

DREAMY CONVERSION

As any good tailor will tell you, to know whether something is well made you need to look beneath the surface. It's the cut, layering, and stitching together that determine how well a garment hangs when worn, and how readily it can be adjusted to fit its new owner. That tailoring principle is also true in architecture and design.

Design team: Forward Architects

Project leads: Michael Pace, Partner, Forward Architects
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Photography: Jeremy Debattista

This project has been shortlisted for the Hotel Under 50 Rooms – Europe category in the 2019 International Hotel & Property Awards

The calm white of the interior courtyard creates a serene atmosphere, enhanced by the louvred windows lining the surrounding walls.



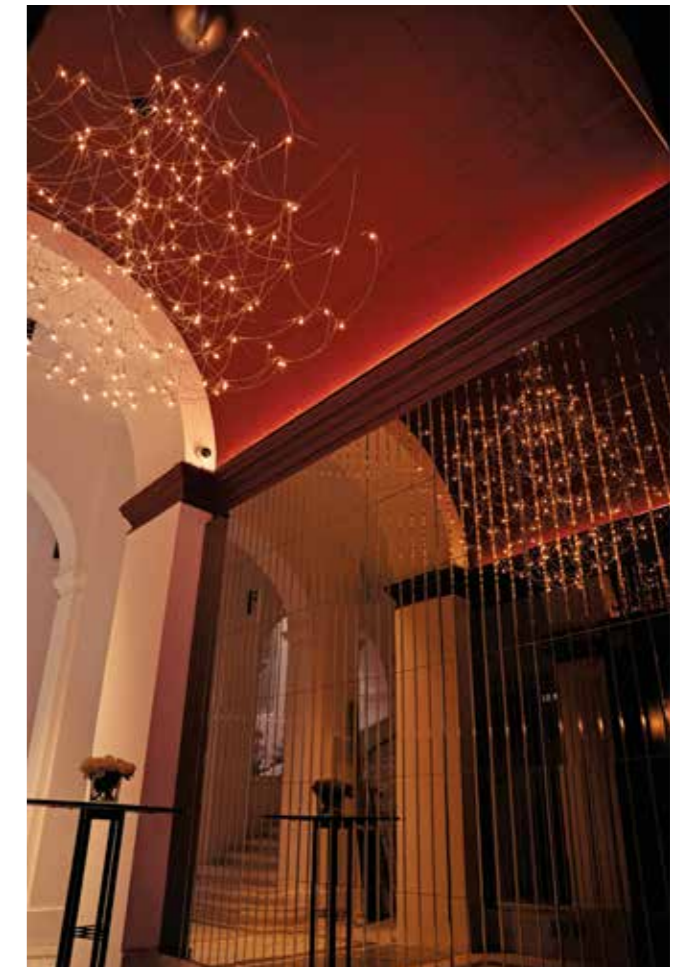
When Forward Architects were commissioned to convert a baroque palazzo in Valletta, the building was not entirely a blank canvas. It had lain empty for a while and was laden with accretions and alterations from its years as corporate offices. However, the original building was structurally stable and had a pleasing symmetrical design, with high ceilings and well-proportioned rooms in classic shapes, which lent itself to a graceful conversion.

The firm was tasked with seeing the building's redesign through to the end, or "all the way from foundations to curtains", as one of the project's designers put it. The process began with defining the design brief. The drift of business travellers and leisure makers towards holiday home rentals signalled to the hotel's owners and designers that something was missing from hotels' current offering. Integrating those elements into the overall design became part of the brief to offer visitors a sophisticated, evocative experience in an aesthetic environment which can withstand the test of time.

◀ *The barrel-vaulted hallway has been given a fresh look with contemporary lighting and a dark red colour which contrasts with the midnight blue of the main door and the white courtyard beyond, creating a pleasing enfilade effect.*

▲ *The external apertures by Joseph Mifsud Woodworks Ltd. are in midnight blue, an elegant contrast to the honey-coloured stonework on the upper floors.*

▶ *A custom-made bevelled mirror wall creates a feeling of space in the hallway while retaining a sense of symmetry.*



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The atelier concept, inspired by Merchants' Street's history of tailoring, infused the design process. The effect is evident in the attention paid to the detailing: the ribbed marble front of the reception desk, the customised bevelled mirrors, the brass room numbers set into the floors, the square motif of the wood-panelling on the walls of the ground floor restaurant, evoking the banks of drawers in which haberdashers once stored their merchandise.

The conversion was designed on plan, meticulously mapping out the details of the hotel's daily operations to ensure a seamless interface between the back and front of house and a smooth visitor experience while respecting all heritage, safety and sanitary concerns. That meant planning for unglamorous practicalities like fire escape routes, service shafts and goods lifts, plumbing and drainage systems for 25 bathroom suites, and providing storage for the copious amounts of bedlinen and towels that a hotel needs to have on site, as well as the more visible creativity of "dressing up" the guest rooms and public areas of the building.

◀ *The light-filled courtyard has been converted into an indoor sitting area decorated in a neutral and soothing white. MI Installations fitted the electrical systems here and throughout the rest of the building.*

▲ *Dark floral backdrops emphasise the seating recess in the courtyard, where the corners of the seating space were softened into curves.*

▶ *Customised shelving emphasises the double-height of the reception area. The materials are classic - marble, wood and glass - in a contemporary design. The large plate glass door opens directly onto street level, enabling easy access.*



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The construction work began with deconstruction – removing the accumulated accretions and alterations to expose the original architecture. A full span mezzanine within the piano nobile was removed to re-expose the space’s double height. The courtyard, which had been reduced in size, was restored to its original three-arch symmetry and turned into an internal space by installing a roof-level skylight with a retractable blind. The air circulation effect – the original cooling system, which depended on air circulating freely upward through the building – has been maintained, but the space is no longer open to the elements and feels light, bright and airy.

The large arched windows overlooking the courtyard were removed, dissolving the visual boundary between the upper floors and the communal space at the heart of the building. Sheer white curtains now hang over the openings, left open by day and drawn at night, making each floor feel like a private space. The walkway bridges installed to connect the two sides of the building internally also provide space for a sitting area on each level.

▼ *Linearity and angularity defines the internal “bridge” connecting two sides of the building, a contrast to the soft curves of the courtyard. The door box frames were custom-made in marble. There are communal seating areas on each floor.*

► *Carrara marble and stucco create a calming atmosphere in the wellness indoor terraces of the Don Pietro Suites, named after the building’s original owners. The curved ceilings echo the barrel-vault of the building’s main hallway.*



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Some architectural adjustments to the original building were necessary. The rooftop was converted into a social and lounge space, with abundant greenery and stunning views of the Valletta skyline and the sea beyond. The ground floor windows on the façade were lowered and are now doors. The main entrance remains where it was originally but the aperture of the window to the left has been brought down to street level, enabling easy access for those with limited mobility. To the right, the new door provides direct access to one of the hotel's restaurants and, around the corner, a separate door provides direct access from the street to the restaurant's private dining room. The external apertures are double-glazed, providing insulation against heat and sound. The windows are shielded by louvred wooden shutters in midnight blue, the hotel's signature colour. On the inside, curtains provide a complete black out.

▼ *The kaleidoscope-patterned marble flooring in the duplex 3 Herons suites was custom-made and laid by hand by Halmann Vella. The ceiling-hung multiple lanterns emphasise the rooms' double height.*

▲ *The duplex 3 Herons Suites at the front of the hotel are named after the symbol of the Rosselli family. The metal-and-wood spiral staircase was custom-made by Servgroup.*

► *The interior of the 1634 suites is inspired by Classicism with palatial solid wood flooring and a contemporary take on tradition. The suites are designed to function flexibly for business and leisure.*



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The undertones of the hotel's interior design are Baroque: bold forms, rich decoration, undeniable affluence, and abundant emotion. Though the rooms in each of the six categories share style elements, the design of every room is individualised in a contemporary aesthetic which flouts design trends, mixing and matching finishes, fittings and furnishing. The 3 Herons Suites on the piano nobile are a contemporary take on palatial design, reflecting Valletta's architectural grandeur. The high-ceiling suites have their own private lounge and sleeping quarters at mezzanine level, connected by custom-made spiral staircases. The marble floors were cut and laid by hand in a kaleidoscope pattern. Walls are in pastel pink and covered, on one side, in the custom-made bevelled mirror used in the hotel's main hallway. Pendant lights are hung at differing heights, creating a chandelier effect.

The Alusietta Suites are a tribute to Alusietta Massa, wife to Pietro Rosselli. The floral backdrops recall the few private gardens in Valletta, which offer a peaceful haven.

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In the Don Pietro Suites, named for one of the building's original occupants, Piero Rosselli (see box), a marble-lined wellness area links the bedroom to private spa facilities. The materials are calming and tactile – Carrara marble, traditional stucco, and warm walnut – creating a soothing, introspective experience. The rounded ceilings here echo the barrel-vaulted ceiling in the building's main hallway. The suites all discreetly overlook the courtyard, with louvres that can be tilted to adjust the light while remaining closed. When seen from the courtyard, the regular rows of narrow arched windows and the uniform white of the apertures and walls create a visual rhythm that is both pleasing and calming.

The Maruzzo Suites are inspired by youth, rich in texture, colour and architectural motifs, representing a dialogue between the old and new. The Alusietta Suites, with their feminine undertones and dark floral walls, are suggestive of Valletta's secret gardens. The East-facing monochromatic Mezza Croce Suites deliver a twist on traditional flooring and plastering techniques, with textures that add a hint of romanticism to their contemporary feel. The interior of the 1634 Executive suite, a private working lounge with interconnected sleeping quarters which can also be used as a family-suite for leisure travellers, is inspired by Classicism with palatial solid wood flooring and a contemporary interpretation of traditional style.

PIETRO ROSSELLI AND ALUSIETTA MASSA

The baroque palace housing hotel Rosselli was once Casa Rosselli-Massam the home of a reputable goldsmith and philanthropist, Pietro Rosselli, who had married Alusietta Massa, the daughter of the Master of Mint in 1634. Rosselli's portrait shows him to be a distinguished and confident man, wearing the Mezza Croce (Half-cross) badge, an honour bestowed on him by the Order of St John.

Rosselli and Massa are reputed to have paid for the building and decoration of the Oratory of the Goldsmiths', that of St. Helen, and for the embellishment of the Confraternity's Chapel in St. Paul's Shipwreck Church in Valletta. They took possession of the chapel of San Pietro ad Vinculis in the Jesuits' Church in Merchants Street, just across from their home in Valletta, and endowed it with damask wall coverings, silver lamps and oil paintings by Mattia Preti.

Today, the couple lies in the chapel beneath a tombstone whose inscription shows that Pietro Rosselli did not measure the worthiness of his soul by his material fortune. The tombstone is adorned with Rosselli's crest which includes the distinctive half-cross and three herons. The herons, the initials of the couple, P.R and A.M and their badge have been restored and today are inscribed on the façade of the hotel.

The terrazzo trend is picked up in wall cladding and flooring by Halmann Vella. Bathrooms were individually designed for each room, with different fittings selected for each space, such as these CEA Design mixers supplied by S&S Bathrooms.



The individualised design of each room and the detailing of the finishes and fittings relied heavily on artisan skills. As one of the designers said: “Suppliers had to go back to their roots. It was important to bring craftsmanship back.” Customised craftsmanship, as opposed to manufacture – that is what defines this project’s design. And if that’s a metaphor for the hotel guests’ experience, it’s something for visitors to look forward to. ■

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The rooftop enjoys views of the Valletta skyline and the sea beyond, and includes a sun lounge area and bar surrounded by greenery.

SUPPLIERS

MI Installations

were responsible for the supply and installation of the building’s electrical and plumbing systems, and for supplying and installing the fire-fighting systems throughout the building.

Servgroup

restored the existing steel railings and manufactured new ones; built the walk-on skylight using glass beams; crafted the spiral staircases in steel, wood, and glass; constructed the internal building bridges in steel and glass; installed the 3-metre high automatic sliding doors at the building entrance.

S&S Bathrooms

supplied luxury brands ranging from towel warmers by Tubes Radiatori, whose collections are curated by well-known Italian designers, to sanitaryware from CEA Design whose products are sketched by the designers themselves and crafted inhouse from solid stainless steel, including the internal parts.

Joseph Mifsud Woodworks Ltd

custom built and installed all external wooden apertures and new louvres, all external glass apertures, and all internal adjustable louvres.

Halmann Vella

restored the old marble and placed the new Carrara marble in the lobby area, installed the waterjet works with a brass insert, the precast 8cm thick solid railing, the Venetian flooring on the lower level, the bridge cladding, the lift architrave, the terrazzo floor and wall cladding in the bedrooms and bathrooms, the precast terrazzo solid door ornamental elements, and produced the bamboo textured Carrara mable cladding for the reception desk.