



# THE MASTER OF MODERN DOLOMITES

Edoardo Gellner devoted his career to the mountain landscape of northern Italy. Adam Štěch reports on his life and work







Active exclusively in the northern Italian town of Cortina d'Ampezzo and the surrounding area, the Italian architect Edoardo Gellner championed a post-war alpine modernist style that was influenced by the vernacular architecture of the mountainous Dolomite region. From the 1940s to the 1970s, he designed and built dozens of projects in the popular tourist and ski resort. Along with Charlotte Perriand in France, Franz Baumann in Tyrol in Austria, and Carlo Mollino in Valle d'Aosta in Italy, he is one of the pioneers of modern alpine leisure architecture in the 20th century.

Born in 1909 in Abbazia, a small town on the Adriatic coast of Croatia, he moved with his father to Vienna when he was fifteen years old. Here, he quickly developed his sense and passion for art and architecture, at first under the guidance of a family friend, the painter Robert Schober, and later at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in Vienna, where he encountered the Secessionist movement, the Art Deco tradition, the new modernist tendencies of Adolf Loos and the 1932

Werkbundsiedlung development. He also worked for his father's company as a design engineer and had already begun to carry out small projects, such as decorating kiosks, shops and cafés.

Gellner enrolled in the Institute of Architecture in Venice, and graduated five years later in 1946. His greatest influence during his studies was the new rector of the school, the architect Giuseppe Samonà, who was a supervisor of his final dissertation work. In 1947, Gellner decided to set up his new architectural office in Cortina d'Ampezzo, his choice of location setting the seal on the rest of his career.

The alpine environment allowed Gellner to develop his signature approach, informed by a deep interest in the organic architecture of the Venice architectural circle, which included Carlo Scarpa among others. With the APAO group (Association for Organic Architecture), Gellner played an active part in the debate on the future of Italian architecture, culminating in Frank Lloyd Wright's important visit to Venice in 1951.

Gellner's early projects included the Casa Menardi, built in 1949 for Leo Menardi, owner of the nearby Hotel Cristallo. This beautifully constructed building is designed around a central stove and uses both stone and wood in an organic manner. Gellner also at this time became deeply interested in the traditional mountain constructions of the region, his studies resulting in several publications exploring the architectural legacy of the Dolomite region that had inspired his work.

The most complex project of Gellner's early career in Cortina d'Ampezzo is the apartment building, built between 1951 and 1953, that incorporates his own apartment and studio, Cà del Cembro. This small three-floor apartment became Gellner's home for the rest of his life. The compact living plan comprises open spaces on various levels, divided from each other by ingenious built-in features: the main living room is connected through a large ceramic stove to the small dining room; raw planks of wood cover the walls and bespoke modernist furniture and lighting surround the dining table and stove, alongside custom-designed ceramic tiles, Gellner's favorite feature in his interiors. This room makes use of different levels divided from each other by several stairs, creating a



**Previous pages:** Edoardo Gellner and one of his cottages from the village at Cortè di Cadore. Above: Casa Menardi. Clockwise from main photo: Interior of Gellner's apartment and studio at Cà del Cembro in Cortina d'Ampezzo; Library and study room in Gellner's studio; Cottages on the mountainside at Cortè di Cadore; Exterior view of the apartment building at Cà del Cembro in Cortina d'Ampezzo



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Previous pages:  
Ceramic tile decoration in  
Gellner's apartment  
(left) and in one of the  
cottages at Corte di  
Cadore (right)  
These pages: The Palazzo  
delle Poste in Cortina  
d'Ampezzo (above);  
The large central  
Hall of Colonia in  
Borca di Cadore (left);  
The lobby of the  
Residence Palace in  
Cortina d'Ampezzo  
(far left); Top right: The  
Church of Our Lady of  
the Cadore, designed by  
Gellner with Carlo Scarpa

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sophisticated multi-purpose space according to the principles of Adolf Loos's Raumplan, which Gellner had explored during his studies in Vienna. The apartment is connected by a staircase to Gellner's architectural studio, kept today just as it was when he was working there.

During the same period, Gellner designed the magnificent Palazzo della Telve office building in the city centre. Covered with a monumental overhanging roof, and built of concrete, rough stones and wood, this building presents an exemplary lesson in Gellner's alpine modernism, a lesson also reflected in two residential buildings designed by Gellner in the 1960s: both the Residence Palace and Casa Giavi adapt sharp forms and traditional materials into an organic style of construction. The entrance of the Residence Palace was designed as a spacious communal interior, with a built-in fireplace, original Elettra armchairs designed by BBPR, and a handrail decorated with triangular shapes on the staircases.

Gellner undertook several hotel and tourist developments. The biggest project of his career, the village of Corte di Cadore, began in 1954 when Enrico Mattei, director of the Italian oil and gas company ENI, commissioned Gellner to design a large recreational development for his employees just a few kilometres outside Cortina. The project consisted of several venues, including a multi-purpose holiday complex for children, called Colonia, more than 280 cottages, a hotel and a church. The central complex is dominated by a large hall with sloping roof, and several pavilions spread over the mountain, all connected to each other by means of elevated corridors. Although this central holiday building is today damaged and largely neglected, other buildings in the same complex, such as the Hotel Boite, have recently been renovated, and several of the cottages, now in private hands, are also awaiting restoration. Of concrete and stone wall construction, they are topped with overhanging roofs and were furnished with Gellner's simple furniture and fittings. Of the more than 300 ceramic stoves Gellner installed at Corte di Cadore, Michele Merlo says they were:

'...produced in Brunico by the Kuntner factory, which had a centuries-old tradition of producing



ceramic stoves for castles in the Tyrol. Gellner had been working with them since his first projects in Cortina. Kuntner held fishing rights on the river near Brunico and Mattei was a keen fisherman. Gellner put them in touch so that Mattei could go fishing and eventually Kuntner made more than 300 stoves for the village of Corte [di Cadore] and for Mattei's house in Anterselva.'

The entire complex is overlooked by the Church of Our Lady of the Cadore, which Gellner designed with his friend Carlo Scarpa. This building symbolically demonstrates Gellner's connections to Venetian architectural culture and its development in a specific mountain region.

Adam Stéčh

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## Modernism in the Alps Tradition and Innovation



Climate and geography always played an important role in the creation of new 20th-century architectural styles. The modernist architecture of the Alpine regions of Austria, Italy, Switzerland and France was characterised by a strong combination of traditional materials and construction methods with new modernist ideas and solutions.



Edoardo Gellner is just one of several great architects who were active in this region. There were also Clemens Holzmeister and Franz Baumann in Tyrol; Bruno Morassutti (Le Fontanelle,

San Martino di Castrozza, left) and Angelo Mangiarotti in Trentino; Carlo Mollino, Umberto Cuzzi and Gino Levi-Montalcini in the Aosta Valley; and Henry Jacques Le Mème and Charlotte Perriand in the French Savoy Alps (Les Arcs, far left), all of whom developed specific versions of international modernism that were perfectly suited to the mountain landscape.