

London-based landscape architect Arabella Lennox-Boyd created new gardens and refurbished much of the interior of Palazzo Parisi, her childhood home and family retreat in Italy. Her husband, Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd, designed the armillary sphere in the drawing room.

Arabella Lennox-Boyd

THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT REVITALIZES HER CHILDHOOD HOME NEAR ROME

Text by Elizabeth Lambert/Photography by Giancarlo Gardin





TOP: The west façade of the palazzo. **ABOVE:** Arabella Lennox-Boyd stands in a corner of the loggia. "It's a 70-foot-long outdoor sitting room with spectacular views of the village and Sabine hills," she says. Rattan furniture, restored by her husband, "is grouped in a casual arrangement."

Palazzo Parisi is a place where I can hear the silence," says landscape architect Arabella Lennox-Boyd. "I grew up here. The house, like the village of Oliveto, has a wonderful soul—a very Italian soul—and part of me will always belong at the top of this hill."

The palazzo is located in the Sabine hills, just north of Rome. The wind blows, and the soil is heavy clay, but the olives produce oil that is light and pure, so good that Virgil



praised it over 2,000 years ago. Lennox-Boyd calls it "the Château Lafite of oils" and remembers that one of the great treats of her childhood was sitting next to the huge olive press, holding out a slab of toasted bread to catch the first drops of the precious oil.

She is based in London but works around the world with designers of international stature—John Stefanidis, David Mlinaric and Peter Marino. She has an honorary degree and awards in England, but her

most recent award, the Premio Firenze Donna for 2005, is Italian. It pleases her to be honored in her own country.

Her father, Piero Parisi, purchased the house during World War II without having seen it. The lire was in big trouble, and investment in property was essential. When he finally got there, he didn't like it much. Village life was hard. These hills were remote—there was no electricity, no running water, not even a road to get there. "My moth-



er, my English nanny and I never minded all that," says Lennox-Boyd. "We would come from Rome for the summer, drive to a nearby hill and continue on donkeys, up and down until we got to the mill at the bottom. The miller would give us lunch, I'd swim in the millpond, and we'd get back on the donkeys and be at the house before dark.

"The house was lit by candles. Women from the village brought water in large copper containers carried on top of

their heads. I learned how to do that. Even today, if I'm carrying something heavy, my instinct is to put it on my head."

A road was finally built, but electricity took a little longer—when her father went out on Saturday evenings, he brought back ice cream packed in ice. She would stand on the balcony waiting to see the lights of his car. From that point he would be at the door in exactly 20 minutes.

He restored some of the frescoes and put in a couple of

baths, but his heart wasn't in it. It was her mother, a society beauty, who decided to abandon Rome and live there all year round. She ran the farm, kept chickens in her bedroom and took on the rustic life completely. Decoration and comfort? She couldn't be bothered. They lived in two rooms and covered dozens of others with dust sheets. "Those rooms were a bit spooky," says Lennox-Boyd, "and there were bats behind the pictures, but I never cared. I was out all day

"Mark and I decorated the rooms together," says Arabella Lennox-Boyd. "The English have a talent for making comfortable rooms," she adds, referring to her husband. **ABOVE:** Frescoes depicting heraldic crests were painted on the *billardo*, or billiard room, walls in the 19th century.

In the master bedroom, a pair of Empire curule stools with Egyptian-style embellishments sit at the foot of a Florentine bed from the same period. Artist Dominique Lacroche, the oldest of Arabella Lennox-Boyd's two daughters, restored the frescoes throughout the house.



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survive. Tree peonies did well, and the irises were fine until a badger ate them.

"The garden looks silvery against the dark hills," she says. "This can be a harsh and dour landscape. I tried to give it a softness—something it has never had—and a sense that life can be a pleasure."

It is indeed. The house is cool on a hot day; there are huge baskets of lavender at almost every door to scent the air and a comfortable chair wherever you need one. "The English instinctively know how to make rooms," she says. "They can't explain how; they just do it. Mark rearranges the furniture, and suddenly there are reading lamps in all the right places, and our mishmash of furniture from many generations—a 16th-century billiard table that has been in the same room for nearly 450 years, my grand Napoleonic bed, my parents' '30s dining table, an armillary sphere designed by Mark—all looks right together."

Though its foundations probably date from the 12th century, the palazzo was built in the 16th century for the Prince of Santa Croce, who held the fiefdom of Oliveto. It was part of the Papal States—the pope and Vatican officials dealt out justice from the courtroom that is now the billiard room. File boxes filled with decrees dating back to 1591 remain, each a treasure of fine script and red papal seals.

Little else is known of its history. There must have been battles—there always were—but the dungeons are now

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wine cellars, and the only disturbance is the murmur of village voices far below on a summer evening, a church bell or a man coming to sell peaches.

This restoration has brought the house and the village alive again. Lennox-Boyd cannot get there as often as she would like, and she makes Palazzo Parisi available for vacation rentals so the rooms do not languish, empty and silent. The "wonderful soul" that she values so deeply lives on. □



playing with my friends; the village was my extended family. There were no flower gardens—the olive trees grew right up to the house, and every bit of land was for the farm. My mother tried to grow petunias, but they blew away."

Years passed. She moved to London, studied landscape architecture, established her career and created her own acclaimed garden at Gresgarth Hall in Lancashire. She wanted to restore the palazzo but had to settle for getting the bats out, putting in some new fabrics and adding a kitchen and a few baths so that she and



ABOVE: Palazzo Parisi is at the summit of the village of Oliveto and is surrounded by olive groves. **LEFT:** An 18th-century chapel stands in the gardens, where "there is something for every season." Wildflowers bloom in the spring, and the grass is kept long until late summer.

her husband, Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd, and two daughters could stay there every summer.

Now she has done more. Much more. Half an acre of roof and all the wiring have been renewed, frescoes have been restored, and more baths have been added. Every room has been given a fresh look, and the house has been set in a landscaped garden.

She never intended to create a garden—it would be too painful to return and find the plants neglected. Then she put in a swimming pool. It needed terraces and flower borders, so she trained a good gardener, got in heavy machinery to deal with the clay and planted lavender, rosemary and wild thyme, experimenting to see what would

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Arabella Lennox-Boyd designed the gardens to blend with the natural landscape and to be easily maintained by one gardener in her absence. **LEFT:** "It's a charmingly rustic area for drinks and alfresco dining," she says of a covered patio nestled among the olive trees.

