

Seen from Benedikt's office, the work cubicles are overhung with 'ring chandeliers', made from dismantled wine vats in the castle cellar. On the right stand some of his own-design 'Corsini' recliners (though without their cushions). The wheeled book racks were made for the office by the *tabaccaia*'s craftsmen

IN THE PIPELINE

When in 1994 Count Antonio Bolza acquired a 3,000-acre estate in Umbria, one of the many buildings included in the sale was a Modernist tobacco-processing plant. It now serves as the base of his architect son, Benedikt, who, bit by bit, is converting the family's 50-odd tumble-down farmhouses and smoking out potential purchasers. Text and photography: Tim Beddow





Left: a section of the office area, without a cable in sight. The stainless-steel mesh shades of the reclaimed standard lamps (made from vertebrae heaters) 'throw the most extraordinary diffused light', according to Benedikt. Below: bricks for the factory were made in the estate's own kiln, which still stands. The gates feature the Castello di Reschio logo, made from rusted and painted steel



Left: a view down the side of the office units. The object on the wall is one of the original factory heaters – Benedikt just cut off the pipes and left them in situ 'because they are beautifully made and look great'. Opposite: the Fiat 600 had been left in the architect's garden for many years and had grass growing out of it. Now restored, it lives happily at the foot of one of the staircases





Left: the design studio sits above the boss's office. On top of resin garden tables lie 1940s posters showing tobacco leaves and the insects that damage them. Top: the portrait (a copy of a copy) behind the desk is of great-great-grandfather Count Joseph Bolza. The original was one of the few things the family managed to take when fleeing Hungary in 1949. Above: the curved staircase was made to measure from blackened steel



Top: a partially cantilevered staircase leads up to Benedikt's father's office. Above: hand-painted on parchment, this original estate map, based on the Vatican's cadastral maps, is dated 1723. Right: the reception area is bounded by four 'Poggibonso' table lamps, designed by Benedikt. An opening in the wall above the vertical log basket takes away the smoke



THE IMPOSING

Modernist building that is still the *Tabaccaia* di Reschio sits – a little incongruously – against a backdrop of rolling Umbrian hills at the entrance to the Bolza family's 3,000-acre estate, acquired by Count Antonio and his wife, Angelika, in 1994. Originally bankers from Lake Como, the family had moved to Hungary in the 18th century following gifts of estates and a title from Empress Maria Theresa as repayment for loans. They left as refugees after the Soviet occupation in 1949, walking across the border with just the clothes they were wearing. But having reinvented themselves in publishing, in 1985 Antonio and Angelika, an architect, bought the former parish house San Martino from the diocese of Perugia. It was an island within the estate of Castello di Reschio, set in a magical valley, which had been neglected for generations. They were captivated. There were 50 ruined farmhouses, a castle and the *tabaccaia*. Their vision was to renovate each ruin in-house, immaculately, and sell them on a selective basis to low-key, wealthy buyers.

Enter Benedikt, number three of their five children. After training as an architect at Westminster, he spent a year in the USA and Austria before a stint with Piers Gough in London. When his parents bought Reschio, 'I was still a student,' he says, 'but I knew then there would be nothing more exciting than joining this project. I was not at all a city person and could not wait to live in this country.' When he did return in 1999 the first houses were being sold. 'We needed to get organised, draw things properly and set up a team,' he says, 'but you are never in control of your life and I did not imagine it would take on such a big and ever-challenging role. I am very lucky to be in this situation.' To date he has masterminded the renovation of 25 of the houses, combining an elegant, sophisticated style with each owner's specific needs. Readers, you will have heard this before, but Benedikt's attention to detail – whether it be in the use of traditional building materials, lighting, choice of furniture and objets, paint colours or effects – and the way he lets a house effortlessly 'flow', are rare gifts indeed.

The team of 14 used to work out of one of the cramped farm buildings. 'It was all boxed in and confusing,' remembers Benedikt. He was mindful of a potential new client's negative opinion, and thought the set-up might not be doing them any favours. 'Here we are all about interior and garden design, lighting and restoration, so I did feel we should have a working environment that reflected us more accurately. But it came quite spontaneously, to convert the *tabaccaia*,' he says.

At one time, all the local farmers were growing tobacco and processing it at this factory. For the past 200 years the area has been all about growing the plant, in part because the early-morning mists create humidity suitable for growing it. 'But,' explains Benedikt, 'these hillside farms also needed water, and after World War II it became very labour-intensive and made no sense to grow on the hills rather than the valley floor, so by the 1980s it had totally wound down. Huge lakes were created in the 1970s to irrigate the valley tobacco, and that still happens.' So this is why there were so many small farmhouses empty on the estate.

The *tabaccaia* is simple fascist architecture built at the beginning of 1940. It is symmetrical, monumental (though on a

small scale) and with little decoration or complexity in design. The unknown architect/builder puts two massive stair towers at each end for the factory workers. The leaves would be brought in to the ground floor where they were kiln-dried and sent in a lift upstairs. On this upper storey, women would stand at tables sorting and grading them before they were packaged and dispatched.

By the 1960s the industry was becoming increasingly mechanised, so while some farmers struggled on, their days were numbered. The factory doors quietly closed for the last time towards the end of that decade, and thereafter the building was used for farm storage. When the Bolzas arrived at Reschio it was leaking badly, so they repaired the roof to safeguard the structure, which they then left alone.

Once Benedikt had chosen the *tabaccaia* as their base, electricians, plumbers and painters – the main teams on all the other projects – swung into action, working at cost to bring the new HQ to life. The ground floor at one end contains furniture bought at auctions or from dealers, which will be used to furnish a house as and when appropriate. At the other end is Benedikt's wife, Nencia's, workshop. An artist trained in *trompe l'oeil* who is happiest when experimenting with pigments, she creates original colours for the parchment lamps and furniture. With five young children it is a small miracle she has any spare time. Her demeanour is calm and unflappable. Nearby is a stone/statuary repository with new projects for clients to peruse.

And so to the first floor. 'I absolutely didn't want it to look like an office,' says Benedikt. To this end the reception area is more like a 'snug' with comfy sofas, a low bronze coffee table stacked with art books and lamps, all designed by Benedikt. In the centre a log fire crackles. A metal staircase leads to his father's office above. For the internal partitions he sourced the wood – 400 scaffolding planks – from a local builder. The rough irregularity of each board – in colour and grain, and with their various cement and paint stains – provided, he thought, a subtle contrast with the smooth, modern floor, walls and ceiling. There is not a wire in sight. Dotted around are Benedikt's reclaimed standard lamps. 'I found these old vertebrae heaters in a heap below, so I came up with the idea to use them as office lamps, with shades made from stainless-steel mesh.'

Above, hanging at intervals down the room, are five 'ring chandeliers'. When dismantling the old vats of the castle cellar 'these fantastic old rings stacked up, so this idea surfaced,' says Benedikt, who acknowledges that it is often Nencia who might notice the beauty in the unexpected. 'She always thinks outside the box and sometimes off the wall! But that's exactly what's creative and rewarding,' he says. At the far end, beyond the large space, which they intend to use for exhibitions, lectures and the odd performance, is his office and meeting room.

The finished result has been a huge success. Aside from the 'wow' factor as new clients visit for the first time, 'it is as though I now have a totally new set of staff,' says Benedikt. 'Everyone is more productive, happier to know who's in, and able to see things happening – it has been a revelation.' Let's get to work! ■
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Opposite: one end of the ground floor is used as a store for the wardrobes, chests of drawers, dining tables and so on that the Bolzas will use to furnish the renovated farmhouses. Both husband and wife are involved in selecting pieces – their favourite stamping ground is the quarterly Parma antique fair