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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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URBAN FAIRY TALE: East London's 'Gingerbread House' Casts its Spell

A view of the ultramarine-and-white villa from the deep-blue lap pool, framed by date palms and with rocky outcrops behind. La Pajarita retains its cavernous character, as Nabil incorporated the sandstone boulders and sloping terrain seamlessly into his plans

TERRAIN IN SPAIN

When artist Ana Corbero and her architect husband Nabil Gholam moved to La Pajarita, a villa built against a rock face overlooking the Andalusian plains, they entirely remodelled it with a 'radical vernacular' accent. Alongside metalwork furniture and totemic sculptures, the couple incorporated a boulder as a baldacchino and local rush-matting as blinds. By George, they've got it, thinks Celia Lyttelton. Photography: Ricardo Labougle

This page, clockwise from top: the terrace overlooks the panoramic fertile plains of Andalusia, patchworked with coloured fields in saffron and green; a half-submerged bedroom, built around the boulders, is swamped in native and imported species of plants; blinds made from local rushes unravel over the door and keep the house cool in summer. The wainscots found throughout the house are made from the same material. Opposite: the south face of the building is bordered by an ultramarine-blue brick pathway

This page, clockwise from top: in the main living room there is no need for central heating - plate-glassed in, it generates enough heat from the winter sunshine. Where there are walls, they are crammed with paintings and memorabilia; Ana hand-painted the tiles on the staircase and fired them in a local kiln; the faux-leather seating comes from Maus Haus, Ana and Nabil's design and furniture company. Opposite: the wainscots made from local-rush matting are installed throughout the villa to protect the paintwork

GRANTA

Ana's great-grandfather made the Neoclassical copper repoussage fire surround in the drawing room. The builders were kindly asked to pee on it, to patinate and oxidise it duck-egg green. The coffee tables, candlesticks and tree-like lamps are from Maus Haus

THAT LA PAJARITA belongs to an artist and an architect is immediately palpable. A serpentine lane winds through gates, crowned with dragons, past pomegranate and quince trees. Colossal, seemingly chryselephantine sculptures of children stand sentinel among date palms, and an ultramarine-and-white villa appears, partially hidden beneath a rocky escarpment, honeycombed with caves.

Fifteen years ago Ana Corberó and her architect husband Nabil Gholam bought La Pajarita, a farmstead with fallow pasture below the ancient citadel of Carmona. The villa overlooks the fertile Andalusian plains that were once the 'olive press' of the Roman world. Carmona's streets are flanked with Baroque churches and Moorish fortifications, and the area is a protected zone. The couple's view will never change.

'At first it looked like a North African hovel. It was a garbage dump,' says Ana. 'People thought we were crazy – there was no septic tank and no access.' The land in winter was a quagmire, and a dust bowl in summer. It was a holiday refuge from the couple's lives in Barcelona and Beirut. In 2006, when they were living in Beirut, Israeli bombs fell and they fled, with their children, to Turkey in a 'sardine can, with wings and propellers', Ana jokes, making light of the perilous journey.

They returned to a hamlet outside Barcelona to live in Ana's childhood home, built by her father, the exuberant and debonair sculptor Xavier Corberó. Three years later she and Nabil made La Pajarita their permanent residence. They uprooted again and Nabil moved his practice to nearby Seville.

La Pajarita is rich in art and artefacts, especially Ana's own work: she is an artist and a doyenne of design who can turn her hand to many media. She wrought the metalwork furniture, lights and window grilles, fired her own tiles, planted every seed and sapling, and sculpted myriad bronze figurines, acting as lares (household gods of the hearth).

As light fades La Pajarita is like a virtual Ana artwork: crepuscular landscape paintings that inhabit the hinterland of dreams, alabaster lamps as opalescent as moons, and embellished grilles that cast silhouettes on the windowsills. It is the looking-glass effect, a portal into Ana's magical realism.

Her totemic sculptures and paintings, of ladders disappearing into trees, vessels, towers and shadowy sensual figures, in luminous glazes of pure colour, have been exhibited, to great acclaim, in America, Europe, the Far and Middle East. Lately the views at La Pajarita have resulted in larger canvases, pared down to cloudscapes and a low horizon line.

Ana's artistry is complemented by Nabil's architectural skills. 'Ana was running the show with the basic technical back-up from my practice,' Nabil explains. 'We never had a proper survey of the house and there were no measurements taken. In fact, there are no straight lines or sharp angles at all.'

Their decoration solution is simple: 'Granny's stuff', items from their design and furniture company Maus Haus, Ana's art and Ikea. Her grandmother's dark furniture, Baroque candelabra and Roman oil lamps, painted white, are given a new lease of life. Walls are crammed with pictures and memorabilia, including a ten-franc note signed by Picasso. Marble fonts were salvaged from skips, while Ana's tiles of an Escher

This page, top: the divan in the grotto, which has been lived in since prehistoric times, is kept dry under the open skies by an overhanging boulder. Above: alongside a basin, the space is peopled with Ana's sculpture of a lizard and child totems in bronze. Opposite: in the dining room, one wall is hung with collages of doilies and Spanish ephemera that decorated Ana and Nabil's tapas bar in Beirut, which was open for only six weeks before the bombs began to fall. Ana's china and ceramics occupy the mirrored cabinets to the right

dragonfly motif, lining the eaves and garden walls, were fired in the local kiln. The sculpture-like metal Maus Haus furniture, forged in Lebanon, is in the spirit of Bauhaus and Giacometti. Coloured Ikea lights illuminate mirrored cabinets of Ana's china and ceramics, fired at Miró's kiln.

Miró was an avuncular figure in Ana's childhood, whereas Dalí, also a family friend, confronted her with his wizardry. She recalls the time 'he woke me up with a prismatic lorgnette to his eye and asked me what I saw. Alarmed, I said, "Lots of eyes" – which of course were his looking at me! He approved.'

While the decoration was relatively easy, the building work was not. 'The local authorities had us under a microscope. We had thefts and vandalism, and the land kept setting on fire until we got sheep.' Eventually the locals were so won over that they gave the family a donkey and cart.

Undeterred by planning laws, they kept to their ethos of 'radical vernacular'. It was a long haul, lasting almost 15 years. 'Nothing could be planted lest it obscure the view, every newly laid brick was illegal and corrugated-iron roofs could not be replaced.' They overcame these obstacles: a long, non-reflective lap pool manages to look like the original cattle trough; extra living space linking the two buildings was created by glassing in the living room's roof terrace. It is the heart of the house with a raised double fireplace built within the original outside wall, between the existing dining and sitting room. When a fire is lit, it is a primal and mystical sight.

Nabil's great respect for the vernacular has won him commissions in the Levant and Gulf states, including villas in Lebanon and a 50-storey tower on the Jeddah Corniche. La Pajarita retains its cavernous character, incorporating the sandstone boulders and sloping terrain. On the lower floor, glass passages and rooms are built around the rock face, and an overhanging whitewashed boulder forms a baldacchino over their daughter's bed. 'We are troglodytes!' Ana laughs.

The Stygian stables on the lower-ground floor were converted into bedrooms and a living room, with ziggurats of art books and Cuban cigars, and Levantine textiles contrasting with abstract art from New York. Beyond the sitting room, a chthonic grotto glitters with crystal geodes. 'When I first stepped in here it felt so powerful my hair stood on end.'

La Pajarita has a true spirit of place, with strong atavistic forces at play. 'People may have been living here for 5,000 years, with its caves, spring water and fertile soil,' Ana says proudly. A Phoenician vase in the Metropolitan Museum was made from clay found on what is now their land.

Ana is a keen plantswoman with a crusading eco spirit. Her motto is 'plant and thou shall be saved'. La Pajarita is a garden of Eden: vegetable allotments and orchards render them self-sufficient, with land to spare. There are plans to establish a foundation for permaculture, as well as writers' residences, a scent-making workshop and a sculpture trail. 'I would love to build a kiln beside the green pond silted up with clay, the same clay bed that the Phoenicians would have used, and hold three-day flamenco kiln firing-parties here' ■

Ana and Nabil design and take commissions. For more information, visit anacorbero.com, nabilgholam.com or maus-haus.com

This page, top: a passageway incorporating the boulders from the rock face. Above: the downstairs loo is occupied by a Renaissance-style head embellished with Mickey Mouse ears and, to the left, a copy of Ribera's *Bearded Madonna*. Opposite: Ana and Nabil's bedroom is lit by a bronze chandelier that, like much of the dark furniture inherited from Ana's grandmother, has been coated in white paint to give it a new lease of life. In comparison with the busy walls throughout the house, those in the bedroom are remarkably plain