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In Tuscany, a Converted Convent



Photographs: Sandro Michahelles for The New York Times

Renovations to the Villa San Giorgio, a two-story farmhouse in Italy.

By EMILY BACKUS

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To Michelangelo, sculpture was said to represent the slow liberation of a form or shape from a piece of stone. Sonja Muller, 50, describes a similar experience working on her centuries-old farmhouse in the rural hills of Orbicciano, near Lucca, in Tuscany, which took nearly 10 years.

For Ms. Muller, chief executive and founder of Muller & Associates, an executive search firm, the point was not to create a work of art, or even just a vacation home, but an oasis. A recently completed expansion also provided the inspiration for a new business project: a global network of private sanctuaries for short-term rentals.

A naturalized American citizen who grew up in Zimbabwe and lived in South Africa as a young adult, Ms. Muller moved to Los Angeles in 1990 with her 6-year-old daughter, \$2,000 in borrowed money, and an idea about how to make it in America. Seventeen years later, she employs 15 people in her firm; lives in New York City and London; and travels frequently.

In seeking a haven for her 40th birthday in 1997, Ms. Muller says, she was inspired by “Enchanted April,” a 1992 movie based on the Elizabeth von Arnim novel in which four Englishwomen rent an Italian villa that changes their lives. She ended up renting a villa near Lucca for seven weeks.

Ms. Muller’s landlords knew of a primitive two-story farmhouse and former convent for sale with 150 square meters (about 1,600 square feet) of living space. The property included 500 olive trees, some fruit trees and a vineyard and was situated on a promontory with panoramic views of forested hills, green terraces and stone churches dating to the 12th century. “There is this incredible peace here,” Ms. Muller said. “It feels like God’s hand is on this place.”

She bought the property for \$350,000 in 1998, when the dollar was about 40 percent stronger in Italy than it is today. But before closing the deal, she asked Karla Rothstein and Joel Towers, architects with SR+T Architects in New York,

to take a look. Ms. Muller had worked with the firm to renovate her offices in Rockefeller Center and her home in Brooklyn Heights. With the exception of some preliminary work supervised by Italian architects, the firm converted the rustic stone structure, which had stalls and hay storage but no flush toilet, into a seven-bedroom three-bath villa, with a home theater, a wine cellar, two outdoor showers, a pool and an elaborate outdoor living area that Ms. Muller calls “the pergola.”

“I think of our decade of incremental work there as part surgery and part alchemy,” Ms. Rothstein, the architect, said. “Villa San Giorgio offers a very unique experiential cocktail.” The pergola and the pool were the most recent additions.

The pergola is an open structure of wooden lattice with a fully equipped kitchen and bar, a grill, a lounging area and a large picnic table. The bar is three meters (almost 10 feet) of glass-laminated white onyx that can be lit from the rear to glow at night. Speakers for the built-in sound system are tucked into corners and hidden along the pool and down into a manicured terrace of olive trees.

Ms. Muller said she wanted the outdoor living area to be inspired by her visits to Bali, St. Tropez and South Beach. “I love a little craziness,” she said. “I was looking for something where, if we want to party, it is going to rock.”

The pool is asymmetrical and perched on a ridge overlooking the valley. It has different depths that represent an inversion of the surrounding terraces of olive groves. “I nearly stopped construction on the pool because I thought, how can you have two shallow ends?” said Ms. Muller. “But children are really comfortable playing there, and the harmony is perfect.”

The renovations began in the late 1990s with what Ms. Rothstein called “careful editing” and “stealthy” enhancements like a vertical slice in a kitchen wall to let more light inside; making the attic habitable; and installing new plumbing, wiring, heating, telephones and broadband service. “The house was a mess inside,” Ms. Muller said. “I wanted it to be possible for everyone to take a shower at once. It was important to me that the house be very functional.”

Now, the front entrance is flanked by the kitchen and the living room. While the kitchen is large, with exposed black wood beams and red terra-cotta floors, the living room is small because Ms. Muller did not want to alter a grotto-like brick wine cellar on the other side of the wall. Instead, she makes organic wine in the cellar, and has created other entertaining areas, like the pergola and an outdoor dining area extending from the front of the house.

On the far side of the cellar wall, Ms. Muller recently built a guest suite with blond wood floors and an ensuite bathroom with a shower that looks out into a small garden. “I don’t believe in curtains,” she said. “When I was in Morocco, I saw how you can have a garden right outside that protects your privacy but doesn’t leave you feeling restricted in any way.”

The second floor has three guest rooms that share a bathroom; the master suite has an ensuite bathroom and a private terrace. Bathing and washing areas are tiled in finger-sized slices of white limestone whose rough texture resonates with the rural setting. The wall behind the bathtub in the master bathroom has original terra-cotta tiling, arranged in an openwork pattern that once kept hay aerated and dry, but now lets in natural light. “This is a work of art to me,” said Ms. Muller.

As the building evolved, so did the garden and the farm. “My family have been farmers for 500 years,” explained Ms. Muller. The English garden is the handiwork of her 78-year-old mother, Franci Muller, who flies up from South Africa every summer, and her father, Alex Muller, who cultivates the fruit trees.

Ms. Muller relies particularly heavily on Antonella Gemignani, a Tuscan who has worked for her for more than a decade overseeing the daily administration of the estate. During construction, Ms. Gemignani found and supervised the builders, blacksmith and gardeners; later she hired cooks and other domestic help.

“I’ve probably poured too much money into this place,” said Ms. Muller, who spends roughly five weeks a year at the property and estimates that she has invested about a million euros (almost \$1.5 million) in improvements. “It took everything I had to build this place — every cent of my savings,” she said. “It was done with a lot of pain and soul searching.”

And the result? Ms. Muller says the property has an uncanny way of liberating people. One guest began skinny-dipping in the pool at 6 a.m. one day, and the pergola’s picnic table has been an impromptu stage more than once. “I have a photo of myself and the C.E.O. of one of the biggest banks in the U.S. dancing on that table,” Ms. Muller said.



