

## Back to Utopia: Mid-Century Retreat in the Alps Becomes Artist Colony

by Edie Cohen | March 26, 2015

Simply put, one profound thought often provokes another. Such is the story of this property in the [UNESCO World Heritage site](#)–listed Dolomites, part of the Italian Alps. More specifically, more than 300 acres in the commune of Borca di Cadore were formerly known as the Villaggio ENI, avant-garde upon its mid-century inception as a corporate retreat. And the property’s current reincarnation as an artist colony, Progettoborca, is well on its way to becoming equally innovative. Revitalization through creativity, that’s the theme of this tale.

The plot line goes like this. Enrico Mattei, chairman of Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, conceived an Alpine village as a vacation spot for the energy company’s employees and their families. A cultural experiment with socialist leanings, it was essentially a camp for adults and children. Everyone, whether executive level or support staff, had equal benefits and could stay, free, for up to two weeks.

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Construction started in 1958 and came to a halt in 1964 after Mattei’s death in a plane crash. At that point, there were 300 family villas—half of what he’d envisioned—as well as 40 single-room children’s cabins referred to as permanent tents, a recreation center, a hotel, and a church. [Edoardo Gellner](#) designed everything except the church, which is by [Carlo Scarpa](#).

Fast-forward to 2000. A real-estate holding company, Mi.No.Ter, purchased the entire village from ENI, which, recently privatized, was no longer interested in maintaining this paternalist amenity. The villas were quickly sold, all but 30 of them. As for the remaining assets, Mi.No.Ter was stymied in determining their next chapter. Then someone suggested contacting Dolomiti Contemporanee. Dedicated to the promotion of cultural activity and the “revitalization of important industrial and civic sites in the Dolomites-UNESCO territory,” as Dolomiti Contemporanee founder Gianluca D’Inca Levis puts it, the organization has infused new life into the property with the launch of Progettoborca as a domain for artists from around the globe.

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In residence for up to a month, they’re invited to set up studios in the onetime rec center, enormous at 323,000 square feet. (To unify its various volumes, a system of ramps, not a single step, bridges level changes.) Accommodations are in the cabins, modified for adult use, and in three of the villas. One villa is home to Levis.

“The villa is truly magical,” he says. “It’s so modern yet so old, and everything functions perfectly.” That’s the story’s most incredible part. Everything in the villas is original and intact: bathrooms, kitchens, even appliances. Intervening decades have seen not a single major intervention, thanks to the high quality of Gellner’s design solutions. “In addition to the architecture, he was a genius of furniture, and he had it all produced by the great Friuli manufacturer Fantoni,” Levis says. “I don’t think there is another site from the ’50’s and ’60’s that is as well preserved as this.” And he means down to the most minute details. They include the ENI logo, a whimsical six-legged dog that appears everywhere: on bedcovers, tablecloths, napkins, dinnerware, cups, you name it—still being used today. In this way, too, Gellner proved ahead of his time. As Levis says, “The entire village was super-branded.”

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Levis hopes to eventually expand the Progettoborca brand to related cultural activities. A university summer school, for example, could boost economic growth in the area. For now, though, on-site artworks and studio visits are bringing in members of the public. More than 2,000 people have come so far—proving that contemporary art and modern design can be every bit as invigorating as the ski runs of Cortina d’Ampezzo, just a few miles away.

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