In Southern Europe, the 1960s marked the beginning of a mass movement of people from the countryside to the city, which left thousands of villages deserted. According to the Spanish Department of Statistics, Spain alone has some 3,000 abandoned hamlets. Many are falling into disrepair for reasons that vary from 'who owns what' to the impracticality of living in locations so far from civilization.

Their remoteness appears to be, however, exactly what appeals to a growing number of people who are buying up villages, monastery complexes and palaces suitable for restoration and habitation. Some are individuals looking for secluded homes for themselves and like-minded enthusiasts; others are companies that regenerate derelict villages for tourism, complete with overnight accommodation. Certain estate agencies, among which Spain’s Aldeas Abandonadas (‘abandoned villages’), specialize in the sale of uninhabited settlements; an entire village can go for the price of a nice apartment in the city. Many buyers share a desire for authenticity and want to preserve the local economy and history. They are deeply committed to the rebuilding process, which often takes years and sometimes decades to complete.

In this issue, we visit eight such places in Portugal, Spain and Italy. Sanderyn Amsberg (architect and strategy consultant) and Daniel Jauslin (researcher and lecturer on landscape architecture at TU Delft) travelled south, along with photographer Ariel Huber. They spoke with the initiators of restoration projects about their plans and motivations, stayed overnight, and wrote about their experiences.
Rebuilding Ruins

Throughout Italy, the ruins of impoverished villages are being converted into luxury retreats.

Text: Sanderyn Amsberg
Photos: Ariel Huber
About five years ago Daniele Kihlgren, former philosophy student and architecture enthusiast, discovered a series of caves, some used as rubbish tips, others as hang-outs for hippies and addicts, all of them mouldy and in decay. Kihlgren had just founded Sextantio, a company with a mission: to lift the history of Italy’s poorer citizens out of anonymity and to save their culture from oblivion. He says he is “working on my own Copernican Revolu-
tion”, in an attempt to make the history of the common people the centre of attention rather than the history of the privileged. As a resident of Rome, where he lives on the Campo de’ Fiori, Kihlgren became tired of seeing his country represented only through the aesthetic lens of kings, popes and the nobility. Italy has many beautiful villages that, although not famous, are functional, cul-
tural and historically valuable. Together with an anthropologist, he decided to delve into their unknown cultural heritage and, in so doing, to restore several villages.

Matera is a town some 250 km south of Naples: if Italy is a boot, Matera is in the ball of the foot that wears it. The town’s nickname, ‘Sassi di Matera’ or ‘Rocks of Matera’, is derived from its rocky foundation and its resources. Buildings there are made of tuff and sandstone. From a distance, the great mass of white buildings rising from the craggy terrain provides an impressive view. The fascinating and somewhat strange landscape was the reason Pier Paolo Pasolini chose Matera as the setting for his 1964 film The Gospel according to St. Matthew. Forty years later, Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ was shot there too. It’s not hard to imagine Matera – narrow streets, an atmosphere of antiq-
ity – as a stand-in for old Jerusalem.

What makes Matera even more special is the number of caves in the rock formations. Even in prehistoric times, these caves were used as places of worship and as homes. They were cool and abundant, offering shelter from the summer heat at a rock-bottom price. In the winter months, cave dwellers who kept animals used their ‘pets’ as an indoor heating system. Without running water and sanitary facilities, thousands drew water from natural wells. People were still using Matera’s caves as homes in the 1950s, despite the country’s symbol of poverty and the national shame of a government led by Alcide De Gasperi’s Christian Demo-
cratic Party, which found the situation in Matera a sign of backwardness. It was then that the central government forced the cave dwellers to move, for the most part into new houses designed by reputable architects. The caves were left deserted.

After Pasolini elevated the status of the caves, they rose to fame, becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993. But the air of shame remained, and most locals avoided them. At the beginning of this century, most of the caves were still empty, but a certain amount of development was evident in the town. As tourism increased, Kihlgren made plans to lease a series of caves from the government. He had been working on the renov-
tion of Santo Stefano, a village in the Apennines, and was look-
ing for another project.

Kihlgren restored a total of 18 caves, which are now immaculate, heated, equipped with electricity (cables and ducts carefully hidden from view), and provided with Philippe Starck bathtubs and vintage furnishings acquired locally. Although not fancy; the interiors are as neat and clean as anything you would expect from a luxury hotel. To achieve this state of cleanliness without damaging the caves requires a huge effort. The caves need constant maintenance to keep the tuff walls from getting mouldy and to prevent lumps of stone from falling. The lodgings rely on underground cisterns, some of which are 10 m deep, and some of the ceilings are as high as 6 m. Holes in the tuff – and there are many – have to be kept clean. Sextantio is determined not to change the original layout of any dwelling. Additions to the caves must be made with local materials, applied by local artisans. Very few new walls have been installed, and none have been removed. Thanks to the meticulous restoration, staying in the caves is an incredible experience. The rooms offer a sense of serenity that has no connection to the world outside. There are no dividing walls or doors, no televisions and only minimal furnishings. Candle-
light is the main source of illumination.

Matera’s hotel is an example of Albergo Diffuso (hotel diffused): a hotel made up of a cluster of small dwellings or similar spaces. The origi-
nal concept – alberghi diffusi – was the brainchild of Giancarlo Dall’Ara, professor of tourism in Assisi and Perugia. He advocated the reuse of village homes in a cluster, to form a hotel, and recommended leaving the original layouts intact. The model has been adopted by many Italian hotel-
ers, as well as by Sextantio, whose hotels belong to a national association called Alberghi Diffusi.
Kihlgren restored 18 caves, which are now immaculate, heated, equipped with electricity (cables and ducts carefully hidden from view) and provided with Philippe Starck baths and vintage furnishings.
The houses of Labro encircle a hill that faces the Piediluco Lake. Stone buildings and matching cobblestone streets define the image of Labro. ‘Old cobblestones are pulverized to make mortar’

A predecessor of the Albergho Diffuso type of hotel is the medieval village of Labro, in the administrative region of Lazio. Belgian couple Ivan Van Mossevelde and Anne Van Ruymbeke, both architects, bought a cluster of houses in Labro in the 1960s, which eventually gained the status of Albergo Diffuso in 2012. While travelling in the south of Italy in 1966, Van Mossevelde and Van Ruymbeke were appalled by the architectural ‘pollution’ they saw in the coastal areas. Wanting to contribute to the preservation of what still remained of Lazio’s beauty, they looked for an unspoiled spot in need of restoration and found Labro in the mountains near Rieti. Labro was a village with a population of 70, among whom Contessa Ottavia Nobili-Vittecheschi, who was living in a hilltop castle.

The architects fell in love with the simplicity and serenity of the village and set out to save it from further decay and depopulation. With a group of friends and acquaintances from Belgium, and with the help of the countess, they purchased 40 vacant houses. They continue to buy and restore properties in the village, even today, including houses, churches and a theatre. The architects have organized several week-long field trips to Labro for Belgian students, who collect stones from the river to create new paved areas and to restore streets. Old cobblestones are pulverized to make mortar. The village is clean and well kept. It has an authentic look barely marked by improvements such as steel doorframes.

In 1989 Van Mossevelde and Van Ruymbeke bought Palazzo Crispolti and transformed it into a hotel. For a time they lived in the neighbouring house and shared a lush courtyard with the hotel. After almost 50 years of devotion to the village, however, they moved to Rieti, in part to get away from conversations that invariably turned to yet another street in need of repair. Together with Palazzo Crispolti, the architects’ former home and several other houses are now known as Albergo Diffuso Crispolti – beautiful lodgings in a carefully restored village.
Another ongoing project tackled by Sextantio is Santo Stefano di Sessanio, a fortified village at the middle of a nature reserve in the mountains of Abruzzo. In the past, the economy of the village was based on the wool of the black sheep raised there. In those days, black wool and wool-based products were popular, but a steep decline in the demand for wool eventually left the villagers with no income. When Daniele Kihlgren bought Santo Stefano di Sessanio in 2009, he was keen to do more than establish an Albergo Diffuso. He wanted to revive the village and the local economy. Besides restoring houses there, he is relying on local crafts to decorate and furnish the rooms. As in Matera, he’s using locally sourced vintage furniture, as well as blankets made in the village: a weaving loom in the common room bears witness to the legacy left by the wool industry. The only modern exception to his attempts at preservation and authenticity is a Philippe Starck bath in every room.

At Abruzzo’s Museum of the People, Sextantio discovered traditional recipes, now prepared and served at the restaurant. A tearoom offers various types of tea made from local plants, and a massage room uses local oil-based products. Various houses in the village are for sale; others belong to the Albergo Diffuso. The business model is a smart combination of the two: people who buy a house in the village can give the hotel permission to rent the house to external guests when it is not being used by the owner. Both sides profit from the deal.
Eremito Hotelito de l’Alma
Parrano | Italy
Restored by the owners

Located in a remote area of the Umbrian Apennines is Italy’s first ‘digital detox’ hotel. Eremito Hotelito de l’Alma was established by former fashion designer Marcello Murzilli, founder of the El Charro label, which demanded all his time and energy throughout the 1980s and ’90s. Fed up with the rat race, he left Milan to sail the world. Arriving in Mexico, he built one of the country’s first eco resorts. Fourteen years later, he moved back to Italy, still in search of peace and tranquillity and filled with ideas for the future. At that point he began to restore an old ruin, which is now a ‘modern-day monastery’.

The building consists of communal spaces on the ground floor and a long corridor lined with rooms-for-one upstairs. Each monastic ‘cell’ is like a well-fitted cabinet with a place to sleep, a place to sit and read, a place to wash, and a place to store clothes – everything neatly fit into a compact space that’s been designed with careful attention to detail. Shower fittings, candleholders and other accessories are of local antiqued brass, simple and beautiful. Candlelight illuminates the rooms, and solar panels provide electricity. Meals are vegetarian and consumed in silence. Classical music plays in the living room. The ambience is peaceful.

According to Murzilli, modern luxury is not found in an abundance of possessions, spaces, and experiences. In the midst of a shrinking economy and a climate crisis, he advocates the use of fewer materials, the consumption of local food and the reduction of our need for electricity. Follow these recommendations, he says, and close attention to detail becomes more important. At Eremito, he hopes you forget the architecture and hear your soul speak.