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Monteroni d'Arbia (SI)
AMICI IN FESTA NELLE CRETE SENESI

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MONTERONI D'ARBIA, SIENA. A JOYFUL SHOOT AT THE END OF AN EXCELLENT RESTORATION JOB

FRIENDS CELEBRATING IN THE CRETE SENESI

A 1930s Tuscan farmhouse, built at the height of the fascist era and reconstructed after the war. An exceptional restoration, with fine details that reveal a rare depth and understanding. The man behind the design is the architect Fulvio Di Rosa. An outstanding professional. And one of our great experts.

The work, which respected the original dimensions and traditional materials, was completed in 2022. "The challenge? Putting myself in the shoes of the farmer-masons of the past and recuperating their methods".

by **Antonio Bianchi**, with photos by **Marco Grillo**



The building was inhabited until the 1950s. It was destroyed during the war, but was hastily rebuilt in the post-war period. "The 'problem' and 'challenge' with this job was putting myself in the shoes of that farmer-mason who wasn't there", said the architect Fulvio Di Rosa. "Let's say I played the part of the stone guest".

There are dwellings that we talk about with a little extra excitement. Places where the language of restoration is articulated on a deeper, more painstaking and detailed level. As is the case with *Podere San Gerolamo*, enveloped in the endless landscape of the Crete Senesi, the clay hills of Siena. This building exudes refined design details on all fronts, from the choice of antique materials to the most minute structural details (the longer you look, the more captivating features you find), from enchantingly creative touches to ground-breaking technological expertise at the service of a vintage building.

To reveal the design's depth, we could compare architectural restoration to music. So many renovations incorporate the ever more infantile pop aspect of the infamous 'catchy tune' topping the charts in that moment. But there are dwellings - like Podere San Gerolamo - that are urged on into aesthetic sophistication, harmonious solutions, structural virtuosity and tonal subtleties that can be compared to great music, whether a symphony, chamber music or polyphony... And again: many renovations stop at a superficial aesthetic, resorting to sampled sounds that simulate string or wind sections. On the other hand, some dwellings - like Podere San Ge-

rolamo - use real instruments, often selected according to philological criteria, as in early music. Yet another parallel: magazines often pander to fashions, destined to fade away and become emblems of the recent past. Other dwellings - such as Podere San Gerolamo - instead pursue a timeless rigour, where the distant past is combined with functional and technological solutions that are clearly and unmistakably modern, similar to contemporary transcriptions and revisions of great historical scores. These musical references have their own subtle legitimacy, given that the driving force behind this project - besides being a formida-

The façades are almost entirely exposed, with the exception of some plastered portions on the lower sections. "These

were necessary to conceal the structural reinforcement (Fibrenet + Betoncino). The new plastering resembles an existing,

partially crumbling plaster. The deception will be less noticeable when the climbing roses have done their job".



ble professional - is a fan of great music. He is the architect, **Fulvio Di Rosa**. To my mind, he is a maestro. We first met him in 2005, when reporting on Borgo di Vagli, an enchanting medieval hamlet in the vicinity of Cortona (AR), which appeared in Issue 6 of CasAntica. This design garnered international acclaim. Frances Mayes, author of the best seller, *Under the Tuscan Sun* (many know the film version), had moving words of admiration for that village and Di Rosa. The same goes for us. The Borgo di Vagli project represented a milestone. And the meeting with architect Di Rosa proved to be seminal. His insights, his approach to restoration, his →

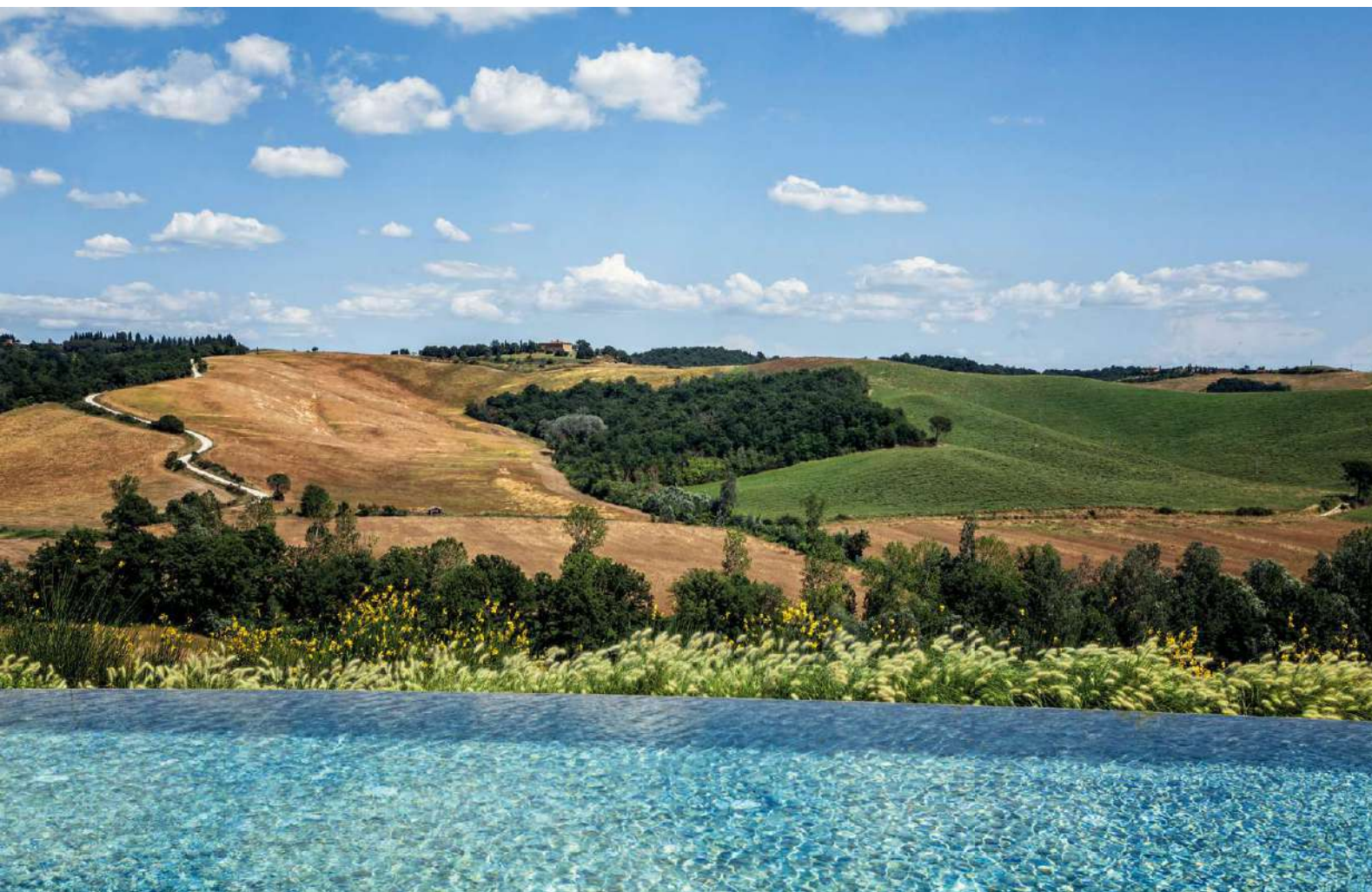
Clarissa takes us on a virtual tour to see the swimming pool. Even in the Crete Senesi, pools have to comply with specific criteria: size, materials, distance from the buildings... "Ours deviates from the rules because its shape is not perfectly rectangular", said Di Rosa. "However,

I convinced the municipal architect that, in our case, the asymmetrically curved infinity edge made sense, since it also followed the curved lines of the terraces of the olive trees below. The landscaping, even from a distance or from a drone, is perfect. Also

because of the colour and texture of the liner, which I've been using for years now: the expanse of water absorbs the colours of the surroundings and mutates, following the changing light, miraculously blending into the landscape and mimicking it".

respect for the pre-existing structures and his devotion to minutiae taught us so much about the subject of antiquity. Over the years we had the good fortune of publishing another wonderful design of his, *Podere Panico*, which appeared in *CasAntica* 79. There are several similarities between that project and Podere San Gerolamo. Both are located in Monteroni d'Arbia (SI) and both were born of a collaboration with the Canadian *Luxus Group* of investors (www.luxusgroup.com), from Edmonton, the capital of the province of Alberta. These two very wide-ranging projects involved Di Rosa on

all fronts: "*The Luxus group has continued to attract and select a special clientele (in this case two Canadian families from the Province of Alberta) for the Tuscan market involving the restoration of old farmhouses. The client buys the run-down property, which is then turned over to me and my team of professionals and craftsmen for the design and subsequent restoration*", Di Rosa told us. Today Podere San Gerolamo is a holiday home, managed by the Luxus Group (their website is www.poderesangerolamo.com). This restoration is also very interesting in →





terms of its chronology. The building dates back to the 1930s, to the height of the fascist period, and has a tripartite layout, with a central body, on two levels, and two lateral extensions. "This type of composition was fairly common in these areas during the Fascist period. In the Fattoria di San →

The wonderful kitchen-dining room, over 100 square metres, was built in the former stables, which were originally made of concrete and brick. Di Rosa transfigured all

of it, respecting the volumes. Take note of the extraordinary work done on the walls, floors and ceilings, particularly the double truss. "Two or three

centuries ago, the farmer-masons would have made this room the same way we did. I like to emphasise that adherence to the culture and tradition of rural Tuscan building practices only happens

afterwards". Also note the detail in the 'king-post' and the forged iron pieces in the trusses. The surprising table was designed by Di Rosa himself: it is made of a single piece

of Carrara marble. The wood-burning oven is just as extraordinary, "a masterpiece made by the most expert masons, plasterers and painters".



Fabiano, which had dozens of farms (including Panico), there are two other twin farmhouses". The building was heavily damaged during the war and rebuilt – "hastily and with no philological approach" – in the post-war period, with methods and materials that differed from those used in rural structures of the past. "Here we come to what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this work: in fact, wherever possible, I tried to recreate →

A photo shoot "populated" by friends, like a party when the work is finished. From left, model Clarissa Di Renzone, architect Fulvio Di Rosa, Francesco Cortonesi ("Administrator of the Property

and Management Company"), Giulio Chiappone ("Concierge of San Gerolamo") and surveyor Giulio Bartolomei ("My collaborator"). The fireplace was created ad hoc. "The

structure, proportions, materials and even the imperfections are the result of a historical memory assimilated over years of work". A black and white panel can be seen in the background. It is a composite of photos

showing the hands of everyone who worked in various capacities at Podere San Gerolamo. The photographer is Marco Grillo (www.marcogrillo.com). He took the beautiful photos in these pages.





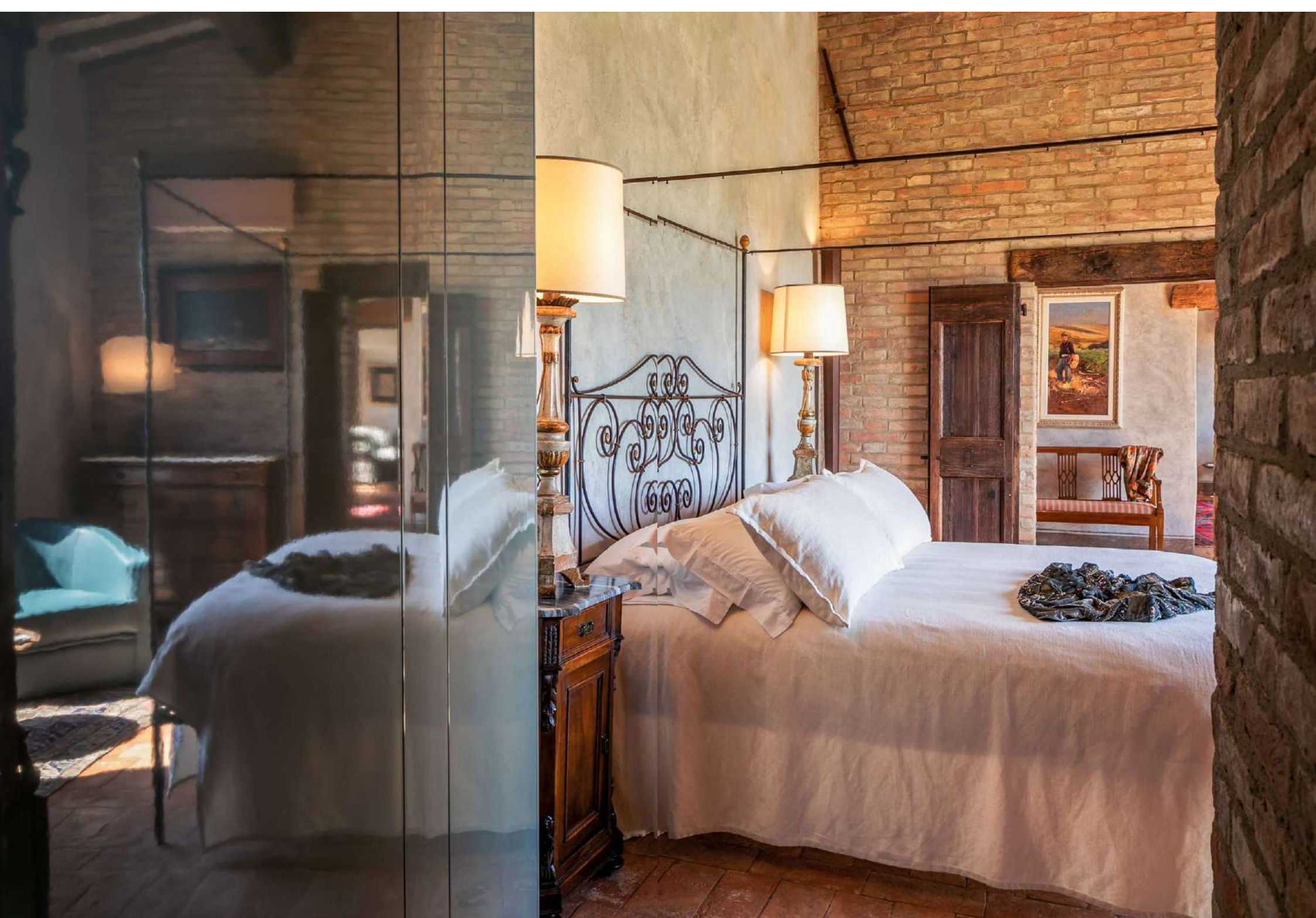
the concreteness and building expertise of the farmer-masons of past centuries, as if it were them working on it. A striking example of this approach is the double truss in the large kitchen/dining room which replaces the concrete and brick structure in what were formerly the stables. The volume is exactly the same. But, two or three centuries ago, the farmers would have built it the way we did". The project commenced in 2019 and work was completed in 2022. Architect Di Rosa is

a firm believer in the total preservation of building structures: the load-bearing masonry was not altered, nor were the distribution and dimensions of pre-existing doors and windows (with rare exceptions, such as the windows of the former stables of Podere San Gerolamo, which were too high, narrow and fragile to be re-used, and were therefore extended to the ground). The materials had to be antique or handcrafted. Not only that: Di Rosa also believes it is crucial to adopt the

construction methods and techniques used by the craftsmen of the past. In the case of Podere San Gerolamo, the emphasis on materials is quite surprising: "All the wood is salvaged, hundreds of years old, including those pieces used to build the two trusses", said Di Rosa. "The terracotta, on the other hand, comes from a small kiln, not far from Civita di Bagnoregio (VT). It only used clay from the surrounding land, which is left to mature and oxidise for days before being →

The living room was a passageway between the cellars and carriage room. The elegant 18th-century wooden fireplace is a sophisticated touch, as is the wonderful Kazak carpet or the 17th century painting by Todeschini. "I like to mix genres and eras", said Di Rosa.







On the ground floor are two rooms with spectacular views of the Crete Senesi. In the photo where Clarissa is sipping tea, there is a glimpse of a well: "Actually, it's the original cistern where we collect water for irrigation". The extraordinary

geometrically "embroidered" panes of glass in the showers were made by Guido Giordano. "He's an architect and sculptor. Very good. He works mainly with brass, bronze and glass. We've been friends for a long time. I involve him in all my major projects".

moulded by the expert hands of the brick-makers". The distinction between the exteriors - which, in the geometrically and chromatically uniform texture of the bricks, bear traces of the 20th century - and the interiors, redesigned with methods used in an even more distant past and faithful to the rural Tuscan tradition, is perceived subliminally. And it amplifies the surprising effect of the extraordinary ceilings and wonderfully patinated lime plaster work. Di Rosa sees these timeless structural envelopes as an ideal container for everything

with a strong identity. "I like to mix genres and eras". There are plenty of surprises. The 18th-century wooden fireplace in the living room, for example, evokes an elegance that is unusual in a rural environment. On the other hand, the fireplace and the wood-burning oven in the kitchen-dining room draw on a more pragmatically rural past: "These are some of the most significant and successful artefacts in the whole project: the structure, the proportions, the materials, even the imperfections are the result of the historical memory assimilated over many years of →



work", Di Rosa told us. In addition to the solutions inspired by the past, a vivid creativity was employed for those details that, in terms of antiquity, are rarely the object of a targeted design. The incredible dining table comes to mind. Many restoration experts would have settled for an old table. Di Rosa, on the other hand, opted for a spectacular design of his own made from a single piece of Carrara marble. "I needed a table for fourteen people. But I wanted to remedy the problem that one always encounters with very large tables, whether rectangular or round: people can't talk to each other, except the person next to them, simply because they have no 'eye contact' and the person in front of them is too far away. Based on this simple fact, I cre-

ated a narrow, curving oval aligned on the axes of the three large windows facing the Crete landscape. The base is a sort of 'open sculpture', also in Carrara marble. However, it leaves two wide lines of perspective, also aligned with the three large windows, open to the view". This ability to dynamically single out functional, conceptual and aesthetic relationships between the details and more general features - between each individual element in relation to how the room is used - is one of the enchanting aspects of Fulvio Di Rosa's approach. And it best exemplifies the architectural depth mentioned at the beginning. A subtlety, knowledge and capacity for creating balance that, time and time again, leave us in awe. →



The second room on the ground floor has a large window backlit by the pattern of brick latticework

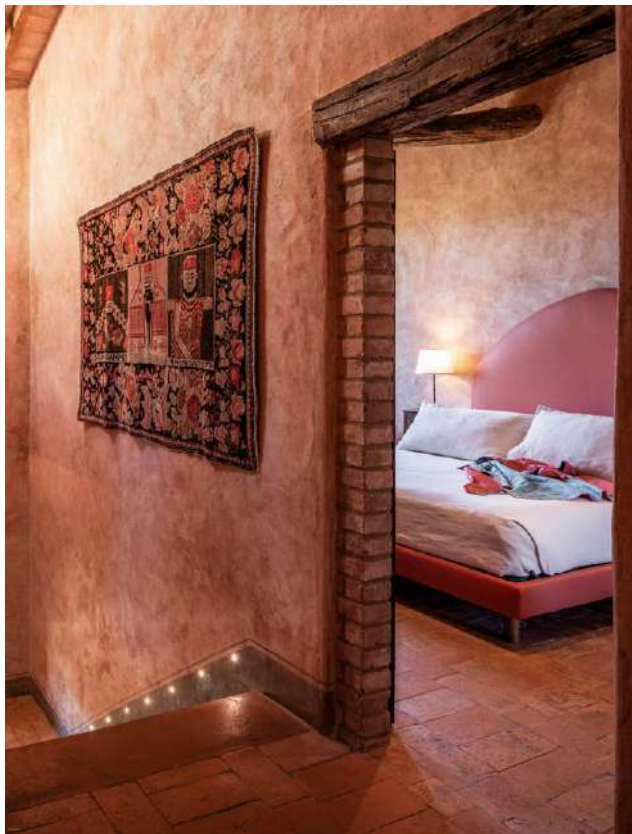
called 'salto di gatto' (cat's jump). In the brightly-lit bathroom, a free-standing bathtub has been positioned to

take in the spectacular view of the Crete Senesi. The bedroom and bathroom are separated by doors

that swivel on a central hinge: "More than doors in the strictest sense, these are separators that have

a dual function: they delineate, without breaking visual continuity, and they mirror".

There are two more rooms with bathrooms to be admired upstairs. The ceiling above the staircase had collapsed: "We made a beautiful barrel vaulted ceiling using bricks salvaged from the demolitions. Also worth noting are the treads, handmade in terracotta in a single piece. The beautiful rug at the top of the staircase comes from Turkey.



The two rooms on the upper floor have similar colour schemes.

"The vivid colours in lime on plaster, again in lime, are the work of expert craftsmen", said Di Rosa. The washbasins are carved out of pietra serena. "The porthole in the first room frames the landscape above the rooftops. The second one, on the other hand, looks out at Podere Casilea, which I'm working on".



The play of cross-references and balances also extends to the intangible. Think of the light and descending light fixtures that geometrically and dramatically bring out the kitchen table and island: "These old 'domes' were found in the stables and also restored with their original cream-coloured paint. Thanks to the 2,700 Kelvin degrees of these reflection lamps, they give the veined surface of the Carrara marble top the homey warmth I was looking for".

Speaking of furnishings, Di Rosa revealed something rather personal: "One of my favourite 'hats' to wear is that of the person

who chooses the furnishings. And in my opinion, one pair of hands runs fewer risks than ten pairs of hands. Especially if everyone wants to be noticed. Better a consistent mistake than a 'mishmash' of inconsistencies. Particularly when you start adding contemporary features to the design. I'm thinking of the table, the sinks in pietra serena, the glass sculptures by Guido Giordano. I think it's important to know exactly when to stop. That's why I'm convinced that a single pair of hands is more likely to succeed. Naturally, the important choices were made together with the client. Also because they →





For this gem of a restoration, the architect Di Rosa (www.fulviodirosa.com) made the most of every reusable material. Starting with bricks. This is how

this wall was made, with a triangular niche, created in a bathroom. "During the work, we had found a small sculpture of St Anthony, protector of animals, in the

stables. We had it detached and stored it in the office-shed on the construction site. When it was time to reposition it, unfortunately, we could no longer find it".

represent one of the matchless joys in realising the design, like a new floor or the first stroke of paint".

Attention to detail goes almost as far as 'the invisible'. The closer you look, the more unexpected and exquisite details you discover. Take the staircase: the treads are handcrafted terracotta - nothing unusual so far - but their uniqueness lies in the fact that they are made in a single piece. And what applies to construction is also confirmed in terms of comfort, energy performance and safety. Tradition, contemporary and structural elements, furnishings, aesthetics and functionality, rigour and creativity, all interact in a peaceful and carefully thought-out balance.

In order to best tell the story of such a special house, an equally unique photo shoot was needed. People never appear in the houses you see in design magazines. This is one of those clichés fuelled by habit. And yet, a human presence suggests the way the house is used, everyday life, the sense of being lived in, the atmosphere of a home... Accompanying us on this conceptual exploration of the various rooms is **Clarissa Di Renzone**, from Sinalunga (SI). But there are others: the architect, Di Rosa, and some friends closely connected to Podere San Gerolamo's rebirth. A photo shoot that feels like a party. The one you throw after an architectural restoration is finished. Excellently, in this case. ■

A MAESTRO AND HIS CO-WORKERS

"All this authenticity would not have been possible without the experience and talent of the artisans who have worked with me for so long. Without them, every one of my designs would have remained on paper", Fulvio Di Rosa told us. A virtuosic maestro who knows how to harmonise and enhance the qualities of his talented musicians. And there are many of them. The architect wanted to mention them individually, with the gratitude, delicacy and grace of a true great. Starting with his team members: surveyors **Giulio Bartolomei** and **Fabio Neri**.

The structural engineers: **Studio Biagini Bracciali** in Arezzo. For the plumbing and air conditioning systems: engineer **Mario**

Bianchi from Arezzo. For the electrical systems: engineer **Pietro Pelucchini** from Arezzo. The geologist **Fabio Poggi**. The construction company **Edilprimavera di Radicchi & Casini** from Marciano della Chiana.

The hydraulic company **Iset** from Torrita di Siena. And the electrical contractor **Elettrosistemi** from Monteroni d'Arbia (SI). **Wellness&Pool** for the installations and coverings of the swimming pool and Jacuzzi.

The artisans: **Francesco Buonomo** and **Pasquale Sebastiano**, from Marciano della Chiana, for the plaster work; **Fabio Berneschi**, from Arezzo, for the paintings and patinas; The **Squarcialupi** company

from Arezzo, for the stone and marble work; **Francesco Valdambri**, from Monte San Savino, for the carpentry work; **Astec**, from Treviso, for the architectural bronze fixtures; the **Fornace Bartoccini**, from Castel Viscardo (TR), for the terracotta for structures and floors; the **Fornace Manetti**, from Greve in Chianti (FI), for the terracotta for the stairs and terraces.

The antique dealers and restorers **Marco and Marcello Marcelli** from Monte San Savino (AR), **Nicoletta Simonella** from Marciano della Chiana (AR), **Stefano Tavanti** from Cortona (AR). **Giuseppe Bosna** from Vitiano (AR). The artist **Guido Giordano** (who made the beautiful glass sculptures).