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Musical Heirs

Thanks to the tuneful Chimay family, their château-side Rococo opera house, modelled on Louis XV's at Fontainebleau, still swells with classical sounds. Cosmo Brockway hums along

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Set in Motion

In a flat in a Milanese palazzo designed by Luigi Caccia Dominioni, director Fabio Cherstich has created a superb *mise-en-scène*, with artworks as his props, as he writes here

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Gainful Enjoyment

Everything from silhouettes to silk purses, wax portraits to waterfall bookcases are arrayed in a collector's huge house up North. And this is after a big clear-out! says Emily Tobin

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A Dar is Reborn

Minimalist aesthetics meet Moorish idioms in a 17th-century house in Tunis's old walled quarter, as architect John Pawson shakes the Hand of Fatima. Text: Paola Moretti



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Recreate some of the design effects in this issue, by Gareth Wyn Davies and Ariadne Fletcher

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A *serinette* that mimics a finch's song prompts Emily Howes to consider the suffocating lot of wealthy 18th-century women

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The lush temperate rainforest of Chile is studded with volcanoes, and architect Germán del Sol harnessed them to make a thermal spa with a Japanese feel. Jane Withers welcomes a wallow

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The Grand Bacchanal

Every September after the war, Italian aristos and Hollywood royalty would float up to Lily Volpi's 16th-century Venetian palazzo for a dazzling ball. Natasha A. Fraser scans the floor

Contributors



Fabio Cherstich

‘Everything I do is about choosing a story and finding an effective and interesting way to tell it,’ says Fabio. ‘What’s amazing to me about opera is that it remains a direct, live communication tool, though it sings instead of speaking.’ The story the director/set designer tells in this issue is his own – or that of his flat in Milan, which he relishes for the ‘surreal sense of rooms filled with the wrong elements’ (page 82).



Paola Moretti

‘Both when I write and design,’ reflects Paola, ‘I need to find the *genius loci*, the core of a space.’ It’s a paring impulse that draws on John Pawson’s sense of ‘a point where you can neither add nor remove – though I’m not quite so purist’. Her focus for this issue is a Tunisian project by the great minimalist (page 66), one which is ‘at once so contemporary and so time-steeped, it’s as if it’s always been there’.



Natasha A. Fraser

A writer with a penchant for celebrity biographies, Natasha holds that fame’s not the draw. ‘It’s always compelling dipping into someone else’s life. I often feel like we’re sharing the same room when I write about someone.’ This time, the person with whom Natasha conjures an audience is Lily Volpi, at Palazzo Talenti in Venice (page 116). ‘I do admire an adventuress who entertains well... they’re so rare.’



Emily Howes

An author, actor, director and psychotherapist, Emily’s practice is dizzily varied – and that’s just how she likes it. ‘I was taught that theatre should engage all the senses, and I think I treat writing in the same way.’ Her debut novel, *The Painter’s Daughters*, indeed, puts down phrases like brushstrokes; her Object Lesson, which centres on an 18th-century bird organ, takes on a similarly synaesthetic feel (page 144).



Louise Benson

‘I spent a term at art school waxing lyrical about my frankly terrible sculptures,’ says Louise. ‘I quickly realised I was better at talking about art than making it.’ Nowadays, the writer and editor tends towards those ‘invisible’ stories that lie ‘at the edges of the art world’. Artist Lubaina Himid has a similar bent: ‘she turns the most ordinary materials and gestures into tales that would otherwise go untold’ (page 58).



James McDonald

While en route to an interior-design course, as James recalls, he was stopped at Heathrow airport for his too-heavy bags. ‘Faced with charges, Dad forced me to open my suitcases – revealing a massive stash of *Wol* magazines,’ he says. ‘By the end, I won the tug of war.’ In the long term too: since 2009, his images have often graced the pages he collects – like this issue’s set of a private opera house (page 76).

A DAR IS REBORN

When a 17th-century courtyard house in Tunis's ancient walled city caught the eye of a Paris-based design consultant, its transformation was all or nothing, and in choosing the minimalist architect John Pawson to rebuild it, stylistically he got both. The house that emerged from this partnership fluently blends modern aesthetics with traditional idioms and forms. Text: Paola Moretti. Photography: Simon Watson

On the door in the patio, a hand of Fatima, picked out in nails, is said to bring visitors luck as they leave the house.





Above: an oval table by Hans Wegner and stools by Eero Saarinen create a visual frisson against the living room's 17th-century tiled floor. Opposite: the stone monolith in the ground-floor dining room serves both to partition the space and provide storage. For evening entertaining, flickering candles can be set in the sconces in niches in the walls. Sitings editor: Paola Moretti with Chiara Tomasini







Opposite: at nightfall, the patio, with its stone bench designed by John Pawson, is transformed into a cool haven. The pernambuco tree, which was brought from Brazil, has adapted well to the Tunisian climate. Above: in the main bedroom on the ground floor, a bed is covered with a Brazilian wool blanket. From the ceiling hangs a mother-of-pearl 'Fun' chandelier by Verner Panton, from the 1970s

Opposite: the hammam, or traditional bath, is on the ground floor. The room, together with a living room and a bedroom, is in a wing reached via the patio. The daybed's mattress is covered with vintage unbleached linen to complement the colour of the plastered walls

It is a rare enough occurrence to fall in love with a 17th-century courtyard house in the heart of Tunis's old walled quarter; it is more surprising still to ask John Pawson, the architect renowned for his minimalist approach, to redesign it. This is what happened more than 20 years ago to a French design consultant living in Paris, long familiar with Tunis, though not, it has to be said, with living in a medina. Originally settled in the late seventh century, the historic area in Tunis was one of the first Arabo-Muslim towns of the Maghreb and was the capital of several of the region's most significant dynasties. With its many souks, residential quarters, madrassas, mosques and *zawiyahs* (mausoleums), monuments and gates, it is among the best conserved of its kind in the Islamic world. It was designated a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1979. Nevertheless, as the owner himself concedes, it may seem a strange choice for a holiday home – reachable only on foot through the winding, crowded streets and folded into the dense fabric of a city of more than two million inhabitants. But, as he comments, you can never predict a *coup de foudre*.

Like all large medina dwellings, the *dar* (a traditional town house) is at a dead end of an alley. The wooden door, decorated in traditional style with large black nails, is all that can be seen from the outside. Beyond it lies a dimly lit passageway that leads, via tall louvered doors that fold back, on to the internal courtyard. (These doors are secured from the inside by means of a peculiar, infallible locking system: there are no keys, but instead sliding wooden bars and vice movements.) The cubic volume of the nine-square-metre courtyard, which frames the bright blue sky, gives the feeling of being in a work by Donald Judd. The seville orange tree in the middle of the patio has grown large and leafy, breaking the space's stark minimalism, but is in

keeping with the tradition in this part of the world to plant such trees in courtyards for shade to cool the house in summer and provide fruit in springtime to make a delicious bitter-orange marmalade.

The house was purchased from an old couple, the neighbourhood's former postman and his wife, who lived in a small part of the ground floor. Their children had been gone for a long time. Electricity was scarce and it had no running water. The owner was very proud of the well that provided drinking water – not only a luxury in a climate like Tunisia's, but a sign of an extremely old settlement. Everything was fairly dilapidated, but the proportions of the rooms and the courtyard had a lot of charm. Nobody had been to the first floor since World War II; there was still graffiti left by German soldiers. As the *dar* is in the middle of the medina, next to the main mosque, the Jamaa ez-Zitouna (the minaret of which you can see from the terrace), it seems likely that it was built for a *qadi*, or Islamic judge, a key figure in pre-modern Muslim society.

The house needed to be rebuilt, which took three years. Its location next to the main souk meant that building materials could only be brought to the site on Sundays, when the shops were closed. The other challenge was to figure out a way to get up to the terraces, given that the ground floor has six-metre-high ceilings and the old stairway was difficult to navigate. John had the brilliant idea of knocking down some of the kitchen walls to make room for a sculptural stairway that perfectly integrates into the traditional architecture of the house and the walled city. Encased within white walls, the staircase sets up a graphic dialogue between light and dark that resonates with both ancient and contemporary design, as if it had always existed and yet it is entirely new. The whole building is in fact a play of

volume and void, arranged as it is around the central empty space of the courtyard, which serves both as a passageway connecting the rooms that surround it and as an extended living space in its own right. This architectural typology, in use across the Arab world for millennia, has long been of interest to John.

In the case of the Tunis house, the four mirrored doors of the patio open on to long, narrow and very high rooms with beamed ceilings and plaster-decorated arches: the greenish dining room, a master bedroom with a bathroom made from local stone, and another bedroom. The patio also connects to a wing of the house that includes a living room with a yet-to-be-completed hammam, a bedroom and living room on the upper floor. John designed some of the furniture, working with Tunisian craftsmen to create the patio table and benches from local stone, as well as sinks, bathtubs and wooden beds. Monolithic stone volumes, filled or empty, are used to partition rooms and create hidden storage and wardrobe space.

From the other side of the patio, there is access to the main, almost open-air, kitchen and to the staircases that lead to various terraces at different levels as well as to the owner's apartment, a studio/library with bedroom overlooking the patio. From there, a steep staircase leads to the owner's favourite room of all, a tiny space with a miniature kitchen and shower overlooking the medina roofs, facing into the wind. The guardian's quarters, also at the top of the house, maintain the original building's character, with tiled walls, blue doors and a small tiled patio overlooking rooftops and terraces.

In this peaceful place, which feels a thousand miles away from the bustle of the surrounding souk, time slows down, and the silence is broken only five times a day as the city reverberates with calls to prayer ☉





Above: John Pawson designed the main bathroom on the ground floor, complete with taps from the “Italica” range by Stella, familiar from Italian Railways. Hanging on the wall is a grey ‘fouta’, a Tunisian towel used in hammams. Opposite: the view from the terraces over the medina at dusk. The sculptural staircase, which rises from the first floor, reflects the traditional architecture of the surrounding city



THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

FEBRUARY 2024



Coups de Théâtre

A private
opera house
in Belgium

A set designer's
Milanese pad

A Venetian
palazzo's
star-studded
balls