

Villa Ada in Bagni di Lucca Is Re-born

Every year a *luogo del cuore* (place of the heart) campaign is launched by FAI, the Italian conservation body, in which people vote for a building or place worthy of protection from the ravages of time.

A friend – Rita Gualtieri – has been campaigning hard to save Bagni di Lucca's magnificent Villa Ada in the old part of the town on the hill. Now her campaign to save the villa from total neglect has finally produced remarkable results: On Saturday 30th May, at 10.30 am, the official inauguration of the restored ground floor of the villa took place. For those of us who visited the villa years ago when it stood neglected, vandalised, and slowly collapsing into ruin, this moment carried particular emotional significance. What once seemed destined to disappear into decay and oblivion is now beginning to find an assured future.

Originally a late Renaissance structure owned by the Lucchese family De Nobili, Villa Ada was completely renovated in the nineteenth century by Sir MacBean, British Consul at Livorno, when the two tall hexagonal towers were built connecting the villa's separate blocks and giving it its present characteristic appearance. The building is surrounded by a large English-style park enriched by artificial limestone caves, wrought-iron railings shaped like intertwined branches, and other elements of garden ornamentation typical of the period. A path starting from the terrace near the villa leads to a pergola and continues towards an artificial grotto hidden amongst the greenery.

The villa, purchased in 1975 by the Municipality of Bagni di Lucca, was later used as a spa treatment establishment. Until recently the villa stood abandoned, with obvious structural problems caused by years of poor maintenance and neglect. The citizens of Bagni di Lucca, through lack of wider interest and mobilisation, had been unable to muster the number of votes required for the building to qualify for preservation funding and restoration assistance.

On a beautifully serene winter afternoon some years ago, blessed with the crystalline light that Bagni di Lucca so often enjoys in winter, I decided with two friends to investigate the interior of Villa Ada, in the spirit of urban exploration. What we encountered was a scene of profound dilapidation and melancholy abandonment – a place of fading grandeur succumbing rapidly to decay. In some rooms, parts of the ceilings had already begun to collapse.

We also saw the places where two fine eighteenth-century marble fireplaces had once stood before being brutally removed, no doubt disappearing into the sordid international black market in stolen architectural treasures.

Yet amidst the decay there remained traces of astonishing beauty. We were relieved to discover that the magnificently carved wooden balustrade of the grand staircase spanning three



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floors was still largely intact, despite the loss or damage of several finials and decorative details.

We were also thankful that many of the sumptuous marble floors remained preserved and that the herringbone terracotta floor of one of the grand salons survived, complete and remarkably beautiful beneath the dust of abandonment.

What struck me most during our exploration of the forlorn majesty of Villa Ada was not merely its size, but the sheer impressiveness of its state rooms, even stripped bare of decoration and furnishings. One could still sense the echoes of another age.

What stately occasions must once have taken place in Villa Ada's belle-époque heyday! What elegance of powdered and perfumed ladies descending the monumental staircase in silk and chiffon. What waltzes, quadrilles, and polkas danced to the mellifluous sounds of a salon orchestra. What grand banquets, what glittering receptions, what delicate canapés and fine wines. What gossip, flirtations, intrigues, whispered declarations of love or betrayal, ambitions realised, and hopes destroyed within these now silent walls.

For years it seemed possible that Villa Ada would simply continue its slow descent into oblivion – another beautiful fragment of European history lost to neglect, weather, and fading memory. And yet, remarkably, the story has begun to change. At long last, that long-awaited awakening of Villa Ada has begun.

Saturday 30th May was the official inauguration of the restored ground floor of the villa and its surrounding park, followed by a reception attended by the Mayor and other local dignitaries.

Importantly, this restoration is not intended as a mere cosmetic gesture or isolated intervention. It marks the beginning of a much wider project. Villa Ada is planned to become a centre for local

associations, cultural activities, and community life – a living building once again, rather than a silent monument to abandonment. It's now part of the Progetto PINQuA, an innovative national programme concentrating on the quality of local living and environment created in order to utilize the funds made available by the European Union following the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much still remains to be done, but this is a profoundly encouraging beginning. The great staircase, the noble salons, the terraces and gardens that once echoed only with melancholy now have reason to hope again.

After years of uncertainty, Villa Ada has at last begun its journey back towards life and contributing to Bagni di Lucca's community.

– by Francis Pettitt

Francis' blog
From London to La Costa
(and Lucca and Beyond), Part 3 is at
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