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'I THOUGHT I WOULD FALL IN LOVE

with it right away, but I found it hard to see its potential,' says Dario Vitale of the 170-square-metre former insurance office he bought in the upmarket Porta Romana district of Milan. The initial excitement that Dario had felt after spotting the 'for sale' sign on the beautiful 1930s building he passed every day on his way to work was dented when he stepped inside to discover linoleum floors, a false ceiling and harsh neon lighting. He needn't have been concerned, though – this building's original features, from pristine parquet floors and decorative bathroom tiles to gloriously high corniced ceilings, were waiting patiently to be rediscovered.

This is an apartment with history – it was once home to the celebrated Italian playwright Dario Fo – and, thanks to a chance encounter with the previous owner, Dario was able to fully imagine its splendour. Inspired, he started to recreate that grandeur, beginning a year-long renovation with the lightest of touches.

Today, the flat is bright and spare, sparsely decorated with objects selected for sentimental reasons and displayed with a minimalist's restraint. 'I have always been fascinated by two things: the aesthetics of monastic austerity and Eastern philosophies,' explains Dario. 'This is why I have ornate Japanese screens, as well as paintings and photographs by Gandhi.' The influence of Eastern culture sits comfortably beside more rustic elements, such as the large cherry wood dining table lit from above by the school fete-style 'Light My Table' string of bulbs by Belgian design firm Studiomie, as well as classic 1950s designs by Italian lighting firm Stilnovo. The key to blending these different eras and ideas is keeping everything else simple. The neutral colour of the walls creates a calm, museum-like backdrop that underlines the importance of the few decorative elements on display.

The apartment's serene look is broken up only by splashes of green – the rug in the dining area resembles a perfectly tended lawn, while images of foliage play across Dario's Japanese screens, and ferns and arrangements of dried flowers are dotted artfully throughout the space. It is not just an appreciation of the natural world that led to this palette choice. 'As a kid, I read in a newspaper that not many people choose green for their homes because it's a difficult colour – it's risky, but one that fascinates intelligent people. Since then, the shade has become a sort of obsession of mine.'

How does Dario feel about his home now that he has successfully uncovered its many concealed charms? 'It's a house. That is all. It fulfils real, shared and primitive needs: there's a living room, a kitchen, a dining room, a bedroom, two bathrooms, a guest room,' he replies, using his fingers to count out the practical merits. It's a typically zen answer, but one that underplays Dario's part in the history of this apartment.



Hallway Wall-mounted vintage lamps by Artemide are placed above a stack of well-travelled suitcases and trunks
Living room The striking chandelier is a design by Stilnovo from the 1950s – the sofa and corner table are also originals from the same era. The pieces on the table are from Milan-based Stories of Italy, which sells Italian crafts Stockist details on p213 □





Kitchen The wooden cabinets with iron detailing that complements the wall-mounted storage and oven hood were built by Milanese furniture designer Giacomo Moor in collaboration with homeowner Dario. They are paired with a Carrara marble sink and a stainless-steel cooker. A vintage iron-topped table, plus 'Bucket' chairs and stools by Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek (available at SCP), create a small dining area. The colourful statement chandelier is another Stilnovo original. Stockist details on p213 □

