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VISION FOR LIVING

Just outside Bologna, Luigi Cavalli—founder of Italian furniture brand Visionnaire—bought an epic 18th-century mansion to claim as his country seat

WRITER GAURI KELKAR
PHOTOGRAPHER MAX ZAMBELLI



A STUDY IN DESIGN
In this study and living room, the 'Oberon' sofa and armchair are by Roberto Lazzeroni for Visionnaire. The 'Rhaps' television and mirror is above a handmade marble fireplace that dates back to the 14th century. The *Animalia* artwork is by Italian artist Michael Astolfi. The 'Nicos' desk has a stainless steel base and a marble top, and is paired with a 'York' swivel chair. The lacquered bookshelf is by Samuele Mazza.

(Facing page)
SELF-REFERENTIAL
In the ground floor living room, the 'Wilbur' sofas are from Visionnaire, designed by Alessandro La Spada. The mirror is from the *Midnight* collection by La Spada and Samuele Mazza. The 'Benson' wall lamp is by Mazza.



HISTORICAL DESIGN
The 'Zeus' chandelier and the 'Maxim' table are by Alessandro La Spada. The 'Asoka' carpet is by Samuele Mazza. The handmade horse sculpture is a 15th-century antique. The fireplace dates back to the 14th century.

(Facing page, from top)

ROOM TO SPARE

The 'Speyer' bookshelf has been designed by La Spada and Mazza; the 'Reginal' pouf is by La Conca. In the corridor connected to the main door, the 'Siegfried' cushioned bench is by La Spada; the chandelier and wall lamps are from the Galahad collection by Philippe Montels, La Spada and Mazza.





COSY SETTING

In the main living room on the first floor are 'Hammond' sofas by Maurizio Manzoni and Roberto Tapinassi and two 'Lanciotto' low tables. The fireplace was built in the 19th century.



(Click on the picture)

APPLIED DESIGN

The 'Dahlia' kitchen on the first floor and 'Armani' stools with backrests are by Alessandro La Spada and Samuele Mazza; the 'Melmoth' ceiling lamp is by Philippe Montels and La Conca. The master bedroom has a 'Cador' bed, 'Thorun' wardrobe (behind the bed), 'Bodwy' chair and applique work (on the ceiling)—all by La Spada and Mazza. In the dining area, the 'Edilbert' table is by La Spada and Mazza; the 'Esmeralda' chairs are by La Spada; the crockery is vintage Limoges porcelain.



This wasn't love at first sight, though an early encounter in the hills did leave an impression. It was the kind of flame that burns slowly, getting stronger with time. "For many years, I lived not far from here; and each time I saw the property it impressed me. Slowly, I started falling in love with it," says Luigi Cavalli, owner of this country house in the hills outside Bologna.

Sprawling over 10,000 square metres, the mansion is straight out of history, with its graceful 18th-century proportions, though that would make the house seem younger than it actually is. It began its very long and chequered lifetime first as a hunting lodge in the 14th century, when an avid hunter, most likely, desired to build himself a comfy abode. More than a century later, a "part of the property was destroyed but then rebuilt, and at the beginning of the 18th century, the Solimeni family bought it. Countess Solimeni restored it and made it bigger", as Cavalli explains. And when the Visionnaire founder bought it, he consciously preserved the original look. "The architectural personality of this house is so strong and overpowering, it's impossible to transform it. If we did, it would get destroyed. We enhanced its look from the outside, visualizing how it would have looked back in the 18th century."

THE BIG PICTURE

It was with the interiors that Cavalli really went all out. "Comfort and functionality were critical, so we made changes in some living spaces and made it our way," he says. The going, though, was not easy, and gave Cavalli and the in-house Visionnaire team enough opportunity to flex their creative muscles. The upside was that finding top-of-the-line furniture and accessories was not going to be a problem. The flip side was the abundance of choice and making absolutely the right selection. "Furnishing the interiors with Visionnaire's pieces was very interesting. We had to balance the traditional architecture with bespoke furniture and furnishings from our collection. That challenge was a lot of fun!" he states. Fun it must have been, because the final result is not so much a home as an ode to history and fine living—courtesy the all-access pass to Visionnaire goodies.

And what an ode it is. This three-storey house has "two kitchens, three bedrooms, the master bedroom, a main living room, a studio and six bathrooms". That's just the ground floor. The first floor has another kitchen, "a main dining room, three bedrooms, a VIP bedroom, a living room, a studio and [another] six bathrooms". And while you catch your breath, there's also a basement, with "a tavern, which is the oldest and most intact part of the house, built in the 17th century", and a TV room, a gym, a playroom, a kitchen and one bathroom. Oh yes, and a "winery, technical rooms and a garage for nine cars". The word you're searching for is colossal.

Imagine stitching together an aesthetic that makes all the spaces look like they belong together. This includes the elaborately designed guest bedrooms, the master bedroom with a lavishly rendered painting on the ceiling, the pristine minimalist kitchens, a bright white main living room, and a cosy studio room in the basement. You might not think that stark white and warm tones would work well in the same house, or that anything old would go with everything new—till you walk through these spaces, where the design flows seamlessly from one room to the next. "Some of the colours on the walls, for example in the studio, are a reproduction of the original colours that we found while doing the renovations. All put together, the general harmony of the colour schemes is remarkable," he states.

SPACE CRAFT

You'd expect that Cavalli and his team brainstormed, blueprinted and prototyped their way through this well-thought-out aesthetic that reconciles modern comfort with opulent furnishings and historic architecture. But the design for the interiors was more the result of going by intuition than a planned-in-advance variety. "Frankly, it's difficult to explain exactly what made us go ahead with certain design choices. Putting together furniture, furnishings and fixtures in different spaces was truly spontaneous, and we just went ahead with our instincts."

Still, there's something to be said for instincts honed over several decades spent building a brand that knows all about sophisticated living. So that eye-catching Visionnaire bench in the corridor leading in from the front door looks like it was meant to be placed there. As do the chandeliers and lights that look as much like art installations as functional lights. Speaking of which, art too is a prominent decor element. "We have a tradition of pairing art with our collections of furniture. We work closely with well-known artists such as Michael Astolfi and Dino della Rocca. That helped in placing perfect artworks in this home," explains Cavalli.

The design was also in not changing too much—from "preserving its wide open spaces, to restoring the murals that stand testimony to its history and tradition". Like the restored 17th-century paintings on the porch discovered during renovation, or the centuries-old fireplace in one of the living rooms, looking absolutely at home amidst contemporary furnishings. Nature too got a look-in, with Cavalli trying to bring in as much of the outside as he could, allowing him "to live with nature within the home. I spend almost eight months of the year here. The light, the silence and the smell of nature are such joys that I can't live without them anymore". This explains the open dining room that's a family favourite in the summer. Lucky for him, then, that along with the house, he also inherited a sprawling acreage consisting of two ponds with a kiddle (a type of dam, which is "pumped with water from the two ponds and irrigates all the green areas"), and a chapel (courtesy the Countess Solimeni). "I love the entire place, from the tower to the tavern."

A historic property, surrounded by greenery, on a hill—defying imagination. How could you not fall in love? ♦



GRAND ENTRANCE
The entrance corridor has a vintage table in calacatta marble and a console from the Cycas collection by Alessandro La Spada and Samuele Mazza.



(Clockwise from this picture)
CROWNING GLORY
The exterior of the house. The patio has 'Farnese' armchairs and an 'Oberto' low table by Samuele Mazza. The chandelier above the landing (between the ground and first floors) is by Philippe Montels. Alessandro La Spada and Mazza; the artwork—titled 'Crown'—is by Michael Astolfi. La Spada designed this 'Victorian' kitchen in the basement.