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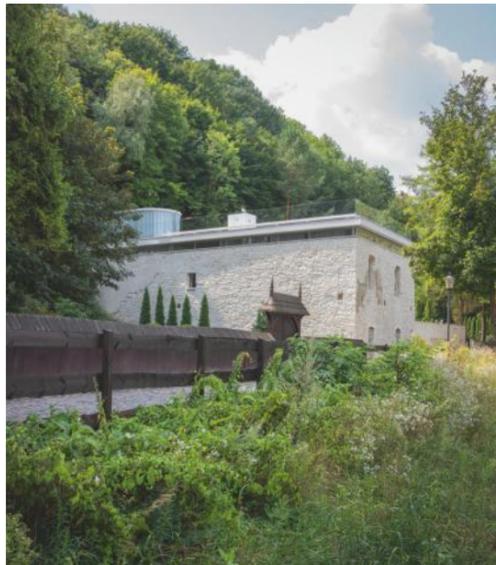
In Residence

Right, made of fibreglass and polyester resin and based on a structure initially designed for Lovegrove Studio's London office, the statement spiral staircase leads to a large rooftop terrace. Below, the terrace, which sits above the former merchant house's 16th-century limestone walls, is the only contemporary intervention that can be seen from the cobbled street.

Happy return

A Polish-born, London-based designer retraces her steps to build a unique rural hideaway

PHOTOGRAPHY: JULIUSZ SOKOŁOWSKI
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Kazimierz Dolny, a small town some 120km south-east of Warsaw and with a mere 2,500 permanent residents, is not an instantly recognisable name beyond Polish borders, but it's considered one of the country's most beautiful rural destinations. Thanks to its strategic location on the Vistula River, the town was once a prosperous grain trade centre and cultural melting pot. Today, its combination of well-preserved Renaissance architecture, numerous galleries and relaxed pace of life means it attracts thousands of tourists, particularly art lovers. Miśka Miller-Lovegrove, a London-based designer, was one of those who fell for its charms.

Polish-born Miller-Lovegrove moved to London in 1979, after graduating from the architecture school at Warsaw University of Technology. The UK was meant to be just a starting point, a pit stop in her career, but turned out to be a new home. Now, with a career that includes 30 years as a partner at Lovegrove Studio, and founding MM-L Studio in 2016, Miller-Lovegrove has a global portfolio spanning interior architecture, exhibition design and art. Collaborations with Paris-based Mathilde Bretillot have included the 2016 Somerset House exhibition 'Daydreaming with Stanley Kubrick' and the first edition of Draw Art Fair at Saatchi Gallery, in 2019, both in London. Recently, Miller-Lovegrove embarked on promoting contemporary Polish design through her Creative Project Foundation. And it is in her homeland that she chose to build her dream holiday house.

Having elected to leave Poland while it was still a Soviet satellite, Miller-Lovegrove was effectively exiled. When the Iron Curtain eventually fell, she was able to take a nostalgic journey to the places she remembered fondly from her childhood and youth. One of the towns she revisited was Kazimierz Dolny. Strolling through its cobblestone streets, she came across a picturesque, almost Piranesian, ruin. It turned out to be the remains of the fittingly named English Faktoria – a 16th-century trading post established by merchants from England. Miller-Lovegrove immediately fell in love with it and decided to acquire the dilapidated building. Following a lengthy process to resolve the property's complicated ownership, the run-down plot became hers in 2000. It took almost another two decades to transform it into her second home.

Now fully redesigned in collaboration with Warsaw-based practice Bogusławski & Partners, Lovegrove Studio's Małgorzata Benedek, and Arup's»





Above and below, a thin slab of pre-stressed concrete lifted on steel columns tops the main part of the project, which also features a west-facing floor-to-ceiling glass wall opening onto a generously planted courtyard with a small swimming pool

Sebastian Szafarczyk, English Faktoria rises from a steep slope covered in lush greenery in the western part of Kazimierz Dolny. From the outside, the architectural intervention seems rather discreet. First, Miller-Lovegrove and her team meticulously restored the historic limestone walls. Then they added two new volumes, extending the property to contain a new entrance zone and a living area, and encircled the plot with a high retaining wall. A glazed strip traces the top of the walls, separating them visually from the ceiling structure, marking the difference between old and new.

The historic part of the 494 sq m residence contains more intimate spaces, such as bedrooms, bathrooms and a studio, while the new areas house a large living space and a mezzanine. Interestingly, almost none of the individual rooms has a door, creating a relatively continuous open space. The interiors feature a restricted palette of colours (mostly shades of white and grey) and materials (limestone, marble, concrete and Corian dominate). There are very few pieces of furniture, mostly designed by Lovegrove Studio. The most spectacular spatial element, and the composition's real centrepiece, is the sculptural, nature-inspired 'DNA Staircase'. Made of fibreglass and polyester resin (and built by Delta Rafał Mikke, a company that specialises in manufacturing gliders, with the help of Lovegrove Studio's Matt Longbottom), the spiral design is an evolution of the DNA concept realised in 2005 for Lovegrove Studio's former office in Notting Hill.

Designing your own house can be a real challenge, made trickier if the design has to consolidate the seemingly irreconcilable: tradition and modernity, local craftsmanship and cutting-edge technology, privacy and openness towards nature. In Kazimierz Dolny, Miller-Lovegrove has done just that, creating a perfect retreat in one of Poland's lesser-known rural gems. ★ mmlstudio.com



It took Miller-Lovegrove almost two decades to transform the dilapidated building into her perfect retreat