

MANSION



Dave Yoder for The Wall Street Journal (5)

GOING NATIVE Giovanni Rubin de Cervin Albrizzi restores historic homes in his native Venice, including the salon, above, in a palazzo complex.

GURU | GIOVANNI RUBIN DE CERVIN ALBRIZZI

RESTORING THE SPLENDOR OF OLD VENICE

An architect works to revive the original beauty of centuries-old frescoes and terrazzo floors—while adding modern-day amenities like air conditioning, extra bathrooms and new kitchen

BY J.S. MARCUS

A typical Venetian apartment is a patchwork of human effort, combining everything from a late medieval ceiling to a late 20th-century boiler.

Giovanni Rubin de Cervin Albrizzi, a native-born Venetian architect, has made it his vocation to wade through the layers to restore historic homes in his city.

Mr. Rubin de Cervin, who set up his studio in 2000, currently is working on 10 projects. The most elaborate is a grand, yearslong endeavor: a piano nobile in a six-level palazzo complex, whose new owner wants to recall the glory of the Venetian Republic. (The piano nobile is the prime living area in a palazzo—in the high-ceiling floors above the damp first level.)

The piano nobile, which is being restored for an Italian client, “is a manual of restoration,” Mr. Rubin de Cervin says, in which every kind of traditional Venetian element has needed to be cleaned and “revived,” using traditional methods and materials. The list includes frescoes, stucco, terrazzo flooring, antique mirrors and silk wall coverings.

For other projects, Mr. Rubin de Cervin employs decidedly un-Venetian touches. Last year he oversaw the dramatic makeover of a two-bedroom apartment in San Marco. The challenge: “to create a new atmosphere out of a very dull place,” he says. He decided to install dark parquet floors—in contrast with the twinkle of Venetian terrazzo—to give the apartment a cozy feel to attract short-term renters.

Clients’ expectations vary dramatically, says the 50-year-old Mr. Rubin de Cervin. Often, he is dealing with foreigners who have bought a second home. They know what they want, but don’t know the limitations associated with

renovating in Venice. He guides them to making the right requests, as well as the right decisions. “I need to be a psychologist,” he says.

Budgets on a renovation typically run from about \$100,000 for a small apartment to \$800,000 for a prime residence in a palace. The 860-square-foot San Marco apartment took about six months to finish; the piano nobile, started in 2010, will take at least five years.

The architect spreads the tasks involved among many contractors and artisans. If he used one large team, he says, it would be faster, “but you get much less control with the final result.” He focuses largely on Venetian residences, taking on occasional commercial projects in Venice and commissions elsewhere in Italy.

Most Venetian houses predate plumbing and central heating, not to mention air conditioning, and Mr. Rubin de Cervin says that “50% of the expense and 80% of the time” involved in a project are given over to technical matters. The majority of his clients want air conditioning, an amenity that many Venetians do without, and he often tries to install up-to-date under-floor heating when possible to take the chill out of Venice’s winters.

At some point or other, most of his renovations come up against terrazzo flooring, the typically multicolored surface associated with Venetian interiors. The scattered-jewel effect comes from irregular chips of marble or granite that are bound into a flat surface and then waxed. Traditionally, the binding material was lime-based. These days, it is cheaper and faster to use concrete—but Mr. Rubin de Cervin abhors it. Concrete is “completely wrong for Venice,” he says. “It’s too heavy” for a city “built out of wood and bricks.” Concrete ter-

razzo, he adds, also has a habit of cracking.

Although some of his renovations replace or cover original floors, the architect prefers “to respect the old terrazzo” with skilled patching, or put in whole new terrazzo floors using traditional methods, which can run about \$65 a square foot—more than double a marble floor.

Nearly all of the buildings Mr. Rubin de Cervin works on are protected historical structures, so he must negotiate with historic-minded authorities, who oversee even minor decorative changes.

Many clients—who likely paid from \$1.7 million to \$14 million or more for a piano nobile—make requests that are nonstarters, he says, like construction of a new outdoor space. Others want to relocate a kitchen. Venice apartments typically have small kitchens at the back. “If you want to have the kitchen near the dining room, sometimes you can do it, and sometimes you can’t at all,” says Mr. Rubin de Cervin.

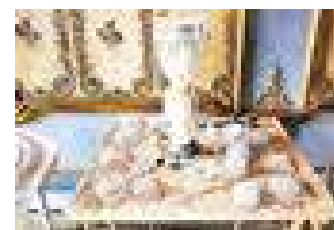
Knocking down walls is often the easy part. Some walls have been put up as an ad hoc solution in some previous renovation. “When you knock down a wall, normally it’s a wall that wasn’t originally there,” the architect says.

Mr. Rubin de Cervin grew up in his family’s Palazzo Albrizzi. Although “accustomed to seeing frescoes, stucco, old windows and old doors” at home and in the palaces of friends and family, he was inspired to become an architect by the work of Venice’s influential architect/designer Carlo Scarpa (1906–1978). With Scarpa’s legacy in mind, modernizing with sensitivity has become Mr. Rubin’s credo.

“Putting in bathrooms, air conditioning and wiring is what my work is about,” he says. “But I do that by respecting the old structures.”



PALACE REVIEW The architect attends to every detail of a palazzo restoration. Artisans such as chandelier specialist Marcello Moretti, left, are hired for their particular expertise.



Giovanni Rubin de Cervin Albrizzi

OPEN FOR BUSINESS Mr. Rubin de Cervin created a cozy new interior with dark parquet floors in the complete renovation of a two-bedroom Venice apartment that is going to be used for short-term rentals.