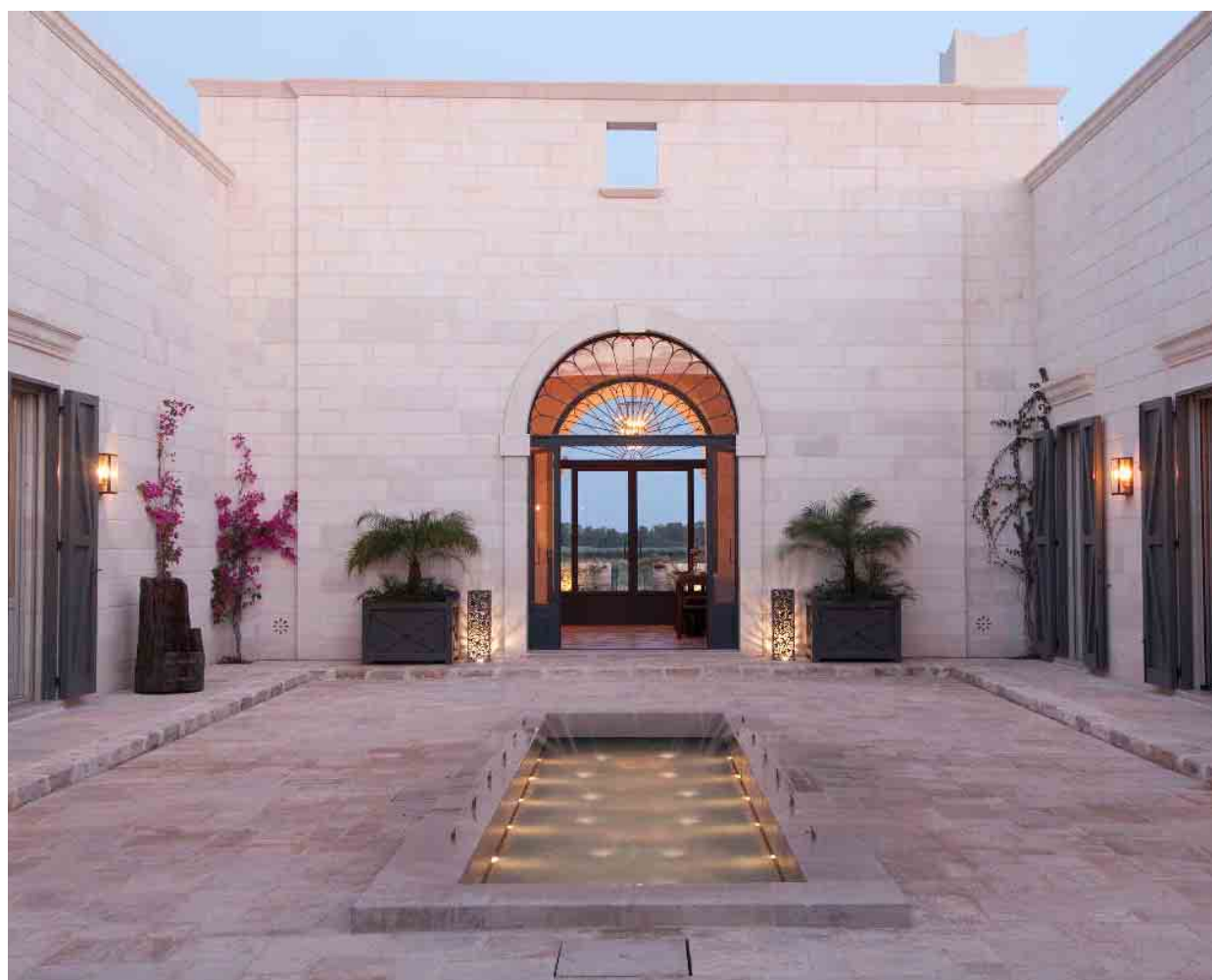


# HOME

## ARCHITECTURE



**Masserie by Essentis in Puglia, with traditional and modern features including pools (above) and swanky kitchens (below).** Photos: Essentis



# PALATIAL ITALIAN FARMHOUSES BREATHE LIFE INTO A DYING ART

**Company based in Puglia region has gained international reputation for trademark use of the local stone and centuries-old building techniques**

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The typical star- and barrel-shaped vaulted stone ceilings of traditional Apulian architecture are a sight to behold.

Each piece of the pale and soft local *pietra leccese* and *tufo* (limestone and sandstone respectively) required to make it are cut by hand and placed so the ceilings can stay in place without the use of mortar.

"Until about 20 years ago there used to be lots of stonemasons who had the ability to do this type of thing," said Francesco Carlucci, who builds luxury contemporary *masserie* courtyard farmhouses in the southern Italian region of Puglia.

"The big problem is now most of them are retired." As Carlucci speaks he points to the vaulted ceilings of a typical *masseria* his company, Essentis, is building in the Salento region of Puglia. Osvaldo Sicuro, one of the stonemasons, brings out a page of calculations that go into working out stone shapes and how the pieces rest on each other to create harmonious patterns.

"First we have to study and then we can actually do the work," he said.

*Masserie* are a common sight in the vast and comparatively unspoiled southern Italian region of Puglia and are usually surrounded by centuries-old olive groves.

Built from the 14th century on, they were initially fairly basic structures fortified against invad-

ers. But they later took on more elaborate shapes as the need for protection lessened.

The *masserie* Essentis builds have all the traditional features of these original farmhouses – external walls, internal courtyards, some even a tower – but also a slew of other features that bring them squarely into the luxury category and the 21st century.

"Most people with money always buy more than what they want," said Carlucci. "We build

**Most people with money always buy more than what they want. We build them what they need**

FRANCESCO CARLUCCI, OF ESSENTIS

them what they need." Of course, "need" is a relative term when it comes to the swimming pools, pizza ovens, wine cellars, water features and indoor spas that are some of the more common extras in the houses built, but each *masseria* does indeed differ in size, specifications and finish.

Many have sustainable features too, such as geothermal pumps for heating, solar panels and organic vegetable gardens.

And you can't get more local than the stone used, said Carlucci

– it comes from the town of Cursi, just down the road. Carlucci set up the *masseria* company with Danilo Bertolli in 2007 and has a waiting list of a year despite the global recession and slowdown.

"One year after we launched the project Lehman Brothers collapsed," he said. "We couldn't have chosen a worse moment."

The most obvious reason for their success is that while many luxury property developers in Puglia build modern homes or restore and refurbish existing *masserie*, Essentis is alone in offering clients a new luxurious farmhouse that is made-to-measure, but nevertheless built using the local stone and centuries-old stonemasonry techniques.

"The weakness of my business is that this is a dying art," Carlucci said. There are fewer than 100 stonemasons left in the region, and given the skills needed to craft the vaulted ceilings, the company can build only a handful of *masserie* a year.

Yet as a self-made entrepreneur, Carlucci has managed to turn this so-called "weakness" into the company's most alluring selling point.

In 2005 he set up a Stonemasons Academy and "recruited the best stonemasons aged between 50 and 80 years old who are now training the youngest on the job". So far the academy has recruited and trained about 40 apprentices in their 20s and 30s.

"The Stonemasons Academy is really the reason for our success," said Carlucci.

Giles Parry, a British stockbro-

ker who lives in Singapore with his wife, Jenny Tan, a Singaporean fund manager, had a courtyard farmhouse built about 25 kilometres south of the baroque city of Lecce in 2008 after a Google search for buying property in Puglia led him to Essentis.

"We love the colour of the natural stone, the architectural symmetry, the surrounding olive groves, countryside and dry stone walls," he said.

Though he knew the region before building a holiday home for his extended family there, many of Essentis' clients, perhaps surprisingly, do not.

"Almost none of our clients have been to Puglia before," says Carlucci. "They find our company in adverts or online, come to see plots and decide to buy."

The construction of Parry's *masseria* took under 15 months, he said, though the pool was added a year later and a traditional *trullo* (white stone buildings with conical roofs that are another traditional Apulian structure), designed to be a guesthouse, a year after that.

"My parents, who live in the UK, helped enormously [with the project] and they made five trips down to Puglia during the construction work. I made three trips from Singapore. And in between, Essentis provided weekly reports and photos of the progress."

Buying a property abroad can be a major headache. But if Carlucci and his team are able to start work immediately, usually no more than 18 months elapse from the time a client has selected a plot of land to moving in.

An average four-bedroom *masseria* weighs in at about €3 million (HK\$31 million), with two

hectares of land, but Essentis has built one with a price tag of €1.5 million and a couple that were "well over €10 million".

Though many choose not to use their property as holiday lets, clients are increasingly renting out their homes for three or four weeks every year to cover their running costs.

These may include the €1,500-€3,000 a month Carlucci charges in management fees to maintain the gardens, clean the pool(s) and so on. Rents start at €3,000 per week for the smaller *masserie* in low season and go up to €12,000 a week for larger ones.

Building only four or five *masserie* a year means the company can afford to be selective. Of roughly 30 preliminary meetings Carlucci has every year with potential clients, at least three-quarters don't go further.

Reasons vary. Sometimes clients "think this is Disneyland" and will ask for things that are not "sympathetic to the local architecture", he said. The strangest request, from a would-be Russian client, was for a *masseria* with five towers. "A *masseria* with five towers just doesn't exist," said Carlucci. "At the most the fortified *masserie* had just one."

Other times, clients want a *masseria* that looks exactly like one of the earlier ones Essentis has built. But Carlucci and his team of seven architects believe their niche appeal lies in constantly upgrading their designs.

Their new "collection" of *masserie* includes indoor pools, ever more sophisticated landscaping, finishes and water features as well as entirely bespoke and handmade furniture.

Welcome to *Masseria 2.0*.

## ON THE MARKET



### Le Cachet, Happy Valley

Located in the heart of Happy Valley, Le Cachet is a 27-storey apartment block with three flats per floor. Public transport is convenient for local and international recreational clubs, schools, department stores and restaurants.

The flat on offer has two bedrooms and one bathroom. Its gross area is 729 sq ft and its saleable area 521 sq ft. Asking price: HK\$ 9.3 million Agent: Ricky Leung (9869 6889) of Colliers International



### Ying King Mansion, Wan Chai

On offer is a three-bedroom flat in Ying King Mansion, 192 Hennessy Road. Its gross floor area is 700 sq ft and saleable area 483 sq ft. Asking price: HK\$5.4 million Agent: Joe Lee (93822839) of Centaline Property Agency



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**STYLE**  
**DAVID RODEN**

**What:** Garden stool  
**Why:** This classic ceramic stool is updated in a turquoise glaze finish  
**How much:** HK\$750  
**Where:** Bowerbird, 2/F, The Oceanic Industrial Centre, 2 Lee Lok Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2552 2727

**What:** Metal glass table lamp  
**Why:** Blown glass with visible bubbles  
**How much:** HK\$9,380  
**Where:** PLC Lighting, 210 Lockhart Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2519 6275

**What:** Curve vase  
**Why:** An ode to art deco in stainless steel  
**How much:** HK\$2,880  
**Where:** Exclusivities, 1/F, Ruttonjee Centre, 11 Duddell Street, Central, tel: 2521 8626

**What:** Lean chair  
**Why:** This minimalist chair in stained or natural oak is handcrafted in Denmark  
**How much:** HK\$12,900  
**Where:** Nook, 11/F, Horizon Plaza, 2 Lee Wing Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2518 3884

**What:** Studio couch  
**Why:** Made by British brand Ercol and upholstered in fabric by Timorous Beasties  
**How much:** HK\$67,500  
**Where:** Lane Crawford Home Store, Pacific Place, Admiralty, tel: 2118 3668