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RESIDENCE/MERANO
Close to home

A life's worth of travelling informs this South Tyrolean haunt – but it finds inspiration on its doorstep too.

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Photography Robert Rieger



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Summer still felt months away, despite it being very late spring, when our residents rolled towards Merano some seven years ago. But dipping down from the snowy Engadine, past the peaks above Vinschgau and into a sun-soaked patch of Italy's high north alive with palms and evergreen pines, things took a turn for the better. Some real-estate window-shopping soon led them to what was then a small, pastel-pink apartment block of three units set back from the main town and the Passer River, which gushes through Merano.

A perfect location, strong modernist bones – the building is a brick, stone, concrete and marble 1960s gem – and the right kind of renovation challenge coaxed its owners into the purchase. Their vision for a sensitive transformation was realised in less than six months by a cast

of builders that only this Austro-cultured corner of northern Italy – known for its crafts, carpentry and smart alpine architecture – can provide. “The builders went above and beyond,” says one of the owners about the process that saw chief builder Martin Mitterer commission sliding timber screens to divide the home more effectively, transform upstairs kitchens into sunny living spaces and smarten the exterior with a new coat of cool-grey paint.

Today, on another brilliant spring day, it's difficult to imagine this place being anything other than the handsome, balcony-blessed, three-storey home it is today. Swinging open a decorative 1960s wrought-iron entrance gate, you're greeted by a neat, enchanting garden that runs the length of the house. It's Japanese in spirit but its verdant subtropical nature – alive



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Previous spread: (1) Characterful original mid-century fittings, like this door handle, can be found across the house (2) A morning newspaper read on Swiss outdoor café furniture by Manufakt

This spread: (1) Vine-covered 'grotto' (2) Original wrought-iron entrance gate (3) Sunbathing statuette (4) Harry Thaler-designed outdoor shower (5) Original pink-pin-striped façade





(1) Photography prints from Stefan Oláh and 'Made in Italy' rucksack from Zilla at the ready
(2) Harry Thaler was responsible for the built-in couch and table; the hanging lamp is vintage from Hamburg (3) Builders matched the new oak fittings with the original timber fixtures; print by Stefan Oláh (4) Cushions from Stockholm's Svenskt Tenn; the mid-century chairs were found for the residents by their upholsterers



(5) Welcome home: the residence's entrance (6) Union de Transports Aériens model aeroplane sits atop a Vitsoe 606 Universal Shelving System designed by Dieter Rams



This spread: (1) Smart nesting tables from Sweden's Svenskt Tenn; prints by Gavin Hurley

Next spread: (1) Dieter Rams-designed Braun wall clock (2) Magazine holder on rare 1970s Bruno Mathsson coffee table (3) Chevron artwork by Virge (4) Egg yolk tiles in the upstairs bathroom (5) 'Merano salad' in the outdoor 'grotto' (6) Italian glasses from Stillsegler (7) Trinkets picked up on the residents' travels (8) Swiss Army knives (9) Pine-cone doorstep (10) Alpine art left by previous tenants (11) Vintage Bell Canada telephone (12) Outdoor seating from Austria's Karasek (13) Original hanger unit (14) Scandinavian Airlines model aeroplane (15) 1950s vintage Italian cinema lights (16) Print from Montréal's Expo 67 (17) Mid-century modern monkey from Kay Bojesen, Artek bench and Fornasetti newspaper stand (18) Art from Virge



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(1) Manufakt table and 'Spaghetti' lounge from Bogen33 (2) Dining table with Marimekko tablecloth, Svenskt Tenn vase and Thonet chairs; vintage chandelier by Austria's Lobmeyr; photograph of Hamburg's Elbtunnel by David Willen (3) Illustrations by Jordi Labanda overlooking modernist furniture by Knoll and vintage Scandinavian pieces (4) Table and shelving unit by Switzerland's USM; the chair came with the house (5) Virge artwork and vintage Lotte Lamp in master bedroom



A tale of two regions: A metaphor for Merano's blur of Austrian and Italian heritage, the residence's architecture has two distinct modes of style. The rear of the house, with its slightly flared roofline, looks to the buildings of the former Austrian empire that it faces to the north. The open, villa-like south-facing front is distinctly Italian mid-century modern in feel. Inside, one's eyes are immediately cast to a majestic original staircase, which formerly connected the three apartments; today it's the spine that holds the home together.



(1) Harry Thaler's custom-designed drinks cabinet – look out for the smart tap (2) Rug from Kasthall, couch from Melbourne's Angelucci and Danish modern armchairs (3) Another clever tap by Harry Thaler (frosty Forst a pull away)





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(1) Italian-made loungers waiting for the residents to soak up the sun (2) Neighbouring snow-capped Dolomites

with floppy native ferns and tall imported monkey puzzle trees – reflects the comfortable living that this warm corner of the Dolomites offers.

Onward and onto a bright tiered lawn garden, where colourful Swiss café outdoor seating and a vine-ceilinged “grotto” provide two alfresco options (one sunny, one shady). A favourite feature of the residents is out here too: an outdoor shower. The smart shower screen that offers privacy was crafted by a young Tyrolean maker who, to the homeowners’ surprise, arrived one day with damp willow branches and a metal frame and wove the screen on site. It was commissioned by Merano’s Harry Thaler, a designer who became a close confidant in the renovation process, collaborating on many clever additions.

It’s on the second – and busiest – floor where this mix of South Tyrolean handiwork and the residents’ international taste blurs best. A large balcony opens up to a sunroom sporting handsome modernist Svenskt Tenn furniture by Josef Frank and a side table by US designer TH Robsjohn Gibbings. There’s

Japanese woodblock art aplenty inside too but the focal point is a massive and magnificent illustrated world map drawn in Sweden, circa 1935. Here, as the evening light upon summer parties dims, guests find themselves mulling over its depictions while enjoying a tipple from the room’s built-in drinks cabinet. This is a magnificent thing; made in the workshop of South Tyrolean carpenter Gufler from oak, marble and cast metal, it opens smartly to reveal an Aladdin’s cave of alcohol.

But despite all the local help this is a residence reflective of its owners – a house for finds from a life’s worth of travelling. From a “Made in Melbourne” Angelucci couch to a vintage Bell Canada telephone, to a hand-drawn sketch from Oscar Niemeyer, to Murano glass lamps secured at the second-hand shop down the road, a world of good design has its place here. More recent furniture additions come from closer to home. “Our aim is to keep it roughly within the old Austrian empire, either Swiss, Austrian, German or Italian,” says one of the residents. “I think we have come pretty good on that.” — (M)