



A kitchen at Borgo di Vagli, near Cortona, Italy (Courtesy Fulvio Di Rosa)

A passion for the authentic Tuscany

By **Andréa R. Vaucher**

Published: December 4, 2008

Fulvio Di Rosa does not agree with the recent trend of creating lavish, over-the-top projects for fractional ownership. "The cultural experience matters more than how many stars a place has," explained the Tuscan-based architect and developer, whose latest venture, Borgo di Vagli, has emerged from the ruins of a medieval hamlet near Cortona, Italy.

Buyers there pay from €50,000, or \$76,200, for a one-tenth share of a one-bedroom apartment with a private outdoor area, which guarantees 21 days a year and additional time as it is available. A two-bedroom starts at €92,000.

Authenticity is the key to renovations, Di Rosa stressed, not luxury for luxury's sake. "I could not have made this into a super high-end project without compromising the land and the original architecture," he explained. Instead, he left the landscape of olive groves, fruit trees and mature oaks as pristine as possible and brought crumbling old structures back to their original forms.

Luckily, there are buyers who prefer authentic stone lintels that force you to duck rather than modern 8-foot-tall doorways. When Frances Mayes, best-selling author of "Under the Tuscan Sun," bought a ruin near Cortona a few years ago, she chose Di Rosa to restore it. And when the destination club Ultimate Escapes wanted to carve a Tuscan hideaway out of a dilapidated 17th-century farmhouse, Di Rosa was called in.

"My 12th-century mountain house was the first private residence Fulvio consented to restore," Mayes said in an e-mail interview. "It's a poem. This and all his ambitious projects - restoring whole villages - are marked by a fine aesthetic, a use of perfectly suited materials, and an attention to detail that makes his buildings works of art."

Di Rosa, originally from Turin, arrived in Tuscany a quarter century ago via a circuitous route that included eight years in Brazil working with Oscar Niemeyer.

"After working with Niemeyer, the great monster of architecture, and being responsible for a site in the middle of nowhere in Brazil, you cannot go back to an office in Turin," explained Di Rosa by phone from Tuscany. "I was looking for more challenges."

Until those came along, he spent weekends in Tuscany, where his mother was born, overseeing the restoration of a house in Lucignano that his parents had purchased.

"I went to Tuscany for one reason and discovered one thousand other reasons to be there," he recalled. "The good food, the congeniality of the people, the fantastic landscape, the cultural richness. It was a real physical attraction like you have for a woman."

As Tuscany became fetishized by Europeans and Americans, inspired by Mayes and others who romanticized their restoration projects, friends implored Di Rosa to find them ruins. In 1985, when he stumbled upon a 25,000-square-foot 17th-century farmhouse, "I started thinking in terms of co-ownership," he explained. "Subdividing a hamlet or huge farmhouse into several residences for more than one family." He divided that farmhouse, Renaiolo, into several units, each of which was sold outright.

Borgo is Di Rosa's fourth Tuscan development and his first foray into fractional ownership. "A detached vacation home with lots of land and a pool is something families are starting to feel is complicated economically," he said, especially if an owner ends up using the house only a handful of times a year.

Besides, there aren't many interesting ruins in Tuscany left to renovate. "It's a sad situation," he said. "After 25 years of doing this, I have become very experienced. But now, ruins are either extremely expensive or not very nice."

Perhaps he will develop the fractional model elsewhere, he mused. Norway. Lisbon. The Amazon. Or maybe, he will devote more energy to the Atopos Foundation, a nonprofit organization that he created with the renowned Italian futurist musician Daniele Lombardi to further awareness of contemporary music.

"It's another of my passions," Di Rosa confessed. "I was always the one listening to the weird modern music no one else would listen to."