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## **A Living Laboratory for Studying Italian Hilltowns**

### **Abstract:**

Nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the northern Lazio village of Civita di Bagnoregio provides a unique living laboratory to study Italian hilltowns. I have been working on the site since 1984, first as a student of Professor Astra Zarina in the University of Washington's Italian Hilltowns Program, and then as the Civita Institute's Astra Zarina Fellow in 2013. I propose to present my documentation of the complex of properties Zarina and husband Tony Heywood purchased, restored, and donated to the Civita Institute starting in 1962.

The five homes, courtyard, garden and library now serve as the Italian home for the Civita Institute and its ongoing study of architecture, urban design, and culture. My documentation of the properties includes my own drawings and photos of the properties as both a student and fellow, plus the work of many other students, fellows, and Zarina and Heywood themselves. Special focus will be on the revival of traditional, sustainable building methods and adaptation of a built environment to house modern homes and facilities. The properties date back over 2500 years to Etruscan origins, with later Roman, medieval, and Renaissance layers added and revealed through skillful renovations.



This paper tells a pair of intertwined stories over the past 50-plus years. A more personal one, of my return to Civita di Bagnoregio with a Civita Institute fellowship, 29 years after participating in the University of Washington's Italian Hilltowns Program in 1984 – a story of connection and continuity. In this article from the Roman daily *Il Messaggero* headlined “a colony of scholars in the city that’s dying,” an unfortunate and very inaccurate moniker that Civita has come to bear, I sit with other students in our studio, and in the picture, 29 years later, still sketching. Far from dying, Civita is remarkably alive.



The main story I want to tell, using my sketches and photos, along with material I culled from the archives there (like this article), is of the living legacy that our UW professor, Astra Zarina, and her husband, architect Tony Costa Heywood, have built over the years and now transferred and entrusted to the Civita Institute.



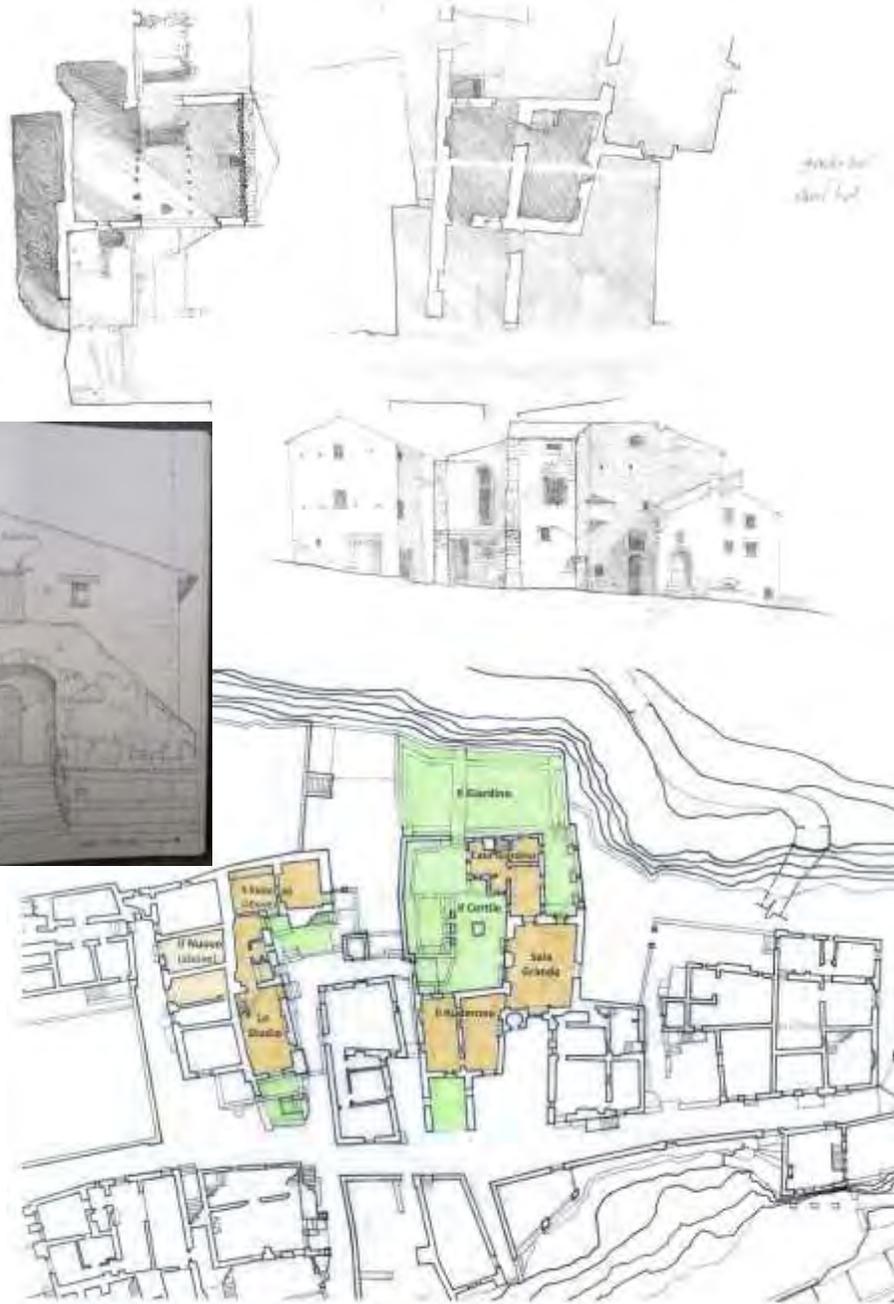
The Civita Institute was founded by Prof. Zarina and several of her former students in 1981 as the Northwest Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in Italy (NIAUSI) to involve the Pacific Northwest's professional design community in the UW Italian Studies Program. It has evolved and expanded to more widely support cultural exchange and excellence in the design quality of the built environment through Fellowships, Membership Stay programs, and educational programs located at the Institute's facilities in Civita di Bagnoregio.



After 29 years much had changed, but the filaments of continuity really struck me, like the family restaurant run by the granddaughter of the couple who lived there in 1984, or watching the son of the owner of the only restaurant that existed in Civita back then, playing soccer in the piazza, just as I watched his father do 29 years earlier.

The Civita Institute provides a living laboratory for studying this unique Italian hilltown, its culture, people and economy, as well as those in the surrounding region. These hilltowns are

microcosms of an imminently livable urban environment that have much to teach about how to make all our built environments healthier and more sustainable. Within the context of the town, the institute's facilities provide examples of how this historic urban fabric, founded by the Etruscans over 2,500 years ago, built upon by the Romans, and achieving the majority of its current form in medieval times, can be renovated using traditional techniques to serve modern purposes while preserving the ancient fabric.



Just down the street from the main piazza and the restaurant shown above and described on the preceding page, I sketched the approach to the Civita Institute. In the distance to the left is the “vicolo” (or alley) to the Institute, and just beyond that is Il Ruderone, or the big ruin, one of Astra and Tony’s properties that was my design project in 1984.

The drawing above was the seed of the idea for my fellowship, to tell the story of these remarkable properties and their evolution, as Astra, and later Tony, bought and restored them over the past 50-plus years.

The Institute has grown to include five homes, in orange, and surrounding open spaces, in green. The entry from the main street of Civita is up that small vicolo, leading to this view of the homes that are available to visitors: Lo Studio, Il Nuovo and Il Ruderino, or little ruin. Around the corner to the right are the Sala Grande, Ruderone, Casa Giardino, Cortile and Giardino.

My fellowship project was fueled by a desire to discover how and where this all started – how did Astra “discover” this isolated place, what was the first piece she bought and renovated, and how did it evolve over the years.

In a way, it started with Emily Kimbrough’s book, *Forty Plus and Fancy Free*, about an East Coast socialite’s trip to Italy with friends in 1954. When Astra went to Italy with the Prix de Rome and a Fulbright fellowship in 1961, she reconnected with a Harvard architecture student she had met while studying at MIT. He told her about the book which contained a letter by the famous art historian Bernard Berenson, describing a side trip through Bagnoregio and down a country lane to see a site he only describes as “of large dimensions.” The author is equally coy about this “Mystery View,” explaining that at the time it was not found on any tourist map, but it was obviously Civita, as seen in this postcard from the era, upper right.



The author didn’t go any further, but Astra did, finding the bridge in perilous disrepair.

On a subsequent visit, she ascended and wandered up that little vicolo and around the corner to capture her first view of the **Sala Grande** as seen in the photo near right. The ruins to the left were later transformed into the courtyard wall and gate, as seen in the 2013 photo, far right -- but on that day in 1962 a cloudburst struck, and she knocked on the door to ask for refuge.



An old man let her in and she encountered a scene not unlike this one shot a few years later by Balthazar Korab – an enormous fireplace where the grandfather tended a pot of soup, several children, and a grand room divided by wardrobes and curtains. “What a beautiful home you have,” she exclaimed as the father emerged from behind a curtain. “Would you like to buy it?” he asked. Before she knew it, she had purchased her first house for the equivalent of \$250.



A friend also bought a house and hired Astra to design a remodel. As Astra began working on the remodel in 1967, she moved into the Sala Grande, virtually camping out with a few furnishings. A leaky lean-to attached to the back side served to store firewood. There was no water or bathroom – that required walking to the far end of town.

Today, the Sala Grande houses much of the Civita Institute’s library and archives, some of which I’ve arranged on the table in the foreground, preparing to scan.

Another shot by Korab shows how the Sala Grande served as a one-room home, with the kitchen surrounding the fireplace, Astra at the dining table in the center opposite her mother, and the bed in the foreground. The chestnut beams have been whitewashed, likely to make the room lighter in the days before Civita had electricity. The door in the far corner leads to the Ruderone.

Today, the beams have been stripped, the dining table is a work table, covered by the treasures I’ve gleaned from the archives, and the beds have been replaced by desks where I and other fellows can do research. The door in the far corner, behind the wardrobe, now leads to Tony’s home in the renovated Ruderone.

A sketch from the archives by Astra’s mentor, Victor Steinbrueck, captures the Sala Grande to the left and the Ruderone to the right, as seen from the Cortile in 1971.

A similar view from the early 60s shows the ruin that would later become Il Cortile, home then to pigs and chickens. The arches of the central wall of the ruin would later become the wall supporting the arbor in the Cortile, as it is now. On the left is a corner of Astra’s first project of her own in Civita what is now known as the Garden Apartment, or Casa Giardino.



Built on the foundation of the ruins adjacent to the Sala Grande, the **Casa Giardino** restored the lean-to as a bedroom and extended its roof to create a bathroom and kitchen. The modest addition was completed in time for a 1974 issue of House and Garden magazine, in an article by Astra. By this time, Astra and Tony had married and this became their first home together in Civita, allowing the Sala to serve as a grand living room/studio/banquet hall, incorporating the completed Cortile, and featuring the first washing machine in town.

Little has changed here in the 40 years since. Just outside the bathroom is the kitchen, lovingly rendered in a Jim Corey painting. Just to the right of that view is a steep stair leading to Astra's first cantina, which extends to the face of the cliff under the garden. The photos by 2006 fellow Dan Corson, bottom right, show part of a network of subterranean Civita that extends under the Cortile and Ruderone, back to the town's main street.

Outside the Casa Giardino and above the cantine, this view from the early 70s shows this first project and the Cortile rising from the rubble of the ruin next to Sala Grande. Beyond the new construction is **il Giardino**, seen today looking north over the cliff and across the valley to Lubriano and in a shot from a 1975 photo survey, looking back through the Cortile to the Sala Grande and Ruderone.



To do these earlier restorations, Astra had to find local craftsmen who could revive the traditional building methods. I was astonished to come across this photo of the young “muratore”, Salvatore, in the white paper hat helping lay the

pavers of the Cortile, days after he showed up to trim the ivy on the walls of Lo Studio, just beyond the Cortile wall.

Another bit of continuity among many changes.

To the right below is the same façade in another 1975 photo, with tufo blocks stacked on the right in preparation of rebuilding the stair to the Ruderino and Nuovo.

The previous views were shot from just outside the Cortile gate, and take us to **Lo Studio**, where renovation began in 1975 to create just that, a studio for the first year of the Italian Hilltowns Program in 1976. Lo Studio is the first piece of the Civita Institute one encounters when arriving along the main street.

The series below from the main street shows two newly installed windows in 1975. Four years later, a terrace was reconstructed and the lower window became a door. Today the house is shrouded in greenery, creating a lovely spot to sit on the terrace outside the lower level of Lo Studio, listening to the tourists passing by, but hidden from their view, as show in the self-portrait to the right.



Lo Studio was the only Civita Institute home for which I found full restoration plans, submitted in 1976. One of the main interventions in all of these renovations were the stairways, as the traditional ones were often little more than ship's ladders.

Another major upgrade was installing a hot water heating system, fueled by natural gas, which Astra and Tony helped bring to Civita in 1982. With radiators installed, Astra and Tony moved into Lo Studio from the Casa Giardino.

The “before” shot of Lo Studio’s lower level, top right, shows the steep, narrow stair, and another large, though less ornate, fireplace. Today, it still houses part of the library and workstations from its time as the students’ work space, which continued for a period even after Astra and Tony moved in.

Moving upstairs, the minimal original stair emerges under the characteristic chestnut beams. Today the beams remain, despite the audible chewing of insects, and the roomy bedroom is arranged to sleep up to four.

On the new stairs of Lo Studio, we find another hallmark of Astra and Tony’s designs – the re-use of uncovered artifacts, like the piece of stone that emerges from the wall of the landing, below left. Rather than removing or covering it up, it is re-purposed as a display shelf - and a recollection of the earlier structure.

Rounding the corner at the base of the stairs toward the kitchen, another found artifact, a ceramic urn, is incorporated in a niche to the left.



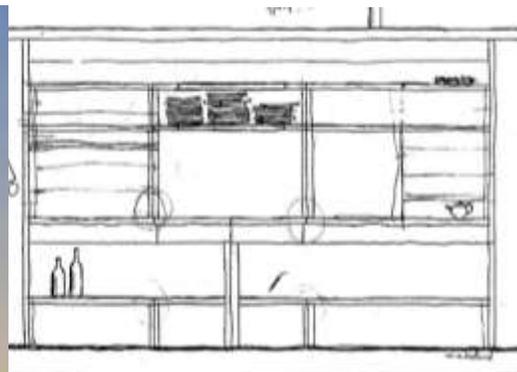
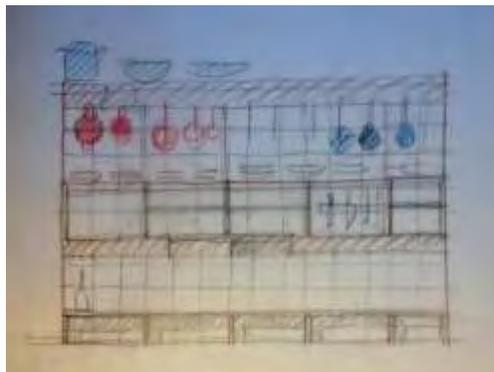
Looking north in the pre-restoration upper level, an older walled-in opening to the adjacent space appears in the far corner. Today, the opening has been reinstated, connecting to the foyer of Il Nuovo.

While Astra and Tony's interventions help make these homes a delight, the windows, like the one in the corner, demonstrate the genius of the vernacular builders. Even though the homes are packed tightly, they gracefully bring in ample natural light, bouncing it off the thick, splayed walls and reflecting the surrounding homes and views when the in-swinging casements are open, providing beautiful vistas while maintaining a remarkable degree of privacy. I believe this is the result of the homes being built incrementally and windows being located as the walls were built, enabling them to be placed in the optimal spots.

To the right is another common element of their designs, the creative use of small spaces for modern amenities. This bathroom uses one-way glass in the high window above the tub for light and privacy, and another high window to the kitchen captures more borrowed light and makes the tiny space feel more comfortable.

The kitchen is also an exercise in efficiently using a tight space to create a very functional and beautiful workplace, with an angled custom table and open shelves. These homes and renovations weren't just the product of Astra and Tony's design skills: they were and still are a living laboratory for design.

While Astra's early sketch of the shelf, below left, set the stage for the kitchen shelves and table, what we see today is the product of later elaborations by students and alums, below right, who were given the opportunity to not only design, but help build the ever-evolving homes in Civita.



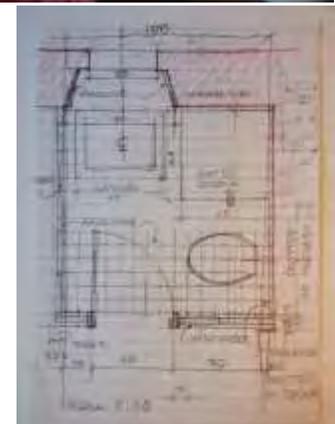
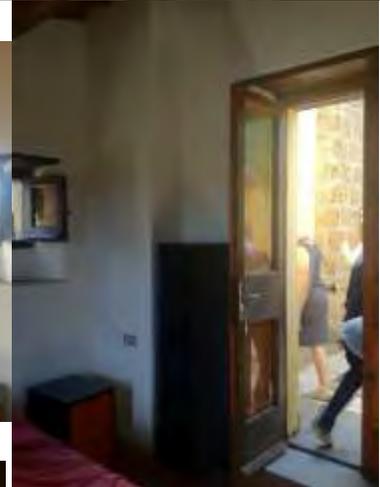
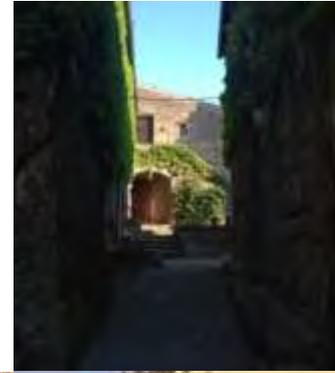
Included in the 1982 plans for Lo Studio's heating system, and housing the boiler in its lower level, is Il Ruderino, the little ruin. The upper level apartment was finished not long before I was first there in '84, and the building's south façade is the focal point as one enters the Civita Institute properties, often bathed in sun at the end of the shady vicolo. The entry at the top of the stairs opens not directly to the apartment but to a tiny courtyard over the boiler room. Since it's not exposed to the streets, more modern interventions could be employed, like the stucco walls and solar panels to pre-heat the water (no longer working, but perhaps a subject for a future project, along with the skylights that provide daylight to the windowless space below).

This little court leads to the entrance of the Ruderino, which is an equally tiny studio apartment. Again, the characteristic chestnut beams, lintels, trim, custom furnishings, and windows and doors; clay roof, sill and floor tiles; and simple plastered walls.

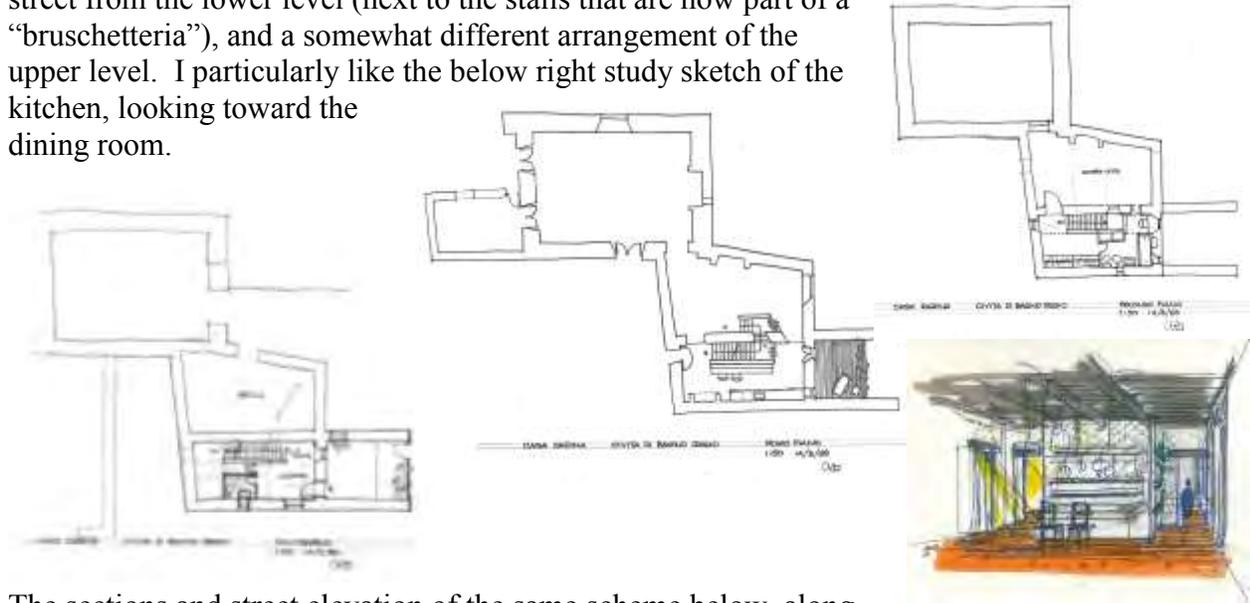
Decorative tiles define the tiny but very functional kitchen, distinguished by a narrow sleeping loft for adventurous guests. To the right, a little bathroom with the characteristic window that doubles as a mirror when shut.

As Astra and Tony proceeded with their renovation of the Civita houses, developing working relationships with the local craftsmen, and perhaps a better understanding of what

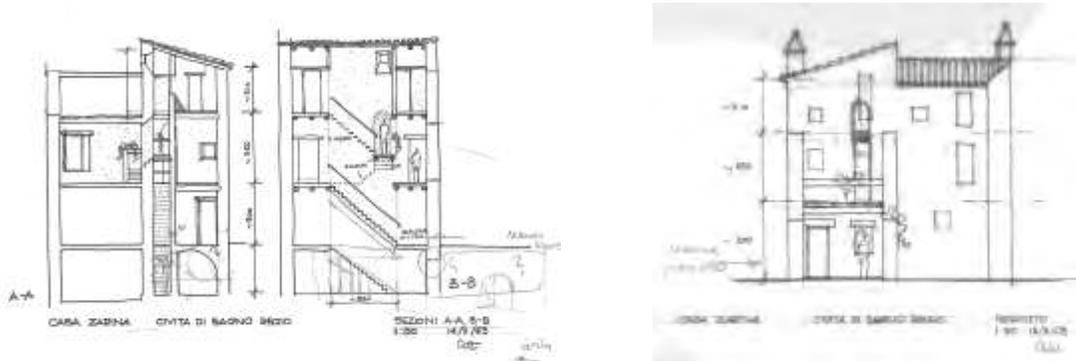
needed official approval, the drawings became less formal, like this freehand, but carefully dimensioned, sketch on graph paper.



The next and biggest home they completed was **Il Ruderone**, though some stabilization work was done on the street façade in the early days, and I found it interesting that Astra began design studies as early as March 1969, while still living in the Sala Grande, before building the Casa Giardino. It was fascinating to see these early studies and the different concepts they explored, like the stair partly wrapping around the central wall, the terrace off the kitchen, the entry off the street from the lower level (next to the stalls that are now part of a “bruschetteria”), and a somewhat different arrangement of the upper level. I particularly like the below right study sketch of the kitchen, looking toward the dining room.



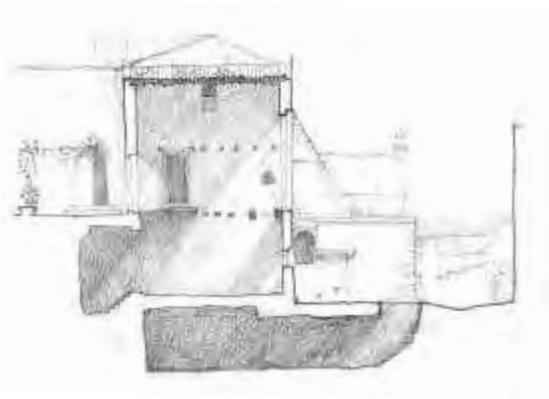
The sections and street elevation of the same scheme below, along with others in the archives, give insight into the evolution of the project. The sketch-over on the elevation shows the emergence of the tall arched window we see there today.



The sequence below shows the evolution of the street façade and that tall window, from before and after stabilization work had been done in 1975, and as it is today.



This section detail from my '84 drawing shows that tall window and how the entrance from the Cortile is a full level above the street. Here's that entry to the Ruderone today, showing the tall arched window through the characteristic open tread stair beyond, and the kitchen to the right.



The kitchen has modern appliances and furnishings, and a somewhat less grand fireplace that has been converted to shelving. This fish-eye view looking back from the far end of the kitchen attempts to capture a complex “knuckle” of the design that brilliantly connects the two levels just inside that tall arched window, all in a tiny space.



Through the door on the right, one enters the ample dining/living room, with yet another walk-in fireplace, a door to the Sala Grande beyond, a door to the cortile at the north end of the room, and the view back toward the kitchen.



Up the stairs and to the left is a small office space, overlooking the cortile.



Continuing to the left is the bathroom, again using the familiar, simple palette of materials.



Looking back toward the office and continuing on to the knuckle, we look up the steps to the bedroom, and back down, with the top of the tall arched window to the left. The skylights bathe this area in light, and even provide a glimpse of the campanile in the distance.



The bedroom has views and light from three sides, overlooking the street to the right and the cortile on the left. The door up the steps to the left leads to the Sala Grande attic, somewhat

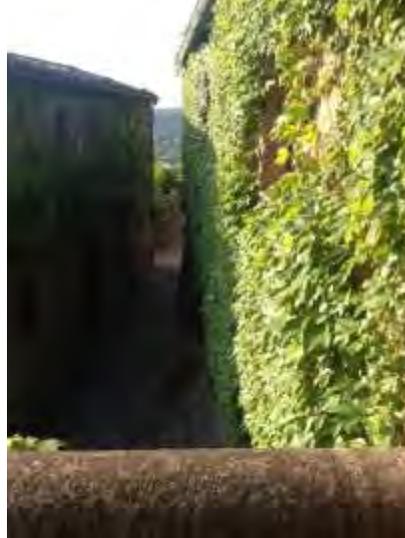


surprisingly partly exposed to the sky – another potential project for the future.

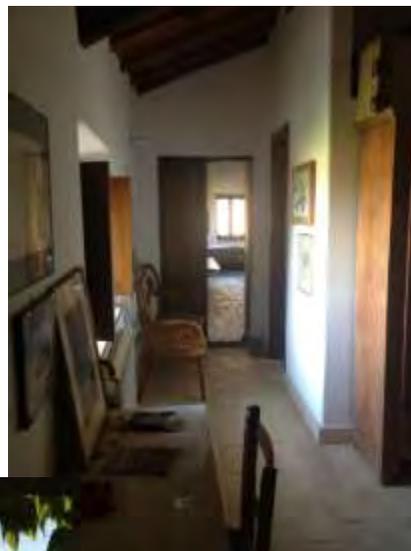


The final renovation by Astra and Tony was **Il Nuovo** – “the new one” – started in 2004 according to Tony’s photo archives, including a shot showing a window on the upper left that was eventually walled in.

The stairs shared by Il Ruderino lead directly to the door of Il Nuovo, and the stoop provides a lovely, orienting view down the vicolo to the main street and the countryside beyond.



The door opens to a foyer, shared by the upper level of Lo Studio. Inside to the left you see the door to Lo Studio, a bathroom to the right, and to the left the view east across the cortile to the Sala Grande, Casa Giardino and on toward the Tiber Valley.



Entering Il Nuovo from the foyer, the large main living area sits atop Alma Civita, an excellent restaurant run by a long-time local family, and has a back door to another vicolo, shared with the restaurant. The windows on this façade admit the enchanting sounds and smells of Alma, an almost irresistible temptation.



This large space and table make Il Nuovo a great place to gather for meals. Like Lo Studio, one of the main interventions in Il Nuovo was introducing a more comfortable stair to replace the steep and awkward original one and to provide a bit of visual connection between the levels.



The stair leads to the bedroom, comfortably tucked under a reconstructed roof. Like the Studio bedroom, Il Nuovo's is set up to comfortably sleep up to four. The only records I could find of this major renovation are these photos. Around the corner on the left is the bathroom and another spectacular but very private view.



Looking to the future, I hope this work will help inform the ongoing work to maintain and continue restoring the Civita Institute properties.

Tony at one point pulled out this post-War photo of the Ruderone, when it was built out to the street, wanting to determine the original height so that it might be reconstructed one day. That would be an ambitious undertaking, but there are other more modest interventions that could improve this most public face of the properties, seen to the right in their current state. I am also working with the Institute to assemble an exhibition of Astra's life and work, and am committed to refining my work to help tell the story of this part of her living legacy.



The Civita Institute properties tell a compelling story and provide a concrete example of restoring historic buildings for modern living using traditional building materials and methods. It is an example that has helped revive traditional building crafts and has been replicated in many other remodels throughout the village and in surrounding towns and countryside buildings.

The town itself has experienced a revival, in large part due to Astra's interventions. There is still much to be done, and new challenges including managing its new-found popularity while maintaining and nurturing a sustainable way of life for the few year-round residents, merchants and growing number of part-time residents.

I want to thank Tony for all his support, here enjoying his daily lunch at Alma with its "padrone", Sandro Rocchi, who was the first Civitonico I met in 1984 and represents the many wonderful people of the town who welcomed me back so warmly.

Finally, I'm eternally grateful to Astra for introducing me to Civita in 1984 and to the Civita Institute for giving me this wonderful opportunity to return there 29 years later and reconnect with its living legacy.

