

# SCARPA CARLO



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# A B S T R A C T

Carlo Scarpa's (1906-1978) contributions to 20th century architecture are on a par with prominent modernist architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. However, comparatively sparse attention has been paid to his life and work. The aim of this research was to examine his biography, design influences, and creative output through four of his most illustrious edifices: the Palazzo Abatellis (1954), Museo Canova (1957), the Fondazione Querini Stampalia (1963) and the Brion Cemetery (1978). Information was gathered from the evaluation of various written sources combined with the critical analysis of visual accounts; photographs, architectural drawings, and Scarpa's own sketches. Drawn from a combination of both spheres of information, the conclusion is that Scarpa's esoteric position in 20th century architecture was down to his contemporarily unusual way of designing; he drew inspiration from art and architectural history, sought out dilapidated buildings to restore and repurpose, and inadvertently kept his geographical scope very narrow (almost all of his works are situated in Northern Italy). All of these things were rejected by his peers- staunch modernists- who focused solely on the present and future, driving a wedge between their work and history, and designing as internationally as physically possible. His transcendence beyond the stringent confines of what was expected of designers at the time is the sole reason for his understatement and obscurity, which must now be rectified to allow greater appreciation of his work.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

# C O N T E N T S

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Figure 5

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978) is an unjustly disregarded name in the discussion of 20th Century architecture. He was an Italian (the nationality famed for prolific artistry as far back as the Renaissance) with a career which developed in the same architecturally fertile decades as those of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Khan (both of whom his creative counterparts and personal friends). His obscurity, then, may be the result of geographical factors, the majority of his oeuvre are based within his home territory of Veneto, a north-eastern region of Italy, or his modernistically misaligned influences; Hass (2016) records: “While other Modernists jettisoned the past, his work... venerated and transformed it.”. The following piece of research aims to examine the character, portfolio, and legacy of Scarpa through the critical analysis of four of his most remarkable buildings.

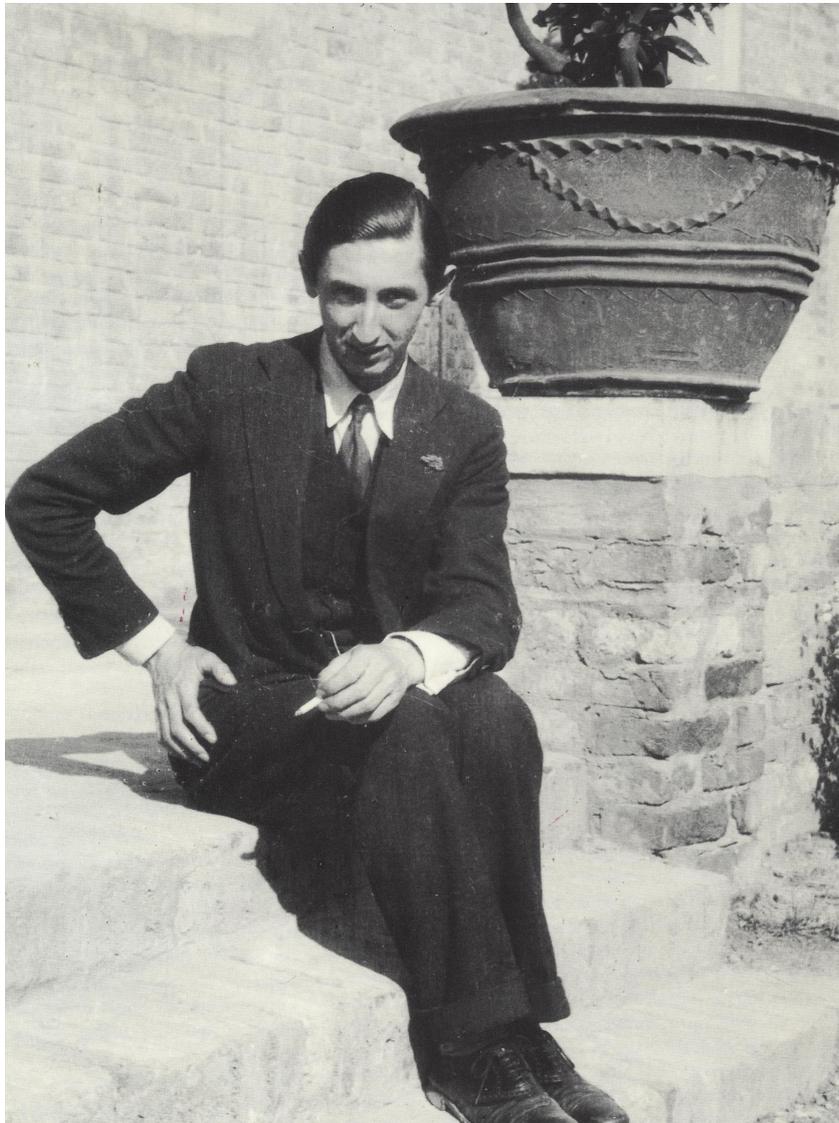


Figure 6

# B I O G R A P H Y

Through the dissection of various sources (Hass, 2016; McCarter, 2013), it is possible to create a succinct timeline of Scarpa's life. He spent much of his life in Veneto; he was born in Venice in 1906 and moved to the city of Vicenza at the age of 2. He returned to Venice after his mother's death in 1911, where he completed high school and enrolled in the Fine Arts Academy in 1920, at the age of 14. Between 1922 and 1924, while still studying, Scarpa worked as an assistant to the architect Vincenzo Rinaldo, and in 1925 began receiving architectural commissions; one in particular entrusted him to oversee the construction of industrial buildings and kilns on the Island of Murano in the Venetian Lagoon north of the city. He graduated in 1926 with a qualification in architectural design, shortly before becoming a professor of drawing and interior design at the newly established University of Venice, where he worked alongside his esteemed Academy professor Guido Cirilli.



Figure 7

He returned to Murano and became their artistic director, first under M.V.M Capellin & C (1926-1931) then under Venini & C (1932-1947). During this time, Scarpa introduced a plethora of new creative glass manufacturing techniques, for which he started to gain notoriety in the world of design (Figure 7). After leaving Murano, he fully devoted himself to architecture. His refusal to take the exam required by the government (this may have been due to political strain in the wake of the Second World War) to attain full architectural certification meant that in all his subsequent projects, he worked in tandem with a licensed architect. He died in 1978 in Sendai, Japan, from his injuries after falling down a set of concrete steps.



Figure 8

# I N F L U E N C E S

By identifying Scarpa's personal interests, one can begin to ascertain his creative influences. These include art and architectural history, Japanese design and culture, old-fashioned craftsmanship and materials, and modernist architecture. His boyhood in the city of Vicenza exposed him to 21 buildings by Palladio, famed Renaissance architect and fellow Venetian. This early introduction to architectural history was broadened by his formal education, during which he learnt how to critically decipher the great masterpieces of all periods. Venice itself was also a huge inspiration to him, as Muraben (2017) states in her article for *AnOther* magazine: "Few architects are defined by a single city as Scarpa is by Venice.". His narrow geographical scope was no doubt due to his complete contentment with his hometown, and his desire to embellish and adorn it. That did not stop Scarpa from gathering international influences, however. He revered Japan (Figure 9); in an interview in the months leading up to his final (fateful) visit to the country in 1978, Scarpa commented: "(I admire Japan's) supreme good taste. What we call good taste is present everywhere in Japan." (Jansen, 2016). Japonisme is a term used to describe the influence of East Asian aesthetics and culture in European art around the turn of the twentieth century. Through his education and leisure, Scarpa would no doubt have caught onto this romanticised view of oriental aesthetics and strove to include such themes in his designs.

Scarpa's time spent in the factories of Murano were formative for both his creative output in the manufacture of glassware and his future design process in architecture. He had burning admiration for the craftsmen and their masterful skills. This respect was mutual; Angelo Anfoldillo (a cabinet maker who worked for Scarpa) reminisced that "(Scarpa was) the only architect for whom our workmen have worked overnight without complaining." (Agon Efendiu, 2012). Linked to this was Scarpa's interest in all things well-made. Egle Trincolato, for whom Scarpa worked on the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, said of his use of materials that "all materials gained in value from his way of deploying them... (he knew how) to combine a base material with a precious one" (Agon Efendiu, 2012). In a similar vein, Stott (2019) observes: "His appreciation of craft often led him to revel in the smallest of details". While his consciousness of retrospect was broad and keen, Scarpa recognised the importance of keeping up with his modernist contemporaries to ensure his work did not fall into obscurity entirely. Like his close friends Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Khan, he embraced the stimulating new techniques and materials pioneered in the early twentieth century. The designer often said the following of himself, which I think encompasses this myriad of influences neatly: "I am a Byzantine at heart, a European sailing towards the orient" (Hass, 2016).

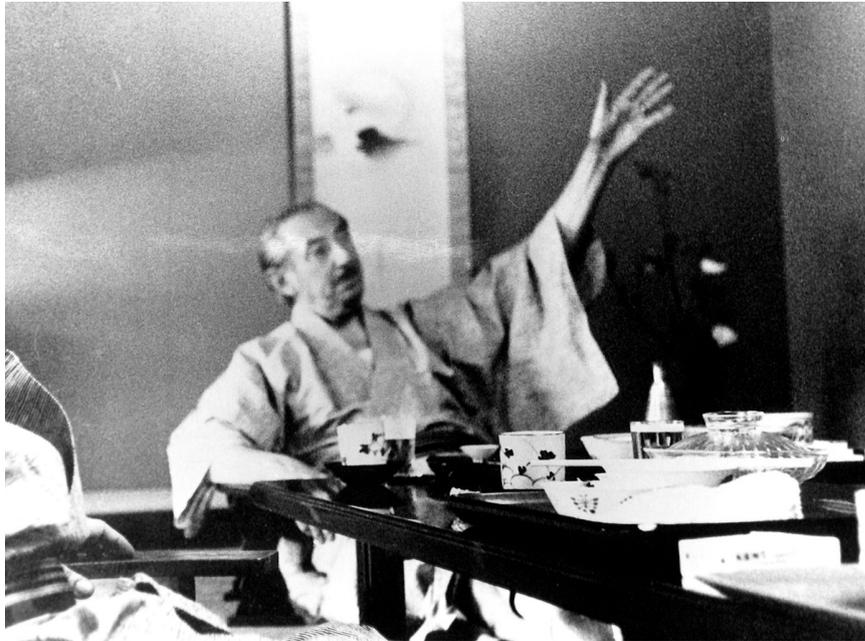


Figure 9



Figure 10

# S T Y L E

Slotting Scarpa into the history of design is deceptively simple: he is a modernist. His career sits within the period of architectural modernism (which spanned from the 1920's to 1970's), and when he built structures from the ground up, his designs bore all the trademarks of the style. They had compositions dominated by rectilinear forms, utilised innovative new materiality, including metal, concrete, sheets of glass, and whitewashed walls, and lacked any decoration. Scarpa's extension of the Museo Canova (1957) (Figure 11) could easily be the younger cousin of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1929) (Figure 12), for instance. However, what Scarpa ended up being notorious for were his oeuvre of restored and reworked historic buildings, and in these we see evidence of the aforementioned historical and cultural influences that would have sickened Le Corbusier, for they were never wholly an unadorned, white painted, poured concrete shrine to rule bound modernism. Betsky (2017) sees these hybrids "architecture as an act of cutting, peeling, stitching, and then acting as a tattoo embedded in and giving meaning to the structure that hosts its parasitic embellishments.". Though Betsky's words are brusque, they do essentialise the practice of renovation and restoration. Today, there are countless architectural firms worldwide specialising in doing what Scarpa was, arguably, the first to attempt- despite going against the grain in the age of modernism.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

## PALAZZO ABATELLIS (1954)

Scarpa's first foray into museum design was realised in the restoration of the 15th Century Gothic-Catalan style Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo, Sicily, which was badly damaged by both the ill-intentioned American bombing of Sicily in July 1943, and the well-meaning but detrimental attempts at restoration thereafter. Formerly a palace, then a monastery, upon completion of Scarpa's project it became the regional gallery of Sicily, housing multiple important renaissance artworks, as well as salvaged artefacts from the building's past. Visitors come first to the inner courtyard, where Scarpa highlighted the medieval windows by layering a white skin of rendering over the external walls. McCarter (2013, p. 62) observes that this smooth patina gives the original adornments the appearance of being hung like paintings, elevating the architectural elements on par with the art inside, where the walls and fenestration are given the same treatment (Figure 14). Furthermore, this fits with the modernist principle of minimal decoration through the use of white, while simultaneously decorating the building with its own original embellishments.

Within, the two floors are divided according to the type of art on display; the ground floor rooms are reserved for sculpture and the first floor houses paintings. Throughout the interior, Scarpa chose to keep exposed the structural ceiling beams necessary in areas of the interior which required more extensive structural restoration (Figure 13), perhaps to add another layer to the strata of the Palazzo's architectural story. The rest of the interior is occupied by displays featuring collections of religious artworks and architectural fragments. In Murray Grigor's documentary *Carlo Scarpa* (Agon Efendiu, 2012), it is observed that "museums and galleries often drain the religious significance out of art once commissioned by the church". Scarpa's deference for the building and its contents ensured that each artefact was displayed with respect and sensitivity, each one hung by or sitting atop individual modernist frameworks and mounts designed by Scarpa himself. Crafted bespoke for each piece from smoothed wood and metal, these support the ancient artefacts, reflecting the relationship between the modern beams and medieval walls above. An example of this is the column capitals and bases connected in the absence of their original shaft by a contemporary skeletal metal frame (Figure 14). This shows not only Scarpa's preoccupation with hand crafted detail, but also represents a microcosmic study of his approach to architecture. As another example of Scarpa's veneration of art history, three icons of saints are mounted on pivoting rods so the curators of the museum can turn them to face the best light at different times of the day (Figure 15), in order to allow full appreciation for the skill of the painter. Overall, Scarpa succeeds in maintaining an atmosphere of quietude and approbation appropriate to both the pieces on display and the medieval building, while ensuring their future by physically and stylistically bolstering them with modernity.



Figure 14



Figure 15

# MUSEO CANOVA (1957)

Continuing to add to his portfolio of museum design, Scarpa was commissioned to design a new wing for the Canova Gypsotecha in Possagno, Veneto. The existing Neo-Classical museum was designed by Francesco Lazzari in the mid 1800's to house the white plaster maquettes by renowned sculptor Antonio Canova, whose marble sculptures now grace museums and galleries worldwide. Scarpa's design solution was a structure grafted onto the side of the original main hall, comprised of a long corridor ('the long gallery') (Figure 19) and a great double height square box ('the high gallery') (Figure 16). While the two spaces are zoned by a difference in height, they are unified by consistent

punctuation of rectilinear windows and white rendered interior walls. Some objects are placed on armatures that sit them away from the walls, and others upon plinths, similar to those seen in the Palazzo Abatellis. These frameworks are dotted around the glossy stepped marble slabs which break up the floor, in contrast to the flat walls and ceiling. Where the original basilica space uses ash grey walls to highlight the pure white artefacts, Scarpa is recalled as reminiscing on his choice of white for the new wing, contrary to the risk of camouflaging the

maquettes: "What sort of colour would I have? Black? Impossible. It doesn't reflect at all..." (McCarter, 2013, p.109). This consideration for light permeates every design choice in this space, and as a testament to Scarpa's inimitable design solution, there are no artificial light sources: purely because they are not required. Luciano Gemin, a collaborator



Figure 16

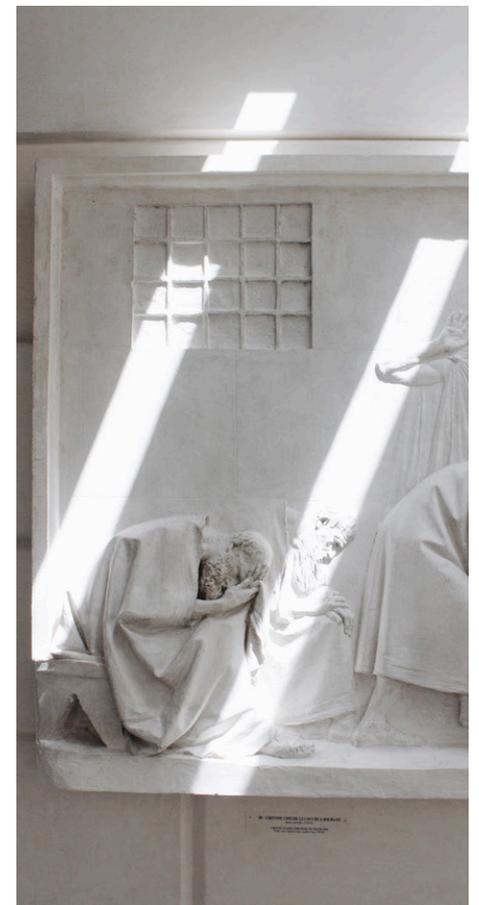


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 20



Figure 19

of Scarpa, said of the gallery: “Scarpa’s great quality was in understanding Canova as a man... It’s Scarpa’s most important work in which light is the determining factor.” (Agon Efendiu, 2012). Through the artfully placed fenestration, he harnesses the changing light of day to animate the delicately crafted features of the motionless yet dynamic actors on their marble stage. The theme of change is prevalent in Japanese art and the culture as a whole, with great symbolism and ancient customs focused on honouring the changing seasons, and it is clear that here Scarpa has considered eastern themes in that context. This is also evident in the choice of lantern windows and use of reflecting pools, in the most literal sense of the word; at the end of the long gallery, a pool outside refracts light upwards, allowing fluid illumination of the maquette of Canova’s masterpiece, *The Three Graces* (Figure 20). This is also an early example of what would become one of Scarpa’s architectural calling cards: the deliberate use of volumes of water as a design feature. The gallery bears many hallmarks of modernism; a dominant use of white, rigid composition of horizontal and vertical shapes, and planar bands of glass. It is paradoxical, then, that it provides the perfect environment in which to view these Renaissance sculptures.

# FONDAZIONE QUERINI STAMPALIA (1962)

Hass (2016) has observed that “(Scarpa) maintained a nearly religious belief that his Modernist sensibility could be braided together with (Venice’s) Gothic past and its charming, slightly askew symmetry.”, which perfectly encompasses the outcome of his design for the Fondazione Querini Stampalia. Once a townhouse owned by the Querini Stampalia family, it is now a cultural and academic research facility which houses a library and art collection.

Scarpa designed some elements of the exterior, ground floor interior, and gardens, beginning by reinstating the traditional entrance to the Palazzo via a bridge. Inside is the foyer, leading through to the porch, where thick irregularly placed stone steps lead up from the water below, which enters through geometric metal grilles (Figure 21). Behind the porch is the main exhibition room, which opens out onto the gardens, where water traverses a multitude of labyrinthine channels

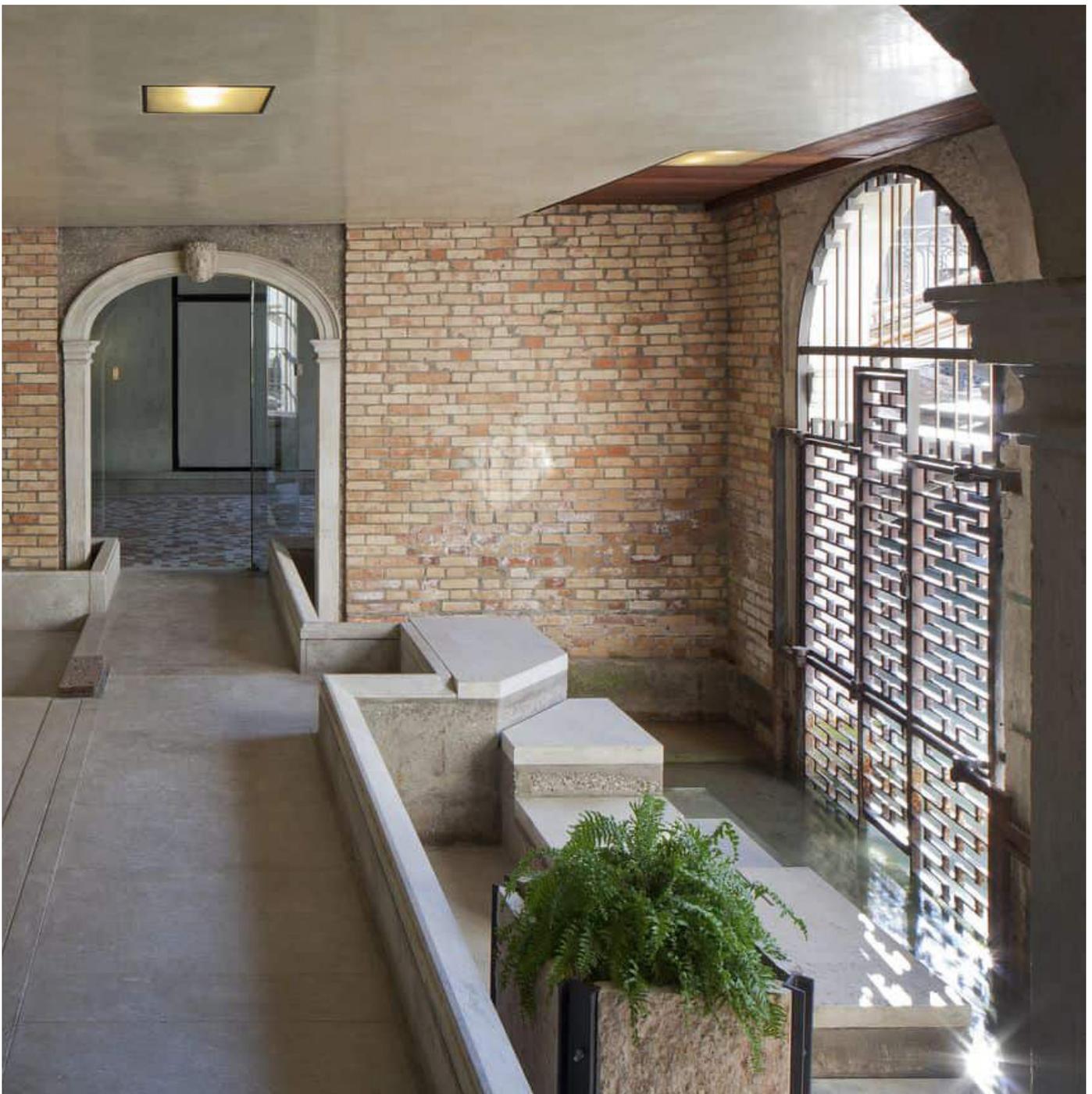


Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24

and water lily bedecked pools. Scarpa placed materiality at the forefront of this design. The new bridge immediately confronts the visitor with a cohesion of both traditional and modern materials with a visible composition of iron, stone, and timber (Figure 22). Throughout the rest of the interior, walls are lined in travertine stone, interposed with ribbed glass light fixtures and united by a brass string course (Figure 23), and outside, the water features (a “Venice in miniature” (Agon Efendi, 2012) echo again this collage of materiality, and in the words of Hass (2016) “(feel) both stark and strangely ancient.” (Figure 24). Experimenting with material collaging was about uniting Scarpa’s love for the past and the present.

Modern metal next to archaic wood and glass next to ancient stone are tangible juxtapositional marriages which Scarpa delighted in. Water exists as a theme not just tamed in the gardens, but also more volatily in the porch, where it enters with no attempt at structural resistance. When asked how he would keep the water out, Scarpa responded: “high water will be inside, as it is in the rest of the city. It is just about holding it, controlling it, using it as a bright and reflective material.” (Barba, 2016). The Fondazione Querini Stampalia is a dramatic exercise in the harnessing of water as the ultimate unharnessable material, and acts an ever-flowing homage to Venice, Scarpa’s unwavering muse.



Figure 25

# BRION CEMETERY (1978)

Referred to in Murray Giger's documentary as "one of the great enigmas of modern architecture" (Agon Efendi, 2012) and by author Sergio Polano as "a true opus magnum" (Barovier, 1998, p. 28), the Brion cemetery was a project which Scarpa spent ten years (1968 to 1978) perfecting. His restored palazzos-turned-museums were now globally recognised, and many would agree with Betsky (2017) in the following statement: "incisions, additions, and refinishing (building's) surfaces seems to have been Carlo Scarpa's fate". Scarpa shattered that expectation in his final masterwork.

The cemetery is situated in the village of San Vito d'Altivole, home to Giuseppe Brion, the founder of Milanese electronics company Brionvega. His widow, Onoria Brion, commissioned the tomb for the family's plot, a 2200sqm L shaped footprint on the perimeter of the village cemetery. The Brion site (Figure 27) is a tremendously complex collection of concrete forms, almost fortified in aesthetic, surrounded by lush vegetation and intricate systems of interconnecting water channels and pools.

The most iconic and widely photographed feature of the Brion cemetery is the entrance (Figure 25), which Scarpa dubbed the *propylaeum*, after the "similarly narrow, T-shaped entry structure to the Acropolis, Athens" (McCarter, 2013, p.242). The shape of two interlocking circles known as a Vesica Piscis are punched out from concrete of the back wall. This symbol has a myriad of religious, scientific, and cultural associations. In this context Scarpa is referring to the interlocking

states of life and death, as well as the unity of male and female; both suitable for an architectural endeavour whose fundamental purpose is to provide a resting place for husband and wife. The circles signpost two passages which lead off to the left and right. The left passage opens out over a grassy plain and great swathe of concrete, under which the bodies of Giuseppe and Onoria are enclosed within individual sarcophagi, gently inclined toward one another (Figure 29). Following on through a sunken walkway, the 'relations shrine', as Scarpa named it (McCarter, 2013, p. 259) is a monolithic edifice which houses the tombs of other family members.



Figure 26

Left again along another passageway, the visitor comes to the chapel. Inside sits an altar beneath an extruding wooden pyramidal ceiling lantern (Figure 26). Back at the entrance, the right-hand passageway leads to the meditation platform (Figure 32), a hovering box sat on four pilotti, placed on a concrete island surrounded by a large pool. Stood on the platform, one looks out over the concrete entombment, and over to the mountains of Northern Italy beyond. This project bears evidence of every one of Scarpa's key influences. Art and architectural history

is evident in the scattering of symbols present throughout the site, as well as the project's sheer monumentality, as if Scarpa endeavoured to create his own masterwork which could rival the grandeur of the Palladian buildings he grew up amongst in Veneto. Venice is paid tribute to through the use of Murano glass tiles (Figure 30) and the presence of water, which is also reminiscent of the Japanese gardens he tried feverishly to imitate in almost all of his works. Scarpa continued to test the

of material pairings; a dramatic example being the altar, which, faced in sheet bronze, appears to glow from the natural light filtered in through the yellow glass windows and the extruded wooden ceiling lantern above. He deepens the meaning of his favoured materials by utilising them in new ways; stepped ziggurats of concrete ribbing either protrude from or implant into many of the exterior walls, and their longitudinal rays of texture extend into the pools, submerged and sheened with algae (Figure 31). Finally, his keenness of modernism comes to the fore in the boundless use of concrete, rectilinear detailing, and monolithic edifices. Scarpa closed both his career and his life with Brion cemetery, and is said to have commented: “The place for the dead is a garden... I wanted to show some ways which you could approach death... other than these shoe boxes” (Prosdocimo, 2016). Scarpa demonstrated his satisfaction with this work in the most convincing way possible; by being buried on the site after his death in 1978.



Figure 28

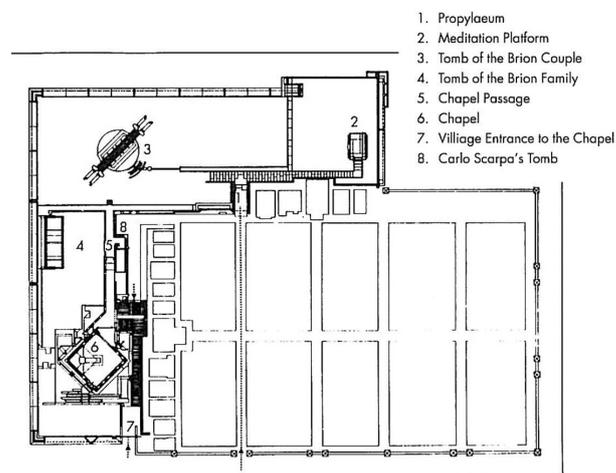


Figure 27



Figure 29

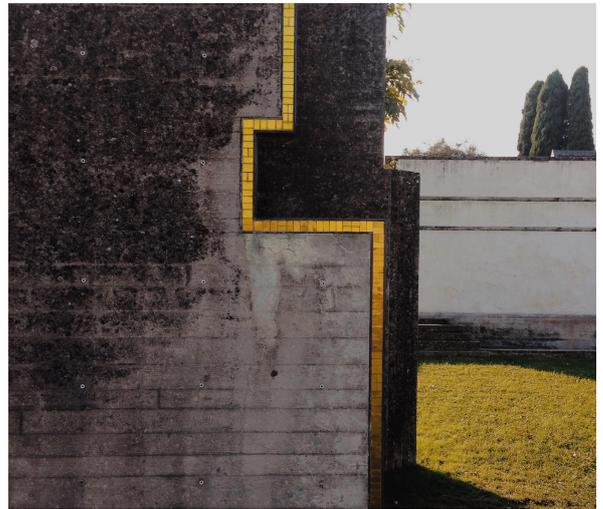


Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32

# C O N C L U S I O N

In his Scarpa monograph, McCarter surmises that “(my research) makes no claims to comprehensiveness... something that is, in fact, impossible with Scarpa’s work.”(2013, p. 7). Despite the profound depth of his creations, by piecing together his personal life and applying it to a thorough analysis of his works, one can begin to understand why he so deserves more recognition. He mastered modernism to the very same extent as his contemporaries, while simultaneously having the confidence to braid into it strands of unconventionality. His reverence for craftsmanship and preoccupation with materiality in all forms and combinations, his lingering fascination with Japan, his mastery of water as a decorative material, and finally, his brazen enthusiasm for historic buildings and their aesthetic and structural antiquity all aided him in the creation of his work. I agree with McCarter, there is much more to Scarpa’s work than can be summarized in a book, let alone a research report; but luckily, it is not about understanding it exclusively with academic appreciation, but also with human awe. In Scarpa’s own words: “If the architecture is any good, a person who looks and listens will feel it’s good effects without noticing.” (Hsu, 2017).



Figure 33

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