

AN UMBRIAN MASTERPIECE

AN ARCHITECT RECLAIMS AN ABANDONED
ITALIAN FARMHOUSE FOR FAMILY LIFE



"It was a challenge to retain the feeling of an old Italian farmhouse while making it comfortable and practical to live in," says architect Domenico Minchilli of a ruin he recently restored for his family. The stone-and-brick residence overlooks a valley in Umbria.





Italian architect Domenico Minchilli and his American wife, Elizabeth Helman Minchilli, are sitting beneath a pergola lush with Virginia creeper at their farmhouse on the outskirts of Todi, in the Umbrian hills of central Italy. They are sifting through photographs of the house taken eight years before, when they climbed a weed-choked dirt track to the crest of the hill to see the property for the first time.

"The house hadn't been inhabited for thirty-five years," recalls Domenico Minchilli. "The roof had caved in, the interior was full of rubble, and the walls were on the verge of collapsing. It was less a house than a ruin."

"Still," adds Elizabeth, "we knew we had found our property. After all, the house could be restored. What convinced us to buy was the view."

Stretching beyond the garden is a landscape of olive trees and vineyards, forests of oak and elm, far-off fields of wheat and sunflowers, and distant Umbrian hill towns of honey-colored stone and ocher-tile roofs. It is an archetypal Italian country view, and one that the couple were determined not to let slip away. Before they were able to thoroughly enjoy the vistas, however, Domenico Minchilli had to resurrect a house from the rubble.

A good many architects might have been daunted by the state of the Todi ruin, but



OPPOSITE: "The focus of the living room is the fireplace, whose carved stone mantel dates to the seventeenth century," says Minchilli. "We use the room mostly in the winter months, when it's cold and wet outside." The Neapolitan urn is 19th century.

TOP: A second living room seating area "is a bit lighter and has a view of the valley." **ABOVE:** "It's the only space where we left the original stone walls exposed," he says of the dining room, which doubles as an entrance hall. The Arts and Crafts chairs and settee are English.



Minchilli has made the restoration of crumbling Italian country houses something of a specialty of his Rome-based studio. Before he took on his own house, he had restored scores of houses throughout the Italian countryside, many of them for American artists and writers, including Al Held, Joseph

living room ceiling to create a sense of warmth, Minchilli did little to alter the structure of the house. He rebuilt the interior walls with the original stone that lay strewn in situ; beams were rescued from another derelict house in the region; and old, weathered tiles were found for the new roof.



ABOVE: "The pool was sited to take advantage of the view yet remain invisible from the house," he says. The paving, which was made with stones found on the property, and the dark bottom help the pool blend into the landscape.

Kosuth and David Leavitt.

"The previous projects taught me a great deal about the limitations and possibilities of these centuries-old stone houses," the architect explains. "By the time it came to renovating my own place, I knew precisely what I wanted, and I had put together an excellent team of native craftsmen who were well aware of my tastes and expectations."

But for raising the height of the second-floor roof, building a covered terrace off the master bedroom and another adjacent to the pantry, designing an independent entrance for the first-floor guest suite and lowering the

"Both Elizabeth and I were set on preserving the timeless character of the farmhouse," he says, "but we also wanted to make the house comfortable and practical in a contemporary sense. From the start we knew that it wasn't going to be an occasional retreat but rather a house that we intended to use year-round. We wanted to entertain here, too, because our Rome apartment is small."

Among the practical improvements the architect introduced were double insulation, radiant floor heating and natural gas. Fireplaces were also installed. "In win-

continued on page 288

RIGHT: "In the summer the covered terrace off the kitchen is where we eat our meals and spend most of our time when we're not at the pool or working in the garden," says Elizabeth Helman Minchilli. Restored 19th-century Italian garden chairs surround the table.





OPPOSITE: A 17th-century Tuscan chair, a 19th-century Roman table and a Turkish kilim occupy a corner of the master bedroom. The vase holds David Austin roses, one of the more than 40 varieties of old roses grown in the garden.

THIS PAGE: Handmade linen panels hang from a four-poster that the architect designed for the guest bedroom located on the lowest level. "It has its own entrance and is very private," says Minchilli. The lamp is 1920s American.



continued from page 224

stretches fifty feet. The pattern stopped two feet short of the wall, but Bray and Schaible solved the problem by putting twelve-inch repeats at each end. "The tableau is so big, the eye doesn't take it in," says Schaible.

Before this panoramic backdrop Bray and Schaible clustered an intriguing array of artifacts and objects on shelves, tables and pedestals. "The three-dimensional quality of the mural expands the perceived width of the room," Schaible points out. "The layers of art objects create another landscape in front of the painted one." A marble head copied from Michelangelo's *David*, a drawing of the owner's mother as a young girl and various bronzes by Rodin, Maillol, Degas and others "add to the depth of field," Bray notes. "You don't know where the objects stop and the picture plane begins."

Several large-scale pieces, such as a mahogany birdcage designed to resemble a Renaissance church, bronze garden urns, Italian marble lions, Neoclassical bronze candelabra and a 1920s vitrine, heighten the dramatic effect. Nothing in this robust assemblage looms higher than about six feet, however. "You need a datum, an imaginary ceiling, where it all stops at approximately the height of the tallest person, so there is a void or dark sky above," explains Bray. "It brings a sense of order to the chaos below."

"We could have used every trick we know to make this apartment seem light and airy," he continues. "But it would have still been a major problem with only three windows on a short wall. So we decided just to turn it into a magical stage set." By painting the ceiling and walls the aubergine hue, they replicated the sfumato effect of old masters' paintings. "The dark aged reds and greens in those paintings are so sensuous," says Bray. The deep green to which he alludes turns up in effulgent floor-to-ceiling velvet draperies that screen Cerruti's open kitchen from the dining and living areas.

Near the kitchen stretches a ten-foot-long oak dining table, around which are placed bentwood bistro chairs salvaged from one of Cerruti's restaurants, Summerhouse. "I am a bit nostalgic," she says, "but I do prefer the chairs' light-

ness and informality." The seating in the living area conveys the same casualness: Six wicker chairs formerly in the living room of her Park Avenue apartment have been grouped around a table piled high with books. "They add to that indoor-outdoor, porchlike ambience, along with the urns, lions and mural," says Schaible. "You can pretend you're in a garden in Italy."

Throughout, the floors were painted with white deck enamel to bounce the light upward; in the lower-level bedrooms, white was the choice for most walls and ceilings as well. The exception is the master bedroom. There too Cerruti longed for the theatrical whimsy that pervades the upstairs, and this time she made a special request for "something Italian." Bray and Schaible had the idea of designing a headboard, which Cerruti asked them to make "playful." So Bray satisfied both requests by going over the top: a trompe l'oeil headboard copied from the eighteenth-century Venetian bedroom of the Palazzo Sagredo, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "We used to sketch the room at the Met when we were students at Parsons," says Schaible. A crimson bedcovering and a folding screen further establish the mise-en-scène. Cerruti wrapped exposed sprinkler pipes with gold thread and fastened plaster putti on them here and there: "We didn't want the room to seem too serious," she says.

The overall result is an arresting combination of design ideas manipulated with thoughtful intent and humor. "It seems as if this is an extreme digression from the Bray-Schaible minimalist approach," says Mitchell Turnbough. "But it really is no different in its reliance on certain underlying principles." Robert Bray agrees but then adds, "When you give up the tried-and-true ways of doing things, it's scary. Your peers can say you've sold out to surface effect." He is revealing a modernist's guilt, stemming no doubt from his days as an architecture student. Yet he quickly recovers: "Bucky Fuller once said at a lecture, 'If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything.'" His statement may sound a bit disingenuous: Anyone seeing this apartment knows no mistakes were made. □

continued from page 244

ter, when some of the other houses in the vicinity are closed for the season, we're here, warm and cozy," says Elizabeth Helman Minchilli. "This is a house for all seasons."

While the exterior of the Todi residence respects the spirit and form of an Italian country house, in the interior, the couple indulged a more cosmopolitan sensibility. Others might have insisted that the design elements be exclusively Italian. Not so the Minchillis. "In fact, when it comes to choosing between a foreign item and an Italian one, be it fabric, a piece of furniture or a work of art, Domenico almost invariably opts for the foreign object," his wife notes.

"The danger of slavishly decorating a house with indigenous pieces—and I believe this is true in Italy or anywhere else—is that the interiors all begin to look alike," Minchilli insists. "The combination of furniture and decorative details here is much more our style; it's a reflection of our distinct backgrounds, our travels and our whims."

The Minchillis' sense of style is, apart from being refreshingly eclectic, one of resourcefulness. When it came time to finish the walls throughout the house, Domenico created a composite of raw pigment, brick powder and plaster that gives the walls a warm, sienna-like hue. He designed the beds in his daughters' room and the guest suite, and fashioned the fireplaces and mantels in the kitchen and living room from odd slabs of stone.

For her part, Elizabeth Helman Minchilli has made the garden surrounding the house bloom with more than forty varieties of old roses. She has also developed a fascination for the millennia-old ceramic art of the region and recently published *Deruta: A Tradition of Italian Ceramics*.

Domenico Minchilli will no doubt continue to seek out and restore the fine stone houses that dot the Italian countryside, but none, it seems safe to predict, will approach the unique style that marks his own Todi retreat. "I wouldn't even be able to re-create this look for a client," admits the architect, "nor would I want to. If we've achieved something singular, well, that's just what makes it ours." □