

The huge doorway to the industrial complex in northern Milan that Andrea Tognon has made over into a starkly beautiful studio and home.

In a desolate corner of Milan, an architect makes a home and studio out of a neglected industrial complex, seeking not so much to transform it — as to let it transform him.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKAEL OLSSON

THE EXAMINED LIFE



THE NORTHERN MILAN district of Bicocca is not an obvious inspiration for an architect's fantasies. Semi-industrial (but not in that noble wrought-iron way), perpetually bedraggled and largely devoid of historical significance, Bicocca is just 20 minutes from fashion's golden triangle of Via Monte Napoleone, Via della Spiga and Via Sant'Andrea, but it's as defiantly dour and dazzle-free as that area is refined and lacquered. The district's signature feature is Borgo Pirelli, an early 20th-century village of red-roofed, low-slung apartment clusters, now used as public housing, built to keep the Pirelli tire factory workers tethered to the nearby assembly line. In 2004, the company turned one of its spaces into a cavernous gallery, HangarBicocca, featuring site-specific, 82-ton Anselm Kiefer installations, but there's been no Bilbao effect, no open tap of artists streaming in searching for loft space. Change comes slowly in Italy, and the Milanese have never seen much charm in grittiness.

But it was precisely the area's rough, unromantic aura and the glacial pace of its metamorphosis that attracted the designer and architect Andrea Tognon. Known for his ability to conceive and swiftly execute boutiques for such brands as Céline, Jil Sander and Max Mara, he eschews gloss and bustle in his private life, preferring to inhabit naturally burnished spaces borne of a Zenlike patience and a sense of restraint. And so, in 2010, he moved some two miles from the conventional apartment he'd been living and working in to Bicocca to create — very, very slowly — a sui generis home and studio in an abandoned industrial office complex. On a road that taxi drivers struggle to find, where daisy-like feverfew poke through cracks in the pavement, there is not a coffee bar or a boutique, let alone a human, in sight.

If Tognon is in no hurry to greet the gentrifiers, it's because he has seen what happens when a place transforms overnight. Raised in Padua, where his father had a factory that produced custom furniture for designer showrooms, he spent much of the aughts in a studio-cum-apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, designing a slew of U.S. stores for Bottega Veneta, watching with sadness as the romantically dessicated factories that had been colonized by painters, sculptors and artisans gave way to plate-glass high-rise condos with "jam-rooms" and fire pits. He realized it was time to return to Europe. "Here," he says, in a quiet, mellifluous voice that seems of a piece with his willowy frame, "you don't worry you will wake up and it will all be washed away."

WHEN HE FOUND IT, Tognon's 40,000-square-foot property was a dumping ground so worthless that the landlord gave it to him for free, knowing it could only be improved. Behind the vast arched wall on the street side was a blocky postwar cube that once held back-office operations, and, across a haphazardly asphalted courtyard, a couple of drafty, bare-bones garage bays. Built in the 1940s and '50s, the collection of buildings had been expanded raggedly through the '70s, then abandoned 20 years ago. Most recently, a construction company had been using the site for refuse, and it was littered with detritus: rusted metal pipe fixtures protruding from the walls of the garages, leftover slats of raw wood gnawed away at the edges, postapocalyptic cement rubble.

Tognon cleared out the wreckage, but resisted the urge to gut the place. Instead, he left many of the ungainly fixtures in the garage bays. He kept the courtyard exactly as he found it, pocked with small eruptions through which seedlings had taken root, and where another architect might have opted to tear down the walls in the office space, to turn it loftlike, he did not. Mostly, he just lived in the place the way it was, making stovetop espresso in the cube's small kitchen, doing his design work, sitting outside in the courtyard, listening. In the past, he had assumed his perfect space would be "a cross



Piles of materials that Tognon is experimenting with, including marble and metal, are balanced in tableaux on shelving units. The view is to the verdant courtyard. Opposite: the bedraggled brown vinyl wall covering in a room that once likely housed bookkeepers or office workers has been painted over in soft shades. On the wall is a slashed canvas Tognon found while helping a friend redo a space adjoining Lucio Fontana's old studio; he likes to imagine it is a Fontana castoff. On the table, white onyx, pink onyx and some stones from his favorite beach in Liguria.

between Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe with a touch of Le Corbusier and a glimpse of Louis Kahn," but that was not what he heard. "You have to let the place itself tell you what needs to be done," he says. "And sometimes it takes quite a while. I think that drives a lot of people crazy?"

To gain clarity on how to proceed, Tognon employed an idiosyncratic technique he has used since childhood, a ritual both aesthetic and therapeutic: He made piles. Stacking things on top of other things, playing with contrast and balance, has always helped clarify his thinking. First, he took 20 6-by-6-inch cement "samples" left in a heap by the construction company — by law, they had to keep one from each job to prove that the material was construction grade — and placed them at intervals on the tar of the courtyard. On top of these he towered stacks of smooth stones he'd collected over the years; the effect is Carl Andre set loose in a Japanese garden. Later, he planted

succulents and wiry, Giacometti-like cacti in concrete pots of his own design that suggest decaying industrial nuts and bolts. Now, seven years in, a bushy 25-foot elm towers from a fissure in the center of the asphalt; it was a sapling when he moved in. "I just threw some coffee grounds on it and this happened," he says. "What it says to me is that things that are meant to survive, survive."

As the property started to speak to him, it became obvious that one of the garages should become a studio: Now, a half-dozen young designers sit at computers on concrete platforms under which Tognon has run hot water pipes that keep the space cozy in winter, working on such new projects as Jil Sander's Tokyo flagship, the Omega headquarters outside Bern and a lighting series made of mesh and metal tubing. The other garage remains an airy, outdoor living-and-conference area, with tables and lounging platforms made from the old metal pipe fixtures and leftover slats of wood and draped with sheepskins. All around are more delicately balanced still life piles, of materials he's considering for projects: black polystyrene with milky-white resin topped with a tiny cube of vivid blue sodalite and smooth slabs of jade onyx, resting against a block of rough blue-green concrete.

Tognon had never been too interested in color — the subtle shading of stone usually sufficed — but in Bicocca, he began experimenting. When he first took over the property, the exterior of the office building was a mildew-stained gray, but one afternoon in 2011, as he prepared for his first visit from executives at Max Mara, he decided it was time to make the place look presentable and painted it charcoal in a day. Inside, he stopped short of removing the sad brown vinyl with a raised, twine-like texture that covered the walls; instead, he painted that, too, in various muted pastels. The effect is an earthy echo of the signature veiny pale pink and gauzy green marble surfaces he has created for Céline.

Though there are now three small rooms on the second floor (the one he sleeps in contains little more than a mattress and a concrete chair of his own design), the building is still far from a traditional house: Downstairs, where office managers and secretaries once likely sat, there are, instead of a living room, tables holding more of his piled tableaux. A long shelf displays an idiosyncratic mix of objects: melancholy found photos, carvings Tognon made as a child. A small vintage oil painting of a landscape hangs on one wall. He covered most of the canvas with a rose-colored carpet sample, inspired by a poem from the 19th-century philosopher

Giacomo Leopardi about how concealment elicits imagination. In lieu of bookends, he's strapped fluorescent duct tape — hot pink, chartreuse — to the sides of étagères. When he has guests, "we hang out in the hallways," he says, which are outfitted with minimalist banquettes made of layers of felt, surplus from various jobs.

So still, lush and self-contained is the compound that sometimes Tognon doesn't leave for days or even weeks on end. On Sundays, he can often be found near the towering tree, sitting on one of his concrete lounge chairs shaded from the Milanese sun, an espresso precariously balanced on a stone beside him, sketching new designs in a cloth-bound book. "The beauty of it all is that you start to adapt to a place, and it changes you," he says. "Maybe it even changes you more than you change it." ▣

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In the garage bay used as an open-air living room, a table made from materials that Tognon tests for projects. Below: a lighting fixture by Tognon beside a banquette made from layers of industrial-grade felt. Opposite: the metal roof of one of the garage bays and fig tree branches are visible from the architect's monklike bedroom.

