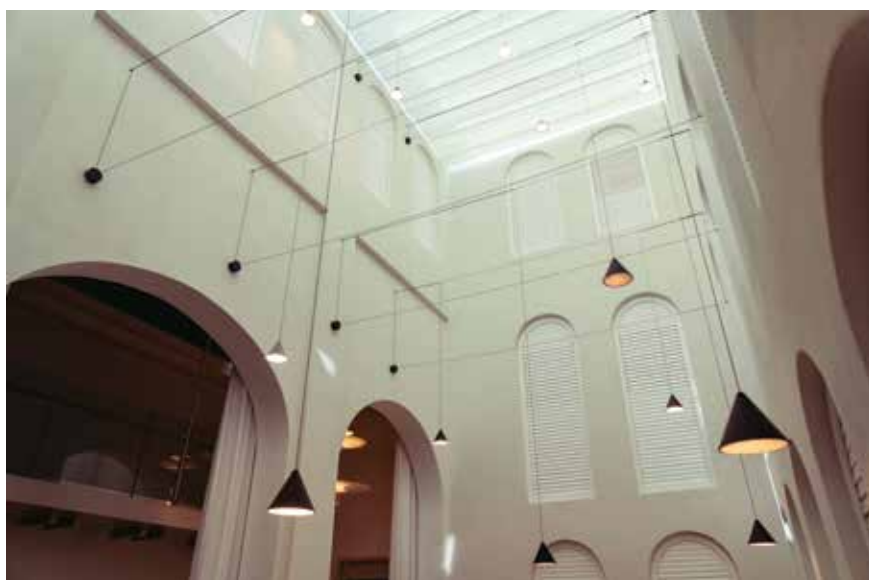
"We wanted this project to be an example

of a union between preservation and contemporary intervention - so we embraced the language of the original build, rich as it is in its architectural history, and used that as a canvas for a tailored design that will co-exist, unchallenged and yet in harmony with the existing architecture, without falling victim to popular design trends," they say, maintaining that their clients wanted each suite to be unique - hence the six different collections. "Some are inspired by youth, rich in texture, colour and architectural motifs, while others are suggestive of Valletta's secret gardens, with feminine undertones and adorned with dark floral walls," they reveal.

Meanwhile, the calm atmosphere of the palazzo's courtyard provides the setting for another set of suites, each with its own private spa facilities that include an indoor terrace, wellness area and sauna, while the east-facing suites deliver an innovative twist on traditional flooring and plastering techniques, with added textures to add a hint of nostalgia to the contemporary feel. "The duplex *piano nobile* suites have an unusual and whimsical feel," they continue, "with their double height they remind us of Valletta's architectural grandeur. And finally, there's the executive suite, which brings together a dedicated private working lounge with interconnected sleeping quarters, with intricate solid wood flooring and a modern-day interpretation of traditional craftsmanship."

Speaking of the state of the building before work started, the architects reveal that the palazzo had been vacant for over 10 years and had previously housed the offices of a major audit firm.

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"Over time, a number of accretions had been built in the courtyard, concealing the arch at the right wing of the building," they say, adding that the fountain was also no longer in the centre of the courtyard - not typical of Baroque palazzos that usually celebrated symmetry. "We also noted that several split levels had been added to the property to increase office space. The original configuration of the rooms had been retained in most parts but with little regard to internal heights and to the location of the windows on the facades," the architects note.

The team at Forward Architects adopted a mix-and-match approach of finishes, objects and fittings which they describe as "at times unrelated but work together to provoke similar emotions," opting primarily for classic finishes that would stand the test of time. These include artisanal details like composite marble flooring,



intricate wood panelling and hand-crafted brass inlays, with similar emphasis on craftsmanship and detail when it came to furniture selection and design.

The resulting design is one which Michael and Nikki feel provokes the emotion they were after. This intention, they explain, set the basis for most of the design decisions they took, and it has been achieved at many levels, "from the calm, introspective space of the courtyard and the soothing tactility of the suites that include private spa facilities to the overwhelming romanticism of the suites inspired by youth." And while they admit that the interior of the hotel might not be Baroque in its purest form, the undertones are certainly similar. "Forms are bold, decoration is rich, and colour and texture are audacious. Rosselli is an attempt on timeless design, in the hope of retaining its appeal even as trends change."







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When tackling projects of this scale, the balance between aesthetic appeal and practical usage of space is of particular importance, and the architects reflect that naturally, the hotel needed to meet the minimum safety requirements as stipulated by law. "For example, although the property had a grand staircase and granted access to most floors, it could not be utilised as a fire escape. Without major intervention, an independent fire escape was introduced on the left-hand side of the building, which spanned from top to bottom. Another example is in the installation of HVAC units concealed within timber units around the frame of each door to provide the required heating and cooling without compromising the visible original building envelope," they reveal.

Although it wasn't without its challenges. Michael and Nikki name the main challenge as the integration of back-of-house within the limits of the palazzo, for which every detail needed to be mapped out meticulously to ensure a seamless interface, all the while respecting heritage, safety and sanitary concerns. Another major stumbling block when rehabilitating a historical palazzo for commercial use is the issue of full accessibility for all, they maintain. "Most entrances at the time were designed with a few steps near the doorway. Having a better understanding of finished levels, we realised that this issue could be resolved by converting the ground floor windows of the façade into doors," they say.

And now that it's completed, I ask, which

are the aspects they're most proud of? "If we had to pick, it would probably be the entrance, public circulation spaces and courtyard," they share, explaining that the palazzo's entrance naturally lent itself to the five-star feel, and they knew that the space needed to be enhanced and celebrated.

"The area was treated in a darker and more dramatic finish to the other areas, and the walls were lined with pinstriped bevelled mirrors which give an interesting play on light. The courtyard is another volume that we are

proud of, particularly in the architectural approach we embraced when extending above the original space, allowing the original arches to be clearly distinguishable from the repeated smaller arches of the addition," they divulge, affirming that the space has been transformed into a place of congregation, defining the front of house. "The colour is white, other than that of the sky overhead - this is a place of rest, a break from the hustle and bustle, a perfect reset button to mark the start or end of a day." **cc**

