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Why settle for imitations of the past?

Toronto can learn from centuries-old Italian hamlet's restoration

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BORGO DI VAGLI, Italy—Never has the need to preserve been greater. Architectural conservation has always been important, but at a time of environmental crisis, it no longer makes sense to tear down the past to clear the way for the future.



Borgo di Vagli comprises about 20 stone buildings outside of Cortona. In the '90s, Fulvio di Rosa acquired the property and set about restoring it. Now it's a fractional ownership resort that still feels at one with its landscape.

More than ever, we must learn to live with history.

Some communities manage this better than others; Toronto, for instance, after a decades-long demolition derby, has started to figure things out; think of Wychwood Barns or the Evergreen Brick Works, both brilliant examples of adaptive reuse. But we're still too quick to destroy.

As Toronto-based heritage architect Carlos Ventin points out, "The most sustainable thing you can do is keep an existing building. When you destroy an older building you are actually destroying the energy used to construct that building. And the amount of energy required to build is phenomenal."

Which brings us to Borgo di Vagli, acclaimed by Ventin as a model of architectural restoration, one from which we could all learn. This 14th-century hamlet, 20 or so kilometres from Cortona, was abandoned after World War II and quickly fell into disrepair.

Then in the late '90s, Italian builder and engineer Fulvio di Rosa decided to acquire the property and restore it. Just tracking down the owners and arranging

to buy the site took fully three years. After that came the hard part.

"When we arrived, only the donkeys were here," di Rosa recalls. "The place was falling apart and completely overgrown."

The borgo comprises a series of perhaps 20 small stone buildings, some detached, some connected. Presiding over the tiny community is a clock tower, also stone, now transformed into a trattoria.

"The intention was to let it be as it has always been," di Rosa explains. "You have to be humble. The less you recognize the architect behind the project the better."

But at the same time, because the idea was to restore the buildings and sell them as a fractional ownership resort, they had to be brought up to code. That entailed providing earthquake and fire protection, power, insulation and so on.

But as di Rosa notes, "The law in Tuscany is strict but understanding of the situation of restorers of historic buildings."

Still, he had to scour the region for old wooden beams and aged stone to restore the borgo. The concrete beams required to stop earthquake damage are hidden between roofs and ceilings. The terracotta comes from nearby Sienna and the plaster is a special chalk-based mix.

"Borgo is at the forefront of what we should be doing here (in Toronto)," argues Ventin, whose projects include the massive restoration of Queen's Park.

"We need a new approach; the perception is that it's cheaper to build new, but that's not true. The true cost is the effect we have on the environment. Today in Canada we are more concerned with materials and process, with building cheaper and faster. I think we're changing; we're beginning to realize that technology is not the answer to everything."

For Frances Mayes, author of the bestselling *Under The Tuscan Sun*, Borgo di Vagli (which translates as "hamlet between the valleys") represents another side of the traditional Tuscan experience.

"Though only 20 minutes from Cortona's lively piazza life," she observes, "you feel immediately a curtain of time drop between you and the hectic world. Vagli is not only secluded, it's isolated."

It is a testament to the power of restoration properly done that this 600-year-old enclave, which reopened in 2006, still feels at one with its rugged landscape.

Indeed, borgo is part of the terrain. The materials with which it was built come from the surrounding area and few complexes feel so organic and unified.

And across the valley and down a few kilometres sits the 1,000-year-old ruin of La Rocca di Pierle, an imposing castle that presides over the district to this day.

Therein lies the charm of the valley and its architecture; not only are the two intimately and inseparably connected, they belong the one to the other.

But maintaining that charm in the face of modern needs and expectations is never easy. For instance, the road that leads from the highway to the borgo is rough and unpaved. It winds through densely forested terrain that could almost be mistaken for northern Ontario. As di Rosa points out, the law forbids the building of new roads in Tuscany.

"This is a protected area," he says, "even creating a road is against the law. That's why the roads we have are 1,000-year-old paths."

The structures that comprise the borgo are tiny by contemporary standards. The walls are thick, heavy and load-bearing. They rise directly out of the ground, in some cases, sitting on top of giant boulders that were too big to be moved.

Though small, the windows are placed to maximize natural light and ventilation. When these tiny houses were first constructed, the ground floor was set aside for livestock.

As di Rosa notes, whenever he faced a problem during the restoration process, he asked himself, what would the original builders have done?

More often, however, we are willing to settle for imitations of the past; precast concrete instead of limestone, plastic rather than wood, and so on.

As Ventin says, "Borgo is an idea. There, I feel the spirit of the place and the quality of the restoration and the workmanship that went into it.

"Here we complain about how expensive that is, but how much is too much to save the environment? The real comparison is the effect new construction has on the environment."

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