

‘JUST *the right* amount’

Pale, but with splashes of colour. Old, but gently upgraded. Uncluttered, yet full of personality. The architect-owner of this house in Athens aimed for less but definitely found more

Photography **Lorenzi Zandri** Words **Malcolm Jack**



DETAILS

What A 19th-century townhouse

Where Athens

Architect Sofia Xanthakou, Local Local



“**F**riends come to the house and ask me: is this new or is it old?” says architect Sofia Xanthakou of the question she often hears when showing visitors around her freshly renovated late-

19th-century townhouse in the heart of Athens. “To me, this is success, because it means it feels rooted. It feels as if it belongs.”

Known as the Neighbourhood of the Gods due to its close proximity to the Acropolis, the Plaka district of the Greek capital has countless layers of history beneath its labyrinthine streets and buildings. Developed largely around the ruins of the ancient agora – the city’s main civic square during the Classical and Roman periods – it is Athens’ oldest quarter, continuously inhabited over a span of more than 3,000 years. Nineteenth-century neoclassical façades thus rub shoulders with Ottoman-era balconies and Byzantine and Roman remnants in the chaotically beautiful kaleidoscope of European-built heritage.

When Sofia and her husband bought their two-storey home here in 2022, with a view to turning it into a long-term base for them and their two children, it just wouldn’t have done to take a heavy hand to the work. Sofia’s core philosophy as an architect, shaped partly by her relationship to Athens, is to “listen” closely to the nuances of a building and its location, and draw out character through delicate material choices and carefully calibrated interventions. ▶

Previous pages In the kitchen, a Louis Poulsen pendant hangs above a dining table designed by architect-homeowner Sofia Xanthakou, inspired by traditional Greek monastery refectory tables and made by a local carpenter. Sofia made the red chairs. **Left** A vintage Jean Prouvé dining table and chairs sit against the calm white architectural envelope used throughout the renovation to maximise natural light. A photo by George Tourkavasilis introduces the subtlest of focal points within the otherwise restrained palette



Above The courtyard was opened up during the renovation by pruning overgrown trees that blocked daylight. An outdoor dining table designed by the architect is paired with durable aluminium chairs by Emeco. **Opposite, top left** The neoclassical townhouse sits on a narrow alley in Athens' historic Plaka district beneath the Acropolis. Original elements including marble door surrounds and wrought-iron balcony railings were preserved and repainted during the renovation. **Top right** The bespoke radiator cover echoes classical grille patterns. **Below left and right** In the kitchen, plaster cornices were introduced to soften the look and add subtle detailing. The original cabinetry was preserved and repainted

“Soft renovations only” were what this building seemed to ask for, says the architect, who studied in New York, worked in London and founded her practice, Local Local, on returning to Greece in 2020. “We fell in love with this place straight away, because we could combine quiet family life in the chaotic centre of the city, and because the house didn’t need extreme renovation. I mean, we did work on it for six months, but we weren’t demolishing walls. We didn’t change windows; we didn’t change all the carpentry work. We thought it was good value for money.”

It helped that the house already had such a practical layout. Some of it was possibly the legacy of a previous renovation in the 1990s, which had been structurally savvy but had dated poorly in style, with glossy marbles and heavy wood finishes. Other elements of the house’s arrangement undoubtedly date back much further still. Spaces flow together naturally in a way that is serendipitously sympathetic to modern patterns of family life.

A long, bright living room – opening to a sunny courtyard at one side – connects through to a kitchen with hidden utility ▶

Right Bold red terrazzo flooring was laid across the ground floor by a local craftsman. Its colour was carefully chosen by the architect to echo the neighbourhood's traditional roof tiles. The vintage lamps are by Finnish designer Paavo Tynell and Sofia designed the sofa





space beneath a back stair, and beyond, a playroom for the children. Upstairs are three children's bedrooms with a dedicated bathroom, independent quarters for a member of staff, and a main bedroom suite with its own bathroom. On the roof is a terrace with views to the Parthenon, which is lit up spectacularly at night.

The architect's rationale throughout the work was to think just as carefully about what to keep as what to take away. "The easy thing is to say, 'Okay, let's remove everything, I'm doing it all from scratch, this is my opportunity to put my mark on the project,'" she reasons. "But, for me, choosing what to preserve is as important as deciding what to lose."

A lot of the features were pre-existing – "I just changed the colours," she says. "The stair, for example, was brown, but I've

made it lighter and more open. The issue with this house was that it was dark, particularly the ground floor. I was looking for ways to brighten it up and allow the light in. That's why I painted all the walls white." The kitchen is similarly close to how they found it – the joinery has merely been given new life with a lick of white paint and some new marble worktops and splashbacks.

Part of the reason for the poor flow of light into the house was a row of mature trees along the side of the courtyard. These had created a smothering shade over the course of many years. They had to go. "I feel bad about it," says Sofia, "but now it's a nice open space, and we spend a lot of time there with our kids."

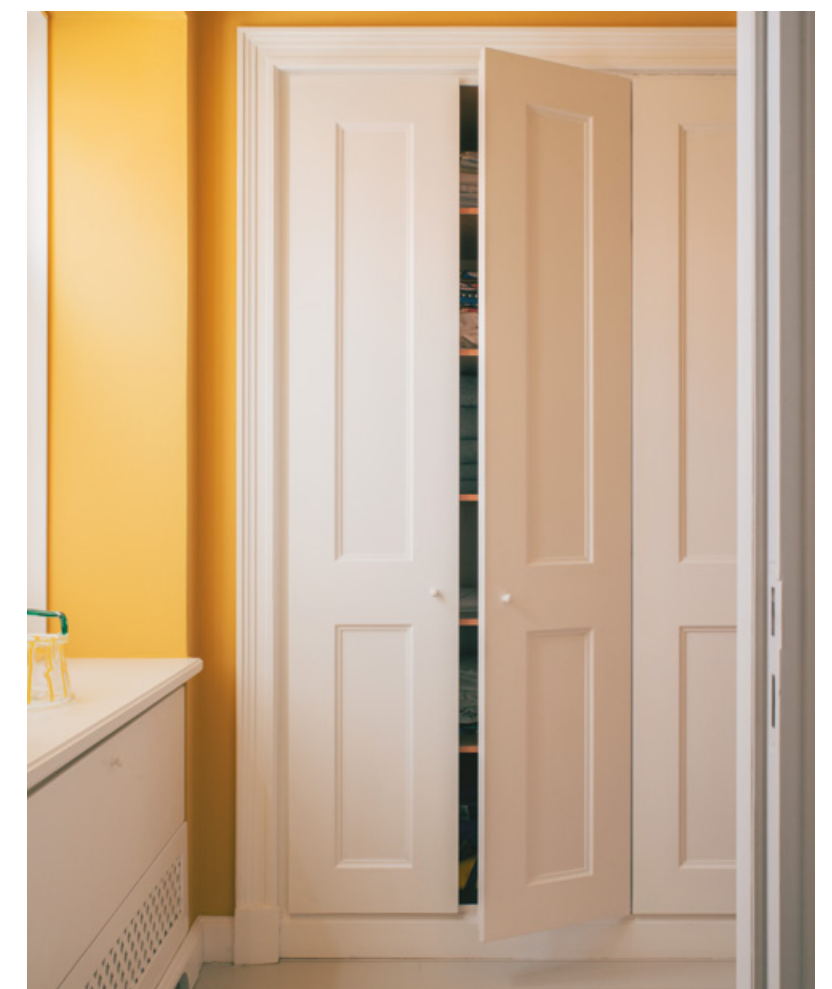
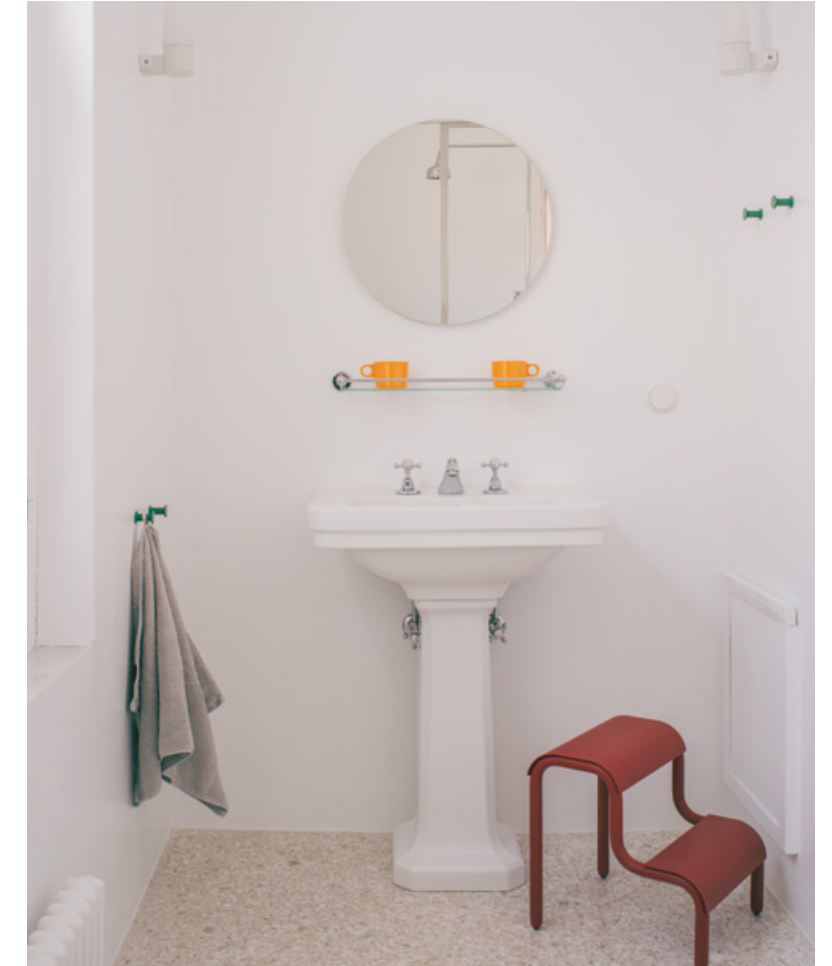
"Removing information" and making things "clean to the eye" were guiding principles for the architect, whose love of white paint gives the house an almost gallery-like feel (her husband ▶

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Opposite, top Framed views through the living space towards the hall emphasise the restored neoclassical proportions of the house. Pre-existing ribbed patterns were extended across the whole ceiling to give the room a more unified feel. **Bottom, left** The calm, uncluttered dining area. **Bottom, right** Plants soften the stone surfaces of the courtyard. **This page** The fire surround was rebuilt using green marble from the Greek island of Tinos. Sculptures displayed on the mantel are by Simone Fattal. Tall bookcases were snugly built into pre-existing spaces on either side of the fireplace to look like they are part of the architecture. The low bookshelves were designed by Sofia, in part to give the couch something solid to stand against





actually works as a gallerist). But not all white is made equally, she hastens to add. “Once the light hits it, this white has many shades,” she says. “It looks different around the lights, different in the shadows created by the detailing of the woodwork and the joinery. That gives depth to the space.”

In places, new joinery and architectural detailing were added to create more surfaces for this delicate play of light and shade – see the plaster corning in the kitchen, for instance, or the timber

radiator covers in the living room with classical grille patterns.

Such a plain canvas also helps strengthen pops of detail and colour where they are applied, as Sofia does with so much fun, energy and purpose throughout her home. Take the teal kitchen table the architect designed, inspired by traditional Greek monastery refectory tables, and sharply contrasted by bright red custom-made dining chairs. Or the warm red terrazzo floors freshly laid across most of the ground floor – a material long ▶

Left and middle Painted timber flooring upstairs replaced the original damaged boards. This is one of the children’s rooms, with String’s modular shelving and a green frog artwork by Enzo Mari. **Top right** Imperial Bathrooms’ pedestal basin was chosen for its classical proportions. The terrazzo flooring is in a subtle shade of white and grey. The red stool is Ferm’s Up Step. **Right** The gloomier ground floor was painted entirely in white, but the brighter upstairs was a chance to play with coloured surfaces. This corridor is painted in a warm yellow tone, mixed on site during the renovation



Left The original staircase was repainted in white to lighten the interior. **Below** Michele De Lucchi's striking Atlantic chest of drawers stands on the stair landing.

Bottom The bathroom has shower fittings by Devon & Devon and more light terrazzo flooring. A vintage vanity table painted teal introduces colour beneath the window



associated with Athenian interiors, particularly those of the 1950s and '60s. "I like the way you can play with terrazzo," she says. "It ages well and is timeless and simple.

"I worked on it with a guy called Nikos," she continues. "We tried various samples to find the correct pigment and the correct stones. Then he came over with his crew and they did it all by hand. It's really nice to work with people who still use their hands with materials that are not all produced in a factory."

She chose this particular shade of red for the way it "communicates", as she puts it, with the colour of the roof tiles used so commonly across Plaka. Take a glance across the sea of terracotta from the house's rooftop terrace, and you will see exactly what she means.

Rooted firmly in its place, this refreshed corner of ancient Athens remains, then, thanks to this most measured of make-overs. As Sofia succinctly puts it: "We did a lot of little changes that made a big difference in the end."

There is still much more that the architect and her husband may choose to do in the future – from potentially revisiting the house's window frames (all 30 of them) to perhaps even adding an extra bedroom. But true to her less-is-more philosophy, Sofia says, "We won't change anything if we feel there is no need. I think it works great. It's a very relaxing place to be, with just the right amount of stuff. And we enjoy it." ■

