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RESIDENCE — Cortina

DESIGN

REALM OF THE SENSES

Weaving together scents, sights and sensations, Cà del Cembro in the Alpine town of Cortina d'Ampezzo stands as a living monument to architect Edoardo Gellner's playful mid-century modernism. We sniff out its hidden charms.

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Before she knew the first thing about architecture, Isabella Longo was aware that she didn't spend her holidays in a typical house. She was just three months old when her family first brought her from their home in Milan to the flat in Cortina d'Ampezzo where they would come for Christmas, Carnevale, crisp April weekends and long summers. She remembers noticing that the staircase smelled of rubber when she was four or five years old. "It reminded me of the Metro in Milan," she says. "I sensed that this was a strange building."

Every morning in winter, children in ski boots would stomp down the staircase, which was covered in rubber from tyre company Pirelli, and pile into a car that would whisk them off to the slopes, while the parents sat on the steps, chatting over coffee in their pyjamas. In the summertime the children would climb the hill behind the house and speed down the grass on makeshift coasters. The building was divided into several homes, each occupied by a large family. In the Longo household, two children would sleep in a bunk bed; a third took the maid's nook in the kitchen; and a fourth slept on a bed on top of the living-room hearth, which could only be reached via cupped ceramic tiles that doubled as a ladder. "It was fun climbing all over the furniture," says Longo. "For us, it was like a game."

As the children explored every corner of the house, they learnt to respect its creator, who lived right above them. At the top of the staircase was a studio and a penthouse where architect Edoardo Gellner and his wife mainly kept to themselves. "*Architetto* Gellner," says Longo. "He was like an entity."

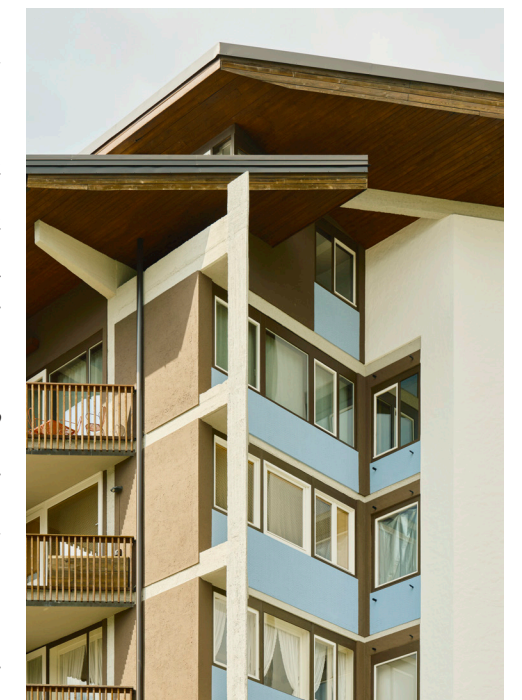
Gellner loomed large over the building, Cà del Cembro, as well as the Alpine village of Cortina. The mountain resort in the Dolomites had cemented its fame after hosting the Winter Olympics in 1956. Gellner, who lived and worked in Cà del Cembro from the 1950s until his death in 2004, oversaw much of the area's accompanying construction boom. Partly because he focused almost exclusively on this region, Gellner isn't as well known as some of his Italian contemporaries, such as Carlo Mollino or Carlo Scarpa. But with Cortina preparing to host the Winter Olympics for a second time in 2026, his buildings are once again coming under the spotlight.

Gellner was born in 1909 in Abbazia, a resort town on the Adriatic coast in what is now Croatia. His choice of profession came naturally to him. His grandfather had been a sign painter and his father an artisan who made interiors for shops and cafés, and enlisted his son as a helping hand. Gellner sat exams for the drawing and architecture courses directed by Austrian-Moravian modernist Josef Hoffman at the Kunstgewerbeschule Wien and later studied in Venice, where he befriended Scarpa. But Gellner had little interest in academia. His thesis project was a commission for a dance hall.

After the Second World War, Gellner reconnected with his family's old clients in

Abbazia and busied himself with projects in Venice, Trieste, Capri and finally Cortina, where there was plenty of work to be found designing dance floors and bars for Italy's rising class of bon vivants. One early project was a boudoir for the owner of the Hotel Cristallo, which later served as a film location for *The Pink Panther*.

By 1951, Gellner had decided to settle down in Cortina, married, found a plot of land on a slope above the old town centre and started building a home studio. The neighbours were a necessary inconvenience: by selling units on the lower floors, Gellner could finance the project and live high above the trees. The families that bought a flat off-plan placed their trust in a young, as yet fairly unproven architect with an unorthodox vision. A few years later, they moved into their apartments, which were each fitted out with custom furniture. Gellner had even picked art for the walls.



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1. Interior of an apartment at Residence Palace, built in 1956 for the Winter Olympics
2. Much of Cortina's city centre was designed by Edoardo Gellner



1. Isabella Longo and her dog, Blitz
2. Jagged staircase at Residence Palace
3. Living with a view
4. The architect's niece, Eleonora Gellner
5. High ideals in Cortina
6. Michele Merlo, founder of
Associazione Edoardo Gellner
7. Climb into bed



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Cà del Cembro looks fairly inconspicuous from outside, with its white plaster walls, timber balconies and low gable roof. But walk past the stone pine tree and the front door reveals a different story. It is panelled with undulating walnut planks, fitted together like a jigsaw, and cut through with small, brightly hued rectangles of Murano glass. These little gems seem decorative but are scattered in a way that allows them to be used as peep-holes, even by a child. It's an example of Gellner's approach to combining function and frivolity. In every flat, a large share of the space is given over to living rooms that feature flourishes such as an in-built bar cabinet, hidden behind a panel decorated with Catholic icons.

Cà del Cembro is built in a spiral, with one apartment on each landing. *Konfekt* knocks on the door at the top and is greeted by Eleonora Gellner, Edoardo's niece, who inherited the penthouse from the childless couple. "I originally just came here to fix the plumbing and sell the place but somehow ended up staying," she says. It's easy to see why. The apartment, which continues the house's stepped layout, is all soft pastel carpets and precious woods. In the open living room is a large wall, fronted by ebony cabinets covered in lacquered parchment. Up another staircase is the bedroom, which can be cordoned off with a partition door that slides shut without a hitch, even after more than 70 years. Eleonora leads *Konfekt* to the top of the spiral staircase, to a sun-bathed roof terrace from which Cortina can be glimpsed through verdant spruce trees. When the house was built, the patio was level with the treetops, so you could reach out and touch them.

The mid-20th century was a period of much activity in the Alps. From Charlotte Perriand's cascading Les Arcs apartments in Savoy to Carlo Mollino's Casa del Sole in Cervinia, the untouched landscape provided a formidable backdrop to avant-garde architecture, while also giving designers licence to soften their stance and borrow from traditional vernacular. Many of the architects were avid mountaineers and often aimed to channel a sense of speed and altitude into their work. Perriand built a Japan-inspired chalet in Méribel les Allues and used it as her year-round retreat. Mollino raced with (and photographed) Olympic skiers and created buildings and furniture that seemed to be on the point of taking flight.

Similar influences are clear at Cà del Cembro. A railing in on stairwell is made from thin wooden poles that are placed far apart, while the roof terrace is cordoned by a rickety metal railing of the kind used on boats. "This house evokes the feeling of being high up in the mountains, stepping on a ledge and knowing that you can fall," says Longo. "It gives you a sense of vertigo."

Gellner went further than his peers in his commitment to the Alpine vernacular. The young architect spent his first years in the Dolomites drawing many books' worth of sketches of traditional mountain architecture, figuring out why, for example, the

houses were oriented in certain directions in different mountain valleys (it had to do with sunlight, orography and the direction of the wind). This deep knowledge of the region's chalets informed his work, which packaged architectural innovation into buildings that also disappear into their surroundings.

A few steps down from Gellner's apartment is his studio, a room lined from floor to ceiling with drawings and architecture books on everything from Frank Lloyd Wright's early work to Japanese temples. When Gellner was building an entire holiday village in nearby Borca di Cadore for the staff of Eni, Italy's national petroleum company, its tycoon owner, Enrico Mattei, would frequently visit. "He would peer over everyone's shoulder to make sure that they were working and then sit down with Gellner for a bloody mary," says Eleonora.

Later, when Scarpa was called up from Venice to help design the village church,



he stayed in the guest room – until one day he criticised Gellner's wife's roast chicken for being too dry and was sent to sleep in a nearby motel (which Gellner had also designed). "After that, there was always a tension in the house whenever Scarpa's name came up," says Eleonora, laughing.

Today the studio is run by Cortina-born architect Michele Merlo, who was Gellner's last employee. After Gellner's death, Merlo was entrusted with keeping his office alive and founded the Associazione Edoardo Gellner to promote a legacy that can seem hidden in plain sight. The Residence Palace in the town centre, built in 1956 to house Olympic athletes, is now all private apartments and inaccessible to the public. The Villaggio Eni, which Gellner spent most of the 1960s designing, is half-abandoned.

In preparation for the 2026 Winter Olympics, some of Gellner's buildings have been renovated. For example, the monumental Palazzo Telve on Cortina's main square, long used as a post office, has been converted into a private residence. But Merlo is sceptical that the renovations can do justice to Gellner's work. "There is such a coherence between the architecture, interiors, materials and colour scheme," he says. "If you touch something, you risk ruining the whole."

Perhaps the ultimate testament to Gellner's success is that all of the original families still occupy Cà del Cembro more than 70 years on. It's here, among the where-withal of everyday life, that the best examples of Gellner's design can be found. Inside, the architect trialled many of the features that became touchstones of his style: walnut-plank walls, closed stoves with bespoke tiles, Venetian stucco walls, varnished wooden ceilings, rubber floors, a colour scheme of bright yellows, blues, dusty pinks and greens.

The residents have deep attachments to their homes. "This place has seen many of the milestones of my life," she says, sitting in the living room with her dog, Blitz. While the interiors show subtle signs of their long life (Longo points to a red-wine stain on the ceiling of her cousin's apartment two floors above, a souvenir from a particularly crammed New Year's celebration), not one apartment has been significantly altered.

That's partly because almost any change was unimaginable when the architect was still living upstairs. "He would get upset even if you wanted to trim the trees around the house," says Longo. Now, some 20 years after Gellner's death, there is an understanding that the building should not be tampered with, because the architect's attention to detail would be impossible to match.

Isabella's brother, Antonio, calls on the phone from Milan, where he is an architecture professor at the city's Politecnico. Like his sister, when he describes his childhood at Cà del Cembro (he's the one who slept in the maid's nook), he immediately brings up the scent. "Even now, when you enter a bedroom in the house, you smell resin, while in the living room it's pine," he says. "It's a house that engages the senses." — K

1. Gellner's penthouse in Cà del Cembro
2. Terrace at the top
3. Joinery devised by Gellner

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