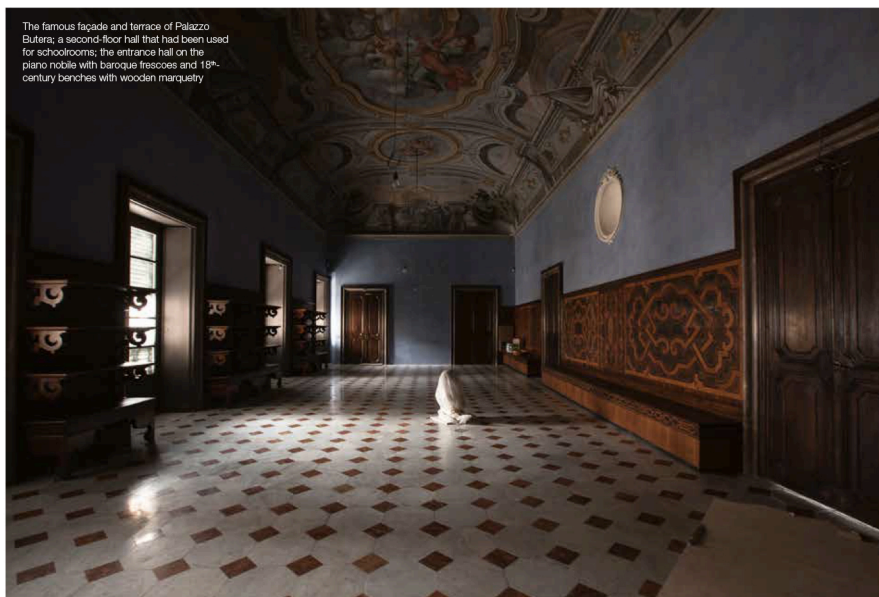
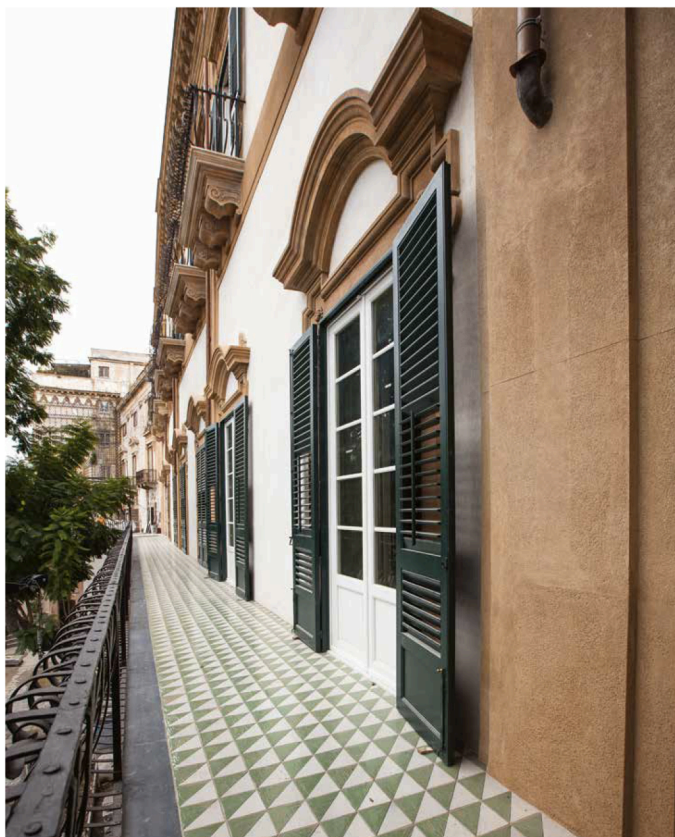


OUT OF THE SHADOWS

ONCE A TOURIST NO-GO ZONE THANKS TO MAFIA CROOKERY AND VIOLENCE, SICILY'S CAPITAL PALERMO IS METAMORPHOSING INTO A CENTRE OF ART AND CULTURE.

STORY JENI PORTER



The famous façade and terrace of Palazzo Butera; a second-floor hall that had been used for schoolrooms; the entrance hall on the piano nobile with baroque frescoes and 18th-century benches with wooden marquetry

CARLOTTINO

The best way to get a sense of the scale of Palazzo Butera, a sprawling Baroque palace built atop Palermo's ancient city walls is to climb up to its tower. From there, besides a panoramic view of the gulf of Palermo, you can see the full sweep of the palace's terracotta-tiled roof behind an almost 50m-long façade crowned by huge stone urns. It's a striking sight that evokes the Sicilian capital's illustrious past when the palace, owned by the powerful Branciforte noble family, was the epicentre of high society with a famed terrace overlooking the grand esplanade below.

But it also has a contemporary resonance as the palace undergoes a monumental restoration to turn it into a centre of culture for the 21st century. It's a transformation that is a signifier for the city itself, rejuvenating after decades of being ground down by poverty, crime and corruption. The city has gone from being "the capital of the Mafia to the capital of culture," as its legendary mayor Leoluca Orlando often declares, especially since it was designated Italy's Capital of Culture for 2018. "This is the turning point that opens a season of cultural change," he says.

Nothing says more about this rebirth than Palazzo Butera, which is second only in size to Palermo's Royal Palace. For the past two years more than 100 builders, stonemasons, cabinetmakers and art conservators have been meticulously restoring the neglected palace, reinstating stonework and delicate marquetry and repairing treasured ceiling frescoes. On the second floor, which had been turned into a school, they discovered secret passageways and wall frescoes from the early 1700s hidden beneath two centuries of paint encrustations. The 900sqm terrace has been relaid with thousands of green and white handmade majolica tiles.

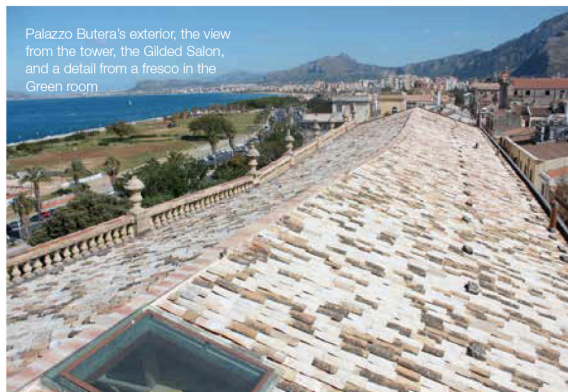
It's a remarkable project in any context but all the more remarkable because two private citizens, art collectors and gallerists Francesca and Massimo Valsecchi, are paying for it. The previously London-based couple had never even been to Palermo until about six years ago. Francesca came first, persuading her husband that Palermo should be the site for what he calls their "crazy Enlightenment" project. Reputed to have sold a painting by Gerhard Richter to help fund the purchase and restoration, they've taken over the piano nobile, or noble floor, as their home and are turning the rest of its 9000sqm into a museum for their decorative and fine art collection as well as a contemporary art space and educational institution.

For almost 500 years there have been only two gates in the fortress wall leading to Palermo's ancient Kalsa quarter; now Palazzo Butera will have an entrance from the sea front, making it a new gateway from the Mediterranean. This is hugely symbolic, as is opening the palace to the public. Even in decline it was one of the last bastions of moneyed aristocracy, guarded by a fierce dog and seen only by those who rented out its gilded ballroom for wedding receptions, as Paul Duncan wrote in his seminal Sicily guide. When the Valsecchis settled the reputed €12 million purchase in 2016, the contract was with 27 beneficiaries, many of them princes and princesses with so many titles it took all day and into the early hours of the next to read out their names, as is the norm in a property sale in Italy.

But come June anyone will be able to roam around ground-floor galleries with vaulted ceilings grouped around verdant courtyards, and climb the tower to enjoy the splendid view. "We hope it will be a new gate on the sea for the historical centre of Palermo and that art, history and culture could become a new source of life for the city," the Valsecchis say.

When the couple were preparing to move to Palermo, art magazine *Apollon* described their collection





Palazzo Butera's exterior, the view from the tower, the Gilded Salon, and a detail from a fresco in the Green room



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as the “least known private holding of great art in London”. Amassed over the past 50 years, it runs the gamut from old masters and gothic revival furniture to art glass and Andy Warhols. Francesca Valsecchi is a granddaughter of the Milan industrialist Carlo Frua De Angeli, who had a renowned but since dispersed modern art collection. She and her husband started collecting contemporary art in the 60s, opening the Galleria di Massimo Valsecchi in Milan in 1973 showing Richter and his contemporaries. “It was never a commercial space because we never sold anything,” Valsecchi told Apollo. “In one sense that has been our luck as we still have all the Gerhard Richters that we bought in the 60s and 70s and the Gilbert & Georges of the 70s.”

They still have the gallery, which played a defining role in the nascent contemporary art world. And although their collection may now be worth hundreds of millions of dollars, the Valsecchis say they were driven by ideas rather than ego. They often went against the market, buying Renaissance paintings in the early 80s when they were cheaper than mediocre contemporary art. Their overall premise was to assemble artworks representing the apex of several cultures and historical ages. “We believe in the profound educational value of art and that the juxtaposition of objects from different worlds is a way to understand the ties that lie beneath cultural differences,” they say. They hope Palazzo Butera will become a laboratory that uses art as a catalyst to tackle broader social issues – they are especially interested in reframing attitudes towards migration.

“We are considered aliens for what we’re doing here. People say, ‘why are you doing this so well?’”

Palermo has been absorbing outsiders for 3000 years from the Phoenicians, ancient Greeks, Arabs, Normans and Spanish to more recent arrivals from northern Africa and the Middle East. The Valsecchis argue this makes it the perfect place to rethink European identity by learning from the past about how to take the best of different cultures and blend them.

Although the couple have high hopes for their “strong gesture of hospitality”, they prefer to keep a low profile. When I visit the palace, I meet Francesca Valsecchi on the huge stone stairs – she likes to walk around and “listen” to the building while Massimo Valsecchi is absorbed in architectural drawings. He shares an office under the rafters with his longtime architect Giovanni Cappelletti and the property developer and engineer Marco Giammona, who is

overseeing the project with architect Tomaso Carigliano. One desk is covered in majolica tiles found on site, some of them dating back to the 17th century.

Carigliano is the embodiment of the modern Palermitano. An Italian-Australian whose mother grew up in Normanhurst, on Sydney’s upper north shore, he’s lived in Palermo for 20 years. He has worked on historical buildings but nothing like Palazzo Butera, either in scale or in the lengths to which they have gone to preserve its patina. “We didn’t want the building to come out polished and erase its past. For instance we wanted to keep the old plaster on the exterior because otherwise the building would have looked new, but that meant analysing it metre by metre which was much more expensive.”

Carigliano believes they’re doing something “heroic” during a period in Palermo and Italy generally when getting things done is difficult. “We are considered aliens for what we’re doing here. People say, ‘why are you doing this so well?’ But the Valsecchis wanted to achieve a level of excellence and prove that it’s possible to do something without begging favours.”

Their largesse will be heralded on June 15 when Palazzo Butera is inaugurated during the vernissage of the nomadic contemporary art biennale Manifesta 12. Titled *The Planetary Garden*, its broader theme of cultivating co-existence aligns with the Valsecchis’ vision. Instead of a curator it has four creative mediators, led by Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, an architect and partner of Rem Koolhaas’ stellar OMA. He’s designed Prada fashion





Clockwise: La Bella Palermo's Blue Salon, Yellow Salon, exterior courtyard and library



shows and renovated the acclaimed KaDeWe store in Berlin, but this project cuts more deeply. Born in Messina, he says he's a product of the Italian diaspora, having lived in the US and now The Netherlands.

"My relationship with Sicily is one of an insider and of an outsider," Laparelli says. "Working in Italy and in Sicily, I'm often confronted with mixed feelings: intimidation, excitement, responsibility."

Before setting the curatorial concept he led a research project, interviewing more than 100 locals from former convicts to university scholars, architects to urban geographers, to map the city. It reinforced his perception of Palermo as a kind of "post-city or node" shaped throughout history by trans-territorial flows of people that have accelerated and expanded in recent decades. "As evidence of this, we discovered across the city hidden networks of Tamil temples in very generic spaces from garages to the backs of house."

The theme of Palermo as a constantly changing "planetary garden" crystallised for Laparelli at a dinner with Giuseppe Barbera, professor of agronomy at the University of Palermo. He pointed out that every plant in a famous late 19th-century landscape painting of the city had come from elsewhere: Japan, Mexico, northern Africa, Asia Minor, the Middle East, even a eucalyptus from Australia. "None was autochthone, the entire landscape was the result of natural movements or human import of plant species from elsewhere," says Laparelli, who hopes Manifesta will seed something that endures beyond its five-month run.

From being shunned by tourists, this year Palermo should rank in the top 10 of Italy's most visited cities.

For Mayor Orlando, Manifesta and Palermo Capitale are the end point of a political career that began in 1980 after the assassination of Sicily's governor Piersanti Mattarella by the Mafia in cahoots with bent politicians. The former university professor became the face of the anti-Mafia movement with bodyguards at his side to this day. When he was re-elected mayor for the fifth time last year at age 69, he said, "I was first a son of the city, then a brother and in the end a father." He's an assiduous promoter of his hometown, placing great stock in tourism as a way out of its economic woes and also as proof of its path back to (relative) normality.

From being shunned by tourists, this year Palermo should rank in the top 10 of Italy's most visited cities, the mayor says. It's a transformation that Francesco Cazzaniga has lived through as a visitor initially and

now as a player in Palermo's tourism scene. Cazzaniga runs La Bella Palermo, renting out his uncle's patrician palace to wealthy visitors during summer months when his uncle is not using it. "I created this name La Bella Palermo or the beautiful Palermo to select some element that's maybe not so common to all the locals but is interesting for other people," he says.

When his uncle, a Milanese property investor, bought Palazzo Pantelleria in 2002 as a refuge to escape northern winters and a repository for his quirky collections, pretty much everybody thought he was crazy. "We visited a lot of places, everywhere was dirty, full of trash, with crumbling façades and many of the palaces were damaged or abandoned," says Cazzaniga. Eventually his uncle bought and painstakingly rebuilt a wing of a once important 17th-century palace. Although it is virtually all recreated, its interiors have a sense of history overlaid with the idiosyncratic tastes of its owner.

Since Cazzaniga opened the palace up to paying guests 18 months ago he has hosted people from all over, including VIP customers of Dolce & Gabbana who came for the Alta Moda show last July with four kids, two nannies and a bodyguard and flew everywhere by helicopter. This year's cultural programs, by contrast, will allow visitors to mingle with common people, Cazzaniga says. He's worried services will come up short but is optimistic about the boost to the city and its citizens. "When I was a kid Palermo was very off-limits – there were only bad things like Mafia or shootings. Now we are seeing it from a different perspective." **W**

