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BACK ON SONG

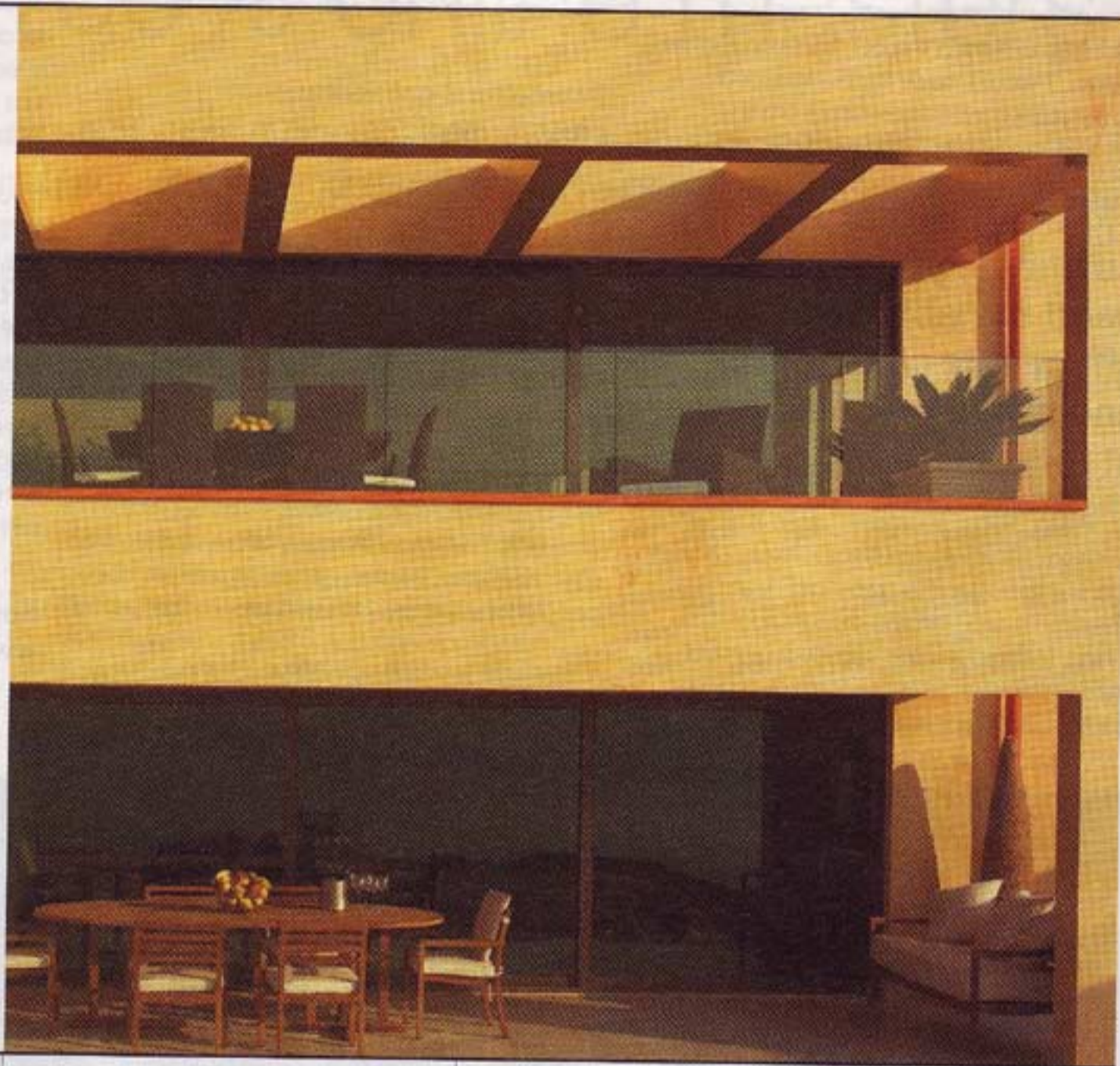
COLDPLAY LEAD THE CHARGE AS THE BRITISH MUSIC INDUSTRY FIGHTS BACK

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PROPERTY

Halfway houses

European architects are creating bespoke properties for clients who get to have their say at every stage of the project. ALEXANDER GARRETT explores the stuff of which dreams are made



IN THE UK'S OVERCROWDED property market, sites where you can build a single detached house on anything more than a modest scale are like gold dust and tend to go to developers. Your chance of having any input into the design and build is usually equally remote.

In other parts of Europe, it's a different picture, and there is ample opportunity to get a big house built to your own design and specification. But not everybody is cut out to be a self-builder, in which case halfway houses – where somebody takes away the hassle but you still end up with a bespoke house – have huge appeal.

At Kilada Hills near Porto Heli in the Greek Peloponnese, architect Mark Potiriadis is offering his own variation on this theme. His company Ergotex has built 11 imposing modernist houses on a plot overlooking the stunning Argolic Gulf, 175km from Athens – their cubist concrete, steel and glass construction providing a remarkable departure from the traditional classical architecture

prevalent in Greece. That is not the only unusual feature of the development, though. Only two of the houses are finished – one blue, one an earthy orange. The others are concrete shells, each waiting for their purchasers to provide the missing pieces of the design puzzle.

The owners can decide exactly where they'd like their infinity pool and terraces to go; how many bedrooms they want, and where; as well as designate space for other uses such as office, staff accommodation, children's playrooms and the like. They can also choose their own furnishings, from the cooling and heating system to the floor timber or steel balustrades. Potiriadis says the houses share some common motifs, such as cubes and atria, but each is intended to be different to all the others.

The smallest house is 240m²; a more typical size is twice that, and the show home is on the market for €3m. At that price, says Potiriadis, people expect more than to simply decide whether to

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Above: one of a number of custom-built cubist houses at Kilada Hills near Porto Heli in the Peloponnese

opt for Philippe Starck or Hansgrohe in their bathroom. He does, of course, have his own plan for how each house should be finished, but the construction method used, with enormous spans provided by the steel girders, makes it possible for clients to configure the internal space pretty much how they want. And they will even be able to choose the colour of their property (careful landscaping ensures that each of the houses will be virtually hidden from all the others).

In the nicer parts of Italy, strict planning laws dictate that getting a large new house usually means restoring an old or ruined property. But if trudging up hillsides to look at a pile of old stones, navigating town hall corridors and dealing with

CASTELLO DI RESCHIO: A RESTORATION COURSE

Italian builders all seems too daunting a prospect, there are people who can take the load off your shoulders. At the 2,000-acre Castello di Reschio estate on the border of Tuscany and Umbria, Count Antonio Bolza and his family have 40 ruined properties awaiting restoration. The estate's own architects and designers undertake the process as a collaboration with the purchaser. Prices start at €3m for a complete project.

A similar approach is taken by a young British company, Monteverdi, which finds properties to restore in locations in the middle of Italy. Daniel Walker, Monteverdi's commercial director, says he and his colleagues are constantly searching for

Monteverdi uses technology to involve clients in the process, providing a secure area of its website where they can monitor progress on the build, download documents and even choose materials from wherever they are in the world.

It's not cheap to do things this way – a 360m² house recently completed cost the client €1.5m all in – but Walker says that many prospective purchasers have already suffered the pain of trying to adapt an existing house to their needs and that this is a more efficient way to achieve the desired result. "People are very specific in what they want at €1.5m," he says. "There are some lovely properties in Tuscany that have been on the market for several

density. "You can have as much or as little input into the process as you want," she says. "There are restrictions to what you can do, such as maximum height and use of colours, and most developments don't want an ultra-modern house in what is quite a rustic environment"

In this market, investment is a powerful reason for designing your own house. A 300m² house that cost €850,000, made up of €400,000 for the plot and €450,000 for the build, should sell for at least €1.4m at the full market price, says Gore. For that reason, many buyers are investors rather than those intending to live in their house.

The final piece in the puzzle, she adds,



properties with the right attributes. "We're looking for places that are south facing and have privacy without being too remote," says Walker. Monteverdi buys the property and markets it until a buyer is found, at which point its client sits down with the architect and works out a brief, including such details as the number of bedrooms, location of pool, tennis court, etc. A turnkey price is established and contracts are signed. "The advantage to buyers is that we remove all the headaches; they only have one contract, which is with us," says Walker. "What can be done to the exterior of the house is usually very restricted, but the interior and aspects of the property such as landscaping are totally at clients' discretion."

years because they're not quite right"

In Spain's Costa del Sol, designing and building your own home is quite normal at the upper echelons of the market. At the luxury resorts in the hills behind Marbella and Sotogrande, you can pick your plot and then bring in your own architects and builders to create the home of your dreams. But, if that seems too exacting, a middle way is to bring in project managers who will do it for you – after listening to your wishes. One such firm is Puerto Banus-based Carrington Estates, which specialises in this approach. Samantha Gore, the company's sales support manager, says that the big resort developments have a bank of land that is licensed to be built at a specified

Above left: the interior of Martinozza di Sopra, which was created by Monteverdi to its client's exact requirements; top: the property was a ruin before its reconstruction as a luxury home; above: the terrace offers a panoramic view of Pian di Marte

is buying in the right development at the right time. She picks out the Monte Mayor Golf & Country Club, close to Benahavis, as being a particularly good buy now. "They are about to put in the club house, which will be finished next summer, so prices are still around 30 per cent below the likely market value," says Gore. A 3,000m² plot starts at around €250,000 and includes the right to play the golf course in perpetuity. If you're not too busy designing your next house, that is.

Kilada Hills www.kiladahills.com;
Castello di Reschio www.reschio.com;
Monteverdi www.monteverdi-estates.com;
Carrington Estates www.carrington-estates.com