



A Journey of Reclamation Reaches a Peak in Spain

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Denis Doyle for The New York Times

Debra Berger has built a career restoring buildings in the ancient town of Vejer de la Frontera, Spain.

By PAIGE WILLIAMS
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Vejer de la Frontera, Spain

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Denis Doyle for The New York Times

She painstakingly restored her own home, salvaging ceramic tiles in the dining room.

WHEN Debra Berger arrived in this mountaintop village in 1999 with one small suitcase and almost no money, it was hardly her first foreign adventure. More than 25 years earlier, at 15, she had left her native Los Angeles to pick grapes in Sicily and hitchhike across Africa, at one point living with a monkey in a Canary Islands cave. By the time she was 27 she had been living in an Italian castle for a decade with a prince, with whom she had two sons. She spent the following 15 years in California, where she reared her children, working as a translator and an actress.

Ms. Berger, who is also a ceramist and a self-taught interior designer, remodeled a few houses in Los Angeles, where she installed her signature mosaic-tile fireplaces. But it wasn't until she arrived in this ancient Spanish town of 12,700 on the Atlantic Coast of Andalusia that she discovered the ideal architectural canvas for her eclectic style. Here she has managed to build a career as an interior designer who modernizes buildings that date back centuries while honoring the region's architectural history.

It all began a year after she arrived, when James Stuart, a Scotsman who owns a tour company in Vejer, hired Ms. Berger and Bertrand Guillou, who was then her business partner, to design some of the rooms at La Casa del Califa, his new hotel on the town's main plaza.



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“A lot of designers, you go into their places and you get the feeling that everything is too ... I don’t know, designed,” Mr. Stuart said. “But Debra’s very good at knowing what works.”

“The spaces in these houses are difficult to get right,” he added, referring to the oldest homes of Vejer, “but she manages to open things up.”

Ms. Berger has since been hired to remodel the public spaces and rooms of three other hotels along the Costa de la Luz, in the windsurfing hot spot of nearby Tarifa, just across the strait from Morocco. At the Hotel Punta Sur, Ms. Berger and Mr. Guillou, who still collaborate occasionally, recently transformed a dark, outdated lobby into a chic area that draws on the seascape’s color and light and, at night, suggests TriBeCa or Miami.

Ms. Berger’s personal masterpieces, however, may be her own houses. She has renovated two old Vejer homes, including, in 2006, a four-story house embedded in an 11th-century castle wall, where she now lives.

The village’s oldest homes, stacked like blocks on the highest rise, are believed to have been built between the 10th and 13th centuries, mostly by Arab occupiers. The Moorish craftsmen who remained in Andalusia after the Catholic reconquest ended in 1492 practiced what became known as the mudéjar style of architecture and design, distinctive for its sophisticated mosaic-tile art, woodcarvings and geometric patterns. Ms. Berger draws on that aesthetic even as she imposes her own idiosyncratic vision of space and color.

“There’s a reason for rebuilding things the way they were,” she said with characteristic intensity one scorching July afternoon. “These houses were built ingeniously, with rooms that stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer. They took into account how the sun moved, how the wind blew, where the animals were.”

WHEN Ms. Berger found her current house in 2002 it was a rain-damaged cluster of adjoining dwellings owned by various members of the same family. She bought the property piece by piece over the next three years, starting with a couple of ground-floor rooms and a tiny courtyard.

To have pursued such a project as a single woman, and a foreigner, and in a language she barely spoke when she arrived, and in a country where property purchases and construction permits can be tediously bureaucratic, and in a town where it’s hard to get a wheelbarrow up the impossibly narrow streets, much less a dump truck — let’s just say Ms. Berger is a very patient, persistent woman.

“I got lucky because I ran out of money a couple of times and had to stop,” she said. “I could think about the flow, see new things.”

Of the original structure, Ms. Berger saved only the load-bearing walls, the classic terracotta roof and some of the earth-tone ceramic floor tiles, which she reused, matching them with new tiles.



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A courtyard staircase now connects a ground-floor bedroom, half-bath, kitchenette and art studio with the kitchen, dining room, loft-style den and sleeping alcove on the second floor. The master suite comprises the whole third floor, with steps to the rooftop terrace, which stretches between castle turrets and overlooks town, country and, at night, the distant lights of Tangier.



Denis Doyle for The New York Times

At the Hotel Punta Sur, in nearby Tarifa, she designed the lobby and the tiled fireplace, above, in the restaurant.

Ms. Berger found many of her materials in flea markets and secondhand shops. She bought the antique walnut kitchen doors from Gypsies on the Mediterranean coast, for what today would be about \$385. From a relics dealer she bought a cache of 1929 glass tiles in marine blues, greens and lavender and used them in the bathrooms and in the Punta Sur lobby.

An old woodworker in town hewed her kitchen's decorative ceiling beams by hand. The custom cabinetry was sanded, rubbed with white paint, resanded and waxed. Ms. Berger did much of the work herself, with a multinational crew of artisans — her favorite way to work. "Basically the secret to all these things is elbow grease," she said.

She softened the hard surfaces and the stark white walls with ethereal accent colors — teal for the shutters, ochre trim for the Moorish arches — and hired an artist to paint a seascape mural in the sleeping nook. The most inspired touches are her ceramic installations: otherworldly fireplaces, headboards and window treatments concocted of marble dust, marble lime and glue, inlaid with the mosaic tiles that she makes by hand. They look almost as if they are blooming, bringing feminine balance to what might otherwise feel like an overly linear space. "You don't want to feel like you're living in a grid," she said.

Whenever possible, Ms. Berger insists on what she calls "authenticity," and she has surprising luck in finding it. When her builders brought in a prefabricated wrought-iron railing for the loft, she decided to wait for something better. Soon, she said, she met Allen Angelo, an ironsmith who had moved his family from France to Spain by horse and buggy, living in a tepee along the way. For six months after Ms. Berger hired him, Mr. Angelo forged iron in the street outside her door. His staircase and railings — graceful swirls, stems and leaves — became the den's focal point.

Yet Mr. Angelo considers the terrace door his finest work: a three-part design of arched glass and iron with an ingenious security latch. "It makes me happy to look at it," he

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Ms. Berger said she cannot estimate the project's overall cost because it took so long and she worked in stages, using money from family investments and her freelance design work. (Though she declined to say how much she paid Mr. Angelo, she did estimate that his next staircase, for someone else, will probably cost at least 7,000 euros, or about \$9,000.)

She is not the kind of person who thinks in terms of boundaries, and she finds it difficult even to consider the square footage of the house. "Two thousand?" she said. "I don't know. It's enough. I've been happy with a lot less."

AT 49 Ms. Berger is tanned and thin, with arresting turquoise eyes. She wears Birkenstock sandals and gypsy skirts, and is prone to cryptic pronouncements, particularly on the subject of her work. When asked to discuss it, she is likely to talk about "letting go" of hang-ups, or to quote Gurdjieff or Jung or [Frank Gehry](#) or [George Bernard Shaw](#). Or she might simply wave her arms and say: "Motion! Energy! Nature! Flow!"

Her dramatic tendencies may come from her father, William Berger, an Austrian-born theater and film actor who was best known in Italy for spaghetti westerns. (Her mother, Marge, worked in fashion in Los Angeles.) After her stint of world traveling as a teenager, Ms. Berger went to Rome to live with her father, who had split with her mother years before. Through his agent she got a lead role in Marcel Carné's "Marvelous Visit" (1974) and a part in Otto Preminger's "Rosebud" (1975).

It was in Rome, at Roman Polanski's house, where she met Alessandro Ruspoli, a "playboy prince and wayward Renaissance man," as one English newspaper put it, known for inspiring "La Dolce Vita," by Federico Fellini.

Ms. Berger was 17 when she began living with Ruspoli, who was known as Dado. He was 49. "He captivated me," she said.

She and the prince shared an opium habit. Their elder son, Tao Ruspoli, 30, is a filmmaker in Los Angeles who is married to an actress, Olivia Wilde. His 2002 documentary "Just Say Know" explores his parents' and younger brother's addiction to (and recovery from) drugs, including, in his mother's case, heroin. His brother, Bartolomeo Ruspoli, 27, also lives in Los Angeles, where he works for an organization that aids homeless people and is married to Aileen Getty, an heiress to the Getty fortune.

Ms. Berger occasionally returns to Los Angeles and New York to take on interior design projects, but has been busy in Andalusia, which buzzes with new construction. In the mid-1990's you could buy a crumbling house in the old part of Vejer for \$30,000; the same house, even crumbling, would cost perhaps 10 times as much now. Fully restored houses are on the market for the equivalent of \$1 million or more.

For now, Ms. Berger cannot imagine selling. One Friday night in July she held a party for a menagerie of guests, including a British couple who own a chic guesthouse around the corner, leather artisans who own an upscale handbag shop and a Seville flamenco singer named Luis Peña and his girlfriend, Lakshmi Basile, a San Diego native and accomplished flamenco dancer.

The sun had long set beyond the lighthouse at Cape Trafalgar. The plains and distant Sierra Nevada had faded to black. Guests mingled beneath the turrets of the ancient castle wall. One of them, Lisa Jensen, a 27-year-old art student from Greenland, wandered through in amazement.

"It's like a fairy tale," she said.



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