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RESIDENCE — Lake Mergozzo

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DESIGN

HIDDEN DEPTHS

A modernist cabin with vintage furnishings on the shores of a small lake in northern Italy has helped clothing specialist Hilary Belle Walker to discover a fresh view on life. She invites us into a bolthole where every detail has a story of its own.



The Mergozzo, a small, secluded lake in northern Italy, is a little-known idyll of crystalline waters surrounded by a halo of verdant mountains and taller, snowcapped peaks. There is just one small-town cluster of bright villas. Hilary Belle Walker realised that she had found something special when she stumbled on the lake in 2010 after following a friend's recommendation to try Piccolo Lago, a restaurant with two Michelin stars amid lush greenery and whose glass-walled dining room offers the kind of stunning lakefront views that can convince a person to make new life plans.

A few years later, Belle Walker was married at Piccolo Lago and, though the marriage didn't last long, the Mergozzo never lost its splendour for her. She began the search for a house there as a getaway from her Milan apartment, where she could immerse herself in nature with her daughter, Diletta Jane, and their dog ("It's a random stray mix – there might be some shepherd but also a bat and a harbour seal in there," she says).

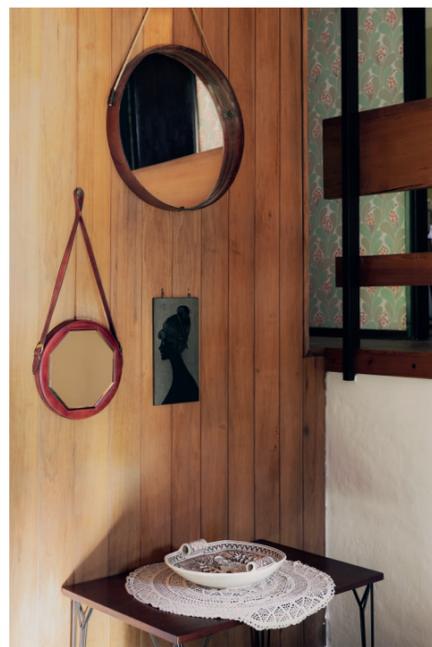
A San Francisco native who has lived in Italy for more than 20 years, Belle Walker imported an American innovation in vintage clothing to Milan when she opened Bivio, a shop in the buy-sell-trade model, where customers bring in clothes in exchange for store credit or cash. In Milan, a city full of fashion professionals and soigné inhabitants with enviable wardrobes to empty, the result is a treasure-filled boutique that has become an institution. She now operates three bustling branches and plans to expand her vintage empire with an online outlet and, once the ledgers have recovered from the hit of recent shutdowns, two more shops.

"Not everyone appreciates vintage but I've always been obsessed with the special beauty you can find in old things and the luck you feel when you find them," says Belle Walker while standing in front of her perfectly preserved 1960s modernist cabin on the shores of Lake Mergozzo, wearing a lace-bedecked Gunne Sax dress from the 1980s that looks as though it were made for her narrow frame. "I bought the house without even seeing it," she says. She found the listing online while visiting family in California so sent her then husband to inspect it.

It is one of about 10 homes on the lake with a private beach and its boxy mid-century architecture is radically different to the stately historical homes that dot its shores. Its split-level pitched roof, oversized picture windows and yesteryear interiors had remained unaltered since it was built in 1963. The original owner, whose architect brother designed the cabin, maintained its condition

"Everybody in this country has a pillow guy. You take the fabric you've found and he tells you what you can make with it. In Italy, it's still possible to make this stuff"

1. Face and the mirrors
2. Matching Missoni rugs from the 1990s



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through the years and sold it to Belle Walker with some of the original cabinets and lamps still inside. "It's pretty exciting modernism for the area," she says proudly.

For the rest of the retro furnishings, Belle Walker was primed for the hunt. "Vintage means a lot of searching – but if you like it, the search is fun," she says, pointing with delight to a pair of timeworn German dioramas framed behind glass, with instructional models of trees and leaves labelled in clean 1960s lettering. "I find flea markets the most relaxing places in the world."

Italy's online classifieds have helped Belle Walker to track down further prizes from the past, such as matching flowered Missoni rugs from the 1990s, which she managed to buy from two different owners. Shops with old stock have also turned up gems: the living room's 1960s wallpaper by a Swedish illustrator, with a strangely charming motif of children climbing trees through rain and spiderwebs; the William Morris tablecloth and throw pillows of flowered paisley found at the Silva fabric shop in Milan. "Everybody in this country has a pillow guy," she says, referring to her upholsterer. "You take the fabric you've found and he tells you what you can make with it." She leans on a custom-made checked bolster pillow as proof. "In Italy, it's still possible to make this stuff."

The living room is filled with signs of her collecting: matryoshka dolls line a shelf; a series of plates in the shape of herring are hung together like a school of fish above the window facing the lake; and ducks of ceramic, wicker and cast metal nestle in every corner. "I like to collect ducks because they're such a big part of my life here," says Belle Walker. "I see so many of them at the lake."

The house needed few changes but tweaks were necessary, starting with the installation of indoor heating and a boiler. In this paradisiacal location, the previous owner had perhaps overlooked such earthly comforts. The green tiling on the floor and wall of wood panelling in the living room stayed, despite naysaying contractors advising that it was too old-fashioned. But Belle Walker jazzed up its den-like vibe with fabric-shaded lamps by contemporary design studio Servomuto. The only room to be completely remodelled was the "totally scuzzy" bathroom. But from a renovation project at a nearby property, the new owner found 1970s tiles hand-painted with brushstrokes of lime green and even an entire set of moss-green fixtures from the same era, including a bathtub, toilet, sink and wall-mounted hidden toilet brush.



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1. Hilary Belle Walker at Lake Mergozzo
2. Balcony on the boxy cabin

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1. Wallpaper by a Swedish illustrator and a William Morris tablecloth
2. Fabric-shaded lamps by Servomuto
3. Offcuts above the fireplace
4. Throw pillow covered in fabric from the Silva fabric shop in Milan

Belle Walker highlighted the geometry of the white stucco modernist house with touches of brick-red paint on the sloping ceiling, the columns and the panels lining the terraces. The same tone reappears in a tiled sign that she installed on an outdoor patio wall, which reads “LAKE HOUSE” in a chunky font that befits the era of the building’s construction. Created by Milan-based mosaic artist Max Marcellia, whom Belle Walker met by chance while buying an antique desk, the sign now serves as the backdrop for a ping-pong table.

From the lawn, where pampas grass waves its feathery tips in the breeze in front of a row of myrtle trees that Belle Walker planted, the only other visible structure is Piccolo Lago, the restaurant that started her love affair with the lake. The rest of the view is occupied by tall, sugarloaf hills and the glassy, sapphire water.

“I try to give my daughter an analogue experience here. We draw. We have dance parties. We go on nature walks”

Following the garden path to her private beach, Belle Walker takes the granite steps she installed down to the lake’s edge. “I try to give my daughter an analogue experience here,” she says. “We draw. We have dance parties. We go on nature walks.” Maintaining the Jewish heritage she was raised with, she has hung a mezuzah (a doorpost vessel containing verses from the Torah) on the house’s doorway and instituted a Shabbat practice of banning screens for both mother and daughter during the weekly day of rest. “When I’m here for a while, I get the patience back to spend an afternoon reading a book.” A novelist before launching her Milan vintage shops, Belle Walker is now at work on a new manuscript.

The life of a foreigner, away from home and familiar society, can feel sometimes unmoored but she has carved out a haven for herself on the Mergozzo. “Not being Italian and not having roots here, it has been hard for me to find my context,” says Belle Walker. Behind her, the lake extends under a cloudless sky. “But this place has changed my life. It has become my context.” — K