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The cover of 'The Sunday Times Home' magazine, Section 8, dated November 11, 2012. The main title 'home' is in large yellow letters. Below it, the text 'WITH INTERIORS AND GARDENING' is visible. The central image shows Lord Rogers of Riverside, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark jacket, a red sweater, blue corduroy trousers, and orange shoes. He is sitting on a stone ledge by a harbor, smiling. In the background, there are colorful buildings and boats. A blue diagonal banner in the top right corner says 'Driving INSIDE'. At the bottom, a yellow banner reads 'PLUS Britain's top towns to live in ★ What will happen to house prices in 2013?'. The main headline at the bottom right says 'In memoriam' followed by 'Lord Rogers outlines his vision for restoring an Italian village and reveals the personal tragedy behind his plans P16'. A vertical credit line on the right edge reads 'Cover photograph: Niek Cornish'.

THE SUNDAY TIMES SECTION 8 | NOVEMBER 11, 2012

home

WITH INTERIORS AND GARDENING

In memoriam

Lord Rogers outlines his vision for restoring an Italian village and reveals the personal tragedy behind his plans **P16**

PLUS Britain's top towns to live in ★ What will happen to house prices in 2013?

Cover photograph: Niek Cornish



After the storm

Richard Rogers's latest project is from the heart: the architect is restoring Vernazza, his adopted second home, after a natural disaster that led to personal tragedy. **Caroline Scott** meets him

It's a balmy afternoon at the end of October, and residents of Vernazza, one of five coastal villages that make up the Cinque Terre region, in Liguria, northwest Italy, are soaking up the last rays of autumn sunshine. Tourists eat slices of focaccia from paper bags on the main square and gaze at the postcard-perfect pink and terracotta houses that hug the steeply terraced hillside.

Perched at a long table on Piazza Marconi, a weary-looking Lord Rogers of Riverside, the award-winning architect behind the Lloyd's building and the Millennium Dome, in London, and the Pompidou Centre, in Paris, bobs up and down, greeting everyone from the mayor, Enzo Resasco, to his old friend Gianni Viacava, who owns the simply furnished rooms where Richard Rogers and his family have stayed almost every summer for the past 50 years.

He has spent some of the most memorable moments of his life in this place; it cradles both his happiest memories and his saddest. His fourth son, Roo, got married on the piazza in 2004 — his wife, Ruth, who set up the River Café with the late Rose Gray, made the cake, and Viacava did the food. "It was the most wonderful day," Rogers recalls. "Roo and his new wife, Bernie, stood on the steps of the piazza and

threw sweets for the children."

Today, it's a different story. Patches of bare plaster, high above the yellow umbrellas, mark the point where, 12 months ago, an avalanche of mud and debris, washed down from the hillside by torrential rains, reached almost as far as the third-floor windows, killing three people and destroying the town's infrastructure.

The Rogerses' youngest son, Bo, 27, who'd been working in Vernazza, survived the mudslides that day, escaping over the roofs, but died after suffering a seizure 48 hours later. His mother has not felt able to come back, but, exactly a year later, Rogers is here with his cousin Ernesto Bartolini, who is also an architect, based in Florence, to present a feasibility study for the regeneration of the village.

Storms aren't unusual at this time of year — Vernazza's 500 full-time inhabitants are used to gusty winds and sudden downpours — but nobody had seen anything like this. The rain began at 3pm on October 25 and, within an hour, water was bursting from gutters and pushing up manhole covers. By 6pm, the main street had become a raging torrent and the little church of Santa Marta was underwater.

Residents watched in horror as a tornado struck the top of the mountain

behind the town, unleashing a mudslide. By the time the storm finally

let up, at 8pm, a third of the average annual rainfall had fallen, and Vernazza had been buried under 14ft of mud. It carried the school bus and even an ambulance in its wake. Houses and shops were engulfed.

The army and government rescue teams stayed for months, removing the mud and rubble with diggers. Residents were evacuated and didn't return until March this year. Ruth Manfredi, a voluble American expat who spearheads the fundraising organisation Save Vernazza, believes the true story of the disaster has not yet been told. "To begin with, I didn't understand the scale of the destruction," she says. "Then I realised, 'Oh my God, I'm standing at the top of the first floor — every single shop, every restaurant, every house is buried.'" One of the photographs shot in the immediate aftermath shows a woman digging for the roof of her house with her bare hands.

Born in Florence to Italian parents in 1933, Rogers stumbled across Vernazza in the 1960s, when he and his first wife, Su Brumwell, were newly married and penniless. "We rented a room with a simple interior above a restaurant, and I have continued to do that with my



children and now my grandchildren," he says. "The nicest thing about this place is that you practically can't touch it. And I've never wanted to. What I love is what we're doing now — having coffee on the piazza. That's my joy."

There are no luxury hotels to lure the wealthy, and as it's a Unesco World Heritage Site, there can be no new developments. It's the peace and simplicity that Rogers loves. Although he has won more gongs than perhaps any other architect — he was knighted in 1991, made a life peer in 1996 and awarded the Pritzker prize, architecture's Nobel, in 2007 — he has also weathered hair-tearing setbacks, notably the scrapping, in 2009, of his £2bn scheme for a glass and steel structure on the site of Chelsea Barracks, following intervention from the Prince of Wales.

"I've never wanted to give up architecture, but I've felt at times it's wanted to give up me," he says. He sweeps his arm across the bay, fringed with slate-roofed houses and the remains of a fort. "This is a good place to run away to."

At 79, Rogers remains an urbanite, right down to his electric blue trousers and tangerine shoes. His home in London is a £12m stucco-fronted townhouse, created in the 1980s and still contemporary today. Inside, all the walls have been knocked through, creating a cavernous, sociable central living area, with industrial steel staircases linking the floors. He is not, and has never been, "a village man".

His thoughts tumble and collide on their way out of his head, giving the impression he's in a rush to be somewhere else, but his smile lights up his face, like a Cheshire cat. "I don't feel this way about anywhere else," he says. "I don't own a country house in England, and I've never felt drawn to village life, but, although Vernazza is small, it's a very urban place — people's homes are tiny, so they live outside."

Asked for a word to sum himself up, Rogers doesn't hesitate. "Piazza — we call our living room at home 'the piazza', because there are always people moving through." He loves the concept of public space, and sees the constant coming and going as the essence of Vernazza. It's also a key part of his plans for restoring the village.

"Bo was rather good at languages

and spoke fluent Italian," Rogers says. "We adopted this place and it in turn adopted us, especially Bo. He had some social difficulties, but he was so comfortable here. He just belonged. It was a family joke that one day he'd be mayor."



For the first 24 hours after the disaster, all lines of communication were down and there was no news from Vernazza at all. Bo climbed out and went to stay with a close friend, a doctor, near Pisa.

"When I spoke to him on the phone 36 hours later, I wouldn't have guessed that he was in shock," Rogers says. "Ernesto says he was excited and overwrought, but I didn't notice that, and neither did Ruthie. We had a long talk and he said he was planning to travel home to London. The next morning, he got up to have a bath. We now know that he collapsed and drowned."

Bo was not epileptic, but he had had a fit once before. "The doctor thought it was likely to have been brought on by the tension and stress of the previous day."

Today, the gelateria on the main street remains closed; a black ribbon is taped to the window and flowers are crammed in the doorway. Its owner, Pino Giannoni, became trapped inside, and his son, Valentino, had to choose between saving his father or his wife and three-year-old child. Pino was pulled out of the door by the force of the water and swept out to sea. "Bo survived all that then drowned in a few inches of bathwater," Rogers says, shaking his head.

Rogers and Bartolini's plans for the public spaces along the main axis of the village are concerned with conservation and gentle restoration. "We're relaying what was there, bringing order rather than anything new," Bartolini says. Trees will be planted, and a new pavement created from locally sourced stone. Dotted with simple street furniture and low-impact lighting, it will feel like a fluid stone sculpture, using the same

"language" to connect key focal points. Save Vernazza has so far raised €300,000 (£250,000); Rogers estimates that €2.5m is needed to complete the work.

The response from residents has been unanimously positive. Giuseppe Usai, 50, who owns the Alumi e Formaggi food store, believes the disaster was a warning from God not to become complacent, because life here is so good. They follow Rogers, Christ-like, up the steep hill to Chiesa dei Frati, a deconsecrated church where the architect presents the plan to a packed audience before rushing back to London to spend a quiet weekend remembering Bo with family and friends.

At 3pm, the precise moment when the rain began to fall, Vernazza observes a two-minute silence to honour those who died. A private memorial service for Bo was held at the River Café in December. "We have a big family and all the kids have been fantastic," Rogers says. After five sons (the eldest three, Ben, Zad and Ab, with Brumwell) came nine granddaughters and two grandsons.

Can Vernazza ever be a happy place for the family again? He says he thinks it can. "But it's Ruthie I'm worried about. She makes me look like a blundering heavyweight." He searches for the right words. "Ruthie is up and down. She's okay, then it hits her and it's like an explosion. She describes it as a 'tsunami' of grief. I'm all right in the day, but at night, when I close my eyes, it comes to me and I can't sleep. I've come to the conclusion women are different. I can bear it somehow — I have no idea how. Ruthie can't. It's a terrible thing."

The memory of Bo will live on in the village. "Bo was the happiest person," Bartolini says. "He was jolly and enthusiastic, so full of life and vim and energy. And when he was here, he was at his most joyous, because he thought of Vernazza truly as home. He loved and was loved here. That's why it's so important that this place goes on — as he knew it and lived it."

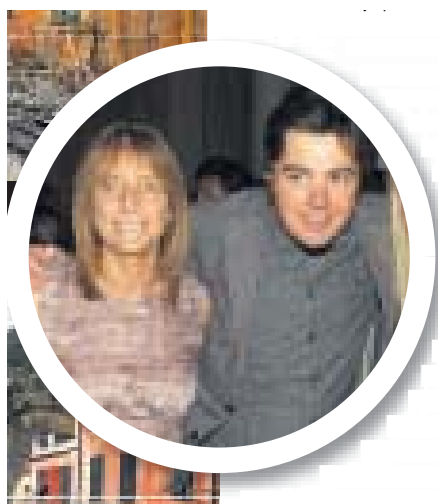
savevernazza.com

“BO WAS SO FULL OF LIFE AND VIM AND ENERGY. WHEN HE WAS HERE, HE WAS AT HIS MOST JOYOUS, BECAUSE HE THOUGHT OF VERNAZZA AS HOME”



Last autumn, a catastrophic mudslide engulfed the town. Right, Ruth Rogers with their late son, Bo

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Rogers fell in love with Vernazza in the 1960s, and kept coming back

Nick Cornish; John and Tina Reid/Getty; Alan Davidson; Tom Wallace

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