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Greek Drama

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Greek Drama

LORD JACOB ROTHSCHILD'S PAVILION ON CORFU

Architecture by Javier Barba
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In the light-filled studio of Lord Jacob and Lady Serena Rothschild's Corfu villa, a table is strewn with a curious mixture of architectural models. A nearby file cabinet is brimming with renderings. The models and drawings make up the collective creative out-put of several international architects tapped by Lord Rothschild over the course of six years to design a summer pavilion and pool on a promontory of his Corfu estate. Although there are examples of Greek Revival, local vernacular, and contemporary with great volumes of glass, none of the signature designs won Lord Rothschild's favor. The whole enterprise, in fact, was nearly aborted for lack of a suitable scheme.

And then Lord Rothschild saw a house by Barcelona architect Javier Barba (see Architectural Digest, January 1992). "It was on the coast of Minorca in the midst of a landscape remarkably similar to Corfu's," Lord Rothschild recalls. "There was nothing monumental about the structure, nothing extravagant. On the contrary, it appeared to blend in thoroughly with the landscape. I was fairly confident that I had found my architect."

Barba was promptly summoned to London. "Before being ushered into Lord Rothschild's office, I was told that I would have no more than five minutes," he says. "The meeting ended up lasting nearly two hours and was followed by dinner. Although my English is rather rudimentary, we spoke the same architectural language. By the end of the evening the commission was mine."



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It was Lord Rothschild's mother and I



ABOVE: "It was imperative that the pool be of the same scale as the marble wall and that water compose as much of the design as possible," Lord Rothschild says. Barba conceived the expansive saltwater swimming pool as "an active response" to the surroundings; he had it painted a deep cobalt blue to match the Ionian Sea.

"Nature is so much more beautiful than anything one can do by hand," says Lord Rothschild in describing his desire for a minimally designed structure. "We wanted to let the site speak for itself."

second husband, the painter Nico Ghi (often referred to as the "Greek Picasso"), who, along with him, acquired an abandoned olive press or headland in the north of Corfu in the 1970s. The family restored the olive press and added a wing and two courtyards until the compound was transformed into a worthy representation of the island's architecture. The Rothschild villa and surrounding property of olive groves, which fronts the Corfu Channel and looks onto the obscure terrain of the coast of Albania, became the family's principal retreat and the source of Lo Rothschild's love affair with Corfu.

The villa's headland, alas, was not entirely sequestered. In recent years

Corfu has been plagued by development, and when the Rothschilds began to feel and hear the encroachment of tourism on a beach just south of their property, Lord Rothschild looked north to a contiguous promontory known as Strongilo (Greek for round, owing to the shape of the land formation) as a potential site for a pool and pavilion. "I didn't wish to forsake Corfu or build another villa," he explains, "but to simply shift the property's center of gravity to the next promontory." Nonetheless, he was not without his reservations. From the villa's expansive terrace there is a clear, unobstructed view of Strongilo, and the Rothschilds were wary of sully the virgin landscape.

"Five different architects drew up plans for the site, and each and everyone of them placed their proposed works on or near the summit of the promontory," Lord Rothschild says. "I much preferred to build nothing at all rather than to see the site ruined. All of the architects seemed to miss the point--all, that is, except Javier Barba."

If place and setting are crucial to every architect, they are paramount to Barba, who has established an international reputation for his ability to integrate his designs into their natural surrounds.

"There are sites that possess a magical quality," notes the architect. "The whole point of my architecture is to occupy such a place without destroying the magic."



ABOVE: The prominent marble outcroppings were left intact, in keeping with Barba's ecologically sensitive, noninvasive philosophy.

When Barba first visited the Corfu property some three years ago, he spent days exploring the promontory. He examined the indigenous rock and vegetation; he marveled at the vagaries of the light. Still, he couldn't help but think that there was something about the terrain that remained concealed. What was first a mere suspicion was confirmed when he pored over old topographical maps and subsequently began to clear mountains of brush at the mid-slope: The site harbored an abandoned marble quarry dating from the Venetian rule of Corfu. When the façade of the quarry was blasted with water, the marble was completely exposed and, depending on the shifting light, came to take on a rose white or pale gray hue.



"It is the very nature of architecture to relate humans to the earth and sky," comments Barba (above). "Sometimes we have a responsibility to build as people did before there were architects."

Barba set the pool at the foot of the quarry, and the water's inland edge follows the irregular contours of the rock face. Massive marble outcroppings and formations were left intact. "It was a revelation," Barba says. "Never could I imagine so dramatic a backdrop for any project." While the other architect had only thought to scratch the surface of the promontory, Barba had uncovered, as it were, a diamond in the rough.

Two artificial waterfalls were built high up on the slope, and the cascades that flow down the marble face into the pool not only provide a vivid visual effect, but their sound also acts to drown out the noise from the pleasure craft offshore and swimming at a nearby cove. As might be expected from an architect who has been called an apostle of integration, every detail was conceived with the natural world as an irrefutable model. The floor of the pool, for example, was painted a deep cobalt blue that matches the adjoining waters of the Ionian Sea. "I wanted to create a whole environment, a natural environment," Barba maintains. "If visitors have the sensation that they've discovered a hidden spring rather than a manmade pool, then I know that I have been successful."

Initially, Barba's insistence on the imperfect took some of the local workers and craftsmen by surprise. The architect designed three colossal retaining walls, which run the length of the compound and descend progressively from the pool area's edge toward the sea. When Barba arrived on Corfu for one of his many inspections, he found that the masons had begun to build one of the walls and that the work was impeccable. Too impeccable.



ABOVE: A Roman bath with a Jacuzzi lies off the dining area.



ABOVE: The whitewashed ceiling beams, stone floor and marble columns of the open-air pavilion are representative of Corfu's vernacular architecture.

"I had to ask them to tear it down," he says. "I told them that I admired their work but that it was too uniform. The stone had to be irregular, rough-hewn-- a word, natural."

For the design of the pavilion, Javier Barba took his cue from local Corfiot architecture. "When in doubt," he says, "it is always best to look to the vernacular." The simple open-air structure consists of whitewashed beams, marble columns and the ubiquitous terra-cotta-tile roof. The walls have been painted a pale ocher drawn from one of the shades of the quarry marble. Except for a bank of seats covered with pillows in a Majorcan cotton fabric, and a weighty marble dining table, the pavilion is essentially without furniture. A magnificent early-Byzantine mosaic set in the floor and a life-size bas-relief depicting a nymph on a wall are, along with terra-cotta pots full of fragrant gardenias, the pavilion's sole source of embellishment. The space has been kept deliberately spare. "What to decorate?" asks Barba. "The focus should be on the quarry, the surrounding countryside, the ships passing through the channel and the exotic Albanian coast. Those features seem to me decoration enough!"



"At night there's a romantic quality to the place--dramatic in a different way from daytime, rather like a Böcklin painting of villas and trees," notes Lord Rothschild. Adds Barba, "Mine is an architecture that grows out of the landscape, which determines the aesthetics of orientation and construction, and the mechanics as well. The lighting, for instance, had to lend something magical to the rocks and plantings."



"I always view my work from afar early in the process make sure that it fits discreetly into the environment," Barba remarks. The pool, which is bound by the jagged contours of the rock along its inland side, and whose angled outer edge follows the island topography, is set the foot of the old quarry. The waterfall is one of two fashioned by the architect.

Although Javier Barba oversaw all the work during the two years that it took to complete the project, he readily admits that the Corfu commission was a unique collaborative effort. "If it hadn't been for the Thannasis Makris, the constructor Jimmy Carveles, the chief of works, and the whole Rothschild family, I would have never been able to realize this project." Indeed, the Rothschild's role was more than merely supportive and lent a familial air to the enterprise. It was Lo Rothschild who gave Barba the freedom to design on a particular scale to which he was previously unaccustomed. His daughter Emmy designed the threshold built from cyclopean blocks of stone that marks the entrance to the compound. The younger Rothschild daughter, Beth, an accomplished gardener who oversees the monumental gardens at Waddesdon Manor, the family's main residence outside of London, took charge of the plantings around the pool and the entire promontory. Beth Tomassini proved to be an especially kindred spirit and utter open to Barba's principles of integration. "If one is viewing Strongilo from a boat off the coast, the trees and vegetation should look like those of any other promontory on the island," she emphasizes. She planted olive trees and cypress myrtle and holly oak, broom and bay. Even thick thistle weeds were cultivated along the water's edge of the promontory for a thoroughly genuine effect. The only departure from the host of indigenous plants is the Chinese jasmine that climbs up the pavilion's marble columns. "I couldn't resist," she comments. "Its fragrance is exquisite."

If Lord Rothschild had been reluctant to tarnish the Strongilo promontory with something man-made, Barba has managed to roundly dispel his fears. A centuries-old quarry has been rehabilitated with a pool and pavilion built skillfully around its marble profile. The olive trees and cypress are taking root; the magic of the place has not been lost. Lord Rothschild offers no faint praise: "Javier Barba," he says, "has created an Arcadia."