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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



In the sitting room, an 'Etruscan' bench with bronze inlay panels faces the fireplace. It was designed by Benedikt. The antique chairs to the right sit either side of a portrait of his great-uncle

## SEVEN'S HEAVEN

While helping his parents restore their Perugian estate, architect Benedikt Bolza and his artist wife, Nencia, came across seven crumbling cottages in need of divine intervention. They spent two years converting them into a family home, in the process domesticating a tobacco-drying tower and creating a treehouse for meals. Now, it's pretty much paradise. Text and photography: Tim Beddow



Right: vibrant jars of home-grown tomatoes line the walls beneath a traditional barrel-vaulted ceiling, typical of livestock barns. Top: the dining table is made of antique oak floorboards. Its metal legs were once wine-barrel hoops. Above: beneath Nencia's portrait in the hall is a Belgian watchmaker's table, its curves marking five workstations



Top: a jungle of figs, the first trees to colonise a ruin, was a natural subject for Nencia's dining-room mural. Above left: she also made the mock books on the stairs, wrapping wooden offcuts with fabric scraps. Above right: the tower, once used for drying tobacco, overlooks the vegetable garden. Opposite: the perforations in the brick, designed to ventilate crops, now scatter dappled light into the Bolzas' bathroom



Clockwise from top: the cast-iron bath at one end of the guest-room was sandblasted down to its raw black state and then waxed; behind the purpose-built four-poster frame is an antique bedhead decorated with a shell collage by Lucia Torrigiani; Benedikt designed the 'Canary' beds in the twin room, basing them on fairground swings





**AS A 14-YEAR-OLD**, Benedikt Bolza enjoyed nothing more than exploring Reschio, the run-down Italian estate on which his parents Count and Countess Antonio and Angelika had bought a house in 1984. Their isolated home, right in the heart of this enchanted valley, served as headquarters as he and his brother Niki explored the surrounding 3,000 acres of woodland and lakes in a rickety old Suzuki jeep. Discoveries were myriad: a castle, a tobacco factory (*Wol* March 2014) and some 50 abandoned buildings in various states of disrepair amid the wild undergrowth.

For 200 years, these Umbrian smallholdings had survived by growing tobacco, but after World War II they had become too labour-intensive and soon began to be superseded by large modern farms built on the valley floor. Combined with the increasing availability of modern facilities in newer villages, a quiet exodus from the estate had begun in the 1950s. It may well have been at this impressionable age that Benedikt, struck by the raw beauty of the land and the appealingly simple architecture of these forlorn buildings, began to nurture a vision of bringing it all back to life.

Ten years later, in 1994, his parents acquired the rest of the estate. Hoping to sell the ruins one by one, they began collaborating with well-heeled buyers (Angelika was an architect), transforming the houses into dream homes. But by 1999 it was clear the count and his wife were in need of help. Houses were selling, 'but there was no office, computer or email. It was definitely time to smarten up.' And that they did. Benedikt, who had been studying architecture in London before working with Piers Gough, returned home with his girlfriend Nencia Corsini, whose grand, old family comes from Florence. 'The initial idea was to live in Florence and work from a studio,' Benedikt explains. 'But after just a month we realised we had to be there permanently.'

Above: among the branches of an oak in the garden, the Bolzas have built a magnificent treetop dining space. The upholstery on the tables and chairs was all made to measure. Opposite: the basket, laden with food, is fitted with a bell that announces its approach to the table

After they married in 2000, Benedikt and Nencia moved into the dilapidated castle, patched up the windows and installed a simple heating system. They stayed there for seven years before choosing to transform the little set of ruins you see on these pages. The houses, in a hamlet called Il Ghetto, were in a commanding position, but the selling point was the staircases; 'seven families, each with as many children, had lived here in seven cottages, all with outside staircases,' Benedikt explains. 'The trick of a house is in positioning the staircase properly. It determines so much: where the entrances are and the way the building flows.' To unite the buildings, he designed a wide stone structure with a glazed front in a former courtyard, and a single staircase leading up to the top floor.

For Benedikt, 'it is much easier to design a house within a given structure than start with a blank sheet of paper. You have to make the most of what you've got,' he says. In this part of Italy, this is a *fait accompli*; local planners – though sympathetic to the work that has been done – require that the footprint of the building not be altered. It no doubt helps that Benedikt is particularly understanding of this; 'there has to be a trace of something there to be able to redesign it,' he says, succinctly.

With a large young family (the Bolzas have five children), an expansive living and kitchen space where everyone could congregate without being on top of one other was crucial. Consequently, at one end of the barrel-vaulted kitchen is a reading area with a fireplace, while the central section is dominated by a large island unit. The family eat around a big, reclaimed wooden table beside windows that look onto the garden and valley beyond. Another table, mainly for children, stands at the opposite end. Cleverly, at Nencia's insistence, a second galley kitchen was installed nearby to help cater for the endless number of visiting friends' children. Summer dining is often in the tree house, which has been fitted with a pulley system, allowing a picnic basket to be winched from the house to this alfresco eating area.

Nencia says she leaves the design side of things to Benedikt. 'He just knows what to do and would rather hatch a plan on his own. I am more of a "squash court wall" – questioning and bouncing back ideas, clarifying his own.' The only point of contention was the windows, as Nencia felt strongly that such a vernacular house should have traditional wooden ones. Benedikt, meanwhile, was firmly of the high-tech, steel-framed, super-thick, insulated school. No guesses who won. 'I am now trying to camouflage the frames a bit with paint,' smiles Nencia. Colours and fabrics they happily chose together.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to Benedikt's unerring eye for detail, the house took a good two years to finish. 'It was very exciting to finally move in,' he says. 'We left the kids at the castle and "tested" the house for a week before they joined us.' And now, aside from being their enviable abode, the house also serves (when Benedikt puts on his PR hat) to show prospective buyers of the 20 remaining ruins what life at Reschio is really like. Of course, in the process of their renovations, some of the other houses on the estate have picked up a certain Bolza flavour too, not least given the pieces from Benedikt's furniture and lighting range, 'BB for Reschio', that are dotted around the place. But in the end, the final designs are decided between Benedikt and his clients. And so by showing people around his own home, Benedikt seeks to show 'that we really are rooted here. Our children are at local schools – this really is our life.' It's a convincing argument ■

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