



Michelle Dufour, co-designer of Casa Illica

# CASA ILLICA

*Restoring a piece of history*

With recession dominating the headlines, now might not seem the time to buy abroad. Yet **Mario Matassa** discovers why investors with an eye for a good buy can still prosper

## DISCOVER ITALIA!



Casa Illica, in the old town of Castell'Arquato

**M**ichelle Dufour knows how to stand out from the crowd. But then when times are difficult and you are buying to let, it helps to know how to differentiate yourself from the competition. I find Michelle sitting in the living room of the villa, which she and her sister, Gabrielle, have just designed. But it's not just any old villa... nor is it just any old design, for that matter.

The villa was the birthplace and home of Luigi Illica (1857-1919), the journalist, poet and librettist probably best remembered for the words he put to some of Giacomo Puccini's most famous operas – including *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900) and, of course, *Madame Butterfly* (1904). So, needless to say, it's a listed building, falling under the Italian laws of *bene culturale*. And, if Italian bureaucracy wasn't enough to contend with, geographical anonymity doesn't help. Casa Illica is situated off the beaten track in the small medieval castle town of Castell'Arquato in the little known province of Piacenza, Emilia Romagna. So to say that the Dufour sisters set themselves a challenge when they convinced Gabrielle's husband, Japanese businessman Yosiyasu Narahara to buy the property as an investment, is something of an understatement.

It certainly wasn't a project for the faint-hearted but now a little piece of Italian history has been faithfully restored and Casa Illica has opened its doors for business.

### THE TIME MACHINE

Casa Illica is situated in the old town of Castell'Arquato. Albeit just a short stroll from the new town, one does not have to be versed in period architecture to see where the modern meets with the old. Being a protected zone, the trappings of modernity that lie beyond the arches are discreetly ensconced behind ancient wooden doors, as they should be in a town of such beauty.

Exactly when the house was first built remains something of a mystery. The villa was given a makeover some time in the early 19th-century, but as with most of the buildings in the old part of town, its origin dates back to medieval times. Ostensibly little has changed in the intervening 800 years. The stone houses fit seamlessly along narrow cobbled streets, all of which lead up to the central piazza at the summit of the hill. Here, and just a few yards from Casa Illica, the castle, the church and the municipal

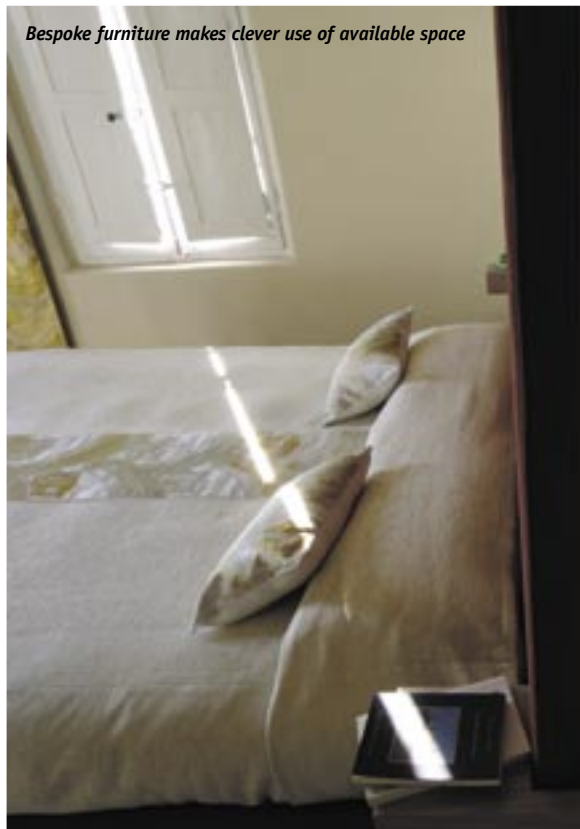
Home comforts and chic design are placed side-by-side in the house



Modern furniture extends to the garden



Bespoke furniture makes clever use of available space



The impressive main stairwell of the house was painstakingly restored

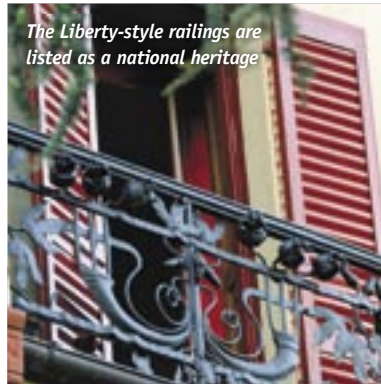




One of the living rooms, seen through an iconic Dordoni screen



A classic designer coffee set takes its place in the antique kitchen



The Liberty-style railings are listed as a national heritage

palace stand defensive watch over the town and the Arda valley. Wandering about the old piazza, with its trappings of medieval life, visitors have no trouble imagining a bygone era, or understanding why the town has earned its classification as one of the *borghi più belli d'Italia* (the most beautiful villages of Italy).

The restoration project started two years ago. It was led by local architect Enrico de Benedetti who, fittingly, specializes in the restoration of historical buildings and churches. Classified as an historical landmark by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, strict building regulations governed any exterior modifications. Fortunately, however, with its intricately designed double-fronted wooden door and distinctively decorated front façade, the towering three-story villa needed little help to make it stand out from the crowd. The design of

*Great pains were taken to salvage most of the old house*

the building is unique in the town, perhaps in some way reflecting the eminence of its former owner.

Inside, fundamentally – or rather structurally – little has changed. The new owners wished to respect the original layout as much as was practical, with the result being that only two rooms of the 400m<sup>2</sup> floor plan were transformed in any real way.

Not surprisingly, great pains were taken to salvage as much of the old house as possible and those traditional features, which help to give a house character, were painstakingly protected and restored. The house has been divided into two large apartments, each with three bedrooms, a living room and kitchen. Downstairs, the basement – now an antique kitchen, ➤

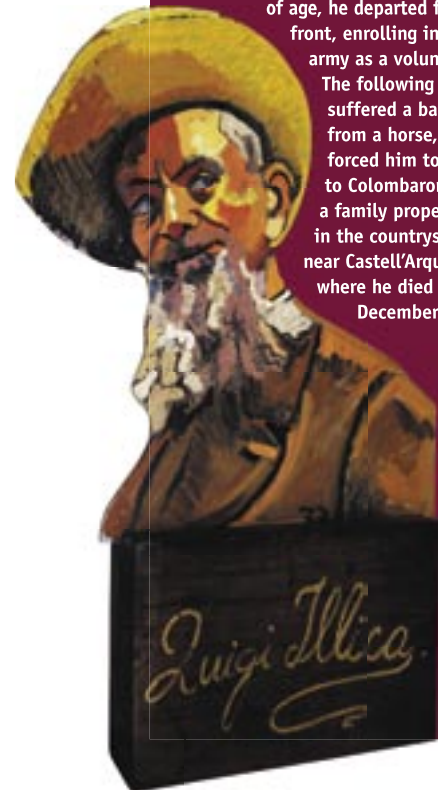
## LUIGI ILLICA

Journalist, verse writer and member of a radical group of Milanese writers and artists, Luigi Illica was born in Castell'Arquato in 1857. His statue is shown below. From his early days he demonstrated a rebellious and fiery temperament and at 20 years old he left home to embark on a naval career. After four years at sea, he returned to Italy, settling in Milan where he found work with a literary newspaper and later became a columnist for the *Corriere della Sera*. Shortly after, he moved to Bologna where he co-founded the *Don Chisciotte*, an ultra-radical journal inspired by Italian poet, Giosuè Carducci.

From 1886 onwards he began to consolidate his reputation as a playwright, culminating in 1891 in the staging of what many consider to be his masterpiece, *L'Eredità del Felis*. Arguably, however, Illica is perhaps best known for his activities from 1889 as an opera librettist. His rising success in this field was crowned in 1891 when he joined Casa Ricordi. Over the course of the following two decades, Illica wrote for some of the best musicians of the era. He completed approximately 30 librettos including, notably *Germania* (1902) and *Siberia* (1903) for Giordano, *Iris* (1898) and *Isabeau* (1911) for Mascagni, and, of course, *Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900) and *Madame Butterfly* (1904) in collaboration with Giacosa and Manon Lescaut for Giacomo Puccini.

The Great War revived his patriotic enthusiasm and in 1915, at 58 years of age, he departed for the front, enrolling in the army as a volunteer.

The following year he suffered a bad fall from a horse, which forced him to return to Colombarone, a family property in the countryside near Castell'Arquato, where he died on 16 December 1919.



**BUYING-TO-LET**

► **TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY?**

Although Italy hasn't experienced the same drop in property prices as the rest of Europe, there are still bargains to be found – thorough research will pay off. When you find the ideal property, offer what you think it is worth, not what is being asked: you just might be surprised.

► **DEMOGRAPHICS**

When buying to let, consider your target market. Are you trying to appeal to families, business travellers, young singles and couples or retired travellers? What interests will they have? What duration – weekend stays, long stays, two-week holiday lets etc.? What expectations might guests have – a pool, city or country views, central location?

► **LOCATION**

Consider carefully before signing on that stone farmhouse, which happens to be completely isolated, no matter how beautiful or how much of a bargain it appears to be. If it takes your guests five hours to reach the property from the nearest airport, you're ruling out weekend stays, non-drivers and anyone who wants to be close to local amenities.

► **BUILDING REGULATIONS**

So you think you've found the perfect property in the perfect location. Think again. Before committing to the property, consult or have your *geometra* (surveyor) consult with, the local planning office about any changes you wish to make to the building. Each province has its own interpretation of the country's regulations – what might be considered feasible in one area might not in another. This does not just apply to listed buildings.

► **SERVICES**

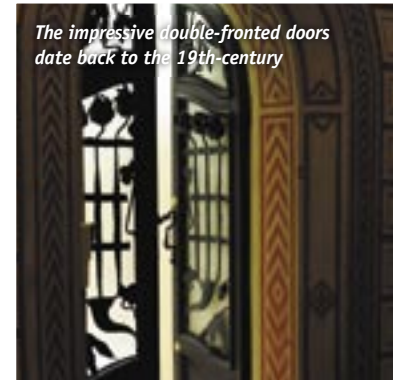
Once you've identified your target market, found the ideal property and consulted the local council, you need to consider what services you need to offer guests. This will depend on your target group – will you need a tour guide, breakfast service or a personal chef? Although these services are normally arranged at extra cost, make sure you have sourced reliable support in advance.

► **THINK GLOBAL**

How, or where, do you intend to market the property? Are you going to rely on a management agency, self-manage through your own website, try magazine advertising or go for a combination of all of these? Also, think beyond your own doorstep. Although the UK may be in the depths of recession, other countries may be faring better – be aware of emerging markets. Potential guests today can be found across the globe!



*A seamless blend of antique and contemporary furniture in the bedroom*



*The impressive double-fronted doors date back to the 19th-century*

► For more information on renting Casa Illica visit [www.casaillica.com](http://www.casaillica.com) or email Michelle at [info@casaillica.com](mailto:info@casaillica.com)



*The family's Japanese connection can be seen in the soft furnishings*

► For more information on the Province of Piacenza visit [www.piacenzaturismi.net](http://www.piacenzaturismi.net)

► which has been painstakingly and beautifully restored with its terracotta floor and ancient hearth – acts as a communal area. It leads out onto the patio and garden area, where visitors can spend the evening relaxing in the hot-tub while enjoying the views over the roofs of the old town and the surrounding Piacentine valley. The position of the house is such that every room comes with an enviable view.

**A DESIGN STATEMENT**

Although structurally the house has escaped the hand of intervention, it was in the interior design that the Dufour sisters sampled the freedom to leave their unmistakable, if somewhat eclectic, mark. And it was here that they literally went to town.

To appreciate and understand the design-style requires a brief family biographical detour. Michelle and her sister Gabrielle are of French heritage and spent their childhood

living in a typical Parisian apartment of the 'Hausmannien' style. Their love affair with Italy was nurtured from an early age – their parents took them to the country every summer from 1958 to 'discover its treasures and everything it had to offer'. Since those early days both sisters have travelled extensively. Gabrielle is a Professor of French in a university in Japan, where she lives with her husband Yosiyasu Narahara. Yosiyasu is equally well-travelled – an experienced senior business executive in high-tech industries, he was born into a noble Japanese family from Tokyo and gained his PhD in the U.S. Michelle worked for the cutting-edge leading design magazine, *Interni*, for over 20 years – first as the Paris/New York correspondent and later as sub-editor. So she knows more than a thing or two about design.

It's not difficult to see how this eclectic mix of cultural heritage, travel and work experience translates into the interior design of Casa Illica today. Walking through the house is like passing in and out of a time machine. In every room, old and new, antique and contemporary,

rustic and chic seem to effortlessly coalesce. Furnishings are a mix of leading contemporary designers and carefully chosen antiques – almost all of which were purchased from local antique dealers and fairs. Pieces by cutting-edge contemporary designers, such as the Italian Rodolfo Dordoni and the French designer, Philippe Starck, designers of old such as Olivari Naj, as well as soft furnishings made from traditional silk Kimono fabrics are all fitting glimpses into the family's international provenance. As Michelle points

out: 'Everything in the house has a meaning. I can give you an explanation for every single piece'.

The idea, she continues, was to appeal to an international clientele. 'We designed the house to stand out,' she explains. 'We wanted to offer something unique, to tap into emerging markets but at the same time remaining faithful to the



*The work of local artists is on display in the breakfast area*

*The intention was to cater for every conceivable need*

spirit of Illica'. To celebrate their passion for art, music and culture, and to help promote local artistic talent, the sisters established a revolving gallery of art. Paintings and sculptures by local artists are now exhibited throughout the house for visitors to admire (and purchase, should they wish). The intention was to cater for every conceivable need, from the basic necessities of

modern-day life – such as broadband internet, satellite TV, designer kitchens with espresso machines and air-conditioning

– to an on-call tour guide plus a chef to prepare typical local dishes.

#### **MORE THAN A TREND**

Michelle describes Casa Illica as a 'unique residence' in-keeping with the trend in boutique art hotels. Certainly, given the former occupant and owner of the house, it is unique. Indeed, it is a slice of Italian history. But it was, first and foremost, bought as a business investment.

Having got to know Michelle, my sense is that in at least two respects it is much more than just a business. First, what struck me as someone who has chosen Italy as my home and who shudders when I read about villages being rendered



*The living areas all have panoramic views*



*Stylish design extends to the bathrooms*

'ghost towns' by foreigner investors, the new owners of Casa Illica have demonstrated all the hallmarks of ethical investment. Practically every aspect of the restoration, from sourcing contractors to purchasing designer and antique furniture, has been a local endeavour. The promotion of local artists was just another example of supporting the local economy and their patrimony has gone a long way to ensuring local support for their project.

Second, during one of our meetings Michelle mentioned that for part of the year the house would be used as a family home and, as such, they had wanted to give it a personal touch. In short, an eclectic family with a diverse cultural background has brought more than a little of themselves to their work and to the town. It is a radical transformation and fittingly, like the radical that Luigi Illica was, I think it is an outcome with which he would be more than pleased. ■