

# Camping it up

*Built as a utopian getaway for workers, Corte di Cadore fell into disrepair but a saviour has arrived to save the 1950s gem*

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Scan the headlines and there’s no shortage of stories about corporations using architecture by big-name practices to dazzle the public and ensure staff don’t stray far from their desks (Apple’s spaceship headquarters by Sir Norman Foster and Frank Gehry’s Facebook campus come to mind). Yet designs aimed at employees’ well-being outside work hours receive little attention in today’s boardrooms. Oddly, to find forward-thinking executives one needs to look to the past, and to the hills. Sixty years ago in the Alps, one Italian businessman had a utopian vision: to build a modernist mountain retreat where workers and their families could get close to nature.

In 1953, Enrico Mattei oversaw the creation of Eni, Italy’s state oil firm. As its president, he fought for cheaper energy prices for Italians against the cartel of private Anglo-Saxon corporations, which he famously dubbed “The Seven Sisters”, that monopolised the world’s oil reserves. Mattei was not a typical manager: he put a poet in charge of the company’s in-house magazine and hired 23-year-old Bernardo Bertolucci to make a documentary about its business. In Milan the company had an entire district set aside for offices, staff housing, a cinema and even a football pitch. Within Italy, Eni supported the country’s post-war economic boom with its network of gas stations and motels for businessmen and travellers.

When it came to vacations, Mattei wanted to offer employees the chance of a mountain holiday,

something beyond the reach of many staffers as tourism at higher elevation was still the domain of the well-to-do. Amidst the picturesque Dolomites, he envisioned cabins and a children’s camp. He had his eye on building in the chic ski resort of Cortina d’Ampezzo, where he hired local architect Edoardo Gellner but land was expensive. Gellner suggested looking further south down the Boite Valley. In 1954 he singled out the town of Borca di Cadore and a sunny hillside next to a forest of fir, pine and larch with postcard-perfect views of the 3,000-metre-tall Mount Pelmo. Here, Gellner and Mattei won approval for Eni’s Corte di Cadore, a complex of two-bedroomed cottages, two hotels, a holiday retreat for 600 children and a church.

Unusual for the time, Mattei wanted cabins assigned at random, so an Eni executive and his family might spend two weeks next door to a factory worker. “The idea was to eliminate differences in social class so Gellner had to come up with a new style of interiors that would be suitable for everyone,” says Michele Merlo, a former colleague of Gellner who looks after the late architect’s studio.

While furnishings in walnut burl were in vogue at the time, Gellner opted for mahogany to make functional tables, chest-of-drawers, and wall-mounted sideboards and benches. Foyers were in stone and thermoplastic tiling was laid on the floors while ceilings were covered in wood. “He liked to contrast the artificial with the natural to avoid the all-wood cabin effect you often get in mountain homes,” says Merlo. “Colours were a mix of blues, yellows and reds that he played with so each interior was somewhat different.”



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## Alpine ideals

Enrico Mattei of Eni wasn’t the only Italian captain of industry concerned for the welfare of his employees outside the office. During the postwar economic boom, Adriano Olivetti oversaw the construction of modernist flats and day-care facilities for staff in Ivrea, where his company made typewriters, calculators and computers. In the Ayas Valley in Valle d’Aosta, his firm organised summer camps and winter getaways for employees’ children to give them a healthy dose of mountain air. Youngsters bunked in smart-looking wood-and-glass dormitories designed in the 1960s by Leonardo Fiori, a student of Le Corbusier, and Claudio Conte. Today, the facility houses a mental health clinic.



- 01 Assembly hall in the children's camp at Eni's Corte di Cadore
- 02 Wrought-iron chandelier in church designed by Edoardo Gellner and Carlo Scarpa
- 03 Living room in one of the cabins
- 04 Staircase in the children's camp
- 05 Ceramic-tiled wood-burning stove
- 06 Close up of ceramic tiled stove
- 07 Custom-made mahogany furniture
- 08 Inside the church by Scarpa and Gellner
- 09 Stackable stools and chair by Gellner
- 10 (Very) vintage Fiat Jeep in resident's garage
- 11 Boite Hotel
- 12 Sliding door in a cabin kitchen
- 13 Campsite with bunk-bed huts
- 14 Hans Wegner FH 4103 chair in the children's camp
- 15 ENI espresso cups
- 16 Cabin with balcony and garage below
- 17 Cabin with Mount Pelmo in background
- 18 Firewood stored for the winter
- 19 Cabin balcony
- 20 Borca di Cadore town seen from Corte di Cadore village



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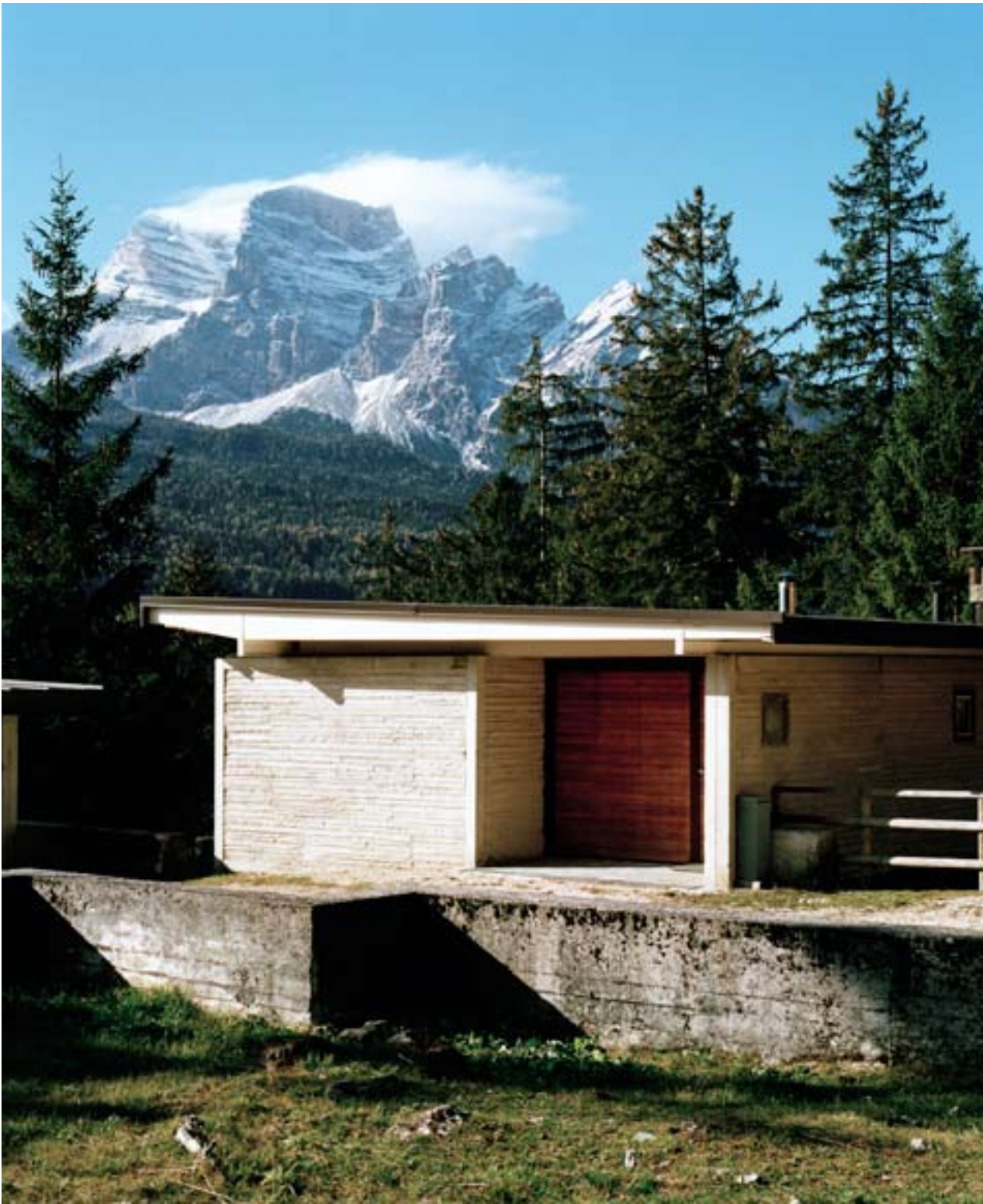
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## Family fun

Holiday camps (known as “colonia” in Italian and popular in the 1950s and 1960s) for employees’ children is a virtually extinct practice, with buildings used by Fiat and Olivetti now standing empty or sold off. While Eni no longer offers mountain getaways, the firm hosts staff’s offspring in summer on the Adriatic at a 1930s facility designed by rationalist architect Giuseppe Vaccaro.

He managed to steer clear of homes with a cookie-cutter design by varying balcony size and using wood sidings on some properties instead of concrete. The cottages – in total, 263 were built between 1955 and 1965 – were arranged in small groups set on either side of unpaved lanes that were linked to a main road snaking up the hill. All had unobstructed views with garages at the side or on the floor below, and each was set atop concrete piles with space between in which firewood can be stored.

More than half a century on, Gellner’s design still feels contemporary. A standout in the sharp lines of the living room is the wood-burning ceramic stove used to heat the cabins. Built by a centuries-old South Tyrolean manufacturer, tiles were made in several colours and designs. “It’s his mix of modernism and regional touches that makes his work unique,” says Merlo.

Gellner made furniture especially for the site, including stackable stools in mahogany and ash and weaved rush chairs for lounging on balconies in warmer months (there are plans to re-issue pieces, says Merlo). Summers offered kids the chance to bunk in triangle-shaped huts; in cold weather, there was an enclosed complex with dormitories, a dining room and an A-framed assembly hall, with Hans Wegner-designed seating.

Asked by Mattei to build a house of worship, Gellner invited Carlo Scarpa, with whom he had studied in Venice, to help. Scarpa’s expertise with cement led to large, rib-like concrete beams to support a steeply pitched timber roof. Crowned by a slender steel spire, it has ribbon windows at the sides to let in light. Inside is an asymmetrical layout, with log slices of larch inlaid into the floor that leads up to an altar in white marble.

Despite its avant-garde design, the Corte di Cadore complex drew fewer Eni vacationers over time as holidaying habits changed and it fell into neglect. In 2001, Gualtiero Cualbu, head of family-run Sardinian construction firm Minoter, became enamoured with the site and bought it.

Though the holiday camp remains closed and the church is rarely used for services, Minoter diligently restored cabin roofs and interiors and has been selling the two-bedroom lodges to architecture aficionados and others looking for a quiet holiday spot. “For us, it’s more a labour of love than a real estate investment,” says manager Giuseppe Cualbu, the owner’s son, who spends holidays in a cottage the family bought. “It’s secluded, has great views and is unlike anything around it.”

Among the traces left by Eni, there’s a collection of cutlery and tableware, including pieces by porcelain maker Richard Ginori, for use by staff. “It was a different era, a different mentality. Mattei was looking after the welfare of his employees even in their time off,” says Cualbu. — (M)