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# On a Greek Isle, Preserving Tradition



Yannis Kontos/Polaris

Tatiana Spinari and Spiro Pollalis, with their two children, Nikolas, 5, and Kristina, 15, have renovated a two-story property on the small Greek island of Poros.

By EMILY BADGER  
Published: November 7, 2007

## POROS, Greece

### Multimedia



Slide Show

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They could have knocked out the doorway and made it wide enough for a garage entrance or tall enough for a boat, or maybe turned the street-front shop into a sitting room, an extension of the home above. But Tatiana Spinari and Spiro Pollalis wanted to keep what they called “the life of the place,” a two-story residential-commercial property on the edge of this small island, an hour by ferry from Athens.

The building has views of the water and, in the distance, the Peloponnesian peninsula. It was built in the early 1800s and owned by the same family until Ms. Spinari and Mr. Pollalis bought it in 2003. At that time, part of the ground floor was still being used for bicycle repair.

The couple, both originally from Greece and now American citizens and professors in the Boston area, had no use for a shop. It was the apartment upstairs — and living on this island of 4,000 people where Mr. Pollalis spent much of his childhood — that attracted them.

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But what to do about the shop?

The town of Poros is a traditional Greek village, the kind of place where everyone knows the baker who wakes up each day at 4 a.m. to make fresh amygdaloto, a popular almond cookie. Altering one of the oldest buildings in town — turning it into a dramatically face-lifted summer home on the water — seemed wrong to the couple. “That was the ethical issue,” said Ms. Spinari, 46.

Then one day, after several glasses of red wine with a friend in Athens, the solution suddenly seemed obvious. Ms. Spinari would turn the ground floor into an art gallery, the island’s first.

She says the defining element of her family’s story is not that she and Mr. Pollalis, 52, are from Greece, with emotional ties to the land and a heightened sensitivity to its tradition. Rather, it is their work.

Ms. Spinari teaches art history at [Boston College](#); Mr. Pollalis teaches architectural design at [Harvard](#). They moved to the United States in the late ’70s for graduate school and never left. Their children, Nikolas, 5, and Kristina, 15, are decidedly American but are just as comfortable on Poros. And Mr. Pollalis is on sabbatical this academic year, so the family will be here full-time until next fall.

Their passion for art and architecture — and, by extension, urban planning — underlies everything they have done here. They bought the property for 500,000 euros (a little more than \$583,000 at the time) and spent about 200,000 euros on a renovation that took a year and a half to complete. The shop space was combined into one large gallery, with polished marble floors and track lighting. The interior of the apartment was altered to add closets and bathrooms: there had been one before, and now there are six.

The two spaces total about 200 square meters (2,153 square feet). But the figure is deceptive because it measures the exterior footprint of the building, which has walls nearly two feet thick. Each of the four bedrooms is no larger than 10 square meters (107 square feet).

All of the work was done by local artisans, with no real architectural plans. They were guided by their own ideas — and by Mr. Pollalis’s belief that the building could be altered without altering its place in the community. “That worries me very much,” he said. “Because what’s going to happen if, say, people from New York or other places in Europe come here and buy all the houses in Poros and then they’re never here? It’s not the same place anymore.” A second-home owner has a responsibility in a small town like this one that goes beyond faithfully restoring a property, Mr. Pollalis said.

The gallery is open three months every summer and has three or four exhibitions during that time, chosen by Ms. Spinari to showcase both Greek art and international influences.

This past summer she showcased the artist Stephen Antonakos, whose signature neon pieces have been a draw in New York for 50 years.

“I really want Greece to keep having this authentic aspect, these artisan shops,” Ms. Spinari said. “But people have to be aware of what’s happening elsewhere. For me, it’s important for us to have a dialogue: Greeks, Americans, other Europeans, just to open up a different perspective for people to see, to assimilate in their own way. Maybe they reject it, but at least they’ve thought about it.”

Outside influences are strongly evident in Greece. Foreigners now own about 70,000 residences here, according to the government, and most were bought within the last 10 years. Most buyers are either German or English. But Americans, in particular, are just now beginning to overcome long-held perceptions of the country as unsafe, said Vaio Cassimati, manager of the P. Cassimatis Organization, a tourism investment and real estate development company based in Athens.

The safety issue was emphasized by Harry Coccossis, chief executive of Greece’s Tourism Development Company, a government body that manages the country’s publicly owned tourism properties. “Now it’s safe from the point of view of personal safety, but also safe from the point of view of investments,” he said. Greece’s stable economy and its place within the [European Union](#) have been the primary factors in its rise as a second-home destination, he said.

Many of the foreign buyers yet to come to Greece are expected to choose the mixed hotel-condo complexes that are part of the country’s tourism master plan. But Mr. Pollalis hopes the rest will share his concerns.

“If you want to have a summer house and go to a gated community, or a gated marina,” he said, “you can find many places. But if you decide to go to a village like here, or similar other places, you need to be sensitive to give life to the place.”

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