

Reinventing THE HEEL

Puglia is the home to Borgo Egnazia, a new 'village' designed and built by two talented locals and it's setting the design world on fire. *Caroline Phillips* pays homage



The entrance to La Corte (this picture) and the Imperial Garden Villa (below)

The sandstone building shimmers like a mirage. Perhaps a huge creamy Moroccan fort. Actually it's a resort in Puglia – in the heel of Italy – and a feat of vision and design. It's a place that has opened to oohs and ahhs. And to which photographers from *Architectural Digest Italia* to *Vogue France* have been hotfooting it.

Welcome to Borgo Egnazia, Italy's swankiest new offering. Think modern rendition of the rural architecture of traditional Apulian villages and masserias (farms). And something that, with its paint hardly dry, looks ready for sightseers on historical tours and for seekers of cool and contemporary.

It's a borgo (Italian for village) and comprises La Corte – a masseria-style hotel – 93 townhouses and 28 villas. It all speaks of the rural architecture of the nearby hill villages and their mix of influences – from Greek and Goth to Norman and Spanish – the legacy of Puglia's invaders.



Borgo Egnazia's creamy tufo (local sandstone) walls rise proudly from within 40 acres – set in a 250-acre private estate – midst lines of purple aubergines, vineyards and fields with thousands of cherry tomatoes. It takes its name from the nearby ancient Roman town of Egnazia.

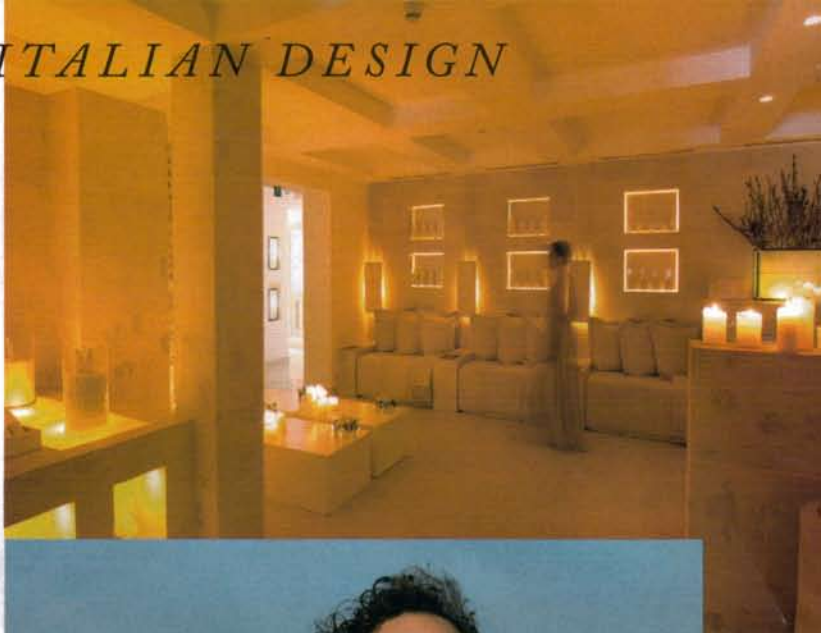
It would be a wow! if it had been created by a firm of world-class architects and designers. But even more so since it's the vision of Aldo Melpignano, 33: the owner and a former investment banker who then worked for Ian Shrager's Morgans Hotel group. (Aldo's mother, Marisa, owns two local masserias.)

Aldo thought up the idea for the borgo when he was hardly out of his high chair. He worked in collaboration with another local, Pino Brescia, 43, an erstwhile waiter with no formal design training turned acclaimed architect. (His first design job, aged 18, was doing the table decorations for a Melpignano family wedding.) 'We came up with the design by travelling around the area taking photos,' reveals Aldo. All the credit for the interiors goes to Pino. It took ten years to plan, six to build and the townhouses only opened this spring.

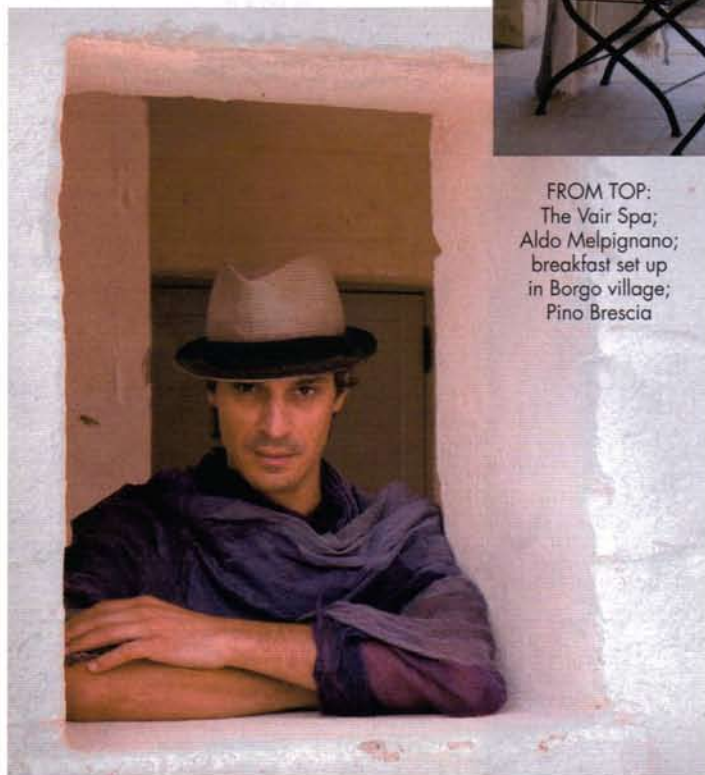
We enter under a Spanish arch leading into a Moorish courtyard, fountains and caditoie-like flying buttresses along the roof and for pouring hot olive oil onto attackers. Nice. 'It has the feeling of a fortress, like masserias that you find along the coast,' says Aldo. 'They were like this for protection from the winds and attacks.' There are also fountains, troughs and rings for tethering animals. And steps to the top of the arch for those inclined to drop stones on aggressors' heads.

Once inside, we're in a calm world of flickering candles, cream-on-cream and Mediterranean minimalism – but not that boring sort of cream and taupe dream that spread like measles. No, this is, instead, a contemporary reworking of local farm interiors with elements that echo the cool town-in-country look of, say, Babington House.

It's like a home. There are huge tufo pots of grain ('pile' as they're known), baskets of almonds and a massive sculpture of hanging birdcages. Pino – who takes perfectionism to



FROM TOP:
The Vair Spa;
Aldo Melpignano;
breakfast set up
in Borgo village;
Pino Brescia



new heights – starts to rearrange the grains in pots as we walk around. 'Every item has been exactly placed by Pino,' reveals Aldo. 'If you move anything, you'll find a big black cross for where it's meant to be put back!' The artefacts are reminiscent of objects they would have had on farms and masserias, their design revisited with Pino's light touch. The restaurant with its vaulted ceiling would have been where farm produce was stored; and it even has animal troughs, no irony intended.

The lighting scheme is genius. Hundreds of hanging (empty) bottles form chandeliers; and electric candles flicker in lanterns on the

walls. Light appears from vases and alcoves. 'Those,' says Aldo pointing to beautiful artworks illuminated internally, 'are pictures with magic symbols that you see in the roofs of trullis. [The typical round, stone Hobbit houses of Puglia with their conical roofs.]'

There are also massive blocks of tufo hanging on ropes from the ceiling and lit behind. 'It's an homage to stone here,' says Pino, in Italian. There is no direct light. It's always hidden and reflected – which is peaceful and relaxing to the eye – and warm: a yellow greenish hue that's never too bright.

Before we wander around the alleyways of the town, let's flag something up. This is a story of local heroes. Pino comes from Fasano, just a tufo stone's throw away. Aldo's grandmother was born on a kitchen table in Masseria Cimino down the road; and Pino did up that masseria, his first decorating job. The duo used almost exclusively local materials – from tufo for the walls and façades to creamy pietra Ostuni inside. Everything comes from nearby – bought, imagined and designed by Pino and made by local artisans: from metalwork to fabrics, furniture and lighting.

We walk next around the borgo in alleyways that wend their way up and down, and marvel at the attention to detail: the religious shrines,



piazza, church and ceramic street names. Little alleyways with names like 'Via Don Cataldo'. It's so clean you could eat gnocchi off the street. And beautiful – but it will be even better when it has a bit of age and more life. (By the time you read this, Vair, its spa with Roman baths – including a Tepidarium, Calidarium and Frigidarium – will be open. And there will be funfairs, food stalls and film nights in the piazza.) It's a work in progress, currently a bit like a film set – with extras wafting past in Alberta Ferretti and Pucci.

Flanking us on both sides are townhouses with thick walls and small windows – a design that controls the temperature naturally, ('it's very green,' says Aldo). Like the hotel, the townhouse interiors are full of contemporary takes on rustic elements: walls hung with agricultural implements, pictures of saints, and kitchens with vegetables, pots and pans hanging from ceilings. And then there are the villas. These have décor inspired by the grand houses of the area: more elegant and classical, but still using local pieces such as traditional ceramic artworks.

But this is not just a story about tufo and mortar. They're creating gardens too. Arab courtyard ones in the townhouses. A herb garden bursting with thyme, mint and basil. There are cacti with prickly fruit providing privacy above the dry stonewalls encircling the villas; and air filled with the scent of figs and oregano. They're planting fruit trees in the surrounding land between monumental olive trees, olive trees more beautiful than any I've ever seen and whose presence predates Borgo Egnazia. Their girths are those of giants, their trunks knotted and gnarled, and they stand in the fields in serried ranks. 'These trees are almost 200 years old,' says our driver. 'They're thousands of years old,' our waiter tells us later. 'About 300,' hazards my husband.

The duo's approach to creating this universe was deliciously different and very Italian. Not Italian in a Berlusconi type of way: more Leonardo-ish. Aldo and Pino developed a masterplan in 2004, then dug some foundations. 'Usually you do a masterplan and full design on paper and then you build,' says Aldo. 'But we designed the exterior and interiors as we were building.' That sounds mad.

'Yes,' agrees Aldo. And how did they stick to their budget? 'We didn't have one.' We both laugh. There was a certain flexibility on timing and changes as they went. Let's just say everything evolved organically.

It all cost a cool €150m according to the *FT*. 'My father told me never to reveal figures,' says Aldo, shaking his head. Whatever. You have to commend someone who builds a village, especially one that showcases so brilliantly local talent that would work on a world stage. From architecture to interiors, it's extraordinary. It is said that Aldo has reinvented the heel: call it Puglia rebooted. Certainly he and Pino have reinvented masterplans, designs and building. ■

Travel to Borgo Egnazia with luxury travel specialists, Scott Dunn. Seven nights start from £1,650 per person based on two people sharing a superior room on a bed and breakfast basis including return flights with British Airways and transfers. 020 8682 5040; scottdunn.com

FROM TOP:
The main pool; the Royal Garden Villa Suite; La Corte lobby; attention to detail is paramount to the vision

