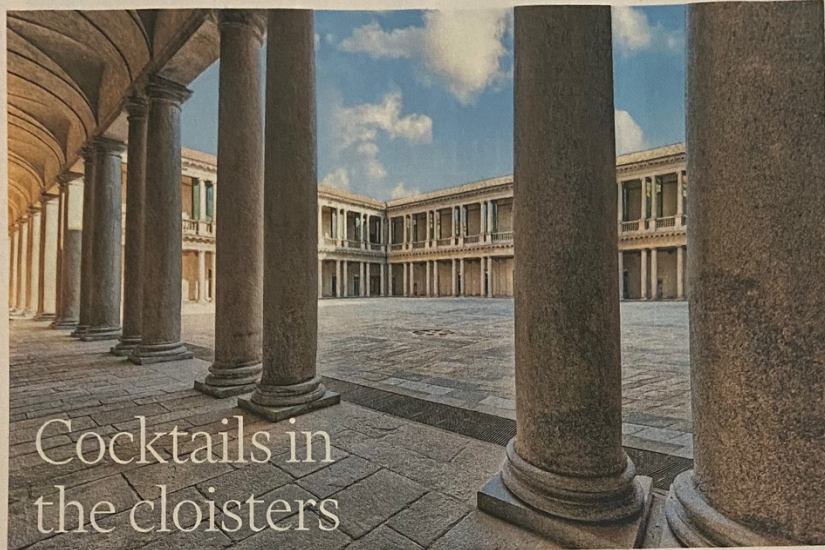


Client: Portrait Milano
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Travel

Tucked between the Corso Venezia and Via Sant'Andrea, in the heart of Milan's Quadrilatero fashion district, is a building that was one of Europe's first seminaries. It is noteworthy on several fronts: its integrity of its Late Renaissance bones; its provenance – commissioned in 1565 by Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan and leading light of the Counter-Reformation, later canonised Saint Charles; and the interventions it underwent at the hands of Piero Portaluppi, the pre-eminent architect of the city's 20th-century golden age.

But for the past 30 years the most notable thing about this erstwhile treasure of Milan's built environment was its obscurity: secreted away behind closed gates, unoccupied, it was a place few contemporary Milanese seemed to even know existed, much less had ever visited.



Cocktails in the cloisters

Milan | One of Europe's oldest seminaries has been opened to the public for the first time – with a plush hotel at its heart. By Maria Shollenbarger

That changed on December 14, when Giuseppe Sala, the city's mayor, officiated at the ribbon-cutting for Portrait Milano, the hotel-restaurant-retail complex which the seminary now houses – the culmination of a decade-long restoration project spearheaded by Leonardo Ferragamo, chairman of the Florence-based fashion and luxury goods house Salvatore Ferragamo.

The seminary's vast courtyard has been rechristened Piazza del Quadrilatero and opened to the general public for the first time, providing walking access between the neighbourhood's two main arteries. Besides the hotel, it showcases fashion boutiques and drinking-dining venues and, beginning later this year, will host art exhibitions, performances and other cultural events.

It's quite the side project for Ferragamo, who has not one but two day jobs: in addition to running global operations for the company his father founded (a role he assumed in 2021), he is chairman of Lungarno Collection, his family's hospitality portfolio, started in 1995 with the acquisition of Florence's historic Hotel Lungarno. It has since expanded to six properties, including two under the Portrait brand: one overlooking the Arno in Florence and another on Rome's Via Condotti. Portrait Milano, the Collection's seventh hotel, is leased from the Catholic Church under a 30-year agreement. It is the company's maiden foray into Italy's capital of design and fashion – and by far its most ambitious development to date.

Ferragamo and Valeriano Antonioli, Lungarno Collection's chief executive, are coy about their total spend (while Salvatore Ferragamo is listed on the Milan Stock Exchange, the Lungarno Collection is strictly a family affair). But when we meet at the hotel, the dapper Antonioli winces slightly when he admits the final tally was "much more than we wanted," citing pandemic-related business woes then delays on materials coming from eastern Europe, as a result of the war in Ukraine.

Antonioli first spotted the seminary in 2013, from the top floor of another site. "I went back to my office and mapped it on Google, and was astounded. I'd lived around the corner



Clockwise from top: the seminary's courtyard has been rechristened Piazza del Quadrilatero; one of Portrait Milano's 73 bedrooms; bathrooms feature a mix of marbles; an aerial view of the courtyard of the former seminary; the basement swimming pool; the hotel lobby

Stefano Zamboni

DETAILS

Maria Shollenbarger was a guest of the Portrait Milano (lungarnocollection.com). Double rooms cost from €335 per night including breakfast. For more on visiting the city see the tourist board website, yesmilano.it

for five years; I'd cycled past the gate [at 11 Corso Venezia] dozens of times, and I had no idea of its magnitude." He made contact with the diocese through a family friend. Initially, he says, the decision makers were "not interested in transforming" along the lines he and Ferragamo proposed (read: no way in, ahem, Hell would there be a hotel on seminary premises). But Antonioli persisted and negotiations continued for two years.

Finally they arrived at an agreement – at which point, Antonioli recalls, "They said, 'You've convinced us! But we can't go ahead with you; we have to have an open bid.'" He and Ferragamo won that, too, something Antonioli credits to their proposal's "inclusivity, which they [the diocese] cared about. We had always had the total restoration and public use of the courtyard in our plan. We used the example of the Salone [del Mobile – Milan's annual furniture fair, which sees the city welcoming the public into normally inaccessible spaces] to describe the kind of 'inclusive exclusivity' we wanted to create."

They hired architect Michele De Lucchi of Milanese studio AMDL. Circle, a 71-year-old whose CV reads a bit like a potted history of modern Italian design. He was an influential member of the Memphis movement, has been creative director at Olivetti and editor of the design monthly Domus, while designing buildings ranging from the Deutsche Bahn office in Frankfurt to NTT Group's headquarters in Tokyo.

The challenge was to translate a heavily listed ecclesiastical building into a modern host for very secular luxury services. De Lucchi describes his mandate as "intervening in an invisible but substantial way" – which meant researching the building's 400-plus-year history of demolitions and reconstructions to understand how to best accommodate exigencies like elevator banks and geothermal exchange systems. One of his interventions was to enclose the first-floor loggia with an ingenious series of sliding glass panels that sit behind the colonnade, a sleek structural element that can be used to retain heat or air conditioning.

Milan's Superintendency of Fine Arts, the civic body that oversees heritage renovations, was also heavily involved. "We worked incredibly closely with them," says Antonioli. "We spent hours – hours – sitting in chairs in the courtyard, deciding the precise shade of grey for the walls. You cannot imagine how many tones of light grey exist in this world until you have done this with the *Sorrintendenza*."

But the results seem to be pleasing those who've discovered the "piazza," now the largest one in the Quadrilatero. Throughout my two-day stay, it was constantly peppered with curious locals. In the ground-level colonnade, opposite the hotel's lobby, I went to the opening party for Antonia, a second outpost of Milan's celebrated concept store, where boutiques-within-boutiques host

rotating brands ranging from Gabriella Hearst to Courrèges. Next door is Beef-bar, the haute "street food" concept restaurant that has played well in places like Monte Carlo, Dubai and Sardinia's Costa Smeralda. Across the piazza is the flagship boutique of SO-LE Studio, the jewellery brand created by Ferragamo's daughter, Maria Sole – a space age-y room displaying her unusual, directional pieces, which often substitute leather in place of precious metals.

As well as inviting Milan in, Ferragamo and Antonioli have reckoned on the appeal of showing hotel guests around Milan. The concierges have created a series of private experiences and itineraries, most lasting between a couple of hours and a half day. I spent an educational afternoon exploring some of the city's finest contemporary buildings (including De Lucchi's own striking, wood-clad UniCredit Pavilion) with an urban-planning graduate student – an itinerary that culminated with a charming aperitivo at the Triennale, after a walk around its gallery.

With its 73 rooms and suites, the hotel itself – the largest of the three Portraits (Florence has 37 bedrooms, Rome only 14) – is the "exclusive" part of this domain. It is for the most part



successful, an undeniably stylish and comfortable hotel with a few spatial dead spots (such as the quite clinical vestibule off the main corridor) perhaps unavoidable, given the vast expanses of unalterable space to fill.

For the interiors, Ferragamo relied on longtime collaborator Michele Bonan, a relative unknown when he was tasked with renovating the Lungarno in 1995. Three decades on, Bonan's unerringly cool house style – which favours carved stone panels and varnished hard woods, collectible European mid-century furniture and the liberal mixing of marbles in bathrooms – is recognisable to anyone who has visited a Lungarno Collection hotel (or any of the beautiful JK Place hotels in Rome, Capri or Paris).

Bonan leaned into Milan's 20th-century design heritage, with specific nods to Portaluppi's Villa Necchi Campiglio, the 1935 Milanese mansion that had a star turn in Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love*. The hotel's bedrooms, on the first and second floors, mix grey *peperino*, a regional volcanic stone, with gleaming wood panelling and shelves. Velvet, piped tweed and soft leather cover sofas and chairs; doors are inset with rattan panels. The floors are larch planks – a hallmark of 18th-century Lombardian bourgeois homes, and an unexpected

The challenge was to translate an ecclesiastical building into a modern host for secular luxury services

moment of rustic *Gemütlichkeit* in an otherwise conspicuously polished whole.

Bathrooms, in contrasting combinations of marble and coloured granite, are indulgent in the extreme. Rooms on the first floor each have their own designated sitting area in the loggia, directly outside their door. Though the rattan furniture is gorgeous, and they're separated by artfully-placed palms and foliage, don't expect privacy.

At ground level, the restaurant, 10.11 (the name marries the piazza's street entrance addresses on Via Sant'Andrea and Corso Venezia) is an all-day venue in a pretty room with ceilings painted to resemble the fabric of a marquee (they took a Florentine father-daughter team of trompe l'oeil artists two weeks to complete). Overseeing it is 32-year-old Alberto Quadrio, a bit of a gamble as a relative unknown – though in lieu of a famous name, he brings a decade-plus of experience working with a lot of them, including Gualtiero Marchesi, Norbert Niederkofer and Alain Ducasse. The Mondeghili, his signature bar snack – tiny fried meatballs with a saffron mayonnaise – are worth the indulgence, though your arteries won't forgive you any time soon.

Despite the globally recognised name behind it, Lungarno Collection is a relatively tiny chain hoping to make an oversized mark here. "Until now we had six hotels, with a total of only 300 rooms – which is, like, the Principe di Savoia," Antonioli says with a laugh, citing Milan's longstanding landmark hotel.

The Portrait isn't the only new challenger in the city: last September, Venetian hospitality impresario Arrigo Cipriani opened Casa Cipriani, a hotel-restaurant-members' club, in an 18th-century building in the city's leafy Porta Venezia neighbourhood; its interiors were also designed by Bonan. Early next year Rocco Forte Hotels will take over and reopen The Carlton, another Quadrilatero stalwart, after a multimillion-euro renovation with its own raft of new restaurants and retail. Meanwhile, though, try for a room at the Portrait during the spring collections, three weeks hence, and you'll be told there's already a waiting list.