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Clients: Mr & Mrs Ian Hancock

Umbrian tower-house

The owners of this fortified farmhouse in Italy asked designer Derek Frost to help them convert it from a ruin into a stylish home. By Stephen Calloway

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERTA FRATESCHI





OPPOSITE
Long windows
open on to the
dining-area of
the terrace,
where dinner
often lasts into
the warm, late
hours. *ABOVE*
The rill runs the
length of the

upper terrace. *LEFT* Derek Frost's bold geometric
floor in the kitchen is of inlaid linoleum. *BELOW*
The new entrance door is iron-studded in an
appropriate, medieval style.

Almost everyone must have dreamed of finding a ruined but still perfect house in a hidden, romantic setting, of throwing up everything, getting away from it all and going to live where the skies are always blue. Few actually do it, and of those who try, fewer still realize the dream and make it last.

For the owners of this romantic house in Umbria, bold moves have become something of a way of life. At a time in their life when, with the children grown up and moved away, they might have thought they were settled for ever, they decided instead to give up life in a big family house in the suburbs in favour of a much smarter and more central London flat. With adventure now clearly in the blood, they moved on to yet more glamour and excitement in the form

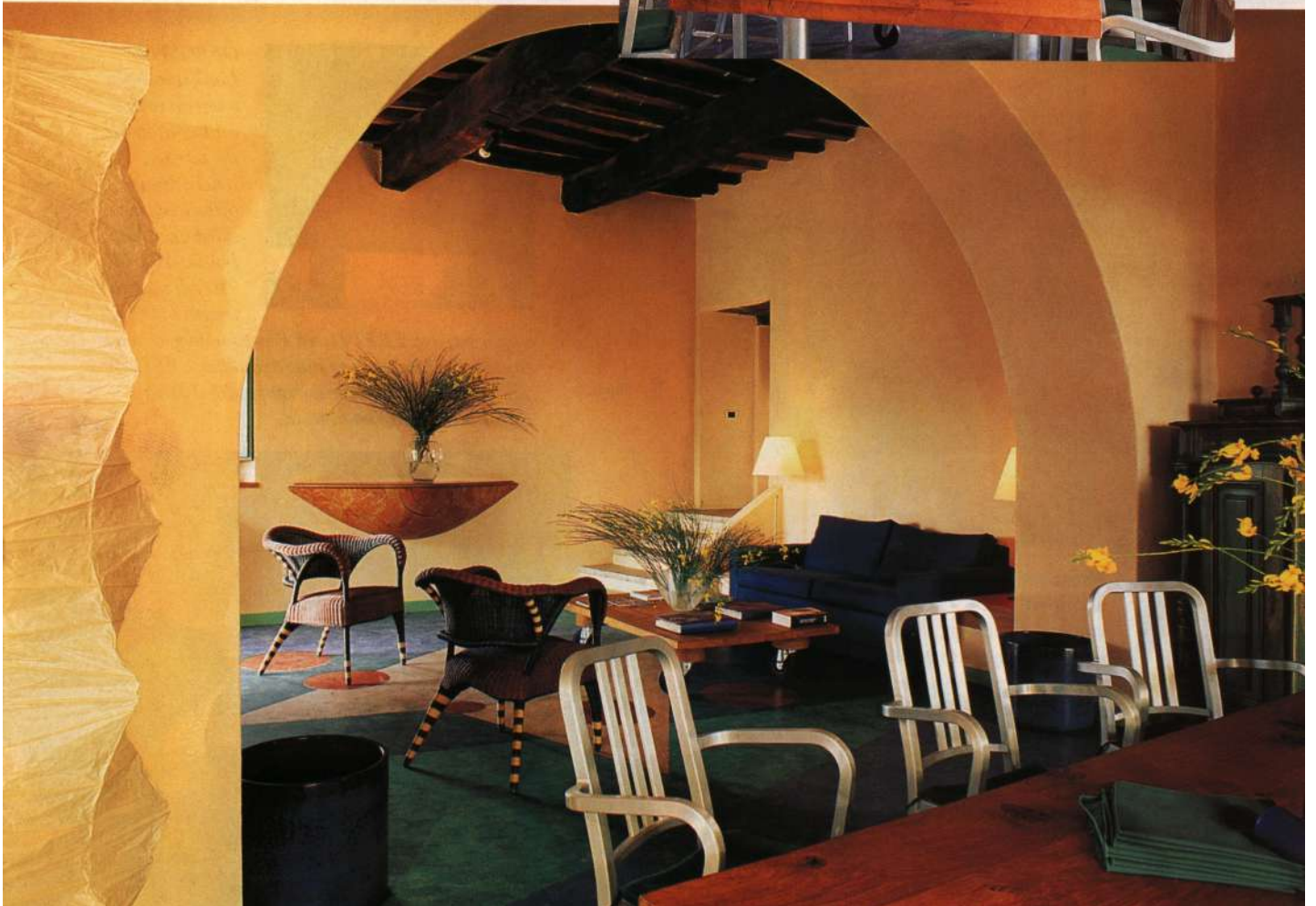


of an apartment in New York. Derek Frost, the furniture designer and decorator who has helped with the creation of each of these homes, remembers the New York apartment as 'extremely stylish, on Fifth Avenue: it looked directly across at the grand architectural façade of the Metropolitan Museum, and combined a wonderful rich art deco feel with some clever simpler touches – an intriguing mix.'

This classic Upper East Side life in the Eighties fast lane of finance (him) and counselling work for people with AIDS (her) lasted three hectic years. 'We did have some thoughts of looking for a place in Italy,' they explain, 'but originally we were simply searching for a house to rent for the summer. An agent took us out from Perugia and we passed this extraordinarily beautiful, wildly overgrown and ruinous place and that was it. We fell in love and just had to buy it there and then. It took two days.'

Lesser spirits might have been daunted. Although the tall, tower-like heart of the old house was still as sound as the day it was built – perhaps sometime in the fourteenth century – it had come to be hemmed in by a mass of later accretions that included byres and tumble-down hen coops. No-one, it seemed, had done

'We wanted a harmonious blend of the old and the new'





The dining-area, OPPOSITE ABOVE, and main sitting-room, OPPOSITE BELOW, are linked by an archway. ABOVE The main bedroom in the tower is furnished with a mix of classic pieces, including a Regency armchair and a Le Corbusier chaise longue.

anything to look after the building – much less lived there – for the best part of a century. Everywhere, a dense tangle of weeds had taken hold. ‘You couldn’t really get anywhere near the place,’ laughs Derek Frost, ‘unless you had an axe in your hand with which to hack your way through.’

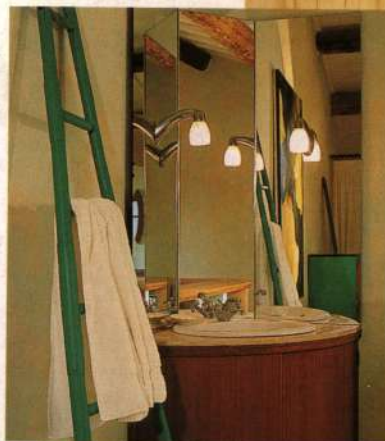
The house was found in the late summer of 1989, and from the beginning of the work in 1990 the entire reconstruction took about two years. By Christmas 1992 the couple were able to move in, and have spent more time in the house each year. Now, they are in Italy for seven or eight months a year, and that the property is very much more than just a holiday retreat is clear from the moment that one begins to inspect the way things have been done, and recognize the thought that has gone into the planning of the spaces and the materials and quality of workmanship throughout.

‘We were terribly lucky,’ the owners explain, ‘to find an extraordinarily sympathetic builder. He and his son did all the work, lovingly re-using old building materials wherever possible or finding appropriate replacements. Their real feeling for the architectural spirit of the place and their desire to do things the proper way were major factors in achieving the look we wanted, which was a subtle and, above all, harmonious blend of the old and the new.’

This combination of bold strategies and sympathetic treatments has resulted in a house that is full of pleasing discoveries and that really works. ‘Their boldest decision,’ recalls Frost, ‘was to take the two upper floors of the tower, the best spaces in the house, and make them into a luxurious bathroom-cum-library and a bedroom.’ ‘But,’ add the owners, ‘Derek’s great contribution to this plan was the idea of



OPPOSITE The bedroom with its lofty beamed ceiling fills the entire middle floor of the tower, BELOW. The dressing-area, RIGHT, and the bathroom, FAR RIGHT, are on the upper floor, enjoying the most wonderful and miraculously unspoilt view from the house – over nearby fields and distant blue hills.



'As a basically medieval building, it's still very tough...'

opening the floor between the two levels into a light well.' This, with its fine staircase and delightfully detailed and locally made iron-work balustrading, creates a superb spatial effect.

Also part of Derek Frost's contribution to the success of the scheme was the idea to create a bath strategically placed by the topmost window and perfectly poised to take advantage of the most wonderful and miraculously unspoilt view over nearby fields and distant blue hills.

Other clever innovations included the opening of a pleasing enfilade of arches through what was once the range of byres. This created the feeling of space in the entrance hall, living-room and kitchen; from these spaces tall, shuttered windows give on to a broad terrace, built up from the ground which previously sloped away. 'We enjoy the terrace so much,' say the owners, 'because it is often possible to be outside for most of the day. Even after dinner at midnight it is often still warm and delightful.'

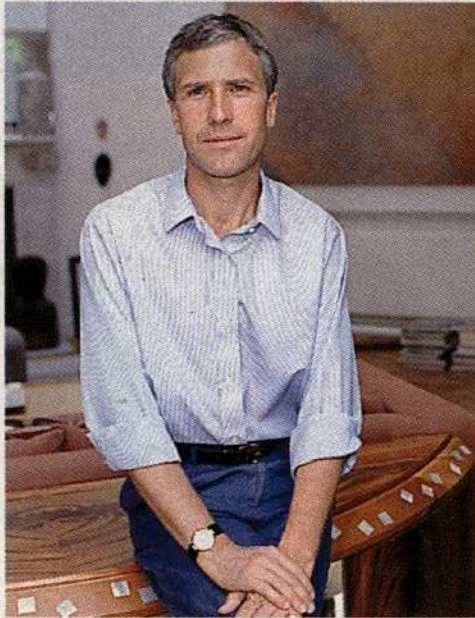
A particular feature of the highly ordered layout of the gardens is a rill, a long, straight, gurgling channel of water which runs the considerable length of the terrace. With its formal and symmetrical details and rows of matching

terracotta pots, the garden illustrates admirably the new chatelaine's love of architectural effects. 'After her stressful years working in counselling and dealing so much with crises and life-and-death issues,' Frost explains, 'I think she was more than happy to turn to new interests such as garden design and decorative painting. Both are fully reflected here.'

If the garden bears most clearly the owner's stamp in its precise planning, which nature is gradually softening and making more romantic, the interiors represent a harmonious collaboration between Frost and the clients who have, over the years, become friends. 'Curiously, a number of my pieces, including a rather bold pair of *chaises longues*, which were designed specifically for the New York apartment, and other things, such as some cast-aluminium chairs that cost just \$15 each, which we brought together, have all come to rest here surprisingly happily.' They work with the house because it is really quite uncompromising. These juxtapositions mirror the way in which the new elements, such as Frost's inlaid linoleum 'modern painting' floor in the lower wing, abut naturally with the old, such as the untreated terracotta tiles of the lower staircase and floors. 'It's this sort of idea that makes the place interesting,' he suggests, 'and I like the way the house has maintained a feeling of being more than just an effete, prettified retreat. As a basically medieval building, it's still very tough.'

It's true; as ivory towers go, this one has attitude – it is very much in touch with the modern world □

DEREK FROST set up his own interior design company ten years ago, having previously trained under and worked with David Hicks and Mary Fox Linton. He kept his company small in order to remain close to the



design process, producing 'truly coutured results' for each client. Derek Frost Associates also operates in the field of product design, creating fabrics, floorcoverings and furniture. Commissions have ranged from Piggs Peak Hotel in Swaziland to the principal reception area for Eurotunnel's London offices; and, as Stephen Calloway describes on page 158, a seventeenth-century farmhouse in Umbria. Derek now reveals that he is on sabbatical, 'perhaps for ten minutes, perhaps for ever'.