

PHOTOS: COSTAS PICADAS



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# Face lift for a grand old lady

*Insider* has the privilege of visiting one of the most beautiful neo-classical homes and in re-living its history and its transformation from an abandoned building to an aesthetically stunning home

Walking past an old house, I have always wondered what lay beyond its wrought-iron gates or what motifs lay buried under layers of plaster on its ceilings and walls. Or what the gardens would have looked like with a bit of tender loving care instead of the dried up creepers on rotting trellises bemoaning their tale of sad neglect and apathy.

## The art of restoration

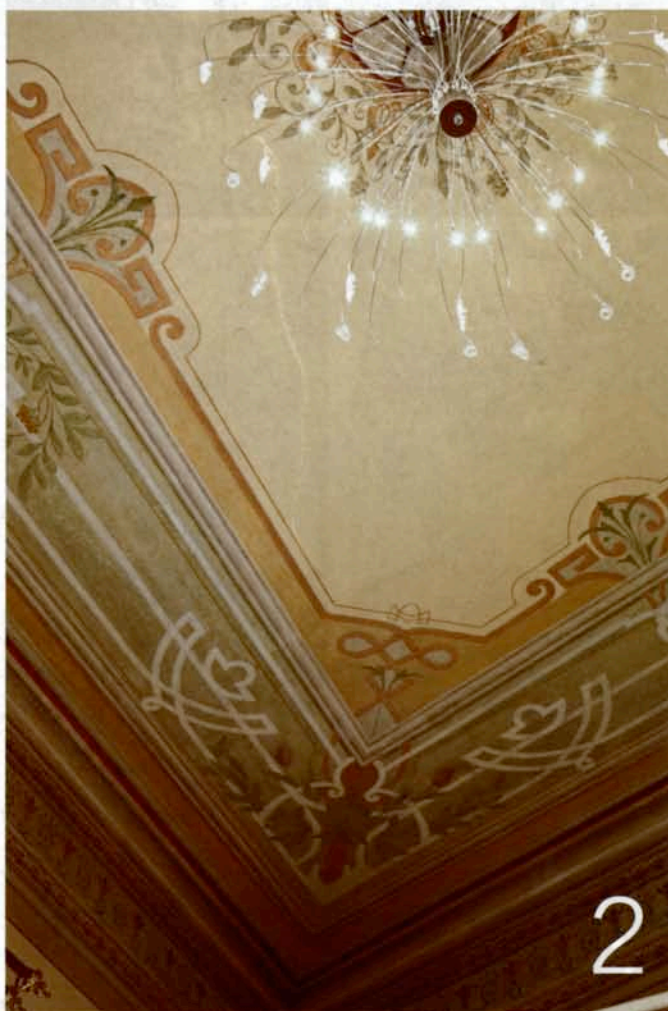
Imagine the power to restore a ruin to its days of former glory, brick for brick. To be able to reflect the personalities of its different owners over different periods of time and its gardens recreated to match the original landscape. Italian architect and restorer, Gherardo degli Azzoni Avogadro Malvasia has been restoring homes in his native Italy and lately has been restoring homes in Athens, in the Peloponnese and on some of the Greek islands. With a degree in Art & Architecture from Florence and Venice, Gherardo describes restoration as the art of maintaining the spirit of the house, the lines and the details using modern drawings but retaining the character of the house by using the same materials as one used in the past.

A good restorer must have the power to imagine the true potential of the house, the grace to accept his mistakes, the resourcefulness to find solutions, but most importantly an abiding love and passion for the house. When restoring, it is very difficult for the architect to decide what elements are worth keeping and what are worth eliminating. And when that decision is made, it should be driven by aesthetic concerns alone and not budgetary or time constraints. For a restorer to maximize the potential of the house, it is critical to know the building very well, to conduct a thorough technical study, to understand the history of the house and to unravel all the transformations the house has been through over time. As Gherardo explains, "one simply cannot design a bathroom in a room full of frescoes. And it is critical to maintain the spirit of the house with architectural harmony. You cannot have an ultra modern new interior housed in an old exterior.

It is also very important for the architect to understand the psychology of the owner, the dynamics of the household and to ensure that the house reflects the personality of the owners. Others they will quite simply not feel at home. Again, it is important to explain why and what is possible and what is not. And finally, it is very important to have a good rapport with the workers. It is they who execute the architect's idea with love and passion, taking care of the smallest details.

## The make-over

We visited an amazing neo-classical house, built towards the end of the 19th century, at the foothills of the Acropolis, on Apostolou Pavlou, a stone's throw away from Pil Poul, the legendary restaurant where Jerome Serres now holds fort, that Gherardo is in the process of restoring. What struck me when I first saw the house was its location. With an unadulterated view of the Acropolis, with nothing between it and the awe-inspiring temple but a patch of verdant green, it was surreal. A few metres to the right and one finds oneself in the quaint Thisseio district. On the other side, is Psyrri with its wholesalers and scrap merchants, bustling with commercial activity.



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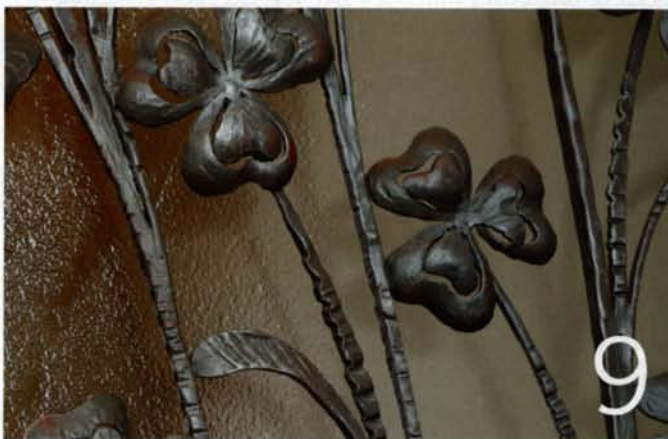


When Gherardo first saw the house in 2004, it was in a dreadful condition. It was occupied by a lawyers office. As he puts it, "When I inspected the house with my technicians, I realised immediately that the plaster was not the same age as the house and I started looking for reliefs and paintings. I brought a few art restorers from Italy and we found the original decoration on the ceiling. It was a very strange and very interesting piece of work with strong European and Greek folk influences. On the ceiling of the first floor, we found an interesting depiction of a house in the countryside, probably the place of origin of the first owner of the house. We spent a lot of time, around three months trying to clean the walls to preserve the original paintings without ruining it. We also had to fix the plaster of the ceiling with the original wood beam that had suffered from years of dampness and moisture without ruining anything inside the house."

Gherardo's team then started work on designing the house along with well known Greek architects Vassilis and Yiorgos Tsikouras of the European Construction Company. They had to design fairly complicated structures, given the constraints of the building's age and original composition. Gherardo recalls two of the several challenges they faced while renovating the house. "We had to install an external lift outside so as not to change anything structurally inside the house. We built a glass lift in the courtyard. Another important thing is when we conceptualised the roof. It had a very irregular form and was difficult to design, but we finally succeeded in preserving the original structure."

One of the highlights of the restoration was the gate of the entrance door which stands at 4 metres. It had to reflect the character of the house, it had to be impressive yet inviting and had to allow guests to have a glimpse of the painted ceilings even before they had stepped in. A very well known metal sculptor designed the grillwork of the entrance door with the motif of a three-leaved clover, a motif that runs right through the house, on its ceilings and parquet floors. Another interesting detail is the parquet floor made of ancient oak barrels which were hand sculpted to have the light dancing off the floor. Yet another challenge was to design the bathroom in a room where the ceilings were covered with rich decoration and motifs. The solution was to have a glass wall so that one could admire the ceiling even from the bathroom.

The best thing about restoration is that one is surrounded by beauty. And the opportunity and privilege to breathe new life into an abandoned structure must be exhilarating.



**1** The view of the house from Apostolou Pavlou St. **2** Detail of the motif on the ceiling of one of the bedrooms on the first floor. **3,4** The detail of the motifs on the ceiling of the main living area before and after the restoration. **5,6** The stairway leading from the hall to the first floor, painted in white and blue, and after restoration, scraped to reveal its original wood finish. **7,8** The bedroom painted in gaudy blue, transformed to reveal its original decoration and fitted in with cupboards and interesting lighting. **9** Detail of the grillwork of the main entrance door with its clover motif. **10** The view of the Acropolis from the roof terrace with an ancient flower pot, sourced from Italy, in the foreground. **11** Glass walls separating the modern bathroom from the bedroom, allowing one to admire the motifs on the bedroom's ceiling. **12** Stained glass doors of the large living room on the first floor juxtaposed against a very modern light fixture on the landing. **13** The magnificent, 4 metre high entrance door to the house.



