



Lešić-Dimitri Palace

The buildings of the Lešić-Dimitri Palace complex, now rigorously restored and adapted as a first-class hotel facility, originally evolved as part of Korčula's medieval urban matrix. A city set on a hill, the town has a disciplined plan that is both organic, its form derived from fishbone, feather or leaf, and geometric, a simple network of parallel east-west alleyways crossing a no less narrow north-south spine. These streets respond to wind and sun. Straight lanes stepping down to the west and the setting sun are open to the cooling maestral (north west) breeze in the summer, while those to the east fall in a gentle bend curving just enough to check the ingress of winter when the south easterly jugo and north easterly bura blow. Built to a regular plot size and densely packed gable to gable along both sides of every street, the town's houses are double-banked stone dwellings backed onto a shared sewage line. Many no more than low cottage structures at first, most now rise from the same original footprint to a height of four or five storeys. So stringently respectful has the renovation of the Lešić-Dimitri Palace been that the integration of its constituent parts into this matrix remains clear and unimpaired.

Of course, in common with many other properties in Korčula, the several plots now aggregated to form the Palace have been developed over time. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the aristocratic Lešić family, local landowners prominent in trade and commerce in Korčula, began to acquire a number of contiguous properties in the town with a view to creating for themselves a prestigious urban residence. These plots were located near the top of the town behind the Cathedral of St Mark and immediately east of the old Church of St Peter. By the systematic merging of six single- and two-storey buildings that lay in two back-to-back rows on streets now known as Ulica Depolo and Ulica don Pavla Poše the basis for a prestigious urban palace was obtained. The separate properties, dating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, were linked by building over the sewage drain running between the rows while three more floor levels were later added to accommodate the family's needs and reflect its significant social position. While a larger volumetric whole was thus achieved none of the visibly monocellular tissue of the original townscape was destroyed.

An entrance to the new composite structure was formed on the western gable, off-street adjacent to the former apse of the Church of St Peter. It seems that the creation of a small forecourt here was made possible through the intervention of a prominent scion of the family, Vicentius Lessius, who became bishop of Rab and later Krk. From the new entrance a flight of stairs rose to the piano nobile where, much in the manner of Venetian palazzi, a single large room extended through the central units of the palace plan from street to street with two corniced doorways in the south wall opening to a balustraded corbelled balcony. Further aggrandisement entailed the acquisition of a row of low sixteenth century cottages opposite the Palace on the south side of Ulica don Pavla Poše. These initially functioned as outhouses and service buildings but were later partially increased in height and connected to the Palace by two narrow bridges, which crossed the street at the level below the piano nobile. While the simple forms of these late medieval cottages have substantially survived to the present, the Palace itself displays the more sophisticated revisions and decorative detail characteristic of the later eighteenth century. Indeed, work on the Palace was not finally completed until the nineteenth century.



Not surprisingly perhaps, the street along which the Palace buildings were principally ranged, now known as Ulica don Pavla Poše, bore the name of the Lešić family for much of the eighteenth century. The surname disappeared, however, in the second half of that century when the Palace passed through the female line into the hands of the Dimitri family. By the time of Napoleonic rule in the early years of the nineteenth century, the buildings were suffering neglect. Rendered ill-suited to the needs of more modest family living by virtue of their adaptation to aristocratic pretension, the buildings were put to public use. For a period, part of the property was leased as a school, while part was given over to occupation by a large number of tenants. Finally, the Palace stood empty, its future unsure. Soundly constructed and secure, the buildings' structural masonry did not suffer unduly from this regrettable abandonment. Timber elements were less fortunate and without proper maintenance roofing spars, floor and ceiling beams, windows and doors were all considerably damaged. On the south side of Ulica don Pavla Poše, the old cottage properties were left roofless and the space within their walls used for a long time as a garden, a fate which caused serious damage to retaining walls and foundations.

From this depressing and uncertain state the Lešić-Dimitri Palace was rescued in 2000 when the complex was purchased by a new owner. By 2008, following a necessarily prolonged period of painstaking survey work, archival research, sympathetic architectural intervention and high quality craftsmanship, the restoration and adaptation of the Palace was largely complete. Not only do the buildings now provide tourist accommodation of the highest category but also an important part of Korčula's unique urban fabric has been secured to be enjoyed by Korčulani and visitors alike. In developing this new residential accommodation the existing spatial organization of the Palace has been stringently respected. On each floor level a single large apartment, lavishly appointed with everything needed for relaxed modern living, has been formed. Of the five units thus created, none is less than 100 square metres in area, the largest utilising the existing bridge links to gain additional space on the south side of Ulica don Pavla Poše. Here, below bridge level, a smaller sixth apartment opens from the street, while the cottages which step down the street to the sea are being adapted to house a restaurant, bar and health spa.

The restoration of the Palace maintains the building's volumetric integrity and historical detail. Existing structural masonry and ornamental stonework are kept, while the poor quality of some recent, less than respectful, interventions has been replaced with contemporary elements unobtrusive and harmonious in appearance. Features such as ceilings, floors, windows, doors, etc. have, where necessary, been reconstructed in their original form and material. In the ground floor apartment of the Palace some very old ceiling beams, probably dating from an early phase of building, have been successfully retained, as has some stone flooring. Several old stone basins have been repaired and put to use. Throughout, surviving corbelstones support new timber ceilings. While the ratio of surviving old fabric to new is remarkably high in the Palace itself, in the cross-street cottages, where the relevant details for an authentic reconstruction do not exist, this is necessarily not the case. Here the provision of accommodation, particularly at the upper levels, has lacked specific historical corroboration. Accordingly, while the historic townscape scale and the shape and size of traditional openings continue to be respected, smooth rendered walls subtly but clearly and honestly differentiate the old from the new.

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