

HOME

# Rhapsody in blue

You can take the artist out of Hong Kong – but you can't take Hong Kong out of the artist, as evidenced by one former resident's Maltese town house.

Text Charmaine Chan / Photography David Pace

Little about this house is typical of the homes usually featured in *Post Magazine*: it is about 200 years old; the garden includes a fountain; and its walls are made of chunky sandstone. It is also nowhere near Hong Kong – although there are hints, scattered throughout the charming rooms, of the owners' former lives in the SAR.

Welcome to the new home, on the Maltese island of Gozo, of artist Fox Daniels and her husband, Paul. Similar to the flats she renovated with aplomb in Sheung Wan and Yuen Long, the 3,200 sq ft house boasts bold colour combinations and distinctive features. Then there are the furniture, furnishings and art that have travelled all the way from these parts to her Mediterranean haven in the village of Gharb, near the city of Victoria, a half-hour's ferry ride from the Maltese main-

land. Her dreamy blue walls are hung with paintings depicting larger-than-life characters she encountered and painted in Hong Kong, including: *Money Man*, in a striped suit; *Law Man*, with his oversized gavel; and *Repulse Bay*, which highlights expat tai-tais.

The modern characters are in stark contrast to the old town house, which the couple found online (through a site called [www.move2gozo.com](http://www.move2gozo.com)) and included on a short list of possibilities when planning to decamp to Europe.

"It had been left alone for five years so it intimidated a lot of people who didn't know how to bring it back to life," she says.

The worn ornate floor tiles, cracked window panes and general decrepitude, however, didn't faze Daniels. Packing a can-do attitude into an 18-day visit to the

island early last year, she assembled a Maltese team that would help restore the property sympathetically, through stonework, carpentry, metalwork and the like.

But despite converting a few rooms, she was loathe to change the house structurally.

"The previous owner had a lot of common sense and did things for a reason," she says. "It was important to me to keep as much of the house as possible."

Back in Hong Kong, Daniels then worked furiously to design and have furniture custom made over the border, as well as shopping for materials such as upholstery fabric. Four months later, in September, the pair moved into the house with Theo, a cat adopted through the Hong Kong SPCA.

Greeting *Post Magazine* at their

new home's romantic entrance, via Skype, Daniels pauses in her husband's reading room, off the hallway, where the blue walls on the ground floor can best be appreciated.

"The floor tiles determined the colour," she says. "You can see the four different shades here. It's very subtle because I didn't want it to be as shocking as it was [in my homes] in Hong Kong. This house asked for gentler colours."

Also downstairs are the couple's bedroom, featuring a wall decorated with corbels from Hong Kong; the living area; a garden shed converted into a guest room; and what she calls her "Rolls-Royce kitchen". "I spent a lot of money on it but it will outlive the house," she says, showing off her tulipwood cabinets and zinc-topped island (see *Tried + tested*), which was also costly in terms of time spent >>





**1 Entrance hall** The console (1,800 yuan/HK\$2,280) came from Yong Chang Furniture ([www.antiqueyc.com](http://www.antiqueyc.com)), in Guangdong province, as did the table lamp (1,500 yuan). The ceiling fan (€140/HK\$1,500) is the same as the one in the stairway and was acquired online from Germany's [www.deckenventilator.com](http://www.deckenventilator.com). Tiffany wall lamps (€50 each) were sourced through eBay ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)) and the paintings on the walls are by Fox Daniels ([foxdaniels.net](http://foxdaniels.net)). The stained-glass doors and floor tiles came with the house. The candlestick holders were bought years ago.

**2 Stairway** At the foot of the stairs leading to Daniels' studio is her *Boat Man* (from the *Men of Influence* series), which hangs under a sconce that came with the property. The centrepiece jar (US\$266), round table (2,800 yuan), table lamp (HK\$1,500) and white console table (HK\$2,000) all came from Yong Chang Furniture. The blue oil lamp came from a shop in Victoria, Gozo, called Scicluna International Homewares (11, 95-96, 101 Palm Street, tel: 356 2155 6633).

**3 Kitchen** Daniel's kitchen was painted to complement the rest of the house. The cabinetry, in tulipwood, was built for €30,000 by Grixti Mobili, in Malta ([www.grixtimobili.com](http://www.grixtimobili.com)). The coffee mill came with the property and the pewter candelabra is old. (See *Tried + tested* for details about the countertops.)

**4 Dining area** The chandelier was made for €1,200 by Gozo blacksmith Mario Cordina (tel: 365 9982 2763; e-mail: [merlino@onvol](mailto:merlino@onvol)).



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net). The bird cage (1,500 yuan), which accommodates a vase, came from Yong Chang Furniture, as did the porcelain jar (US\$266). The table and eight chairs (two are in the dressing room) were made by George Grech (tel: 365 2155 3653), a carpenter in Victoria, for a total of €3,700. The fabric came from Fabrics etc in Hong Kong ([www.fabricsetc.com.hk](http://www.fabricsetc.com.hk)).

**5 Sitting room** Material bought from Fabrics etc in Hong Kong was used to upholster the sofa (€900) and armchairs (€690 each), which were made in Gozo by Carefree Furniture (tel: 356 21 557456). The art-nouveau mirror is from the couple's previous home, as are the Balinese dolls. The side table (1,500 yuan),

table lamp (1,500 yuan), floor lamp (2,000 yuan) and coffee table (1,500 yuan) all came from Yong Chang Furniture.

**6 Study** Paul's study features a mixture of styles and blues. The rosewood desk (11,000 yuan) and coffee table (1,900 yuan) came from Yong Chang Furniture. The Chesterfield sofa and desk chair (£3,470/HK\$44,000 for both) came from LE-AL in Britain ([www.le-alfurnitureltd.co.uk](http://www.le-alfurnitureltd.co.uk)). The bookshelves (€2,200), made by Grech, are tulipwood stained black. The picture of the Chinese woman was picked up in Cat Street, Hong Kong, years ago. *Money Man*, by Daniels, is from her *Men of Influence* series. The wall light came with the house.



## Good life Design

researching and finding the material. Classic cabinets, again in blue, complement the look. “A lot of people put ultra-modern kitchens [into old homes] and it looks awful,” she says. “I think it’s easier to listen to what the house tells you to do.”

That principle also applied to the open lounge and dining areas, which enjoy 19-foot-high ceilings and walls made of the local sandstone.

“Gozo is famous for its light, hence there are a lot of artists here,” she says. “It has to do with the stone, which affects the light.”

Natural illumination is something this part of the house enjoys in abundance, thanks partly to the high, stained-glass windows, whose shape brings to mind the Maltese cross. For the chandelier above the dining table, among other items, Daniels sought local experts, who were only too happy to help create her designs. That included the blacksmith, who shed tears when he saw his creation installed.

“He was so happy with the result,” Daniels says. “It’s a masterpiece.”

Others made similar emotional investments in their work.

“People here take pride in what they do,” she says. “They keep their word and always try to find a solution, no matter how difficult the problem is.”

One dilemma – solved by finding the original craftsman – was how to replace some of the broken stained glass. Another

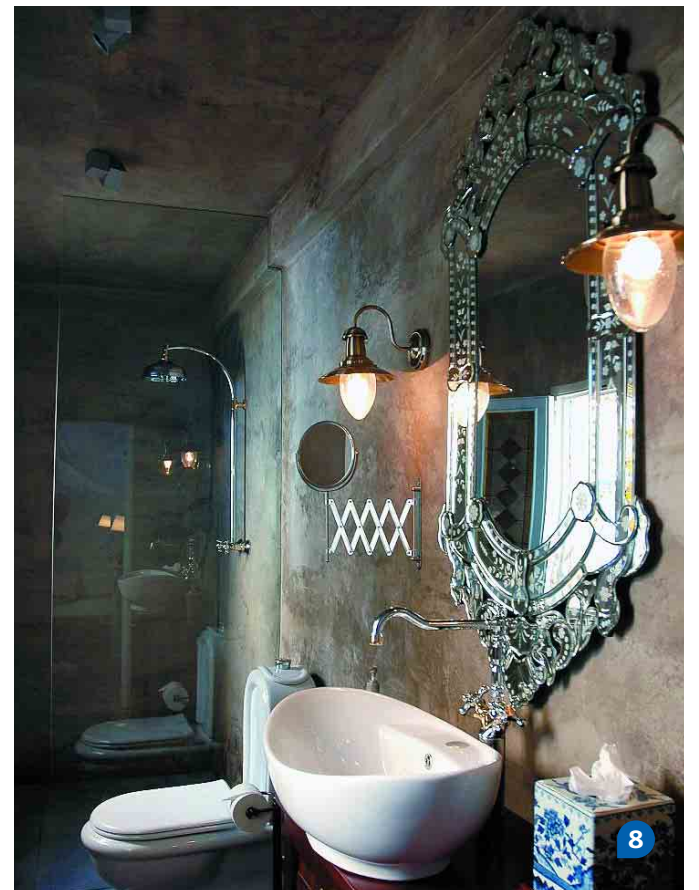


was how to achieve the curve needed for the backs of her dining chairs. The answer? Make them in three pieces.

But now everything is done, can Daniels cope with her quieter life away from, for example, the Hong Kong subjects who inspired her to paint?

“We had a party yesterday and we’re having two other social events this week,” she says.

With a little of their former city’s sparkle, perhaps, the house has returned to life.



**7 Bedroom sitting area** Through the original stained-glass windows of the master bedroom can be seen the courtyard, with fountain in the background. The armchair, ottoman and floor lamp came from Ikea via a Maltese importer.

**8 Bathroom** Beauty meets the beast in the en-suite bathroom, which features brutal concrete walls and romantic fixtures. The shower and tap set (€700 for both) came from AF Ellis in Victoria (afellis.com.mt). The sink and toilet were from Joseph Caruana (Caruana Building, Mgarr Road, Victoria, tel: 356 21 560 019). The mahogany wood vanity (€320) was made by Grech. Also from Victoria are the extendable wall mirror (€15), which came from an SPCA charity shop; the large detailed mirror (€170), from Grech’s Central Stores (137 Republic Street, tel: 365 2155 6633); and the wall lamps, from Silhouette (www.silhouette.com.mt). The ceramic tissue holder is old.

**9 Master bedroom** Giving character to the master bedroom are the faux fireplace and corbels (HK\$4,000 for all) that Daniels attached to the wall with glue. She sourced the polyurethane items from Int’l Florist Industrial Company (12/F, Profit Industrial Building, 1 Kwai Fung Crescent, Kwai Chung, tel: 2426 2677). The bed and bedside tables are from her previous home, in Yuen Long. The cotton mosquito net (US\$200) was bought through www.mosquitonets.com. The Bakelite light switch cost A\$10 (HK\$70) through Australian company www.palesinstyle.com.au. Flanking the bed are wall lamps from Ikea that she acquired through a Maltese importer, who also bought the floor lamp for her. The ceiling fan (€140) came from www.deckventilator.com.

## TRIED + TESTED



**Zinc efficiency** Unable to find a local source for the material she wanted for her kitchen countertops, Fox Daniels trawled the internet and found zinc, milled in Italy and supplied by British company Metal Sheets (www.metalsheets.co.uk), which charged a total of €800 (HK\$8,500), including shipping and metal studs. A Maltese company then installed it on a wood substrate for €2,000. The patina is the feature that attracted Daniels to the material, which she “distresses” by rubbing half a lemon directly onto the surface every month. The juice, she says, “blends” marks left behind by wine and the like, at the same time creating interesting patterns. The green metal milk buckets were from Ikea in Hong Kong (various locations; www.ikea.com.hk).