

Spirit of reinvention

Madrid's De La Villa Studio turns
a former office into an expressive
apartment filled with adventurous art

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Images / Erlantz Biderbost





When De La Villa Studio first saw the property a young couple wanted them to refurbish in Madrid's northern residential district of Chamartín, it was far from the spacious sophisticated apartment it had once been. "It had been turned into offices and had a long dark corridor in the centre of the space," explains Juan Esteve, co-founder of the Madrid-based architecture and interior design practice alongside Miguel Otero and Alberto Espejo. "Most of the original residential elements had been removed and instead we found endless partition walls and small spaces for offices, archives, toilets and so on."

The studio's first task was to return light to the space and create a home that was as open as possible so daylight could penetrate all parts of it. The apartment, which is part of an eight-storey standalone building from 1972, benefits from three facades, including one that faces south on to a wide street called Calle Alberto Alcocer. "We decided to put all the social and living areas as well as the master bedroom on that side, and the other two bedrooms and kitchen facing north," says Esteve.

The apartment came with a main entrance and a service one that goes into the kitchen. Though this service door already existed, De La Villa created a hallway in front of it so that light can penetrate from a window into the previously dark main entrance next to it; this area can be closed off if necessary with a sliding door.

Once inside the apartment, the material and colour palette is immediately evident. Natural materials such as oak and stone abound and the colours are neutral, providing a blank canvas for the art (more on that later). There are many refined touches, including the way the thresholds into each space are marked by olivillo travertine arches or sides, some fitted with concealed sliding timber doors whose ends are also clad in marble so that they almost disappear. The architects managed to talk the clients out of carving four bedrooms out of the space and created a generous three instead. "If you use up however many square metres to create an extra room that you're never going to use, or, at least, not for years, then a part of the



house is not being used at all," says Esteve. "Now, they think it's been the best decision."

Much of the furniture was made bespoke for the project, including the round and solid-looking dining table. "We wanted to make it out of marble but the client thought it was too heavy," says Esteve. Instead it is made of a timber frame that is clad in microcement and clay, and is just one of the many realistic and sophisticated surfaces used by the designers in this project and made by A Vida, "a Spanish brand that works with new materials and creates microcement coatings for a lot of retail and hospitality spaces," explains Esteve. The architects also used the product to great effect in the bathrooms to create a volcanic rock hue for the shower and bathtub in the master bathroom, as well as a sand finish in the other

Above
In the hallway,
a hidden oak
door leads to
a cloakroom

Facing page
Sliding doors
recede into stone-
lined door frames

Previous page
A vibrant painting
by artist Sune
Christiansen hangs
in the dining room



Left
Travertine and onyx tables sit in front of a Tub sofa by Studio Bañón; the round chestnut sculpture on the plinth is by Tadanori Yamaguchi, sourced from Puxa Gallery



Above
Joquer's Serene
chair and Depart
footstool sit on
the balcony

Facing page
A 1970s Marcel
Breuer mahogany
desk, paired with
a Paulo Mendes
da Rocha chair
from Objekto

bathroom. Another piece designed by the studio that stands out is the central kitchen island unit, made from slabs of honed travertine for its legs and worktop that then continue up the wall beside it.

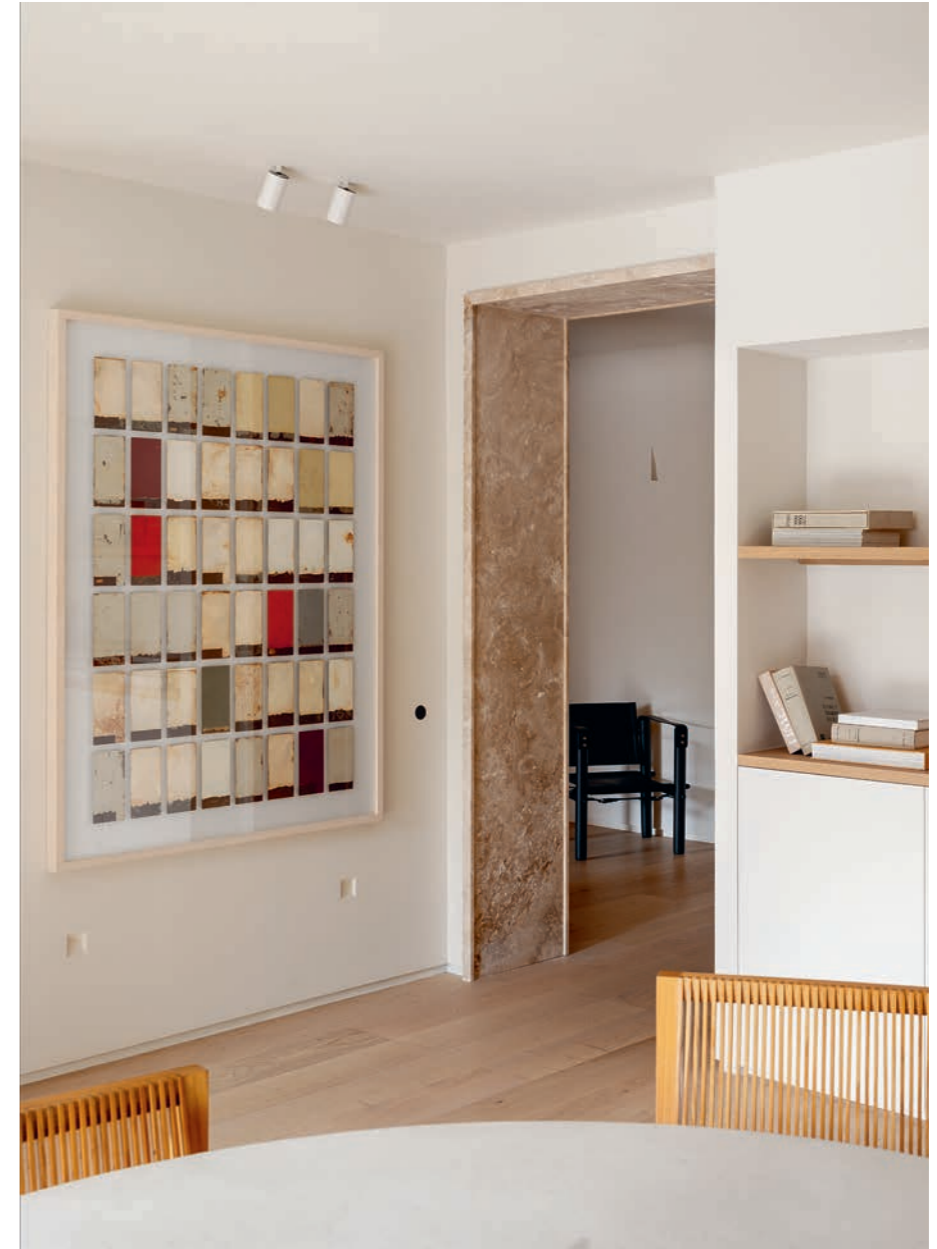
Where the client and architects decided to buy furniture for the house, the selection was studied for maximum effect. The dramatically curved modular leather sofa in the living room, for instance, is by Madrid furniture maker Studio Bañón, and was conceived to add some contrast to all the right angles in the space. Behind the sofa, a monochromatic painting by Antonia Ferrer matches the soul of the project with its off-white and grey smoky hues, simple lines and minimalist geometric appearance. Works by up-and-coming Spanish artists Jordi

Alcaraz and Bruno Ollé are also fairly sober chromatically and in terms of content, though the former has intriguing spots of colour. It's a different story in the separate dining room, however. A colourful abstract piece by Danish painter Sune Christiansen, at once enigmatic and playful, sits next to the dining table. "There's so much life that goes on around a dining table; it's where you have dinner, lunch and parties with friends, so we wanted to bring colour into this part of the house, whereas the living room area was supposed to be more of a peaceful realm," says Esteve.

The art in the apartment was all chosen by the client in close collaboration with the architects. Art is an area that the studio is increasingly becoming knowledgeable about and getting into. It's also a great way of getting insight into your clients, explains Esteve: "We enjoy it because it's an area where you have a lot of dialogue with your clients and get to know them really well. I was in Barcelona for another project we have there recently, and I took our client to a gallery we work with and his reactions were amazing. You could immediately tell what he liked, what was creating an emotional response. We weren't planning on using photography in the project but he stopped for ten minutes in front of a piece by a Korean photographer and now we are going to use photography!"

The biggest challenge here, says Esteve, was peeling back the previous distribution and layout of spaces and reconceiving the entire apartment to create a comfortable home. The abundance of structural pillars was also an issue. "When we removed all the dividing walls, it looked like a forest because there were so many columns," he explains. The building is also unusual, he continues, in that the plumbing conduits for the floor above are located on the ceiling of the apartment below, so these elements had to be concealed within the interior walls and ceilings too. "We wanted the spaces to flow and feel like part of the architecture, not random in any way," says Esteve. "It's something we aim for in all our projects – a sense that the space and the surrounding architecture belong together."





Facing page
De La Villa designed the lacquered oak stools in the kitchen to complement the travertine island and shelving

Above
A colour study painting by Bruno Ollé, sourced from Alzueta Gallery, hangs on the dining room wall

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Facing page
An amber-toned alabaster disc light sits on an oak shelf, which forms part of the custom-designed bed and linen-upholstered headboard

Above
Left to right: A dressing area leads to the en suite bathroom; the monolithic microcement bath merges with its surroundings