

THE ANATOMY OF A HOME

British artist Madeleine Fenwick moved to Malta to make the most of the islands' "unique" light. Since then, she has taken over a property in Valletta, which she has renovated with the help of Forward Architects. Here, Iggy Fenech gets a tour of her quirky home.

PHOTOS: MARK CAUCHI; JONATHAN BORG

Upon opening the door to Madeleine Fenwick's Old Theatre Street property, the eyes are immediately drawn to the old Maltese tiles, which are framed by a huge painting to the left, a gated door at the very end of the hall, and a staircase to the right.

Taking just a few steps forward, the whole scene guides you upwards as five storeys of wrought-iron railings spiral to reveal a spectacular elliptical skylight in the ceiling, where the sky becomes an ever-changing landscape.

"I love the perfect symmetry of the oculus," Madeleine smiles. "There's nothing like seeing the stars, the moon and the infinite stairway reflected in it at night; or the light of the blue void as I run up and down the stairs during the day."

For Madeleine, this house isn't just a home; it's a passion – one that clearly elates her every time she sets foot in it. And it must be said that she can't be blamed for being thrilled because, on top of it being a spectacular home, it is also, clearly, the materialisation of her quirky character, while also doubling as a studio – and an inspiring one at that.

"I moved to Malta almost five years ago for a very particular reason – the light," she reveals. "I was here on holiday, floating around in the Blue Lagoon in Comino with some of my dearest friends when I suddenly had this eureka moment that compelled me to move to Malta. The light here is so bright, and the shadows so sharp, it is almost incomparable to anywhere else I have found.

"The islands' surroundings of clear blue skies and crystal blue seas combine to reflect the most incredible luminosity, which makes it the perfect environment for an artist, as well as a great antidote to my years in London with its concrete gloom and endless grey clouds."



IMAGINE MY SURPRISE WHEN I CLIMBED TO THE ROOF AND DISCOVERED I COULD SEE THE GREAT DOME OF THE CARMELITE CHURCH AND THE SPIRE OF ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL RIGHT UNDER MY NOSE, WITH MDINA CROWNING THE WESTWARD HORIZON. I ALMOST COLLAPSED IN EXCITEMENT!

Sure enough, a year later, she rented a property in the Three Cities – where she “adored living” – but always found herself gravitating to the “surreal streets” and “steep steps” of Valletta. The more she saw of the capital, the more she fell in love with it, so when the time came for her to find a permanent home here, Valletta was at the top of her list.

“When I found this enchanting slice of Valletta, I let go of my dream of having a big garden and embraced this property’s view. I mean, imagine my surprise when I climbed to the top of the roof and discovered that I could see the great dome of the Carmelite Church and the spire of St Paul’s

Anglican pro-Cathedral right under my nose, with Mdina crowning the westward horizon. I almost collapsed in excitement!”

The house immediately showed great potential, though it was not an easy project. Probably the most challenging aspect for Forward Architects, entrusted with the renovation, was making the five storeys, consisting basically of one room on top of another, work as an entire space.

“From the basement to the rooftop, I wanted to create a series of liminal spaces, each with its own individual character, inhabited with the changing moods of the light of night and day...

At least, that is what I wanted when I signed up to the slightly-bigger-than-I-realised renovation project that this house was to become!”

All salvageable elements were carefully restored. These, coupled with a sensitive, restricted choice of traditional and natural materials, focused on maintaining the legibility of the existing spaces, gave Madeleine a base palette for the rest of the décor.

“We used stone, marble and traditional ceramic tiles as core materials for the dwelling,” she continues. “For the bathroom, meanwhile, we used slate for its impermeable nature.





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"Of course, we were aware of the problems of humidity in Malta, so Forward Architects' design intelligently created good airflows for climate control, with the house's idiosyncratic structure proving a great help in this."

Indeed, even the colours of the interior walls and plasterwork – in white and a subtle shade of warm grey – were inspired by this.

"The architects teased me for having to take so many paint samples to decide the perfect shade of grey,"

she recounts, laughing. "But I was very happy with the final choice, which alludes to the serene nature of the neoclassical style the house had been built in while also complementing the original patterned tiles."

The only thing that contrasts this calmness is the oak flooring upstairs, which was installed for warmth, and the polished concrete in the garden studio.

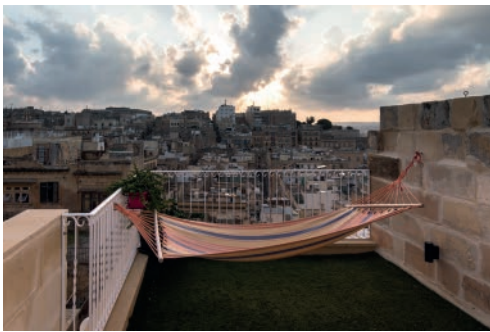
The latter space was very important to Madeleine; in fact, the whole house is filled with plants, with

the terraces and outdoor spaces injected with lush, dense vegetation, contrasting with the bare rooftops of her neighbours.

But this was no afterthought: not only did she plant her courtyard creeper before the work had even begun to give it time to establish itself, but she also got in touch with a Chelsea Flower Show-winning supplier of artificial grasses to turn her dream of having a lawn into a reality.

"The 'green carpet', as the builders dubbed it, was shipped along with





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deep insulating foam cushioning to make a little soft patch of green in the sky,” Madeleine, who had spent some time working with urban landscape gardeners in London, explains.

“Once it was installed, and all the plants were in their respective places and the hammock had been set up, I was finally able to enjoy my patch of bliss.”

And that is truly the spirit of this home: from the floating garden in the middle of the city, to the cosy kitchen complete with an armchair by the fireplace, Madeleine’s home stands testament to the opportunities we can unwrap through respectful and restrained design. ■

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