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Leeza SOHO tower Beijing

Zaha's 46-storey tower with the world's tallest atrium takes shape, page 5

JW MARRIOTT VENICE RESORT + SPA

Matteo Thun & Partners' sensitive resort island masterplan brings out the best in old buildings

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JW MARRIOTT VENICE RESORT & SPA ITALY



Island life

James Parker interviews the architect behind an award-winning hotel masterplanning project on a Venetian island which sensitively re-used a variety of old buildings in an elegant new context

An artificial island in Venice's lagoon is the location of a new high-end Marriott resort which is a new composition of restored and enhanced existing buildings, creating a beautiful, laid-back retreat. This new identity as a secluded island, away from the bustle of Venice itself, is somewhat in contrast with the place's history, its relative isolation having lent it other uses in the past.

Located a mile south of the city, the 16 hectare Sacca Sessola (since renamed the more fragrant-sounding Isola delle Rose) began construction in 1860, with its very prosaic purpose being a fuel dump. Since then a variety of medical buildings have been constructed on the island, including in the 1930s a large T-shaped 'Pulmonary Hospital' which was closed in the 1970s. It became a ruin, until a restoration

CANALS REOPENED

The approach to the refurbished main hotel building is enhanced by an authentic 'Venetian' canal – reopened in the architects' masterplan © JW Marriott Venice



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MICHELIN STAR

The Dopolavoro restaurant has been renovated into a Michelin-starred establishment using a steel structure and copper roof



© JW Marriott Venice

programme started in 2000 – but that was curtailed in 2004.

The island offered amenity for its workers, including doctors and nurses, such as what was called the Dopolavoro ('After Work') building where they were able to relax after shifts in the hospital. This has been renovated into a Michelin-starred restaurant with the same name, one of the key draws of the resort, sitting adjacent to the private landing stage.

Milan-based architects Matteo Thun & Partners were appointed by JW Marriott in June 2011 to address the whole site to provide a resort and spa for a high-end demographic including families and couples. Construction started in June 2013 and was completed in under two years, with all works being finalised in April 2015. The resulting complex has been widely acclaimed and last year picked up the MIPIM Award for Best Hotel & Tourism project, as well as the European Hotel Design Award of the Year.

While the hotel has now been open over a year, feedback from the guests to the client has led to the architects being commissioned to design a children's pool and additional sun bed areas for the resort, including a new deck.

Matteo Thun undertook nothing less than a transformation of the whole island, including conversion of the main hospital building and 17 other smaller early-20th century brick buildings (mainly warehouses) into 266 hotel rooms, suites, restaurants, bars, plus the spa. The practice revisited and improved the internal layout achieved in the partial restoration of the main building.

Built "in the character of pre-war Italian Rationalism," says project architect Luca Colombo, the main building saw the practice add a large rooftop terrace including an infinity pool, a bar and a restaurant offering views across the lagoon to St Mark's Square. Largely following the original layout of the interiors, with their wide corridors, glass doors and terraces, Matteo Thun adapted the hospital into a luxury hotel with 230 contemporary Venetian-styled suites.

The zone including the main hotel building also includes a conference centre and an Art Nouveau brick building, the former residence of the hospital's director now converted into a luxury villa. The architects' masterplan reorganised the island into three parts, each defined by its abundantly green, landscaped areas.



Masterplanning tranquility

A key part of the masterplan was reopening the old canal system on the island, part of which leads up to the main hotel. As Colombo says, restoring the formerly buried canal “makes it possible to stay in an authentic Venetian atmosphere, surrounded by nature and calm.” The main hotel building faces a generous 12 hectare park.

A new area was also created on the west side for a newly constructed family pool, adjacent to a further canal. “This was the key element for the use of the outdoors spaces,” says Colombo, “leading us to create a well-balanced combination of the early 20th century formal garden and the more ‘informal’ green spaces.” These include a redesigned vegetable garden and a central olive grove, both supplying produce for the restaurant. He says this combination “allows the guest to experience the island in different way.”

Colombo says that in addition to organising the site to integrate a dislocated set of buildings for a new purpose, the masterplan had to address the challenge of allocating functions to those buildings. He says the architects took the approach of “studying the consistency of each of the existing

buildings in detail, and then allocating to each one the function that best suited the current building’s size.”

He says that the masterplan was developed to enhance the guest’s experience, taking in the whole island. “The entire island is considered as one unit, with the outdoor spaces corresponding to the public spaces of a standard hotel. The guests are free to move from the formal garden through the family pool before enjoying walks down to the spa.” He adds: “The ‘public spaces’ also include the swimming pools, the adventure garden and the water square, a perfect combination to enjoy Venice in a new way.”

Boxes in boxes

Colombo says the architects “wanted to keep the spirit of the place, respecting the existing historic buildings.” He explains that they employed a “box in the box” concept to achieve this, building new structures inside the old walls, as “a perfect solution to protect the historic character of the buildings which would provide a new building that was fully compliant with current standards.”

The architects say the design and restora-

ABOVE LEFT

La Maisonette - renovated former agricultural storage – now a villa
© Daniele Domenicali

ABOVE RIGHT

Interior of La Maisonette
© Daniele Domenicali

BOTTOM RIGHT

Rooftop infinity pool on main hotel building
© JW Marriott Venice



TRANSFORMATION

The T-shaped main hotel building, transformed from its former function as a hospital
© JW Marriott Venice

tion concept was “shared and agreed with” the City of Venice’s Cultural Heritage Office, which was essential since the island is designated as a protected historical area. The collaborative relationship achieved with the City was sustained through all the subsequent design and construction phases. A team of restoration specialists supported the architects in ensuring the project preserved the buildings’ historic value including the distinctive ‘patina’ of the walls.

The client is now able to offer guests five different varieties of accommodation, exploiting the styles of the various building types – in addition to the main hotel there are a variety of villas, grouped into four types. Particularly successful are the gener-

ously high and bright ‘La Maisonette’ (a brick building formerly for agricultural storage) and the single-storey ‘La Residenza’ (formerly hospital offices), which both have private gardens and pools.

All of the old buildings remain on the site, and the architects took a painstaking approach to ensuring the best methods were found to treat and recover the patina of the historic walls.

“We restored the facades of each of them and then build new structures within the original frames without touching the walls, which allowed an authentic restoration.”

Colombo comments: “The box in the box concept allowed us combine restoration and new construction to respect the existing



buildings while providing all modern hotel facilities.” At ‘La Residenza,’ preserving a historic wooden roof structure this meant designing prefabricated white wooden boxes, containing all suites, around the Zen-like atrium.

The concept was extended further in ‘La Maisonette’ using glass as well as wood. A concrete frame combined with a light steel structure for the roof was constructed inside the old brick walls, creating a two-storey building, and a copper roof was added.

Similarly for the Dopolavoro restaurant, a copper roof and a steel structure were inserted into the old brick walls. For the two former stable buildings used for spa and treatments, the internal boxes are made of

plasterboard. Windows have been screened with a steel grid, inspired by Venice’s ancient shops, tucked away in alleys, which provides shade to the spa’s interiors.

The architects reverted to this building’s original footprint, seeing it as better than its subsequent additions. Says Colombo: “We restored the historical parts that were not damaged by previous works, keeping the footprint of the original building and creating outdoor spaces within the original shape.” To put it another way, the original building volume of the historical building was restored, and in the process new external spaces were created.

A yoga and meditation garden separates the spa and treatment buildings. In keeping



VENETIAN INSPIRATION

The spa features steel screening to windows inspired by ancient Venetian shops
© JW Marriott Venice

SUSTAINABILITY FACTORS

- The complex is a “three zero” village, in terms of construction and management – this refers to zero CO₂, zero waste and ‘zero kilometres’ (ie sourcing locally)
- In general, local materials were used throughout as well as local labour
- All the land from excavation was re-used on the island
- High performance building envelope in the new ‘box in box’ additions
- Reduction in energy demand such as lower lighting
- Avoiding food waste by producing food on the island

with the goal of creating a venue that serves as an “eco-friendly escape,” says Colombo, “we carefully preserved the red brick facade, wooden pitched roof and uniquely shaped windows.”

Design challenges

The T-shaped building created what Colombo says was an “amazing opportunity to have most of the rooms facing the formal garden on the south side of the island.” The building also benefitted from existing balconies, formerly used by the hospital for ‘sun therapy.’

The biggest challenge here, says the architect, was to create a pool on the roof without increasing the load on the existing structure. The solution was a light stainless steel pool construction.

As well as the complexity of construction on top of an existing building, site logistics in terms of transporting materials was a consideration. “Everything had to be transported via water, and the installation of a big tower crane was not possible. We had to work with smaller ones, on boats and we also needed to create a proper camp for the workers,” says Colombo.

La Residenza has had its layout reworked to provide a set of attractive three bedroom suites, but the existing facade

and window openings needed to be preserved. According to Colombo, work here consisted “mainly of interior design, due to the fact that the beauty of the existing building required only a soft restoration.” The major intervention was externally, in terms of landscaping, a pool, and installing the same services the main hotel building has.

Sustainability & materials

As the architects say, the concept to bring an abandoned island back to life – by reusing existing buildings as opposed to necessitating new construction – is in itself a benefit in sustainability terms. As Colombo says, sustainable achievement “does not only mean generate energy using renewable energies.”

The project had a range of other sustainability achievements however, extending beyond the overall benefit of not using new greenfield sites to bringing existing architectural gardens back to their original purpose, and reusing all excavated material. Further sustainability gains are shown in the box (below left).

Materials for the project were carefully sourced to strike a balance between an authentic Venetian feel and modernity.

Key materials include light fittings blown by a local glass blower, and for the interiors the architect opted for locally available materials such as bricks and tiles, chandeliers from Murano, and Venetian textiles and mirrors.

From ‘macro’ to ‘micro’ design

The architect managed the complexity of the project by shifting from the macro masterplanning across the site to the micro design details that make all the difference to hotel guests. This included the interior styling of the rooms and suites, as well as the bars and restaurants, and all interiors in the spa.

Matteo Thun prides itself on a “holistic, sustainable approach in architecture and interior design,” and its architectural and interiors specialists work closely together, enabling them to make decisions fast in addressing what is a fairly wide estate of buildings.

Luca Colombo concludes that this challenging project brought out the best in the firm, thanks to a good relationship with the client: “In a project on this scale we had to deal with a lot of different problems, but thanks to an outstanding collaboration with the investor, the owner and the suppliers, it was completed successfully.” ■