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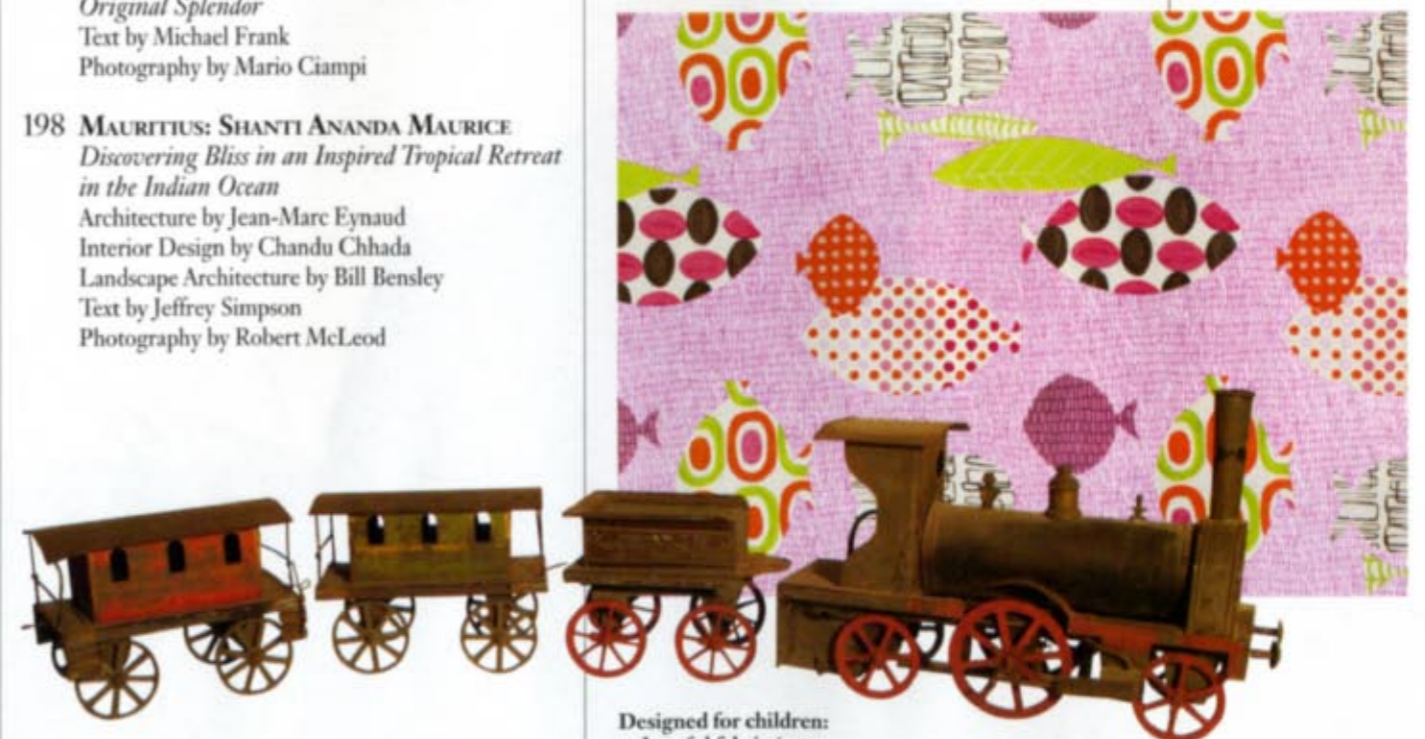
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# Villa San Carlo Borromeo

A FALLEN GEM OUTSIDE MILAN RECLAIMS ITS ORIGINAL SPLENDOR

Text by Michael Frank/Photography by Mario Ciampi

ABOVE: Cristina Frua De Angeli, president of the International University of the Second Renaissance, has spent 25 years restoring the grandeur of the 14th-century Villa San Carlo Borromeo, near Milan, Italy. It now houses a 50-room hotel. "The way it appears today is the product of an enormous labor," she says. OPPOSITE: A 17th-century wood coat of arms is in the drawing room.

There are several ways in which great old houses resemble great old novels. Both are capacious and rambling. Both capture moments in time: houses with their ornament, organization and intentions; novels with *their* ornament—or style—organization and intentions. Both vividly convey human personality: Ambitious houses reveal a good deal about the architects and owners behind them, just as ambitious novels, of course, reveal the writers who made them up.

But where novels, once finished, are fixed artifacts, houses regularly undergo change. They are enlarged and redecorated. They are sold or inherited. They are vulnerable to weather and shifts in fortune and fashion. They decay and are remade. Sometimes they merely decay.

When a grand old house falls into serious disrepair, it can take a determined spirit to bring it back. Such was the case with the Villa San Carlo Borromeo, out-

side Milan, which was lucky to fall under the custodianship of the multitalented Cristina Frua De Angeli. As president of the International University of the Second Renaissance, the organization that has owned the villa since 1983 and has operated it as a deluxe hotel since 2005, De Angeli has spent the last 25 years rehabilitating this storied place.

The villa is a novel-like house if ever there was one. The site, which is just 12 kilometers from Milan, has Celtic roots that go back to the eighth century b.c. It was a Roman stronghold believed to have been used by Julius Caesar himself. The Visconti put up the first villa, which in the 17th and 18th centuries was expanded, and expanded some more, by the Borromeo family, whose descendants continued to own the property until the 1980s. Over the centuries the villa has been visited by Leonardo da Vinci, who praised its healthy air, Diderot, Stendhal, Pirandello and Borges, among other notable figures. But





by the late 20th century its furniture had been auctioned off, its roof was leaking, and the park was overgrown. The house was, in brief, a wreck.

"This was not a simple restoration," De Angeli says with wry understatement. "It was the effort of a lifetime."

The villa that De Angeli helps run today wears several faces. It is a luxury hotel and a conference center adapted to both business and academic gatherings. It is home to a publishing house (Spirali, founded in 1973 and also directed by De Angeli) and a private museum, and it offers studio space to visiting artists.

Yet the hotel is in many ways the heart of the villa, since it has enabled De Angeli to restore and revive the structure's interiors and put them to lively use. "Although I am not professionally trained myself, I come from a family of designers and architects," De Angeli says. "It's probably fair to say that everything I've lived and learned I've poured into this place."

One of the most surprising things about the Villa San Carlo Borromeo is how intact it now seems. It helps to have a full-time team of restorers living and working on the property (the villa also has its own printers, restaurant and florist), but much is due to De Angeli's meticulous detective work. She guided her restorers to salvage or duplicate existing floors, woodwork,

**LEFT:** De Angeli says she was "lucky to track down" the late-18th-century Murano glass chandelier that hangs above St. Basil's Stairway. **ABOVE AND OPPOSITE:** The dining tables in Vienna Hall feature plates depicting garden labyrinths and jewel-toned wine- and water glasses. When she began the restoration project in 1983, all of the rooms, including Vienna Hall, were empty.





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“There is nothing uniform or traditionally hotel-like about the appointments,” asserts De Angeli. “Each room has its own character.” FAR LEFT: A 19th-century fretwork screen is the centerpiece of the Prince’s Room. LEFT: A Pier Gabriele Vangelli bronze rests in a wing of the villa’s museum. BELOW: “I am partial to Shakespeare’s Room,” De Angeli admits.



windows, mosaics and frescoes. She was able to buy back some of the villa’s original furniture; when the original was unavailable or lost, she collected pieces in-the-spirit-of. Yet the villa doesn’t have the fusty or didactic air of a historic building. It feels like a vibrant house—albeit a substantial one—that might have been lived in by actual people.

As one would expect, large, rather lavish public rooms abound, such as the hall that contains St. Basil’s Stairway, where an 18th-century Murano chandelier the size of a spaceship floats above a Piranesi-like array of arches, balustrades, stairs and coffered ceilings. Similarly impressive is the Rome Hall, with its elaborate ironwork, stuccoed ceiling and musicians’ gallery.

But it’s the more intimate, private rooms and suites that make guests feel as though they have their own place of retreat within this great architectural dance. Many of these De Angeli has named after favorite writers—an apt note to strike in a house that is like a novel. There’s Freud’s Room, Ionesco’s Room, the Borges Café (the poet paid a happy visit in 1985). The

room named for Shakespeare has a jewel of a painted beam ceiling, a four-poster bed, a red sofa, and mirrors with shimmery silvered glass; Elisa’s Room, named for De Angeli’s mother, has a selection of Rococo Venetian furniture and a small painting by Chagall.

Does De Angeli have a favorite? “That’s like asking if you prefer one of your children

over another,” she says. “But if you pressed me, I’d say I have two: the Shakespeare room, because it is so masculine and evocative, and the room named for my mother. When you go into these rooms and close the door, it is as though you have traveled back in time. You almost forget that 25 years ago the villa was falling to pieces.”

Almost. □

### Villa San Carlo Borromeo

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