

The archaeological *attitude* as a design strategy

The following studies are, like others I have previously undertaken, “historical”, due to the sphere they deal with and the references they utilize; they are not, however, the work of a “historian”. This does not mean that they summarize or synthesize work which may have been done by others; they are – in one wishes to regard them from a “pragmatic” point of view – the record of a long and groping exercise, one which has often had to be revised and begun anew. It was a philosophical exercise; its stakes were to find out the extent to which the effort of thinking about one’s own history can liberate the thought of what one thinks in silence, and to allow one to think in a different way.¹



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Fragments of the Bri-
on Cemetery “a con-
temporary ruin”

With archaeological caution, the research aims to find in the practices, in the material vectors of the works or drawings, a form of tacit knowledge, a design attitude outside of a historiography, as restitution of an interpretative orientation, (in)actual and extensible methodology of analysis and design.

Rereading our architectural history, starting from the years of post-WWII reconstruction, a common thread seems to interconnect a small group of European architects who work on a Barthesian form of re-writing on the existing, a reading of the artifact (physically present or only ideal) as a critical text or, better, a proper construction paradigm.²

Lessons of balance, the works of architects such as Scarpa, Pirkionis, Lewerentz or Fehn seem to move from the fragment, from a work on the detail where each singularity participates in the organization of the organism-architecture.

Their projects seem to work seamlessly between the interior and exterior, by starting from the small scale and then rediscovering an idea of unity - perhaps more than in the overall composition of the structures - precisely in the design process or in a particular *attitude*, revealing a possible form of tacit knowledge in the “veiled messages” mostly identifiable in their drawings rather than in writings or declarations.

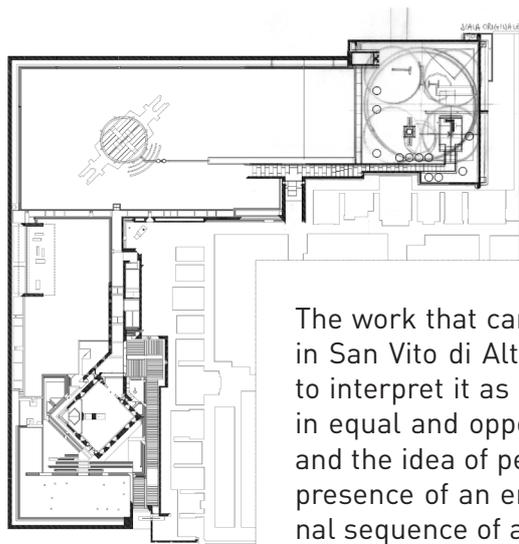
In fact, we can describe them as a generation of silent masters, who rarely published treatises and writings about their project methodology, or created “schools”, rather leaving us works and drawings as materials from which we can draw a reflection on their poetics. Even the European architectural culture, which on the one hand has exalted the great quality of the works, has often avoided dealing with a wider reflection, often relegating their works and identities to “historiographic cabinets” that have accentuated their isolation, attributing the success of their works to a particular talent or a form of genius that was impossible to imitate.

An in-depth analysis of their working method shows instead of a disciplined design coherence where, even if the work is set in motion by personal drives, a particular process of research of the origin seems to free them initially from an idea of form, subsequently found among things through a patient research.

That genius is (also) discipline can be demonstrated by investigating the work on the physical matter operated by Carlo Scarpa, architect who in Italy paradigmatically inaugurates a design practice that has as its principle a careful re-reading and re-writing on the existing, a «conscious manipulation that continuously transforms».³

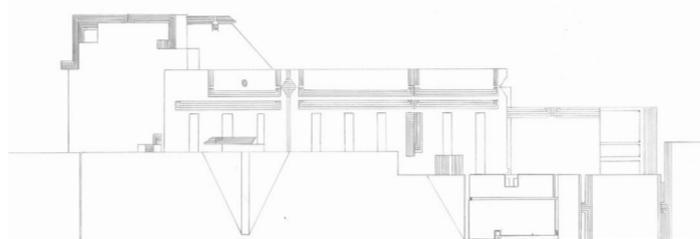
The ongoing indexing process of the huge archive of preserved drawings⁴, offers us the opportunity for a study and a reinterpretation, precisely through the drawing, of some of his paradigmatic works, allowing us to find also in detail, in its execution, the research for a *point of onset*.

1. M. Foucault, Introduction to *L'usage des plaisirs*, Editions Gallimard, 1984, 15.
2. G. Postiglione, *L'intervento sull'esistente come “ri-scrittura” dello spazio*, in *Patrimoni inattesi: Riusare per valorizzare. Ex-carceri, pratiche e progetti per un patrimonio difficile*, edited by F. Lanz, Siracusa, LetteraVentidue, 2018, 251.
3. *Ibid.*
4. The inventory work is currently being carried out by the MAXXI Architecture Archives Center (Rome, IT) which manages the Carlo Scarpa archive acquired in 2001.



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General plan and initial studies of the fronts and details



The work that can be considered the author's testament is certainly the Brion Cemetery in San Vito di Altivole (1969-78). As Paolo Portoghesi already pointed out, it is possible to interpret it as a moment of conclusion of his research, also as a form of preparation, in equal and opposite movement, for the dismissal of death through his contemplation⁵ and the idea of permanence through architecture. Thanks to the full design maturity, the presence of an enlightened client and a considerable financial availability, the exceptional sequence of artifacts and built spaces seem to be suspended between several times, born from a stratification of subsequent interventions and connected by an uninterrupted narrative.

The investigation of the initial *ideographies*, the sketches and the drawings that precede a finished draft, can possibly reveal an extensible methodology.

Moving from the fragment: the excavation

For Scarpa, to each phase of the design process corresponded a drawing method, a scale and a technique. For the initial studies the drawings were made in charcoal on heavy paper prepared according to the Beaux Arts technique of the *stretcher*, in order to allow a quick and continuous modification of the same design while keeping a trace of the previous ones.

The working method is first and foremost a selective practice that seems aimed at isolating: to the interrogation of matter corresponds a process of extraction of the detail, of the "fragment" (material or immaterial) that defines a first separation, a boundary.

The intent seems to research what Goldschmidt would define as "form-element", a paradoxical structure, both sensitive and mental, which somehow contains the *éidos*, which is produced through a «lay alongside», a «join together» and, above all, a «exhibit» and an «expose».⁶

The author seems to be tracing an excavation perimeter in preparation for his investigation campaign, as an archaeologist delimits the area by initially defining a hypothesis of the artifacts to be revealed. Drawing is, in fact, always in projection of a program of uses to be developed as a construction but, at the same time, a measure of one's own obsessions, a primordial act.⁷

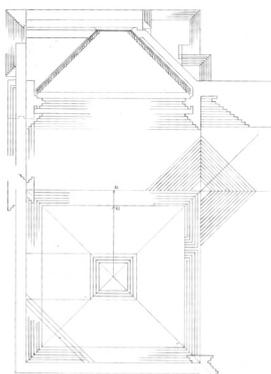
Starting from a repertoire of simple geometric shapes (the square, the circle, the rectangle, etc.) he seems to build a topography of interconnected signs, to be investigated later and of which he always keeps track during the process. From its Venetianity he «derives a perverse dialectic between celebration of form and the scattering of its parts, between the will to represent and the evanescence of the repress of its parts».⁸ In a certain way he does not take pieces from Venice but totally reconstructs his idea of the city, of relationships between spaces, paths and atmospheres. In a sense it can be seen as landscape-recall from memory that, more than to a form of contextualism, can be assimilated to what Michael Heizer's does in his *City* project, an attempt to synthesize its *lume materiale*, ancient monuments and industrial technology.

5. P. Portoghesi, *The Brion Cemetery by Carlo Scarpa*, «GA: Global Architecture», 50, 1979, 2-7: 2.

6. V. Goldschmidt, *Le paradigme dans la dialectique platonicienne*, Paris, Vrin, 1985, 53.

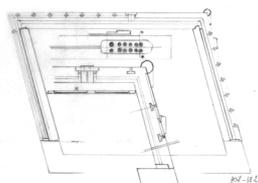
7. As in 1945 A. Giacometti wonderfully describes «In every work of art the subject is primordial, whether the artist knows it or not. The measure of the formal qualities is only a sign of the measure of the artist's obsession with his subject; the form is always in proportion to the obsession», quoted in: *Contemporary Jewish-American Dramatists and Poets: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, edited by J. Shatzky, M. Taub, Westport (CT), Greenwood, 1999, 302.

8. M. Tafuri, *Cultura e Fantasia di Carlo Scarpa*, «Paese Sera», December 3, 1978.



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Details studies of the coverage of the temple and tombs



9. S. Beckett, *Proust*, Milan, SugarCo, 1978, p. 28.

10. M. Tafuri, *Il frammento, la "figura", il gioco. Carlo Scarpa e la cultura architettonica italiana*, in *Carlo Scarpa: 1906-1978*, edited by F. Dal Co, G. Mazzariol, Milan, Electa, 1989, p. 79.

11. *Ivi*, p. 86.

12. The term refers to the way Carlo Scarpa used to call his cardboard flats.

13. B. Zevi, *Un Piranesi nato nel'900*, *L'Espresso*, January 15, 1981, 143.

14. M. Frascari, *The tell-the-tale detail*, in *VIA 7: The Building of Architecture*, edited by P. Behrens, A. Fisher, 1984, 23-37.

15. G. Zambonini, *Process and Theme in the Work of Carlo Scarpa*, «*Perspecta*», 20, 1983, 21-42: 24.

The countless tests, modifications and stratifications of drawings thus outline an aphoristic and systemic inclination, which is not in itself conclusive. That "unruly magician" that is involuntary memory⁹ has yet to elaborate the experience precisely through the trace.

As Tafuri already pointed out in his essays about Scarpa, it would indeed be wrong to speak of a fragmented architecture, with a nostalgic character, as this tendency to isolate and the regard for the artifact does not exclude his «playful game»¹⁰ with the same. It seems to be taking place, instead, through an elaborate use of geometry as a remeasuring element, a «poetic made of "figures" [...] as to indicate the traits of possible happiness even in the "time of crisis"».¹¹

The artist's initial *segnatura*, the use of the famous 5.5 x 5.5 cm module, is in this sense a form of pre-understanding of the place, not an ideal abstract, but derived from a system of proportions that is rooted on an idea of community, modulating - here with explicit reference to the LeCorbusian modulator - its dimension. Techné is *construction on* and not *creation of*; it is not the art of memory but *memory of art*.

The joint as onset point of form: the exposure

We can therefore define as an archaeological attitude, to say it with Agamben, that practice that deals not so much with a generic "origin" of things as with their *point of onset*, in the grounds of *technics*, in which the architect experiences history deconstructing its paradigms. In fact, what seems to be of interest to the architect in the subsequent design phases is precisely the interstitial, the link between the various elements arranged on the table.

Making poetry of the jointing also requires discipline. The increase in the hardness of the pencil corresponds to the use of different drawing techniques; on Scarpa's *cartoni*¹² the permanence of the different lines, erasures and overlaps highlights the history of the project. The choice of the orientation of the drawing is also fundamental as it will be the same maintained during the construction phases.

The drawings seem to be permeated by vector intentions: always aimed at resolving the details, the joints, the moldings, the architect does not work scaling down from a general drawing but, as Zevi perfectly describes «he would reverse the process, attacking with ferocious inventiveness and extraordinary tension of energy each and every detail, in order to make them signifying, in the certainty that from their dialogue and interlacement it would spontaneously spring the message of the whole».¹³

It is in this process of (re)signification of detail that formal (re)emergence is played: detail becomes the generator of architecture as «*construction* and *construing* of architecture are both in the detail. Elusive in a traditional dimensional definition, the architectural detail can be defined as the union of construction, the result of *logos* of *teckné*, with *construing*, the result of the *teckné* of *logos*. The *teckné* of the *logos* becomes the manner of production of the detailed design and *logos* of the *teckné*, which is the expression of the Venetian craftsmanship, becomes the dialectical counterpart in the physical generation of the details».¹⁴

The method used for managing of such a complexity perhaps resembles that of the drawings of small objects (certainly mastered by Scarpa given his experience in *botteghe* and ateliers in the youth years), the use of overturned sections, of different colors, layers of tracing paper, allows him total control - and codification - of the complex spatial dynamics that gradually forms, showing on paper not only what is visible but also what is behind the observer or the represented structure.¹⁵

We can extract from these *tomographies* not only a way of representing but a proper way of conceiving the project - therefore the space - in which unity will have once again to be sought in the *binder* and not in the parts, its *forming* in their polarization.



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Fragments of the Brion Cemetery

Narrative Archaeologies: History & Stories

This form of exposition, observed in its various depths, takes on narrative features precisely where the gesture, measured, becomes a sign, therefore meaning.

The drawings seem to be permeated with movement: in the technical plans or sections, permeated with an incredible number of stratified details, construction notes, human figures scrutinize the process, as a dance of references and references in which «thought and design coincide, sensations and figures overlaps».¹⁶ There is no clear final destination but a path made of attempts and uncertainties, an experimentalism where a rationalist and a pictorial-expressionist component seem to alternate. The joint becomes narrative path, making those Focillonian families of spirits close in harmonious and lasting relationship. Quoting the words of the editorial Vittorio Gregotti dedicated to the architect «there are no details in the work of Carlo Scarpa, but only constituent elements of a work, each of which proposes the whole question of architectural language at its micro level [...] its material way of being in the specific condition».¹⁷

In the design process there is a vector intention that articulates the whole in function of a moving spectator, guided through the paths - albeit with ample freedom of movement - to the contemplation of an open space inserted in the Venetian countryside.¹⁸ The restitution of a path through the context generates experience: among image and reality, it seems to dissolve the relationship between revealing what exists and transcribing a program through the project of use, an action that sets the experience in motion through the various architectural devices by activating original narrative configurations.

Thus, the forms that emerge from the basin of water in which the small Chapel is inserted seem to represent the foundations of ancient buildings in dialogue with the reflection of the built, in anachronistic continuity. Precisely through this connection, Piranesian rummaging through the ruins, that *other City*¹⁹ is slowly being built, consisting of stratifications, pieces, paths and references in which the architect has chosen to be buried. The *arché* towards which this archaeology regresses cannot be located chronologically but, precisely through this phase shift - a peculiar relationship with Time - the (personal) stories can finally enter into dialogue with History, thus managing to transform it. For the dweller, the recognition of a personal (and collective) spatio-temporal identity in order seems possible: it is art of exhibiting, of recognizing through the timelessness of what is offered to the eye.

The possibility of reading the project, of the space as a place of the gesture, allows its transmission and testimony, precisely starting from its material and its relationship with time, through its overall narration. A succession of figures populates the architect's drawings as if they wanted to scrutinize the process, try to understand how each part connects to the others by interrogating it in different ways, wanting to verify its premises. In fact the faces, the figures are «metonymically embodied»²⁰ in the artifacts, like ghosts they wander within the space using it in a poetic way, in a synchronic exchange in which man measures space, man himself coincides with the idea of space.

The lesson derived from Scarpa's work, from the observation and rereading of his drawing process, is that of a slow way of working, made of overlaps, in which the details lead to proximity and, in fact, are a way to *take care* of its users.²¹

16. F. Dal Co, *Il corpo e il disegno. Giulio Romano, Scarlo Scarpa, Alvaro Siza, «Casabella»*, 856, 2015, 53-62: 60.

17. V. Gregotti, *Carlo Scarpa, Frammenti 1926/78, «Rassegna»*, 7, 1981, 4-5: 5.

18. V. Zanchettin, *Tomba Brion, cimitero di San Vito d'Altivole (Trevi- so)*, 1970-78 in *Carlo Scarpa. Mostre e Musei 1944-1976, Case e paesaggi 1972-1978*, edited by G. Beltramini, K.W. Forster, P. Marini, Milan, Electa, 2000, 362-383: 362.

19. P. Noever, *The other city / Die Andere Stadt. Carlo Scarpa: The architect working method as shown by the Brion Cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole*, Berlin, Ernst & Sohn, 1989.

20. M. Frascari, *A New Corporeality of Architecture*, «Journal of Architectural Education», 40-2, 1987, 22-23: 23.

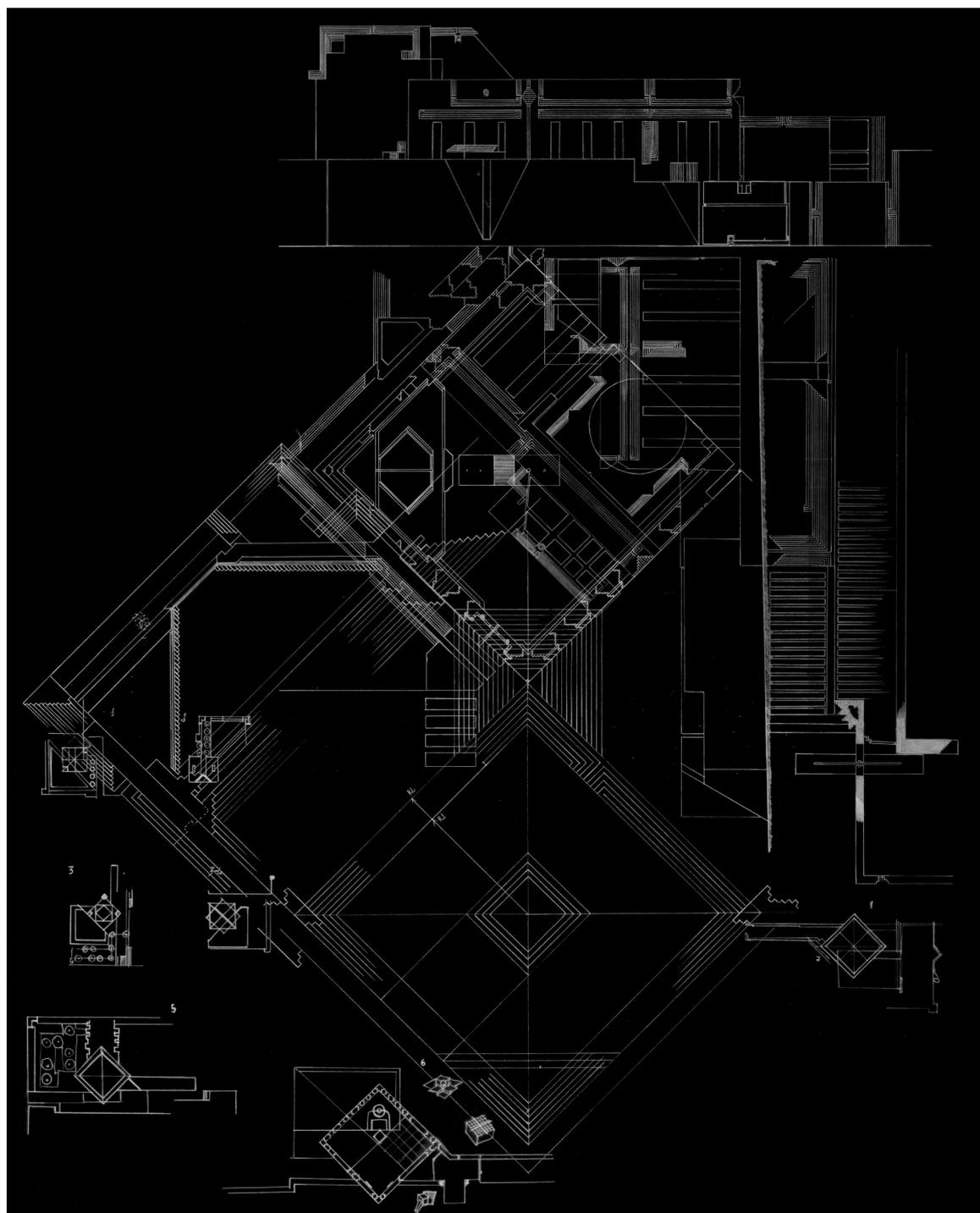
21. A. de Curtis, E. Miglietta, *Muovendo dall'interno. Il lavoro dell'architettura: contenendo, esporre*, in *Costruire l'abitare contemporaneo. Nuovi temi e metodi del progetto contemporaneo*, edited by G. Cafiero, N. Flora, P. Giardiello, Il Poligrafo, Padua, 2020, 296-300: 296.

In the same way they offer the starting point for a possible definition of a work methodology, which investigates the *chronosyntheticity* of his designs by comparing it with a series of works by contemporary masters and architects, in order to grasp the connections and, possibly, formulate a systematized work methodology proposal. The same can result in an open, inclusive process that can be used regardless of formal and stylistic choices, in its whole or in parts. A guideline therefore for that *imaginative process of thinking*²² that can make it become a responsible practice, disciplinary foundation that is established right from the tools of the practice to be investigated, a test field for decisions made beyond the single project.

— A selection of interpretative drawings will be presented during the conference in March.

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Initial analysis of the small Chapel (Tempietto), interrelations



22. J. Van Den Berghe, *The Imaginative Process of Thinking*, in *DS 66-2: Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Design Creativity (ICDC 2010)*, edited by T. Taura, Y. Nagai, 2010, 1-5: 5. available at: <https://www.designsociety.org/publication/30281/The+Imaginative+Process+of+Thinking> (last accessed: 14/02/2020)