

Taste & Flair

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drinks, architecture, art and design

SECOND LIFE

A finalist in the residential category of the 2018 World Architecture Festival, the regeneration of J House illustrates how architecture can transform a building's troubled history to recapture a sense of belonging

Architecture: nabil gholam architects
Structural design: Serhat Consulting Office
Electro-mechanical design: Pierre Dammous & Partners
Landscape design: Vladimir Djurović Landscape Architecture
Photography: Geraldine Bruneel, Nabil Gholam, Joe Kesrouani, Richard Saad

This page: The stairs to the main entrance are bounded by walls covered in Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) which turns a brilliant red when the weather turns cold in the autumn. *Photo by Richard Saad*

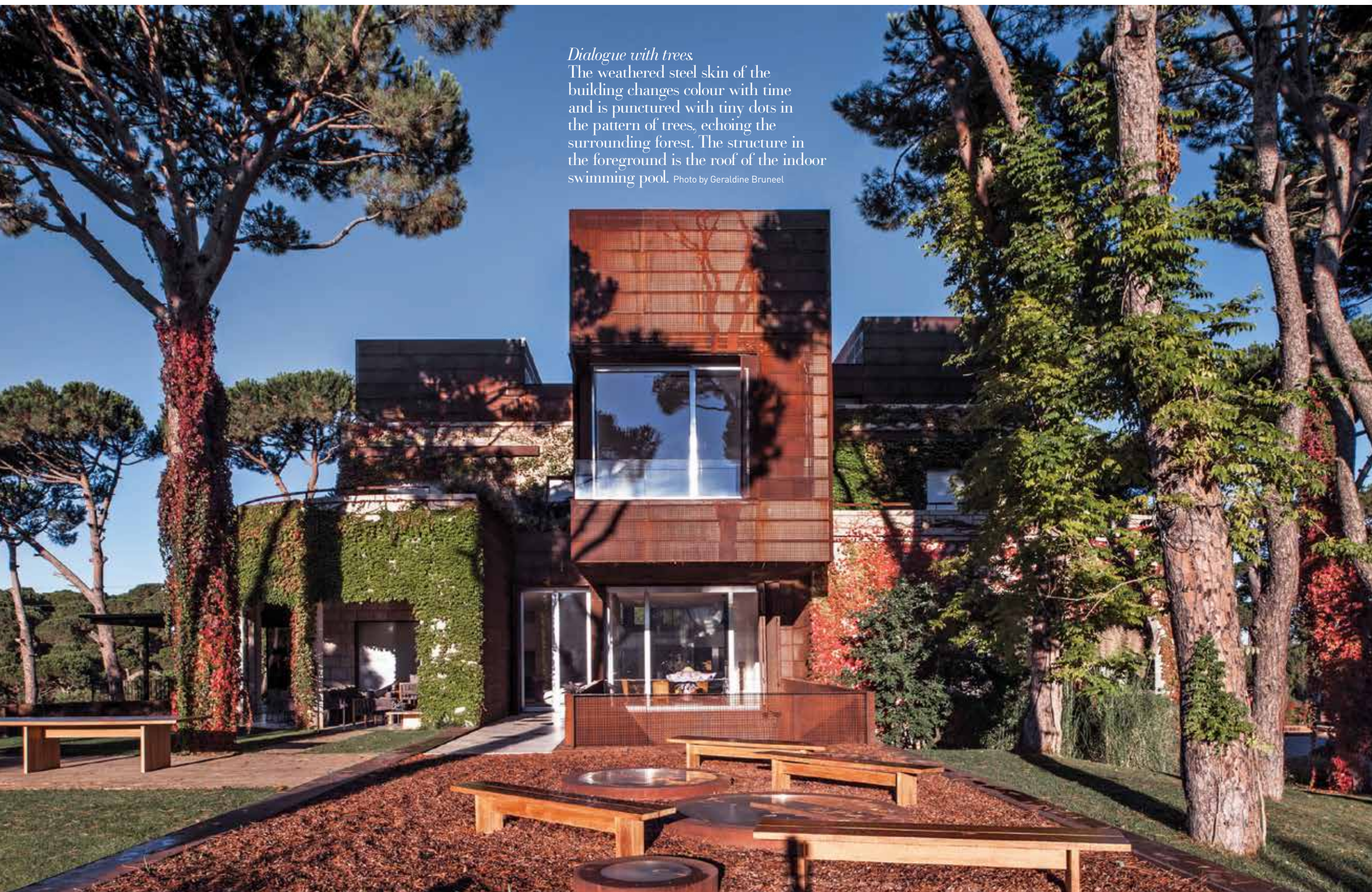
Opposite page: The bent outline of aged trees is worked into the contemporary cladding, visually rooting the new structure into the building's past as a family home set in a pine forest. *Photo by Geraldine Bruneel*

The house as it looked in the late 1940s, when it belonged to the current owner's grandfather. Set in a pine forest near Lebanon's mountain village of Bois de Boulogne, it was one of the first modern homes to be built in the area.



Dialogue with trees

The weathered steel skin of the building changes colour with time and is punctured with tiny dots in the pattern of trees, echoing the surrounding forest. The structure in the foreground is the roof of the indoor swimming pool. Photo by Geraldine Bruneel



House's story is one of psychological resilience and architectural defiance, celebrating the triumph of life over death. Originally built in the 1930s by the current owner's grandfather, the house was set in the pine forest near the Lebanese mountain village of Bois de Boulogne, an area bitterly fought over during Lebanon's civil wars as it straddled an important front line. Damaged by gunfire and shelling, the house was occupied by assorted military and militia forces and, for 28 years, it was used as a torture and detention center.

When the current owner decided to regenerate the building, transforming its painful past presented a wide range of complications. Although the building had fallen into ruin, much of the original structure still stood there so decisions had to be taken about what to do with the building itself. Its design was of limited architectural interest but it had been one of the first modern homes built in the area in the 1930s and, as it had originally belonged to the current owner's grandfather, there was a sentimental attachment to its pre-war history.



During Lebanon's protracted civil war, the house was occupied by various military and militia forces and used as a torture and detention centre. Regenerating the house as a home meant wiping out the horror of its recent history.



By gutting out the house and retaining parts of the original structure, the current owner has exorcised the building's recent, painful past while maintaining the historic link to what was his grandfather's home.

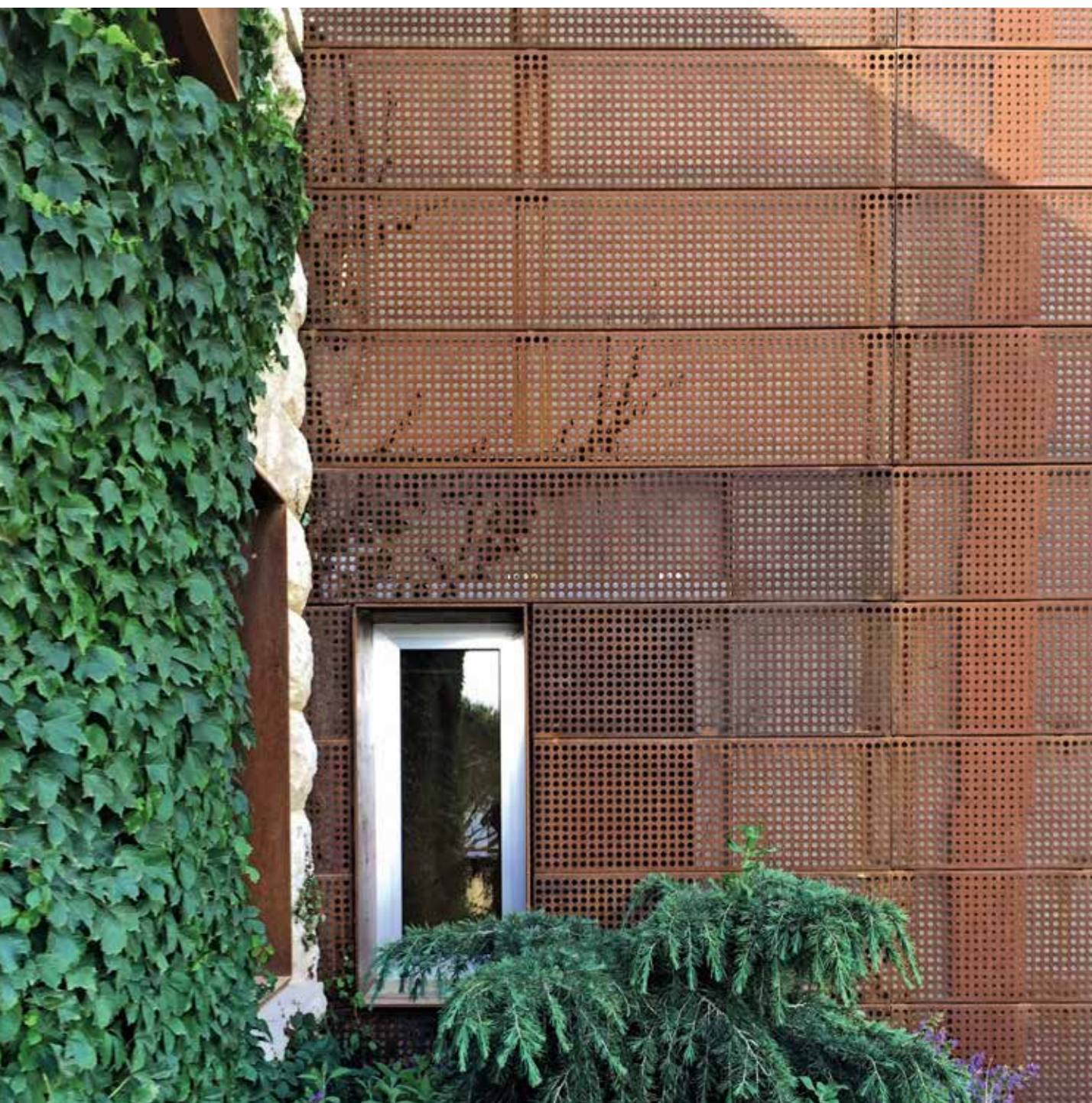
The architects found that they were dealing with splendour which was buried in memory. Beneath layers of deliberate and natural destruction, evidence of the occupation was scrawled onto and burned into its interior. The internal walls were covered in graffiti and engaged messages of resistance and were stained with black soot from when the departing secret services burnt their archives inside the house to cover their tracks.

The deeper design problem was deciding how to approach the regeneration project. This was a difficult and protracted process as the building's personal history as a family home and the bitterness of its wartime experience generated contradictory feelings. If "home" symbolises warmth, freedom, security, and a sense of belonging, a home's use as a torture and detention centre inverts and distorts its meaning.



The main entrance to J House. Nature has been encouraged to camouflage the building, blending it into its surroundings and sweeping away its troubled past.

Photo by Richard Saad.

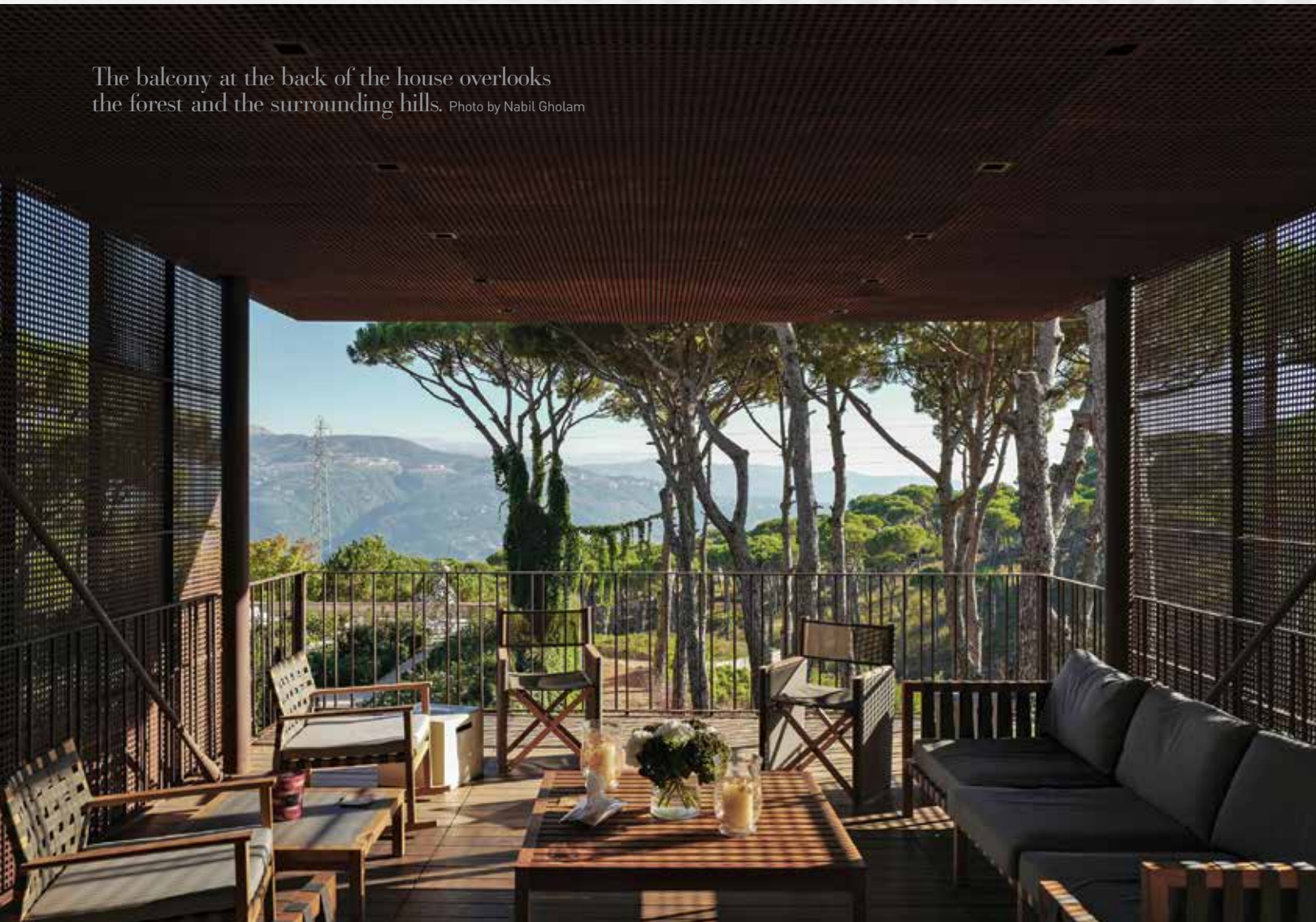


Exorcising the building's troubled past was a given but how to go about the difficult exorcism took two and a half years. The owner had to consider whether to work with what remained, preserving some connection to his grandfather's house despite its painful associations, or to start again from scratch, which would have swept away the building's horrific history but would also have destroyed its last remaining connection to his family's past.

In the end, the decision was to both maintain the historic connection to the original family home and to wipe out the building's recent and painful past. Cleaning up the house and its surrounding garden took four months of intense work before reconstruction could even begin. The ruins were gutted out and then reinforced and reused as an historic shell into which a brand-new home could be inserted, the architectural emulation of the hermit crab, which makes its home in the abandoned shells of other molluscs.

The weathered steel skin changes colour with time and is punctured with tiny dots in the pattern of trees, echoing the surrounding forest.

The balcony at the back of the house overlooks the forest and the surrounding hills. Photo by Nabil Gholam



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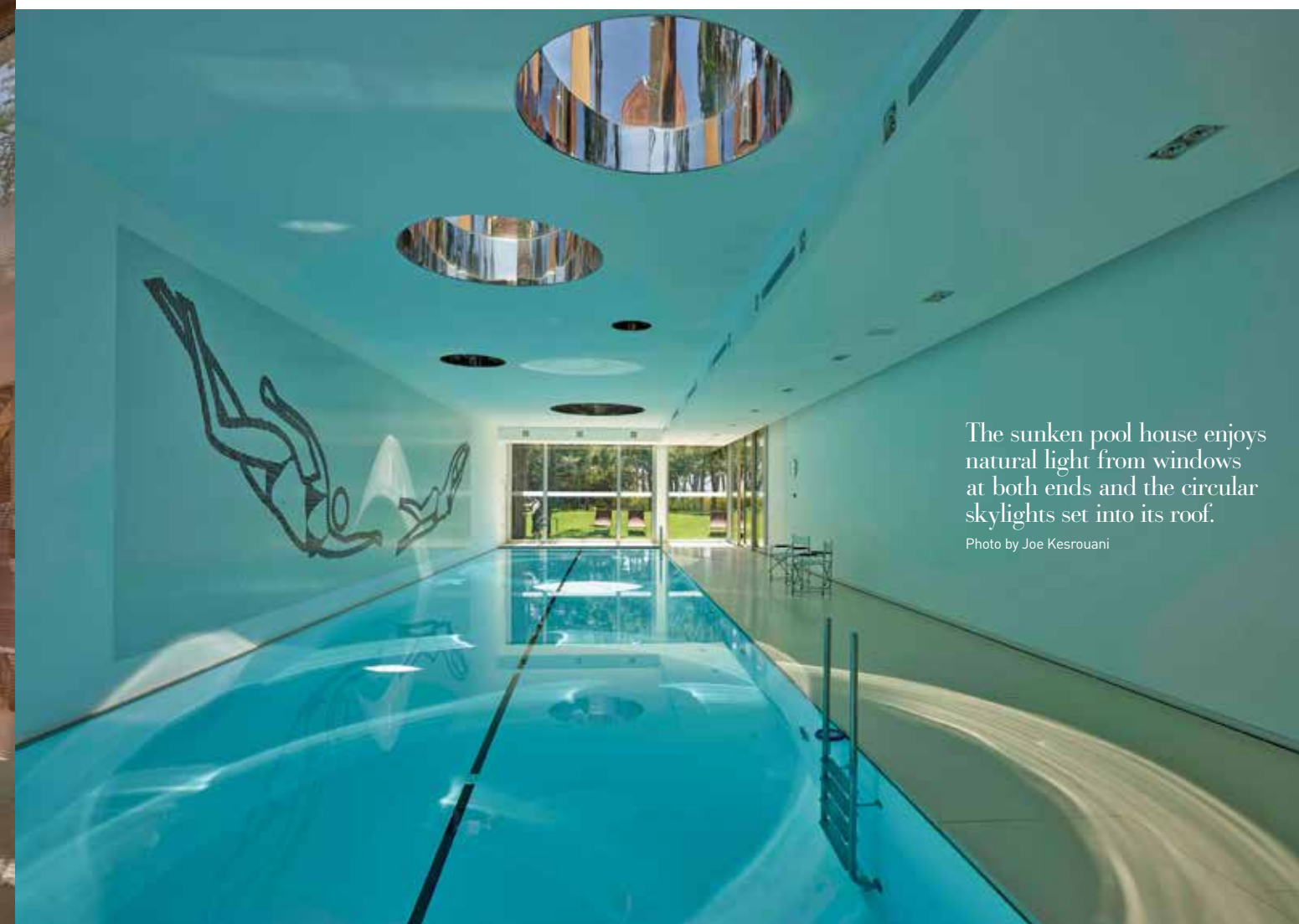
Stretching through a grove of replanted pine trees, the regenerated house is sunken into the sloping ground facing the snow-clad mountains in the distance and is designed to blend into its surroundings. The ruin’s new “resident” is a series of spartan and perforated weathered steel-clad boxes, a stark contrast to the classical arcades and stonework of the old home in which it sits. Curiously, and despite its defiant modernity, the new design echoes the boxy, low-rise mountain homes of Lebanese tradition, in form if not appearance.



Stacked on one another, the steel-clad boxes nestle in the two remaining sections of the old house but also project beyond it, both at the roofline where their aesthetically rusting outline is just visible above the parapets and at the south-eastern end of the house, where they project dramatically above a low-slung, 35-meter weathered steel-clad concrete and glass oblong with a planted roof. The weathered steel skin changes colour with time and is punctured with tiny dots echoing patterns of trees, a sort of “tree trunk ghost” projected onto the façade which echoes the surrounding forest.

The renovation added more than 2,000 square metres to the original 1,500 square-metre stone house. Along with an annexe and a guard house, the main house now includes a swimming pool and art gallery. Sustainable design was at the core of the renovation: the house uses solar energy for winter heating while harvesting rainwater and its walls are backed with a double insulation layer to prevent seasonal heat loss and gain. Among passive cooling strategies, the villa’s shading is designed to take advantage of natural light. Ivy covers the external walls, helping to shade the building and prevent heat gain in warmer months.

The new design blends into the surrounding landscape through terracing. A sunken patio leads to the indoor poolhouse on the same level. Photo by Joe Kesrouani



The sunken pool house enjoys natural light from windows at both ends and the circular skylights set into its roof.

Photo by Joe Kesrouani

Internally, the house's layout is dictated mainly by the remains of the past, although where possible and desirable, internal walls have been removed to create greater space. Narrow by contemporary standards, the main entrance opens directly onto a spacious living area flanked by several smaller rooms. The upper level is given over to the owners' bedrooms. Again, by modern standards, most are relatively small but by exploiting the full height of the already high ceilings – in some cases they are now even higher thanks to the new additions – each bedroom has a mezzanine level and so functions more like a loft than a standard room.



The staircase is flooded with natural light from the many adjacent windows with views over the surrounding landscape. Photo by Geraldine Bruneel

Climbing plants and vines have been encouraged to colonise the former ruins to camouflage its past, cloaking its troubled history of death and destruction with new life. The process was hastened by the introduction of recessed planters on the various terraces of the old home. More than a thousand new trees – umbrella pines, oak, cork, Lebanese cedars and other indigenous trees – and a rose garden now upholster the landscape. The scene is now one of fertile and blossoming land and the villa itself, restored to its rightful place as a family home, is almost unrecognisable from what it used to look like during the war. ■



The remodelled interior includes a staircase in a contemporary design and an elevator in a clear glass and metal frame. A contemporary artwork hangs on the wall. Photo by Joe Kesrouani

...by draping your walls in Virginia creeper you help feed any birds able to survive the blazing guns of Malta's sparse countryside. Its tendrils do not penetrate the supporting surface, so it cannot weaken mortar joints or stone.

Green Cover up

Fast growing creepers quickly scramble over a bare wall or patch of ground, providing much needed colour in a barren townscape.



How to propagate Ivy

Propagating Virginia creeper and Boston ivy is easy. Cut short stems just below a growing point, dip the cut end in rooting-powder and plant three or four cuttings in a six-centimetre-diameter pot filled with damp growing compost. Alternatively, bend a growing branch so that its growing-point can be pushed into a pot filled with moist compost. Cover the growing-point well and keep the compost moist. Once roots develop, cut the branch loose from the parent plant. Keep new plants in individual pots until the following spring when they can be planted out into the ground.

Parthenocissus quinquefolia (see page 99) and Parthenocissus tricuspidata are elaborate names for simple plants. This is one case where “just add water” is the only instruction you really need. The large, overlapping leaves and the hanging tendrils of new shoots shield a building's external walls from the fierce summer heat, helping to prevent heat gain. In cooler weather, the leaves drop off, allowing a building to be warmed by the winter sun.

Parthenocissus quinquefolia is better known as Virginia creeper, a tribute to the source of the first specimens brought back to Europe from North America. A prolific climber, it can reach up to 30 metres in height and several metres across in just a few years. The plant attaches itself to a supporting surface using its own tendrils tipped with adhesive pads. These do not penetrate the supporting surface and so can safely be planted against the walls of your home.

The creeper's small light green flowers appear in clusters in spring, ripening to small hard purple-black berries which are poisonous to all mammals, including humans. Birds have no problem, though, so by draping your walls in Virginia creeper you help feed any birds able to survive the blazing guns of Malta's sparse countryside.

The leaves of a mature Virginia creeper can grow up to 20cm across. New leaves appear in late winter as the weather warms up, and they remain green until autumn when they will turn a fiery orange-red in a cold snap.

Parthenocissus tricuspidata—more commonly known as Boston ivy, because it covers many a façade in the US university town—grows in poor soil and can cope with difficult conditions. It is native to eastern Asia, but its hardiness makes it ideal for Maltese gardens where strong winds and scorching sunlight burn through most attempts to create a lush environment.

The woody-stemmed creeper can grow up to 30 metres in height and spans several metres, making it ideal for covering high walls. It clings naturally, using tendrils tipped with adhesive pads, saving lazy gardeners the need of tying back the vine as it grows. Its tendrils do not penetrate the supporting surface, so it cannot weaken mortar joints or stone.

Its flowers are greenish and grow inconspicuously in clusters, eventually developing into dark bluish-purple, berry-like fruit which is inedible to humans, but attractive to birds. When budding in spring, the young leaves are a light pink, changing to brown and then bright green as they grow. The colour lasts until autumn when, as the temperature cools, the leaves turn a spectacular dark purple. If the vine covers a great expanse of wall, the magnetic colour makes for a brilliant focal point. Boston ivy is deciduous, so the leaves fall off each year. But given the short Maltese winter, new leaves grow back as early as late February.

Boston ivy can be distinguished from Virginia creeper by its leaves. The leaves of Boston ivy are similar to those of the grape-vine when mature and its berry stalks are dull in colour. The leaves of Virginia creeper leaves are similar to those of Boston ivy when young but they split into leaflets as they mature and its berry stalks are bright orange-red.

To gain the quickest and most complete coverage, Virginia creeper and Boston ivy should be planted close to a supporting wall or fence, with several plants put into the ground a couple of metres apart from each other. Alternating Boston ivy and Virginia creeper and allowing them to grow into and across each other will give you bright green cover from spring through summer and early autumn, followed by a blaze of colour in the late autumn. Keep them well watered in the growing season and water them very frequently in the hot months — daily while they are still small and not yet established. ■