

ELEMENTS OF CARLO SCARPA

A study of the works of Carlo Scarpa using the *Elements of Architecture* framework presented at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale

by Jason Goh

Report for Byera Hadley Traveling Scholarship 2014



Rio de l'Arsenal.

PREAMBLE

“Architecture is not in good health,”¹ laments the curator of last year’s most prestigious architecture event – the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. Indeed, pessimism is not hard to miss in the micronarratives of the 15 elements that form the exhibition *Elements of Architecture*; homogenization, unsurprisingly, seems to be a shared story amongst the elements.

By means of introduction, Rem and Co. confronts visitors with the centerpiece of the exhibition – a contemporary drop ceiling, bathed in cold blue light, suspended under the decorated Art Nouveau dome of the Central Pavilion. Once charged with symbolism, iconography, and decoration, the ceiling has evolved into a blank, generic and expressionless surface. This begs the big question: Is this it? Are we all doomed to live under the stifling monotony of these square tiles?

Of course, we mustn’t discount the efficiency, comfort and safety these standardized elements bring us, yet this sameness of elements throughout many buildings and almost throughout the modern world is reducing architecture to mere utilitarian, placeless shells. All this is not new. The increased uptake of modeling software in major architectural practices today that enables users to effortlessly ‘drag-and-drop’ standardized components into virtual models may also spur homogenization.

Hence, an identity crisis of buildings is inevitable. The common remedy is to bestow the task of expression on one single element – the façade. Yet one need not venture far beyond the grounds of Giardini to find the rich, regional works of Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978) that certainly do not suffer from such insecurities. Perhaps we could take apart his works and study his elements in isolation, in a similar fashion as the *Elements* exhibition. Perhaps we could begin seeing elements differently, and start to tinker or modify them. And perhaps the ubiquitous sameness and placelessness can be overcome one element at a time.

This study covers six key elements, i.e. the floor, wall, door, window, stair and corridor, of his handful of works from the Olivetti Showroom at St. Mark's Square to the (very) far Cemetery of Brion in Altivo. This study comprises a series of simple observations of how his elements delight and speak to us about a building's place and history. Naysayers may argue that his works are anachronistic, hardly worth examining. I beg to differ; his works are as relevant then as they are today, so long as we focus more on the principles (and less on his lavishly stunning junctions!)

City of Venice

A maze of narrow roads where one wrong turn can lead you completely astray; a network of paths that leads one in a constant circle; tiny backlanes, only wide enough for a single person to inch along, suddenly opening up into a sunlit square...²

Yutaka Saito's description, detailed as it may be, only begins to describe the at times overwhelming city of Venice. My scattered memories of the place are of experiences of wandering the labyrinthine city; of sights of old brick buildings and their reflections in the canals; of smells of seawater and of leather from a shoemaker's shop; of sounds of church bells and of lapping water; and of the feel of wind on my face while traveling down the Grand Canal on a *vaporetto*.

The culture and history of Venice is rich and vast, and any attempt to summarize it within a few paragraphs would prove to be futile. Instead, I have chosen to briefly focus on three aspects of Venice, based on observations, which make it unique from other places I have been to.

Waterways and the acqua alta

Beginning as an archipelago in the 11th century when the Romans first settled here, the landscape has undergone dramatic transformations over centuries, to give birth to the citta nobilissima that is the Venice we see today.³ At present, water transportation remains the dominant mode of travel and takes the form of waterbuses (*vaporetto*),

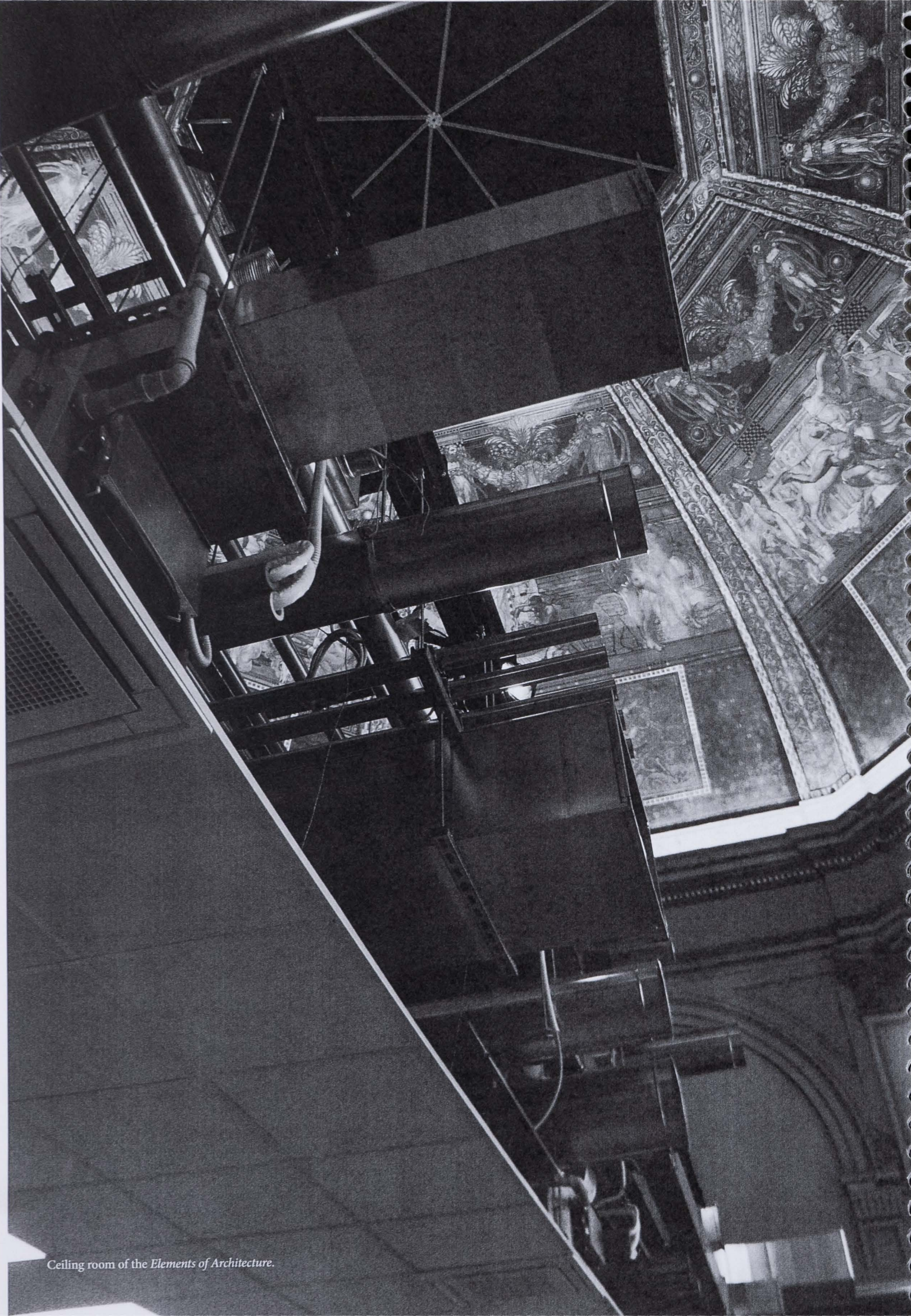
water taxis, and gondolas. Important buildings or houses owned by noble Venetian families line the Grand Canal, offering a dazzling architectural feast. Because Venice is built at water level without embankments between the water and pavement levels, the city is often flooded by *aqua alta* or tidal surges that reduces trafficable land to basic, elevated platforms. It is this unique land-water relationship from which Venice derives its identity and charm.

Layered histories, layered buildings

As a bridge between East and West, Venice's commercial power was unrivalled in the 13th century. With trade comes stylistic influences from abroad and what results is a uniquely Venetian architectural style born of the fusion of both Byzantine and Islamic forms overlaid on a Latin Christian foundation.⁴ Venice was also, for centuries, one of the most populated cities, even overtaking Rome at one point.⁵ To satisfy the demand for housing, old buildings were enlarged, new floors were added, and new buildings were built on newly reclaimed lands. This piecemeal development that coincided with stylistic changes as Venice rose to become a maritime empire has produced the historically rich and layered urban fabric that we see today.

Rich materiality & craft

Being the trading crossroads of the Mediterranean, Venice received supplies of spice, silk, precious stones, iron, tin, copper, wood, hides and cloths from Western and Eastern tradesmen.⁶ The upper classes of Venice, wanting to show off their wealth and social status, would adorn their buildings with materials acquired from international trade. Floors are paved with sumptuous stones and walls covered with silk and textiles. Variety in materials coupled with a long history in crafts such as glass making, terrazzo laying, *marmorino* wall coating, fresco painting etc. diversifies and enriches the architecture of Venice.



Ceiling room of the *Elements of Architecture*.

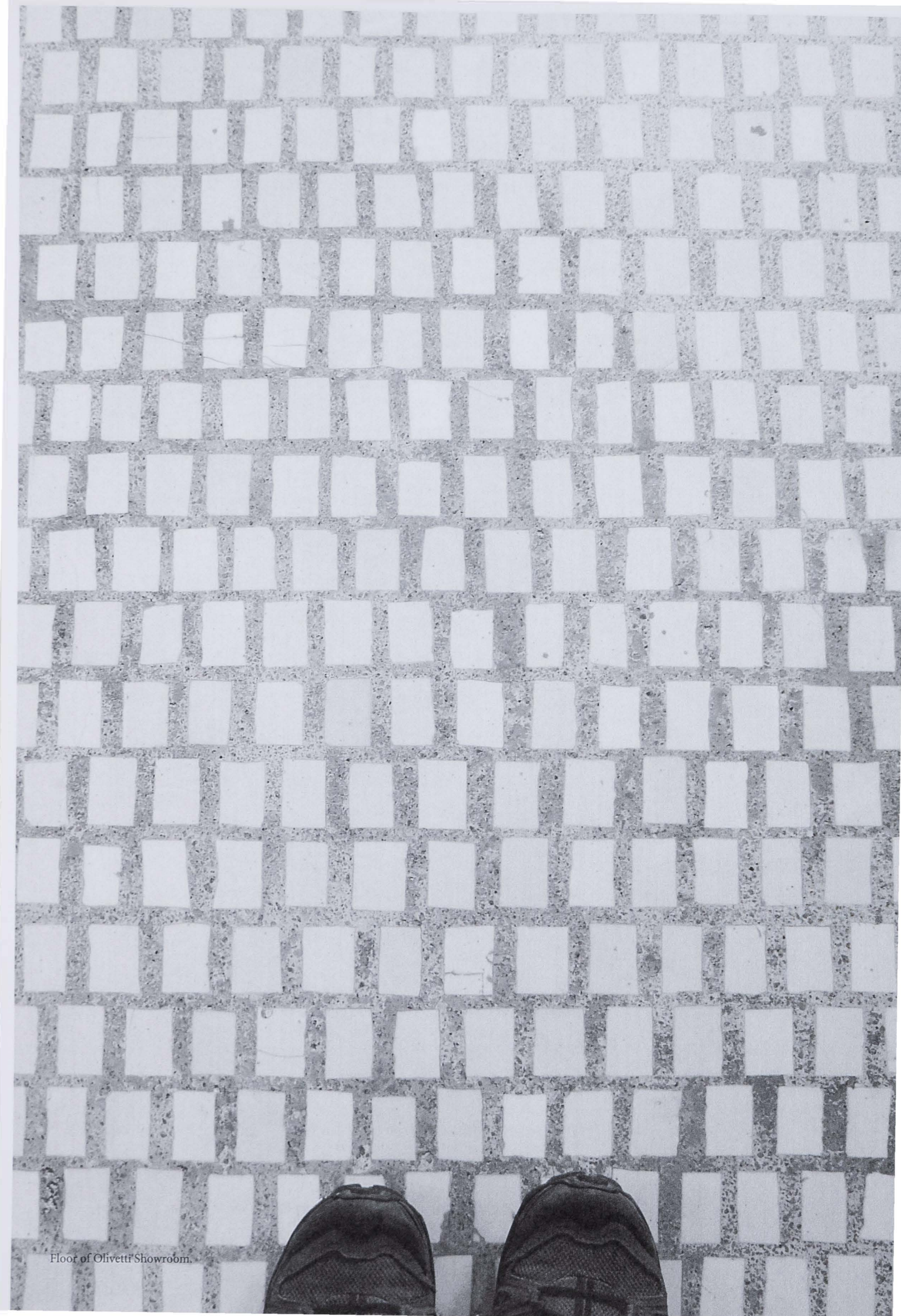
The Elements of Architecture

Hosted at the Central Pavilion at the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale - Fundamentals, the *Elements of Architecture* looks at the fundamentals of our buildings used by architects, anywhere, anytime: the floor, wall, ceiling, door, window, stair, escalator, elevator, ramp, toilet, fireplace, corridor, balcony, façade, and roof. It is a study of their histories and micronarratives and how they have evolved, or “stagnated” as Archdaily suggests, into their current versions through “technological advances, regulatory requirements, and new digital regimes.”⁷

The tone is set by the first element, also the centerpiece of the exhibition – a contemporary drop ceiling, bathed in cold blue light, suspended under the decorated Art Nouveau dome of the Central Pavilion. Once charged with symbolism, iconography, and decoration, the ceiling has evolved into a blank, generic and expressionless interface between a world of utilities and the space below, to satisfy our insatiable appetite for greater comfort and security. All other elements have undergone similar developments, except perhaps the façade, whose expressivity seems to have flourished in inverse proportion to that of the other elements.

Carlo Scarpa, 1906-1978

Born and bred in Venice, Scarpa's unique works are influenced by and inseparable from the landscape, materiality, culture, and history of the place. Beautifully crafted details and junctions, born from background in glass-making, his close relationships with local craftsmen and his unique method of designing on site, characterizes his works, which comprise mainly of exhibition designs and restoration works. *Verum ipsum factum*, which can be translated as ‘we only know what we make,’ served as a guiding principle for Scarpa, who learnt through the process of making and building.⁸ The four works visited and chosen for this study are the Olivetti Showroom (1957-58), the Fondazione Querini Stampalia (1961-63), the Castelvechio Museum (1956-64) and the Brion Cemetery (1969-78).



Floor of Olivetti Showroom.

FLOOR

...once a surface for symbolic expression – defining the way spaces are used, the “rules of the game” – floors in the 20th century tended towards a purely Cartesian surface, rational, undecorated, unloved, always perfectly flat, ideally soundless.⁹

Think Martin Place. Think about the relentless swaths of dark cold granite tiles from end to end. And imagine for a moment what it would be like if these same tiles were simply lighter, warmer in tone and hue.

Floors, as impactful as they are on an environment, often fall victim to tight budgets and a proliferating optical culture that favors vertical surfaces (e.g. the façade).¹⁰ Another reason for their neglect is the commoditization of floors in the world of real estate, where quantity rules over quality.¹¹ The result is stacks of mundane floor plates sometimes topped with a cheap floor finish. A common “cure” for the surface’s muteness is affordable, photographically printed vinyl tiles that mimic other expensive and oft-exotic materials: Italian marble, white slate, tropical wood, you name it.

Thud, thud, thud... goes the footfalls of visitors on the raised false floor, another type of floor commonly used in commercial spaces, on which the Floor exhibition takes place. Each dull thud is a reminder of the thinness of the 600 x 600 mm floor tiles, and of how far it has evolved from its predecessors. Rarely does the modern floor excite us the way floors of the past do, be it the dazzling pavements of Venetian churches or even the humble cobblestoned floors of adjoining squares; and gone are the days where floors told us something, anything about the building and its place.

Before we study the floors of Scarpa, (to study alternative ways to create useful, meaningful and delightful floors, other than specifying the latest realistic faux tiles), we must first understand the elusive nature of the floors of Venice. Venice is built at water level without embankments between the water and pavement levels. Hence, the

city is often flooded by *aqua alta* or tidal surges that reduce the city's pavement, for a few hours, to the elevated pathways laid out to allow for basic pedestrian circulation (it was most unfortunate that this did not occur during my visit). This intimate and almost playful relationship between floor and water defines the *genius loci* of Venice, and becomes an important recurring theme in Scarpa's works.

A daily reminder

Scarpa's floors are anything but flat, mute surfaces. With an exaggerated kerb made of concrete and lined with Istrian stone, separated from the walls with a deep moat, the new floor in the entry foyer of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia assumes weight and volume, and becomes a tangible element. This arrangement also clearly expresses the insertion of a new architectural vocabulary into the existing fabric. More importantly, the design protects the gallery from the high waters, and in Richard Murphy's words, serves as a "daily reminder...of Venice's 'dominance' of the waters."¹² Expressed drainage channels in the next room again emphasize the vulnerability of the building to inundation. The floor, with formal modifications, becomes a specific and indispensable device that poetically connects the building to the canals of Venice.

A memory keeper

A short walk away is the Olivetti Showroom at St. Mark's Square where one can find a very different type of floor. George Ranalli notes how the unequally shaped and sized mosaics in the showroom, hand-laid in an alternating pattern, 'make the floor appear to ripple and undulate like moving water,' a possible reference to the watery landscape.¹³ Of course, this is only one interpretation that may not necessarily be architect's true intent. Nonetheless, the floor is no less grounded in the memories of its place. The floor of the showroom makes an additional reference to Venice's rich history of decorative terrazzo floors, but instead of using stone elements, Scarpa embeds glass tesserae from nearby Murano in the reinterpreted floor. Without dwelling in literal mimicry, the floor captures the memory of place by means of subtle reference.

A space organizer

Like the tatami mats of Japan, floor grids can structure a room's size, proportion and use. To break down the mass of the floor and spatially organize the ground floor gallery of the Castelvecchio Museum, taking its cue from the now removed wooden beams, white stone bands run perpendicular to the axis of movement on the floors with a shallow moat along its perimeter. By doing this, in Scarpa's words, "the floor of every room is individuated as if they were a series of platforms,"¹⁴ each permanent display then occupies its own "platform." The sequence of the gallery and the way in which the works should be experienced is paved out, literally.

A guide

A series of polished stone strips in the floor paving, which continues outside as paving in the garden terrace of the foundation, leads visitors outside (this same method is repeated at the Brion Cemetery with embedded metal strips). Once outside, the paving wraps around the raised lawn (to protect it from the brackish water during acqua alta) and continues as a chain of stepping stones on the lawn that appear to point to either side of the designated path, perhaps subtly extending an invitation to step onto the turf.



External wall of Castelvecchio Museum.

WALL

...walls provide structure and divide space: the load-bearing wall, separating roof from ground, and the contingent partition wall, organizing movement within the resulting container. The former is seemingly as stable as the human need for shelter; the latter as changeable as our forms of sociability... the partition is now in the ascendancy...even as outwardly it becomes increasingly bare, minimal, even transparent...¹⁵

The charm of Venice comes partly from a widespread problem – exposed and crumbling brick walls. Salt crystals left behind on the wall when water, absorbed through the walls from the brackish water in which the buildings are set in, evaporates and causes the outer face of the bricks to disintegrate.¹⁶ To overcome this, coats of lime, and later plaster, are applied. To add to the rich layering of materials, we see some such walls adorned on the inside with lavish finishes for self-gratification and social self-promotion, like embroidered fabrics, frescoes and decorated leather panels (*cuori d'oro*).¹⁷ However, these luxuries are things of the past...

Ten freestanding walls dominate the Wall room, each made of materials from a different time and culture, beginning with a rustic stonewall and ending with a kinetic skin wall. Fascinating as this may be it was the material of the room's wall that intrigued me – flimsy plasterboard. The cruel joke – our inescapability from cheap, lightweight walls – was not lost on me. From the Venice Central Pavilion to our very own homes, plasterboard walls are prevalent, and not without good reason. Heightened demands for quick, economical construction, building adaptability, and a prevailing throwaway culture fuel its popularity today.

Yet the fact that these walls are blank, flimsy and hollow matters little to most people so long as it fulfills the task of arranging spaces; and the desire for openness and transparency simply means the removal of these walls. But perhaps there is more to this element than just being a means to compartmentalize or liberate spaces. While Scarpa may not be able to offer an alternative material to plasterboard, his rich wall

details do offer insight into other functions and meanings a wall can assume.

A permeable wall

Two concrete walls set in a staggered arrangement, overlapping in the middle, separates the outdoor café from the lawn at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia. Despite the division, the walls do not completely isolate but subtly link and enliven the two spaces. Openings in and between the walls allow oblique views through it, while sounds from a fountain that flows along and through one wall and a band of Murano glass tiles set at eye level enrich the spaces on either side. The beauty of this wall lies not only in its sculptural form, but also in its ability to balance the needs for privacy and openness, polar desires walls often struggle to meet.

A gentle boundary

Hefty, uninviting barriers that sit imposingly typify perimeter walls. Yet these are alleviated by a simple gesture of inclining the concrete perimeter walls at the cemetery. Angled inwardly at 60 degrees from the horizontal and braced by buttresses, these walls appear to rise gently from the ground like a mound. At the corners between two buttresses, its upper portion is opened as a concrete lattice window, which reduces the visual weight of the wall and offers glimpses into the compound within. From within on a raised lawn, the inward sloping walls envelopes visitors, directing views to the distant hills.

A storyteller

To separate the two distinct developments from different periods – the defense wall and the former barracks, the northwest corner of Castelvechio Museum's stucco-faced wall is carved and brought to an abrupt halt just before the stone walled-bridge. Cantilevered into this gap is the Cangrande equestrian statue, the museum's most significant artifact that is encountered multiple times from different vantage points while experiencing the museum. Sections of the stucco are also removed to reveal the original brick wall underneath as part of the partan ion works of the former barracks. By delaminating and revealing the layers of human occupation, a narrative

is presented to the visitors through the walls of the museum.

Castelvecchio... is a densely layered 'spatio-temporal' experience, filled with innumerable details revealing the laminations of the history of human occupation of this place, allowing the building to be experienced as a series of spatial joints, simultaneously new and old, thereby weaving history into the present moment.¹⁸

Partition reinterpreted

Within the gallery, a few chosen canvas paintings are liberated from the walls and freely suspended on metal rods, revealing the often unseen backs of these artifacts. What is even more remarkable is how these large paintings have been used as spatial dividers in the gallery, assuming and replacing the roles of partitions. This way, visitors' attention is focused entirely on the artworks and less on the built fabric. Only the ingenuity of Scarpa (and leniency of the museum director I might add) could have come up with such a radical interpretation of the gallery partition!



Steps of Fondazione Querini Stampalia.

STAIR

The staircase is considered dangerous – safety requirements limit architects’ ambitions – and is possibly endangered, only still in existence in order to fulfill the requirement of having an exit strategy ... yet the stair has an illustrious history as a physically and architecturally demanding element allowing ascent – to upper chambers and heightened spiritual states.¹⁹

Steps punctuate the canal banks of Venice to allow embarkation or disembarkation of goods and people; arched bridges with stairs link the many islands of Venice while allowing boats to pass underneath. A walk around the city reveals that stairs are elements mainly used to descend to or cross the canals, crucial mediators of land and water. Perhaps it is this awareness that enables Scarpa to transform and enrich spatial experiences with stairs or steps, giving this oft-neglected element the rightful title, according to Friedrich Mielke (founder of Scalology, the study of staircases), “the queen of architecture.”²⁰

Returning to the Elements exhibition, three stairs are found on one end of the Stair room, each with different inclinations for three distinct social hierarchies: the bourgeoisie, feudal, and the clerical; with the last being the most gentle so as not to impair the display of majesty. Today, the primary concern is the avoidance of death.

BCA Part 3.9.2.3 – Balustrades:

- The height of the balustrade on the pitch of the staircase must not be less than 865mm from the nosing line.
- Openings in the balustrades must be constructed so that any opening does not permit a 125mm sphere to pass through it.¹²

The requirements for balustrades have become increasingly strict across the world for child safety. Generally, balustrade openings must not allow a sphere 4” in diameter (the size of the head of the smallest child) to pass through.²² In which case Scarpa’s

guardrail-less marble staircase in the Olivetti Showroom would be deemed outright life threatening by the same building codes, and yet few other stairs have attracted as much acclaim. The culture of safety is stifling stair designs, turning this once cultural and delightful element into a mute utility of ascension or emergency egress.

A grand sculpture

The grandmarble staircase dominates the showroom and merges the upper and lower spaces into a single unified volume. Its cantilevering treads that shift in and out of alignment also offers a secondary use: surfaces for sculptures. In fact, the stair itself seems to resemble more a dynamic sculpture and less a utility. Its beautiful composition aside, the stair invites visitors to study its tectonics by offering glimpses of the tread supports – comparatively small cylindrical brass cylinders. It is perhaps the unsafeness of these stairs, that engages visitors' attention step-by-step, which heightens ones awareness of ascension. Now imagine if there were code compliant balustrades!

A poetic link

Just like the showroom, the foundation is arguably best known for its steps meandering down towards the canal. This is reminiscent of the aforementioned steps lining the Venetian canal banks. Despite not having a real practical purpose in this case, these steps are no less important or profound as Murphy attests:

The staircase performs three architectural roles. It is a great celebration of the ritual of arrival by water and the original formal entrance to the building... Secondly, it reinforces Scarpa's intervention and the insertion of his new passageway... And finally it acts as an informal water-level check.²³

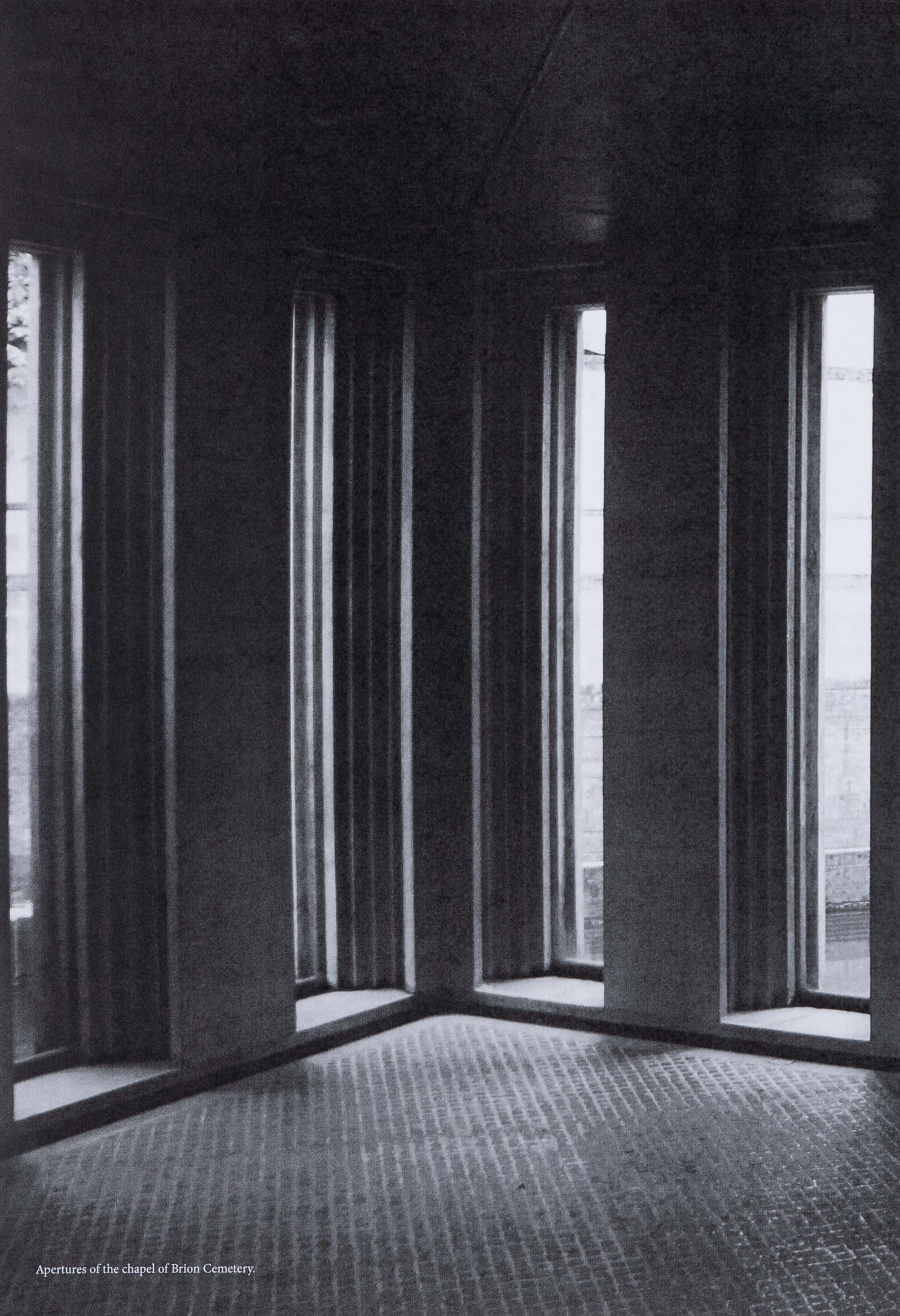
It may not be an overstatement to say that these five steps, together with the kerbed floor, embody the *genius loci* of Venice.

Coexistence of old & new

There is another much-understated (and quite dimly lit) staircase leading to the library of the foundation. Instead of simply refinishing the floors with new tiles as part of the restoration works, Scarpa came up with a far more sensitive solution. The existing, well-worn steps have new polished white marble slabs placed on top of them; these new slabs are set back from the wall with a vertical slot in the risers to reveal the original fabric underneath. Balustrades are also shaped in such a way to accentuate the profile of the original steps. The new coexists respectfully with the old.

Stairs reinterpreted

Another two stairs worthy of mention are found at the museum, both formal reinterpretations of the element of ascension. The first is a rusty steel stair found in the top most gallery in the fortress tower leading to an inaccessible loft. Three folded steel steps lead to a landing before it turns leftwards where the steel steps are then suspended from above on one end and bolted to the wall on another. The obscured second flight seems to suggest its exclusivity to certain personnel only. The second one is encountered while returning to the main gallery, a concrete stair with playful, alternating steps.



Apertures of the chapel of Brion Cemetery.

WINDOW

The growth in size of panes of glass, and the invention of the glass curtain wall, have generalized the window: it is now everywhere and nowhere... windows were strong connections to the *genius loci*, to the peculiarity of the place. But both cases are exceptions in the mainstream of modern architecture.²⁴

Far has the element detracted from the earliest meanings of the window in various languages, and gone is the intimacy and site specificity once attributed to this element. My favorite is probably the Sanskrit word *ramate* which means window, and also to rest.²⁵ Windows, once a framing device of particular vistas, a source of connection to the outside air, sounds and space, and also a destination in a building (think Edwardian England bay windows), have today been assimilated into the façade in the form of the curtain wall.

All the expansive modern glazing offers today is a disembodied visual spectacle for the occupants, and a liability hot potato for the architects. Confronted with building codes, increased complexity of off-the-shelf windows, and the fear of litigation, architects employ specification consultants to navigate the design and performance requirements for a given program, structure, and construction and rely on manufacturers to design these elements based on required performances.²⁶

Placed in the middle of the Windows exhibition is one such standard aluminum framed window, being subjected to an endless durability test, sitting next to sets of standard window handles; on the wall are its predecessors: a magnificent range of windows of great level of craft and variety of style. Do these windows still have a place in contemporary architecture or will they forever remain artifacts on display? A ride on the *vaporetto* down the Grand Canal will reveal a dazzling number and variety of decorated windows on the facades of buildings, testament to Venice's rich history and wealth. And it is perhaps this wealth of window types that inspired Scarpa to produce highly unique apertures that connected occupants to the peculiarities of a place.

Receptacles of light

According to Yutaka Saito, the chapel of the Brion cemetery is placed at a 45-degree angle to the east-west axis to take full advantage of the qualities of light from all directions.²⁷ The narrow vertical glass apertures in each of the chapel's wall, edged with a zig-zag motif that creates a gradation of light and shadows, further enhance the internal light quality, which Saito likened to "divine light" that ceremoniously pays tribute to death.²⁸ These receptacles of diffused light, with their multifaceted edges, also register and amplify the slightest fluctuations in daylight.

A few glimpses

Behind the altar of the chapel are a series of small apertures. Eight square apertures on the northwest and northeast walls are inlaid with thinly sliced onyx to allow faint light to filter through, revealing the beauty of the material. When opened, visitors' get glimpses of the garden outside, or of the skies when kneeling in front of the altar. At floor level between the two abutting walls are a pair of windows that open onto the pool, bringing in air and a view of water. The intimate size and locations of these tiny apertures also beckon us to come nearer and study closely the surrounding subjects that they carefully frame.

Eyes of a building

Before the arrival of modern architecture, windows were strong connectors to the genius loci, to the peculiarity of place. Today, the role of the window as something that has to represent the eye and frame a view is largely gone. On the upper level of the showroom, a pair of unmistakably anthropomorphic windows can be found. Following the curves of the arched arcade outside, these small, eye-like windows, which relate to the viewer's eyes, focuses his/ her attention on the life of St. Mark's Square below; curiously, the less we see the more we notice.

The vesica piscis

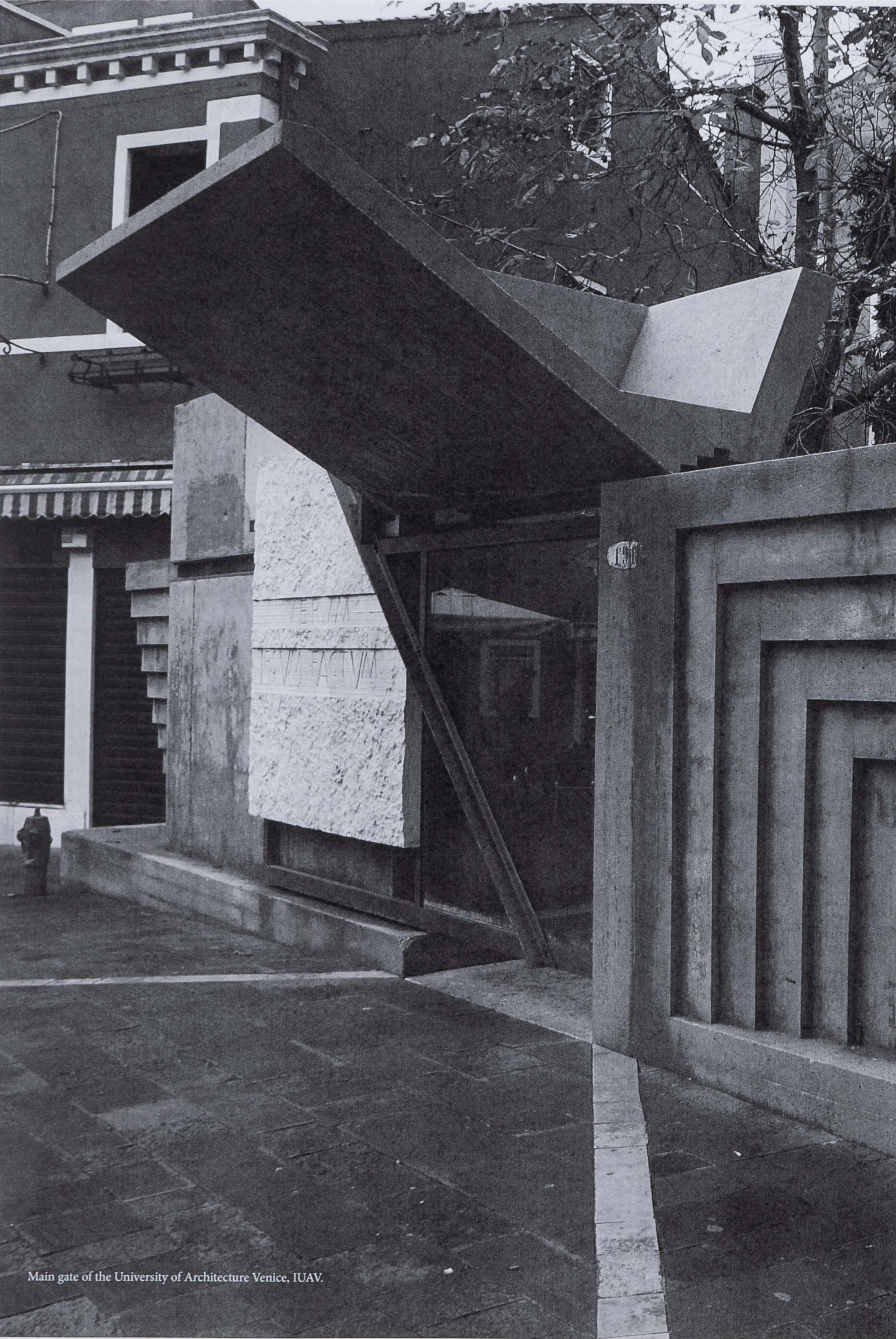
No one truly knows what the two intersecting circular openings are or mean. They may represent the union of husband and wife, both buried here, or a viewing device

or a portal into what Scarpa calls a garden for the dead:

The place for the dead is a garden. I wanted to show some ways in which you could approach death in a social and civic way; and further what meaning there was in death, in the ephemerality of life other than these shoe-boxes.²⁹

Regardless of its true meaning, its gravity, derived from its location, purity of form, and scale, of the vesica piscis seems to be understood, as Saito observes:

Although there is a water tap at the entrance to the cemetery, I have often seen people pass through the overlapping circles of the entrance wing to obtain water from the small stream that runs below in order to water the flowers on their family graves.³⁰



Main gate of the University of Architecture Venice, IUAV.

DOOR

A traditional element once invested with physical heft and iconography has turned into a dematerialized zone, a gradual transition between conditions registered by ephemeral technologies ... rather than physical barriers. The transformation took place concurrently with a transformation in society: whereas isolation was once the desired condition, our professed aspirations now are for movement, flow, transparency, accessibility.³¹

Three elaborate doors tower over visitors in the Door room: a classic southern Chinese door, a Torana from India, and a Mannerist door from Sebastiano Serlio's Extraordinary Book of Doors. At the end of the room, almost unnoticeable, stands a fourth door – the modern city gate, the universal walk-through metal detector. Whilst not a door we commonly encounter, doors of today do possess qualities of the metal detector.

Take a stroll in Sydney city and chances are you would not need to open a single door (except that one time where you went to the loo). Doors have become increasingly thin, transparent, immaterial even, for better accessibility especially in the public realm. The ubiquitous automatic glass door, used commonly in institutional, commercial and corporate buildings, silently parts at the very sight of an approaching person. In many cases, doors, seen as a potential impediment to business, simply do not exist on retail shop fronts.

And to answer our obsession with security, especially in public buildings, swipe cards, biometric detectors and body scanners have now replaced thick doors and heavy locks. Doors in the private realm, on the other hand, have become increasingly blank and standardized; a consistent development with other elements. Dematerialization of these portals would subsequently dim our awareness of the built environment and dilute our experience while traveling from one space to another. Walking through the invisible sliding glass doors of my faculty building certainly does not excite me

as much as entering IUAV through Scarpa's concrete gate.

Engineer Werner Sobek's prediction of the diminishing importance of the door in an interview with Rem Koolhaas makes it hard to imagine that the (very) heavy doors of Scarpa would have any relevance whatsoever in this door-less future.³² Nonetheless, I was surprised to find two examples that were significant not because of how these were physically constructed, but how they were reinterpreted and conceived as elements that allowed passage and enriched one's spatial experience.

A grand gate

Doors are important identity and social status markers in the congested city of Venice and residents go to great lengths to differentiate these elements with intricate ironwork, elaborate door knocks or colors – one would be hard put to find two identical doors. Outside IUAV stands a grand gate worthy of a university of architecture. This gate, with its recognizable stepped concrete front and stone sliding door as well as seating ledges, doubles as a useful meeting or reference point. The operability of a door lies entirely on the hinge – a mechanism that is often concealed; this is not the case here where the sliding mechanism is revealed and celebrated.

A wall cut-out

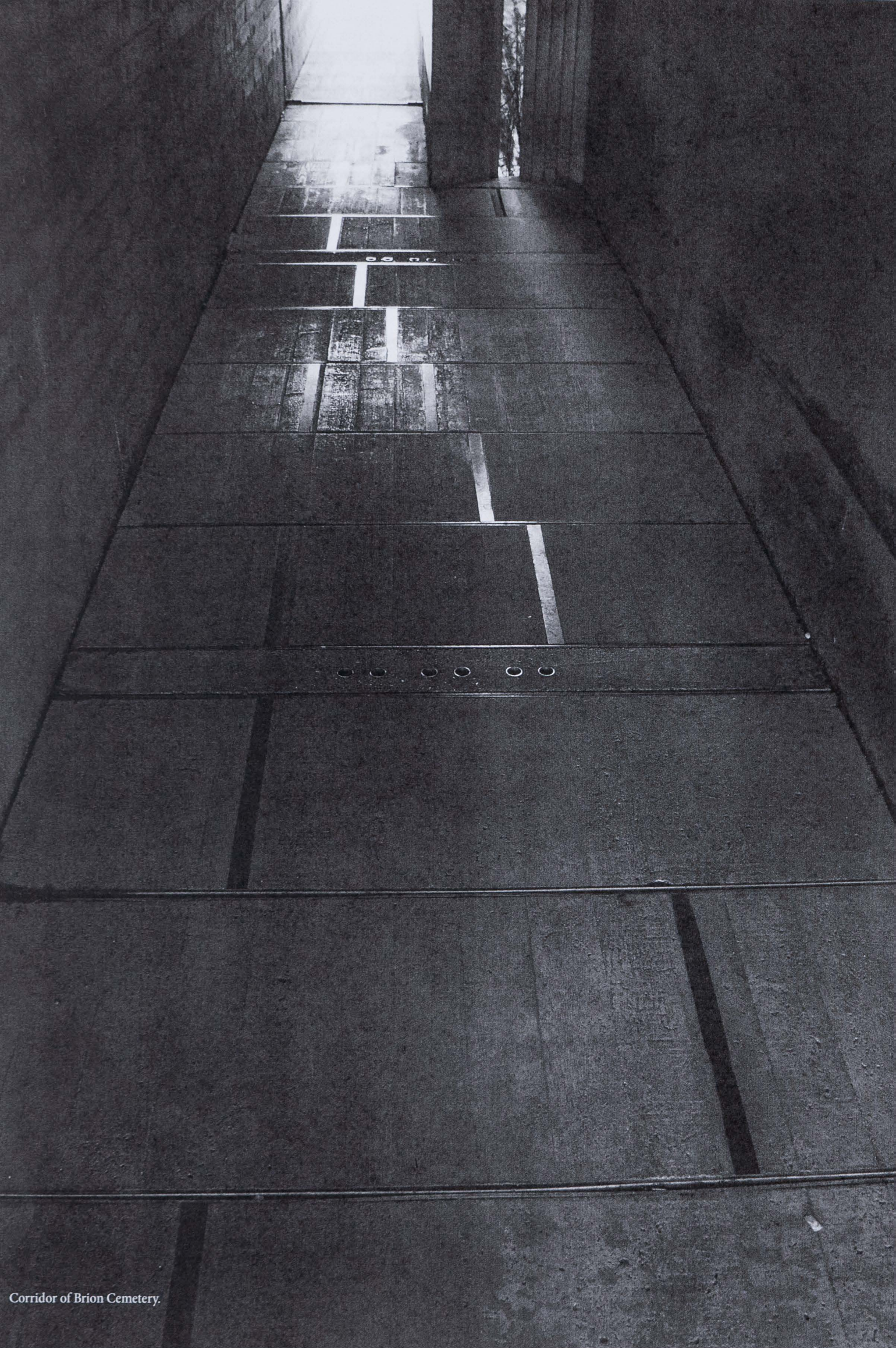
Made of the same Istrian stone (a common building stone in Venice) as the adjacent wall panels, this door appears more like a wall cut-out than a door installed, maintaining the visual integrity of the gallery. Despite its unassuming appearance, it is a physically demanding door that heightens visitors' awareness of the presence of a threshold. A change in floor levels, the creaking hinges, and the unique door "handle" all enrich this act of spatial transition. The replacement of a conventional handle with a simple cut-out invites visitors to feel the edge of the polished stone door, creating an unfamiliarly intimate relationship between door and user – a closeness that is usually absent with standard doors.

A window redefined

Much attention has been given to the bridge of the Foundation but the story of the entrance – a former window, is relatively unknown. Scarpa's proposal to convert the original window into an entrance reached by a new bridge was met with opposition by officials whose idea of 'restoration' required formal mimicry, rather than the living quality of architecture which Scarpa argued for.³³ This scheme, initially considered to be a violation of the window, was finally approved and realized in 1963. The appropriation of the window as a door renews the meaning and use of the element and of the building, enriching the ongoing evolution of the architecture.

A split entrance

Another clever intervention can be found at the entrance of the museum. To emphasize the entrance, to control circulation and to perhaps celebrate the experience of entering and exiting the building, a new, bold concrete wall is inserted through the middle of an old doorway, creating two openings out of one. By doing so, an otherwise two dimensional threshold delineated by a door is expanded into a three dimensional transitory zone. Once inside the main foyer, the wall steps down and veers to the right to receive exiting visitors. Again, Scarpa has redefined and amplified the meaning and use of an historical element to adapt to new purposes.



Corridor of Brion Cemetery.

CORRIDOR

In the 20th century, confronted by the imperative of the open plan, the corridor is forced to retreat to the backstage of architecture. Dictated by safety codes, and meant to be used only in a state of panic for exiting a building, the contemporary corridor is ironically a confirmation of our worst fears of the corridor as a lonely, blank, interminable passage...³⁴

A browse through the history of corridors reveals a far richer past. From the temple complexes of India to the shrines of Korea, corridors are holy passages that orientate devotees to the world and to more sacred realms;³⁵ in traditional Chinese residential complexes, interconnecting corridors around courtyard gardens become intermediate spaces between buildings.³⁶

In more recent times, the corridor has taken on a more utilitarian role in giving order to and connecting rooms in mansions, social housing, prisons, hospitals and hotels. It is often designed simply as a means to get from A to B, rarely as a space for occupation; this could not be truer for the ubiquitous egress passage. Host to a variety of items like exit signs, smoke detectors, fire resistance doors, fire hose reels, evacuation maps etc., the sole purpose of this element is to funnel you out of buildings as quick as possible. The slide in the corridor's popularity is understandable.

Without surprise, the Corridor exhibition takes place in a series of narrow corridors. Visitors, whose discomfort were palpable, had to be constantly on the move in these congested, partan passages, much like the faceless figures in evacuation simulators playing on screens. Yet corridors can be important elements in choreographing movement in a building to create a journey, and need not be enclosed on all sides. Other forms of corridor include the yan, corridio, aisle, enfilade, gallery, arcade and avenue.³⁷ Corridors can be more than mere passages for egress.

Floor pavements, metal floor strips, raised grassy lawns, polished plaster bands on

concrete walls, and openings at the end of paths offer glimpses of and/ or guide visitors towards the focal point of the cemetery – the tomb of Brion. Scarpa's perceptiveness in using paths and corridors may have been influenced by the city of Venice, where he was born and bred, which abounds in charming lanes for strolling.³⁸ Besides choreographing the movement through the cemetery and inviting visitors to study the building's surroundings, these corridors and paths also link and unite all other elements (walls, floors, windows etc.), achieving, in McCarter's words, a "wholeness of inseparable elements,"³⁹ and a highly place-specific identity.

CONCLUSION

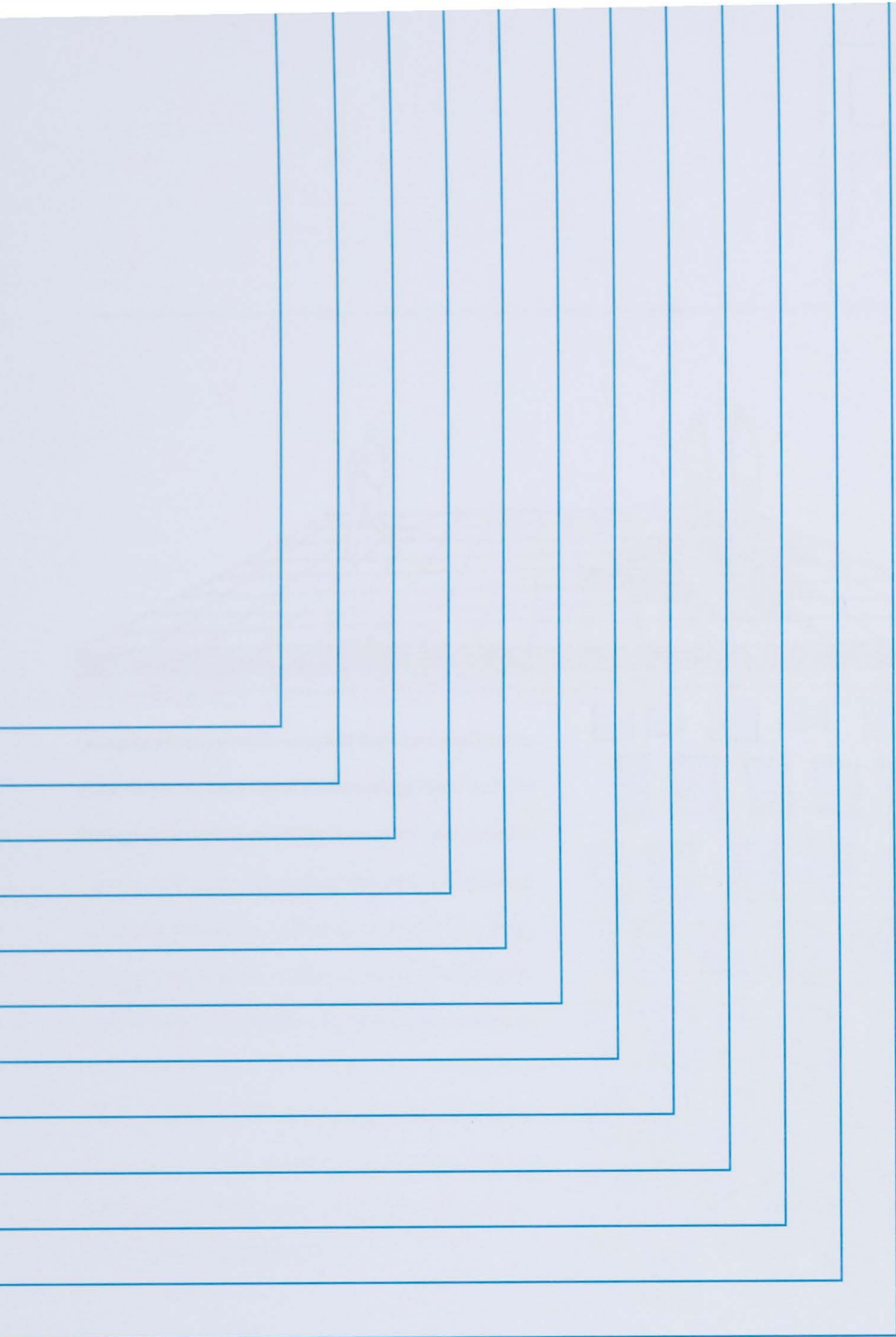
The Elements of Architecture of the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale, having presented extensively the past and present of the fundamentals of architecture, makes few predictions about the future. As elements homogenize, so do buildings. At this current projection, architecture may just be, in Kieran Long's words, the "mere shuffling around of cladding, walls, doors, stairs, roofs and toilets."⁴⁰

The works of Carlo Scarpa offered a counterpoint and an opportunity to relook at the elements; and without anticipating the outcome of this study, taking apart the works of Scarpa and scrutinizing his elements in isolation has proven rewarding. He shows us how delaminating layers of a wall can poetically narrate the history of a place. He shows us how embedding metal strips in a floor can shine and guide us down a dark corridor. He shows us how 'restoring' a former window, making it a new entrance, can breathe new meaning and life into an old building. He shows us how an element of ascent can be presented as the centerpiece of a showroom. He shows us how laying a few steps can profoundly connect architecture and people to the memories of the watery landscape of Venice.

Perhaps before we populate our next grand architectural scheme with another set of mute, off-the-shelf elements, we could rethink, remake and refine some of them, small as these gestures may be. Perhaps we could make them speak about a place's specific landscape, culture, history and/ or materiality, transform and beautify spaces and heighten and enrich our experiences of places.

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ELEMENTS OF CARLO SCARPA

A study of the works of Carlo Scarpa using the *Elements of Architecture* framework presented at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale by Jason Goh

“Architecture is not in good health,”¹ laments the curator of last year’s most prestigious architecture event – the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. Indeed, pessimism was not hard to miss in the micro narratives of the 15 elements that formed the exhibition the Elements of Architecture; homogenization, unsurprisingly, seems to be a shared story amongst the elements.

By means of introduction, Rem and Co. confronts visitors with the centerpiece of the exhibition – a contemporary drop ceiling, bathed in cold blue light, suspended under the decorated Art Nouveau dome of the Central Pavilion. Once charged with symbolism, iconography, and decoration, the ceiling has evolved into a blank, generic and expressionless surface. As elements homogenize, so do buildings; hence, buildings have become increasingly banal and placeless. The increased uptake of modeling software in major architectural practices today that enables users to effortlessly “drag-and-drop” standardized components into virtual models will also spur homogenization. Having presented extensively the past and present of the fundamentals of architecture, the exhibition makes few predictions about the future; it begs the big question: Is this it?

The rich, regional works of Carlo Scarpa that lie not far beyond the grounds of the biennale offer a useful counterpoint. This study scrutinizes six key elements (the floor, wall, door, window, stair and corridor) of his handful of works from the Olivetti Showroom to the Cemetery of Brion. Recording, through hand sketches, his elements in isolation reveals their potentials to become more than means to a utilitarian end.

He shows us how delaminating layers of a wall can poetically narrate the history of a place. He shows us how embedding metal strips in a floor can shine and guide us down a dark corridor. He shows us how laying a few steps can profoundly connect architecture and people to the memories of the watery landscape of Venice.

Perhaps before we populate our next grand architectural scheme with another set of mute, off-the-shelf elements, we could rethink, remake and refine some of them, small as these gestures may be. Perhaps we could make them speak about a place’s specific landscape, culture, history and/or materiality, transform and beautify spaces and heighten and enrich our experiences of places.

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28. McCarter, R., 2013, p. 182.

FLOOR

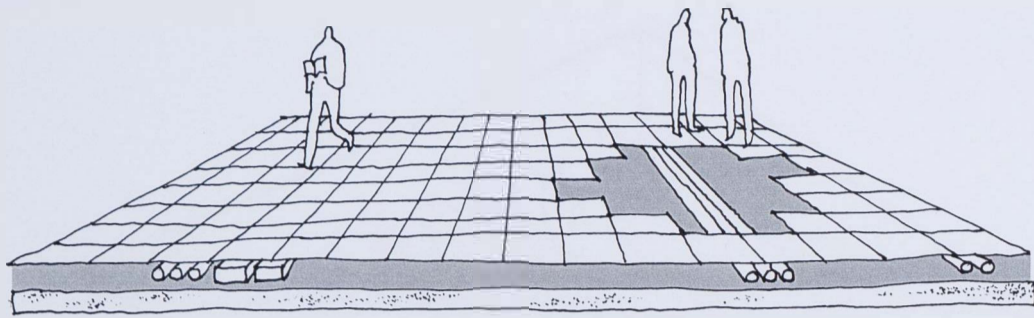


Fig. 1: Floor room, Central Pavilion.

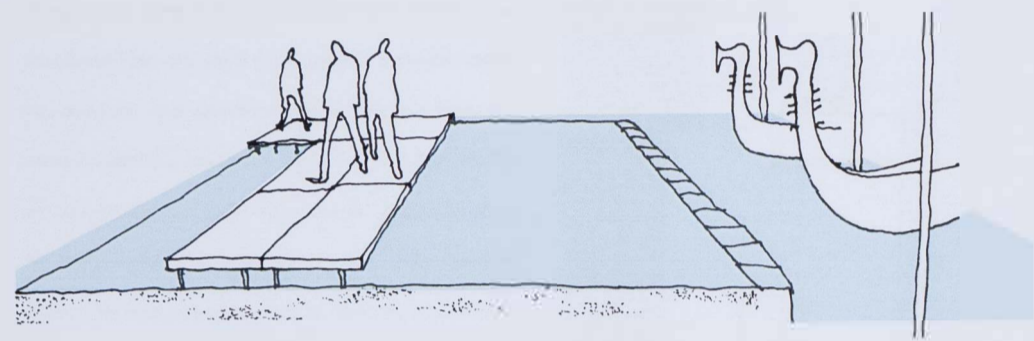


Fig. 2: Floor of Venice during acqua alta.

“...once a surface for symbolic expression – defining the way spaces are used, the “rules of the game” – floors in the 20th century tended towards a purely Cartesian surface, rational, undecorated, unloved, always perfectly flat, ideally soundless.”²²

Think Martin Place. Think about the relentless swaths of dark cold granite tiles from end to end. And imagine for a moment what it would be like if these same tiles were simply lighter, warmer in tone and hue.

Floors, as impactful as they are on an environment, often fall victim to tight budgets and a proliferating optical culture that favors vertical surfaces (e.g. the façade).³ Another reason for their neglect is the commoditization of floors in the world of real estate, where quantity rules over quality.⁴ The result is stacks of mundane floor plates sometimes topped with a cheap floor finish. To cure the surface’s muteness, affordable, photo-realistic faux tiles are specified. These vinyl tiles mimic other expensive and oft-exotic materials: Italian marble, white slate, tropical wood, you name it.

Thud, thud, thud... goes the footfalls of visitors on the raised false floor, another type of floor commonly used in commercial spaces, on which the *Floor* exhibition takes place (fig. 1). Each

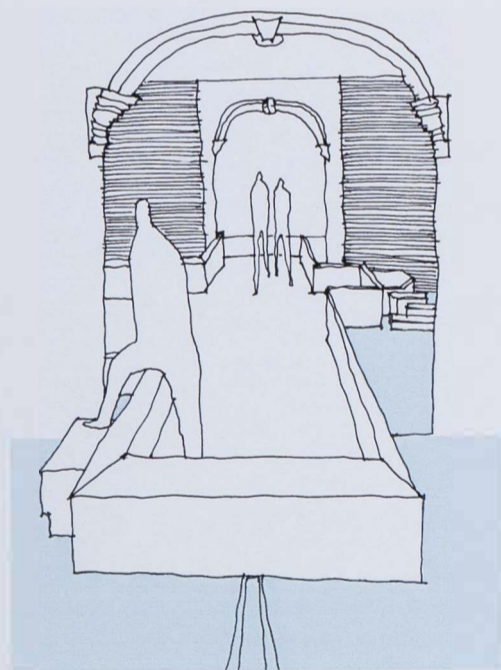
dull thud is a reminder of the thinness of the 600 x 600 mm floor tiles, and of how far it has evolved from its predecessors. Rarely does the modern floor excite us the way floors of the past do, be it the dazzling pavements of Venetian churches or even the humble cobblestoned floors of adjoining squares; and gone are the days where floors told us something, anything about the building and its place.

Before we study the floors of Scarpa, we must first understand the elusive nature of the floors of Venice. Venice is built at water level without embankments between the water and pavement levels. Hence, the city is often flooded by *aqua alta* or tidal surges that reduce the city’s pavement, for a few hours, to the elevated pathways laid out to allow for basic pedestrian circulation (fig. 2); it was most unfortunate that this did not occur during my visit. This intimate and almost playful relationship between floor and water defines Venice, and becomes an important recurring theme in Scarpa’s works.

A daily reminder

< Entry foyer, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

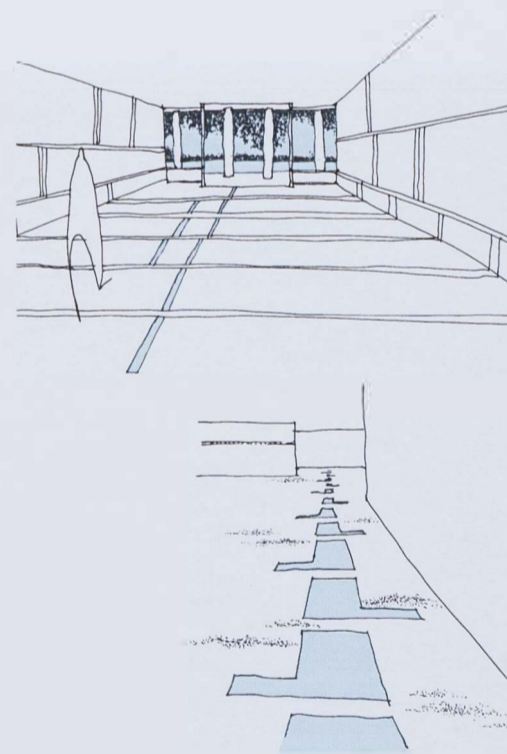
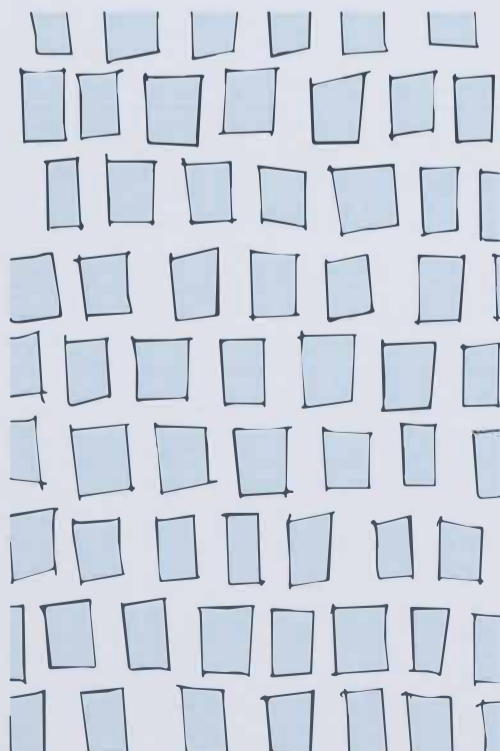
With an exaggerated kerb made of concrete and lined with Istrian stone, separated from the walls with a deep moat, the new floor in the entry foyer assumes weight and volume, and becomes a tangible element. This arrangement also clearly expresses the insertion of a new architectural vocabulary into the existing fabric. More importantly, the design protects the gallery from the high waters, and in Richard Murphy’s words, serves as a “daily reminder...of Venice’s ‘dominance’ of the waters.”²⁵ Expressed drainage channels in the next room again emphasize the vulnerability of the building to inundation. The floor, with formal modifications, becomes a specific and indispensable device that poetically connects the building to the canals of Venice.



A memory keeper

Ground floor, Olivetti Showroom >

George Ranalli notes how the unequally shaped and sized mosaics in the showroom, hand-laid in an alternating pattern, ‘make the floor appear to ripple and undulate like moving water,’ a possible reference to the watery landscape.⁶ Of course, this is only one interpretation that may not necessarily be architect’s true intent. Nonetheless, the floor is no less grounded in the memories of its place. The floor of the showroom makes an additional reference to Venice’s rich history of decorative terrazzo floors, but instead of using stone elements, Scarpa embeds glass tesserae from nearby Murano in the reinterpreted floor. Without dwelling in literal mimicry, the floor captures the memory of place by means of subtle reference.



A guide

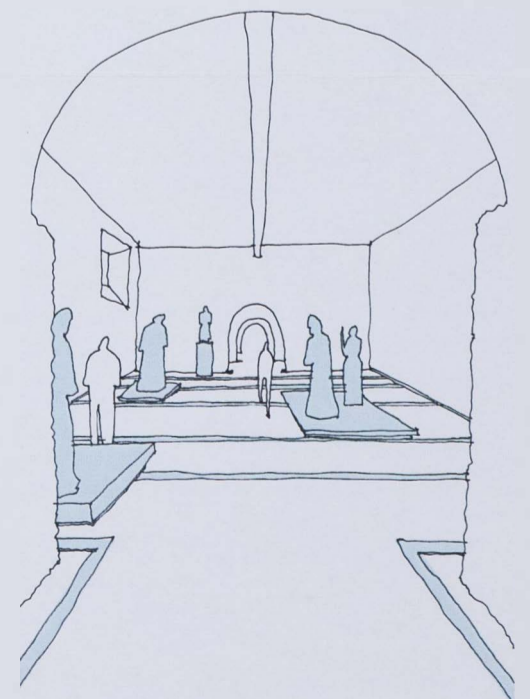
< Gallery & garden, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

A series of polished stone strips in the floor paving, which continues outside as paving in the garden terrace, leads visitors outside (this same method is repeated at the Brion Cemetery with embedded metal strips). Once outside, the paving wraps around the raised lawn (to protect it from the brackish water during *aqua alta*) and continues as a chain of stepping stones on the lawn that appear to point to either side of the designated path, perhaps subtly extending an invitation to step onto the turf?

A space organizer

Ground floor gallery, Castelvechio Museum >

Like the tatami mats of Japan, floor grids can structure a room’s size, proportion and use. To break down the mass of the floor and organize the placement of artifacts, taking its cue from the now removed wooden beams, white stone bands run perpendicular to the axis of movement on the floors with a shallow moat along its perimeter. By doing this, in Scarpa’s words, “the floor of every room is individuated as if they were a series of platforms,”²⁷ each permanent display then occupies its own “platform.” The sequence of the gallery and the way in which the works should be experienced is paved out, literally.



WALL

“...walls provide structure and divide space: the load-bearing wall, separating roof from ground, and the contingent partition wall, organizing movement within the resulting container. The former is seemingly as stable as the human need for shelter; the latter as changeable as our forms of sociability... the partition is now in the ascendency...even as outwardly it becomes increasingly bare, minimal, even transparent...”⁸

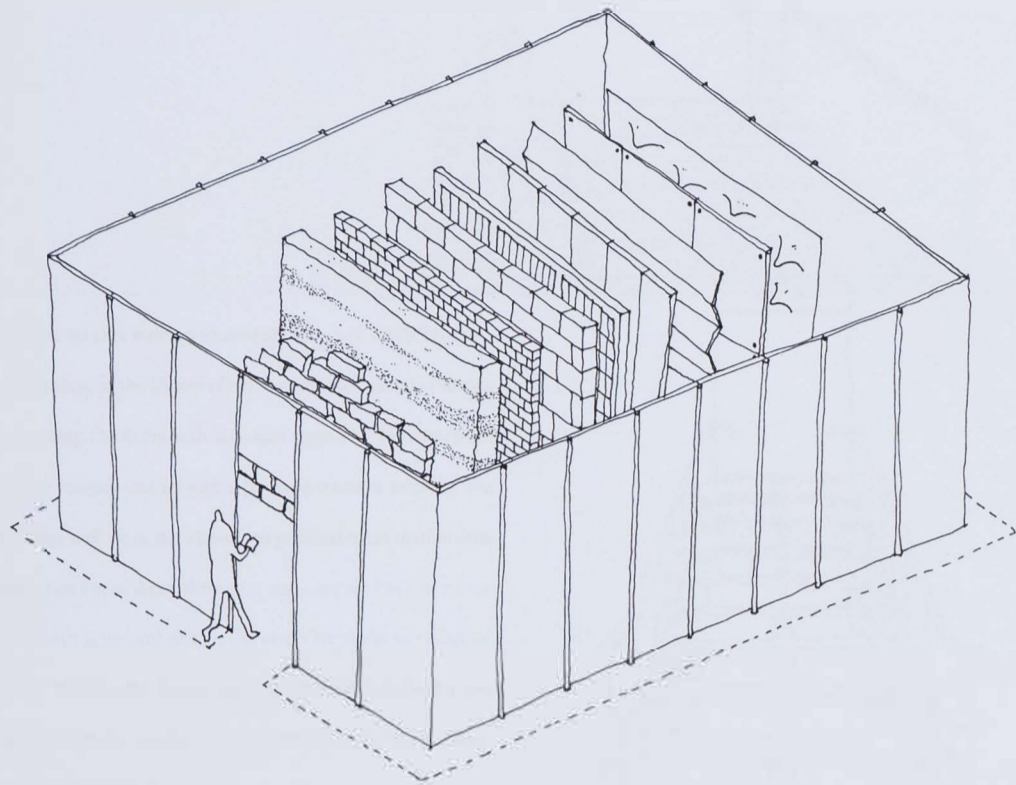


Fig. 1: Wall room, Central Pavilion.

The charm of Venice comes partly from a widespread problem – exposed and crumbling brick walls. Salt crystals left behind on the wall when water, absorbed through the walls from the brackish water in which the buildings are set in, evaporates and causes the outer face of the bricks to disintegrate.⁹ To overcome this, coats of lime, and later plaster, are applied. To add to the rich layering of materials, we see some such walls adorned on the inside with lavish finishes for self-gratification and social self-promotion, like embroidered fabrics, frescoes and decorated leather panels (*cuori d'oro*).¹⁰ However, these luxuries are things of the past...

Ten freestanding walls dominate the Wall room, each made of materials from a different time and culture, beginning with a rustic stonewall and ending with a kinetic skin wall. Fascinating as this may be it was the material of the room's wall that

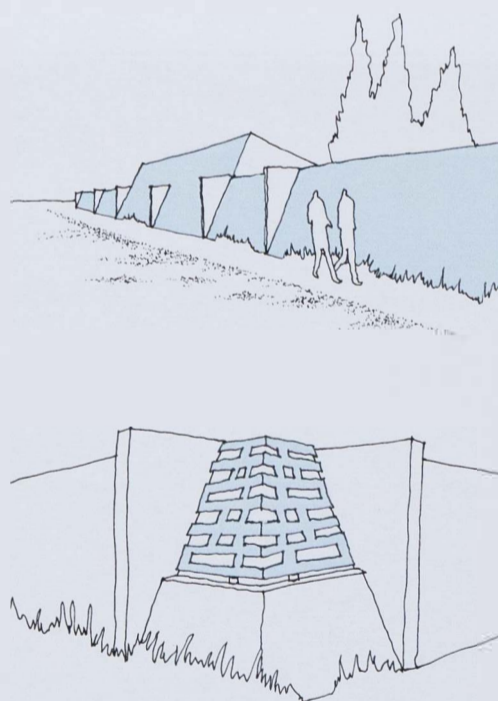
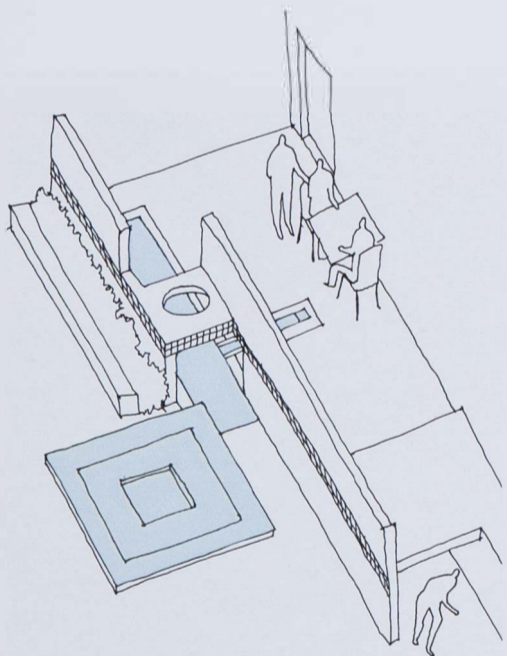
intrigued me – flimsy plasterboard (fig. 1). The cruel joke – our inescapability from cheap, lightweight walls – was not lost on me. From the Venice Central Pavilion to our very own homes, plasterboard walls are prevalent, and not without good reason. Heightened demands for quick, economical construction, building adaptability, and a prevailing throwaway culture fuel its popularity today.

Yet the fact that these walls are blank, flimsy and hollow matters little to most people so long as it fulfills the task of arranging spaces; and the desire for openness and transparency simply means the removal of these walls. But perhaps there is more to this element than just being a means to compartmentalize or liberate spaces. While Scarpa may not be able to offer an alternative material to plasterboard, his rich wall details do offer insight into other functions and meanings a wall can assume.

A permeable wall

< Garden, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

Two concrete walls set in a staggered arrangement, overlapping in the middle, separates the outdoor café from the lawn. Despite the division, the walls do not completely isolate one space from the other but subtly link and enliven the two spaces. Openings in and between the walls allow oblique views through it, while sounds from a fountain that flows between and through the walls and a band of Murano glass tiles set at eye level enrich the spaces on either side. The beauty of this wall lies not only in its sculptural form, but also in its ability to balance the needs for privacy and openness, polar desires walls often struggle to meet.



A gentle boundary

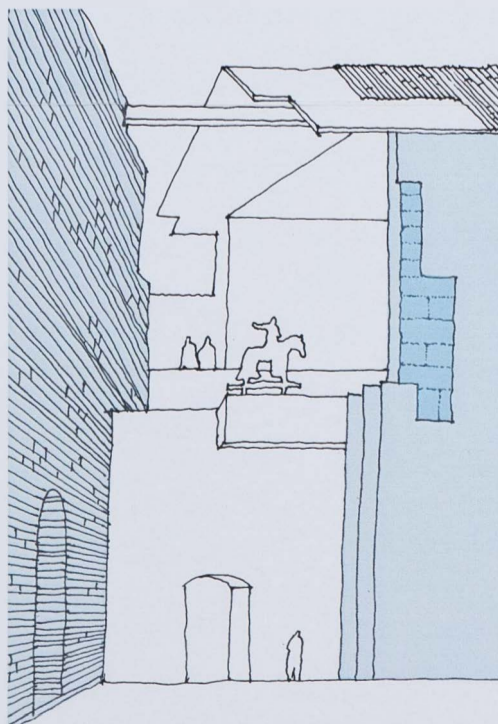
< Perimeter wall of Brion Cemetery

Hefty, uninviting barriers that sit imposingly typify perimeter walls. Yet these are alleviated by a simple gesture of inclining the concrete perimeter walls at the cemetery. Angled inwardly at 60 degrees from the horizontal and braced by buttresses, these walls appear to rise unobtrusively from the ground like a mound. At the corners between two buttresses, its upper portion is opened as a concrete lattice window, which reduces the visual weight of the wall and offers glimpses into the compound within. From within on a raised lawn, the inward sloping walls envelopes visitors, directing views to the distant hills.

A storyteller

Former barracks wall, Castelvechio Museum >

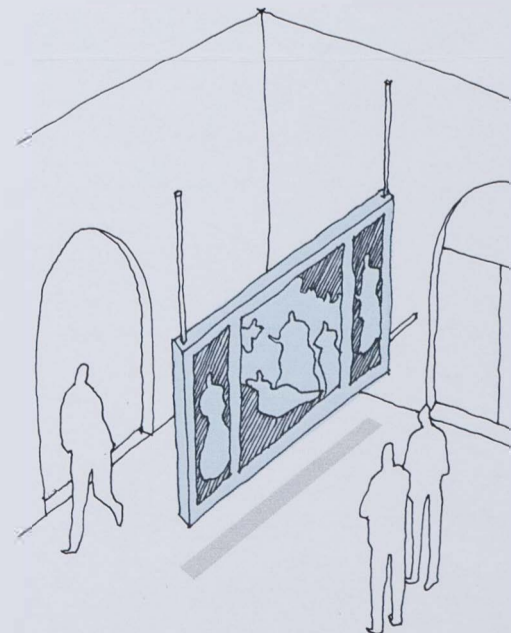
To separate the two distinct developments from different periods – the defense wall and the former barracks, the northwest corner of Castelvechio Museum's stucco-faced wall is carved and brought to an abrupt halt just before the stone walled-bridge. Cantilevered into this gap is the Cangrande equestrian statue, the museum's most significant artifact that is encountered multiple times from different vantage points while experiencing the museum. Sections of the stucco are also removed to reveal the original brick wall underneath as part of the restoration works of the former barracks. By delaminating and revealing the layers of human occupation, a narrative is presented to the visitors through the walls of the museum.



Partition reinterpreted

Upper gallery, Castelvechio Museum >

Within the gallery, a few chosen canvas paintings are liberated from walls and freely suspended on metal rods, revealing the often unseen backs of these artifacts. What is even more remarkable is how these large paintings have been used as spatial dividers in the gallery, assuming the roles of partitions. This way, visitors' attention is focused entirely on the artworks and less on the built fabric. Only the ingenuity of Scarpa (and leniency of the museum director I might add) could have come up with such a radical interpretation of the gallery partition!



STAIR

“The staircase is considered dangerous – safety requirements limit architects’ ambitions – and is possibly endangered, only still in existence in order to fulfill the requirement of having an exit strategy ... yet the stair has an illustrious history as a physically and architecturally demanding element allowing ascent – to upper chambers and heightened spiritual states.”¹¹

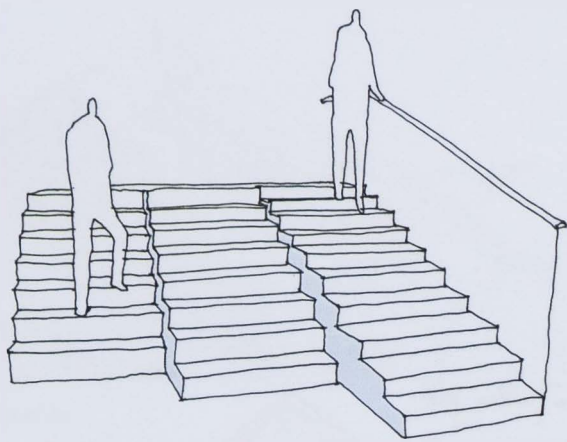


Fig. 1: Inclinations for different social hierarchies.

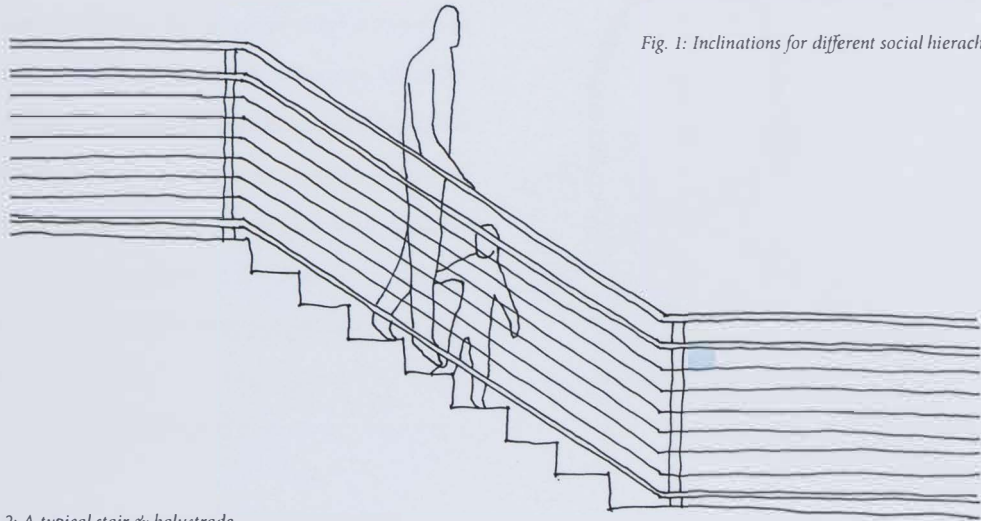


Fig. 2: A typical stair & balustrade.

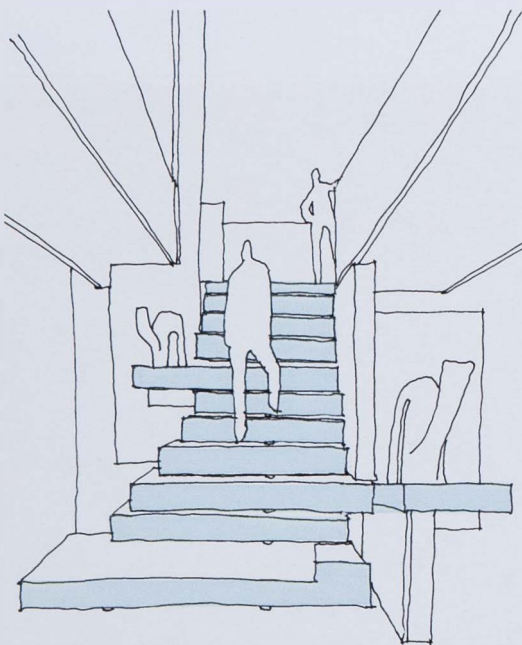
Steps punctuate the canal banks of Venice to allow embarkation or disembarkation of goods and people; arched bridges with stairs link the many islands of Venice while allowing boats to pass underneath. A walk around the city reveals that stairs are elements mainly used to descend to or cross the canals, crucial mediators of land and water. Perhaps it is this awareness that enables Scarpa to transform and enrich spatial experiences with stairs or steps, giving this oft-neglected element the rightful title, according to Friedrich Mielke (founder of Scalology, the study of staircases), “the queen of architecture.”¹²

Returning to the *Elements* exhibition, three stairs are found on one end of the Stair room, each with different inclinations for three distinct social hierarchies: the bourgeoisie, feudal, and the clerical; with the last being the most gentle so as not to impair the display of majesty (fig. 1). Today, the primary concern is the prevention of death.

BCA Part 3.9.2.3 – Balustrades

- The height of the balustrade on the pitch of the staircase must not be less than 865mm from the nosing line.
- Openings in the balustrades must be constructed so that any opening does not permit a 125mm sphere to pass through it.¹³

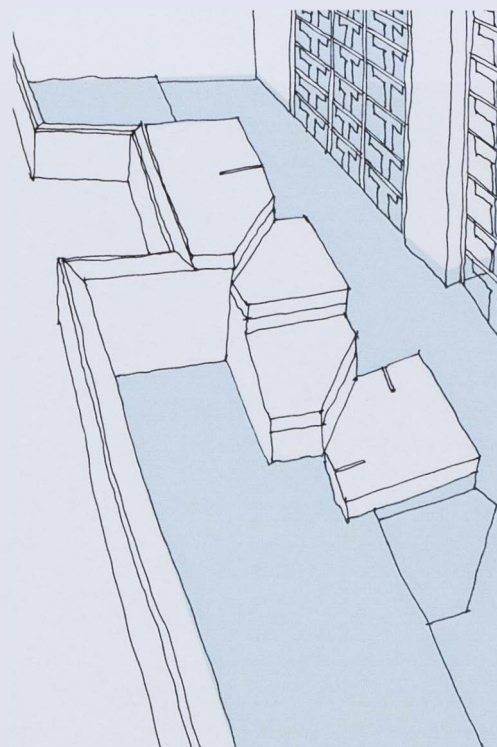
The requirements for balustrades have become increasingly strict across the world for child safety. Generally, balustrade openings must not allow a sphere 4” in diameter (the size of the head of the smallest child) to pass through (fig. 2)¹⁴. In which case Scarpa’s guardrail-less marble staircase in the Olivetti Showroom would be deemed outright life threatening by the same building codes, and yet few other stairs have attracted as much acclaim. The culture of safety is stifling stair designs, turning this once cultural and delightful element into a mute utility of ascension or emergency egress.



A grand sculpture

< Olivetti Showroom

The grand marble staircase dominates the showroom and merges the upper and lower spaces into a single unified volume. Its cantilevering treads that shift in and out of alignment also offers a secondary use: *surfaces for sculptures*. In fact, the stair itself seems to resemble more a dynamic sculpture and less a utility. Its beautiful composition aside, the stair invites visitors to study its tectonics by offering glimpses of the tread supports – comparatively small cylindrical brass cylinders. It is perhaps the unsafeness of these stairs, that engages visitors’ attention step-by-step, which heightens one’s awareness of ascension. Now imagine if there were code compliant balustrades!



A poetic link

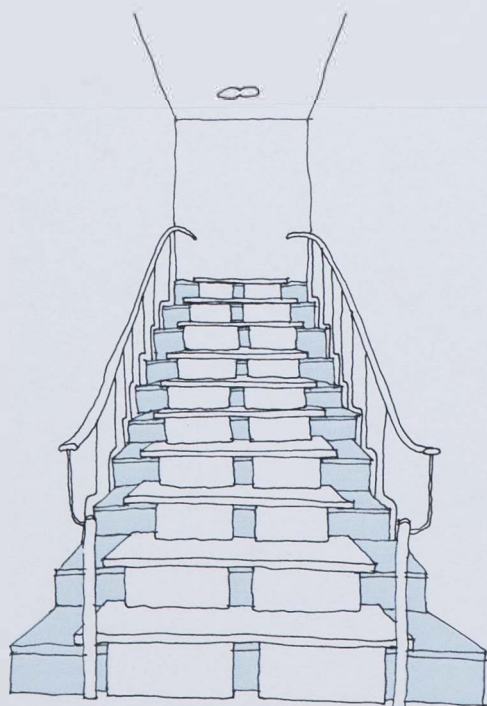
< Entry foyer, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

Just like the showroom, the foundation is arguably best known for its steps meandering down towards the canal. This is reminiscent of the aforementioned steps lining the Venetian canal banks. Despite not having a real practical purpose in this case, these steps are no less important or profound as Murphy attests: “The staircase performs three architectural roles. It is a great celebration of the ritual of arrival by water and the original formal entrance to the building... Secondly, it reinforces Scarpa’s intervention and the insertion of his new passageway... And finally it acts as an informal water-level check.”¹⁵ It may not be an overstatement to say that these six steps, together with the kerbed floor, embody the *genius loci* of Venice.

Coexistence of old & new

Library staircase, Fondazione Querini Stampalia >

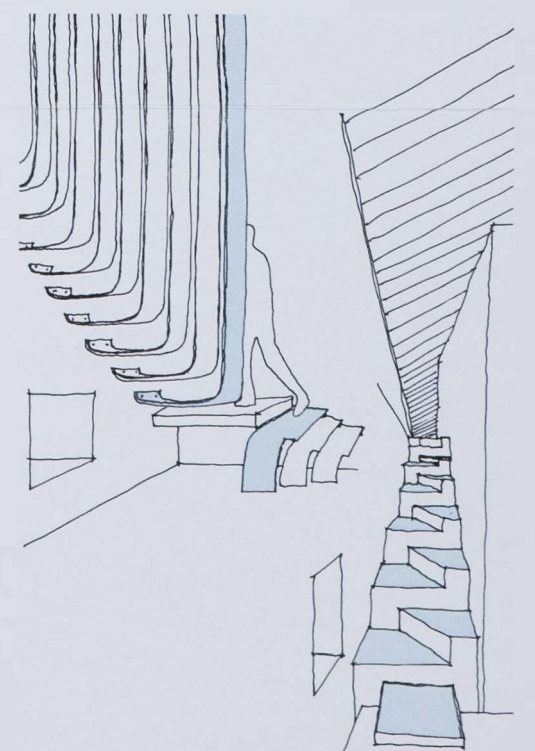
There is another much-understated (and quite dimly lit) staircase leading to the library of the foundation. Instead of simply refinishing the floors with new tiles as part of the restoration works, Scarpa came up with a far more sensitive solution. The existing, well-worn steps have new polished white marble slabs placed on top of them; these new slabs are set back from the wall with a vertical slot in the risers to reveal the original fabric underneath. Balustrades are also shaped in such a way to accentuate the profile of the original steps. The new coexists respectfully with the old.



Stairs reinterpreted

Fortress tower gallery, Castelvecchio Museum >

Another two stairs worthy of mention are found at the museum, both formal reinterpretations of the element of ascension. The first is a weathered steel stair found in the top most gallery in the fortress tower leading to an inaccessible loft. Three folded steel steps lead to a landing before it turns leftwards where the steel steps are then suspended from above on one end and bolted to the wall on another. The obscured second flight seems to suggest its exclusivity to certain personnel only. The second one is encountered while returning to the main gallery, a concrete stair with playful, alternating steps.



DOOR

...A traditional element once invested with physical heft and iconography has turned into a dematerialized zone... whereas isolation was once the desired condition, our professed aspirations now are for movement, flow, transparency, accessibility – while maintaining the utmost security... a paradox that the door is charged with resolving...¹⁶

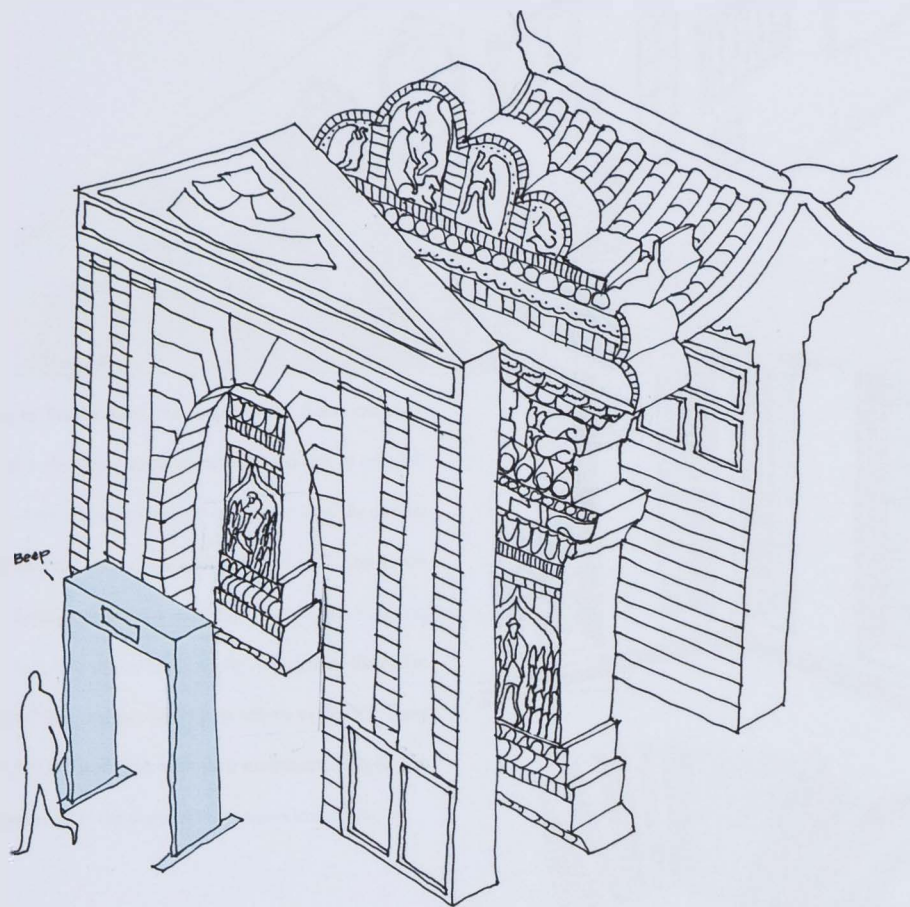
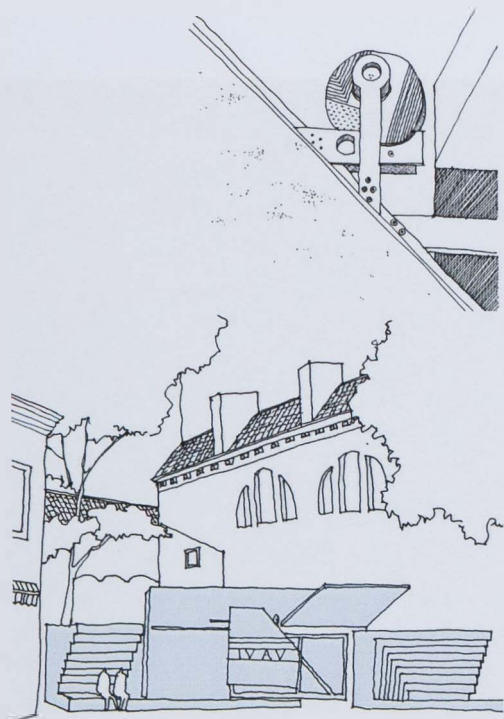


Fig. 1: Door room, Central Pavilion.

Three elaborate doors tower over visitors in the Door room: a classic southern Chinese door, a Torana from India, and a Mannerist door from Sebastiano Serlio's Extraordinary Book of Doors (fig. 1). At the end of the room, almost unnoticeable, stands a forth door – the modern city gate, the universal walk-through metal detector. Whilst not a door we commonly encounter, doors of today do possess qualities of the metal detector.

Take a stroll in Sydney city and chances are you would not need to open a single door (except that one time where you went to the loo). Doors have become increasingly thin, transparent, immaterial even, for better accessibility especially in the public realm. The ubiquitous automatic glass door, used commonly in institutional, commercial and corporate buildings, silently parts at the very sight of an approaching person. In many cases, doors, seen as a potential impediment to business, simply do not exist on retail shop fronts.

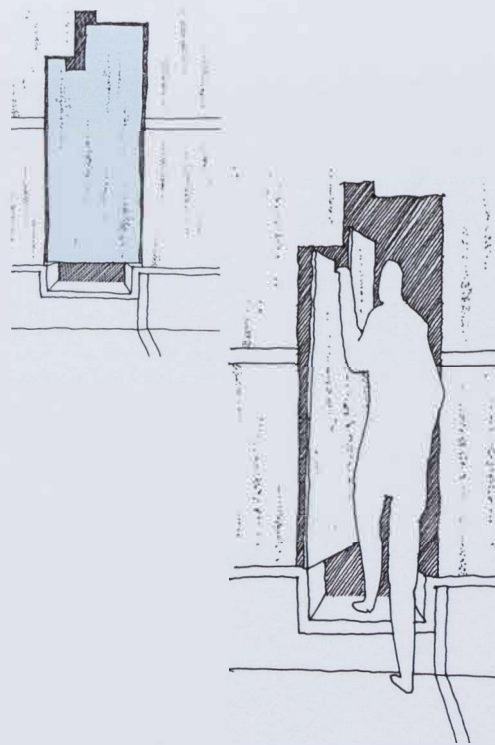
And to answer our obsession with security, especially in public buildings, swipe cards, biometric detectors and body scanners have now replaced thick doors and heavy locks. Doors in the private realm, on the other hand, have become increasingly blank and standardized; a consistent development with other elements. Dematerialization of these portals would subsequently dim our awareness of the built environment and dilute our experience while traveling from one space to another. Engineer Werner Sobek's prediction of the diminishing importance of the door in an interview with Rem Koolhaas makes it hard to imagine that the (very) heavy doors of Scarpa would have any relevance whatsoever in this door-less future.¹⁷ Nonetheless, I was surprised to find two examples that were significant not because of how these were physically constructed, but how they were reinterpreted and conceived as elements that allowed passage and enriched one's spatial experience.



A grand gate

< Architecture University of Venice (IUAV) main gate

Doors are important identity and social status markers in the congested city of Venice and residents go to great lengths to differentiate these elements with intricate ironwork, elaborate door knocks or colors – one would be hard put to find two identical doors. Outside IUAV stands a grand gate worthy of a university of architecture. This gate, with its recognizable stepped concrete front and stone sliding door as well as seating ledges, doubles as a useful meeting or reference point. The operability of a door lies entirely on the hinge – a mechanism that is often concealed; this is not the case here where the sliding mechanism is revealed and celebrated.



A wall cut-out

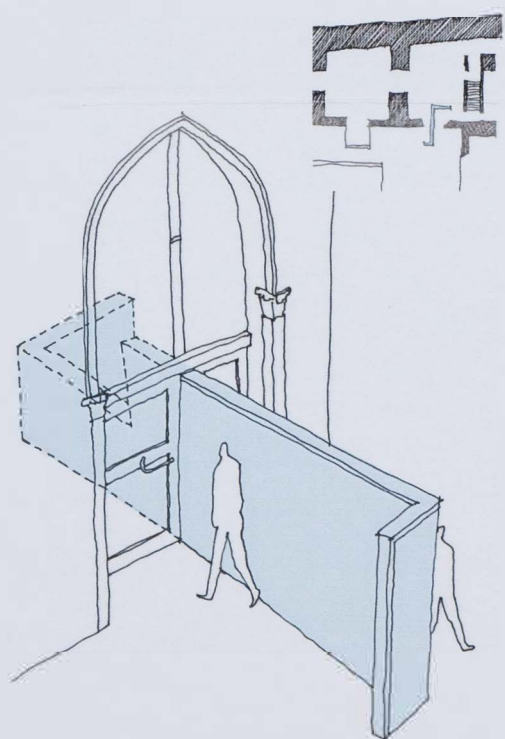
< Gallery, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

Made of the same Istrian stone (a common building stone in Venice) as the adjacent wall panels, this door appears more like a wall cut-out than a door installed, maintaining the visual integrity of the gallery. Despite its unassuming appearance, it is a physically demanding door that heightens visitors' awareness of the presence of a threshold. A change in floor levels, the creaking hinges, and the unique door "handle" all enrich this act of spatial transition. The replacement of a conventional handle with a simple cut-out invites visitors to feel the edge of the polished stone door, creating an unfamiliarly intimate relationship between door and user – and by extension building and user, – a closeness that is usually absent with standard doors.

A split entrance

Entrance, Castelvechio Museum >

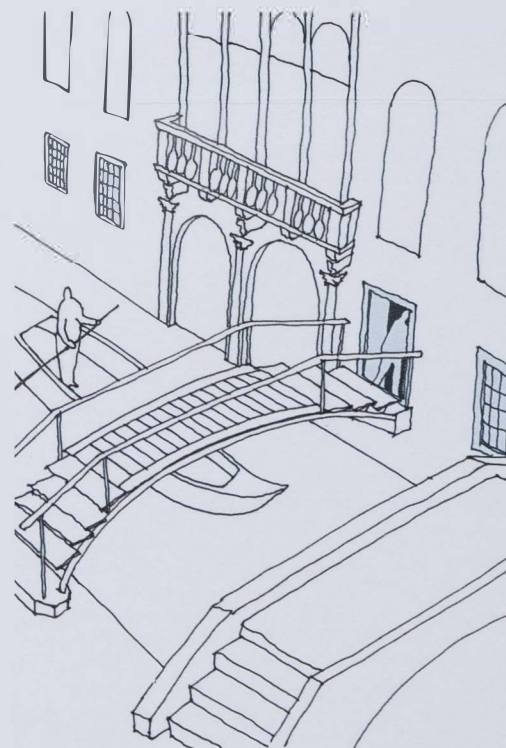
Another clever intervention can be found at the entrance of the museum. To emphasize the entrance, to control circulation and to perhaps differentiate the experience of entering and exiting the building, a new, bold concrete wall is inserted through the middle of an old doorway, creating two openings out of one. By doing so, an otherwise two dimensional threshold delineated by a door is expanded into a three dimensional transitory zone. Once inside the main foyer, the wall steps down and veers to the right to receive exiting visitors. Again, Scarpa has redefined and amplified the meaning and use of an historical element to adapt to new purposes.



A window redefined

Entry foyer, Fondazione Querini Stampalia >

Much attention has been given to the bridge of the Foundation but the story of the entrance – a former window, is relatively unknown. Scarpa's proposal to convert the original window into an entrance reached by a new bridge was met with opposition by officials whose idea of 'restoration' required formal mimicry, rather than the living quality of architecture which Scarpa argued for.¹⁸ This scheme, initially considered to be a violation of the window, was finally approved and realized in 1963. The appropriation of the window as a door renews the meaning and use of the element and of the building, enriching the ongoing evolution of the architecture.



WINDOW

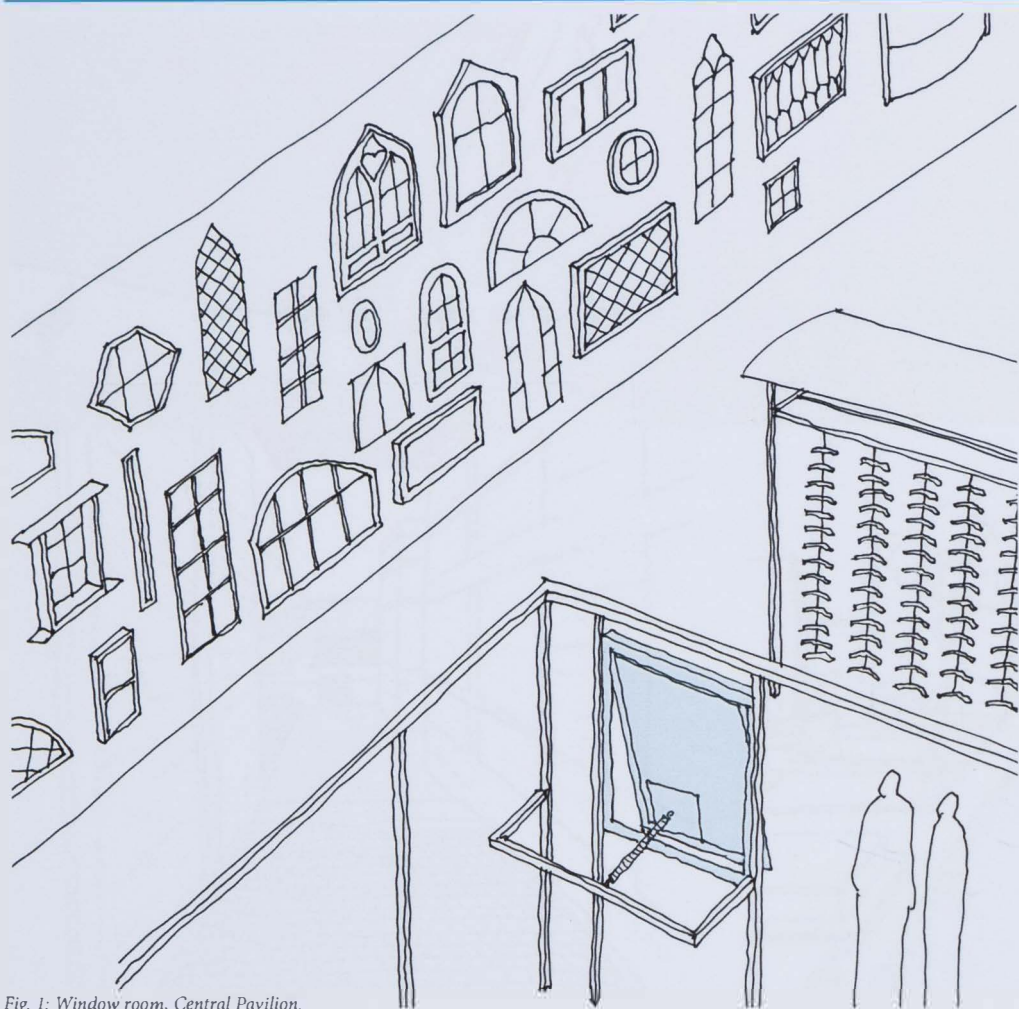


Fig. 1: Window room, Central Pavilion.

“The growth in size of panes of glass, and the invention of the glass curtain wall, have generalized the window: it is now everywhere and nowhere...windows were strong connections to the genius loci, to the peculiarity of the place. But both cases are exceptions in the mainstream of modern architecture.”¹⁹

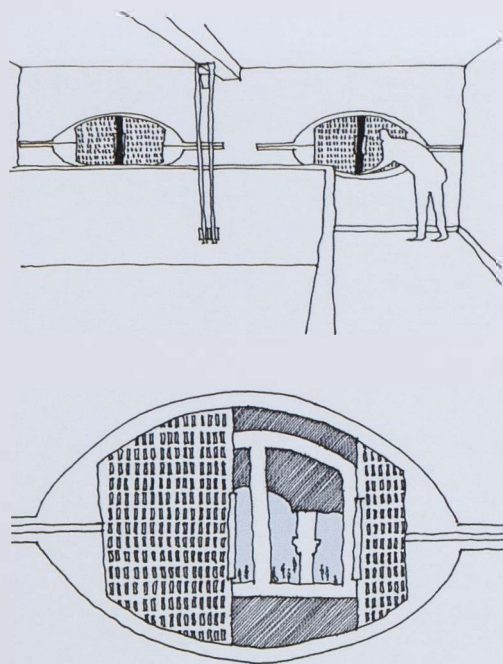
Far has the element detracted from the earliest meanings of the window in various languages, and gone is the intimacy and site specificity once attributed to this element. My favorite is probably the Sanskrit word *ramate* which means window, and also to rest.²⁰ Windows, once a framing device of particular vistas, a source of connection to the outside air, sounds and space, and also a destination in a building (think Edwardian England bay windows), have today been assimilated into the façade in the form of the curtain wall.

All the expansive modern glazing offers today is a disembodied visual spectacle for the occupants, and a liability hot potato for the architects. Confronted with building codes, increased complexity of off-the-shelf windows, and the fear of litigation, architects employ specification consultants to navigate the design and performance requirements for a given program, structure, and construction and rely on manufacturers to design

these elements based on required performances.²¹

Placed in the middle of the Windows exhibition is one such standard aluminum framed window, being subjected to an endless durability test, and sets of standard window handles; on the wall are its predecessors: a magnificent range of windows of great level of craft and variety of style (fig. 1). Do these windows still have a place in contemporary architecture or will they forever remain artifacts on display?

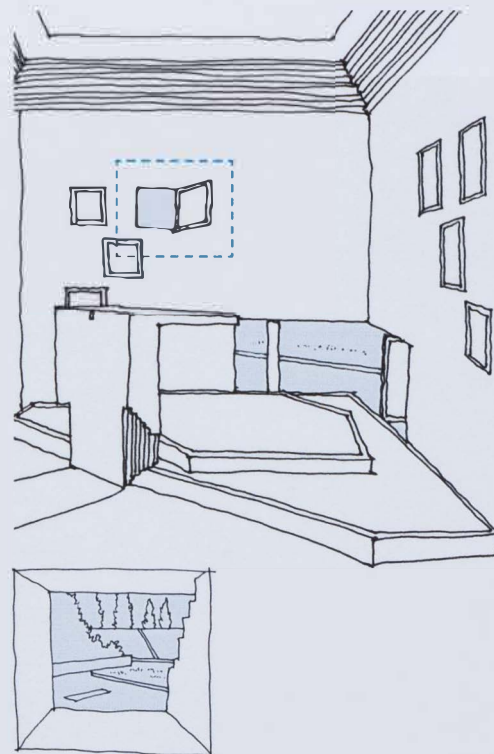
A ride on the *vaporetto* down the Grand Canal will reveal a dazzling number and variety of decorated windows on the facades of buildings, testament to Venice's rich history and wealth. And it is perhaps this wealth of window types that inspired Scarpa to produce highly unique apertures that connected occupants to the peculiarities of a place.



Eyes of a building

< Upper gallery, Olivetti Showroom

Before the arrival of modern architecture, windows were strong connectors to the *genius loci*, to the peculiarity of place. Today, the role of the window as something that has to represent the eye and frame a view is largely gone. On the upper level of the showroom, a pair of unmistakably anthropomorphic windows can be found. Following the curves of the arched arcade outside, these small, eye-like windows, which relate to the viewer's eyes, focuses his/ her attention on the life of St. Mark's Square below; curiously, the less we see the more we notice.



A few glimpses

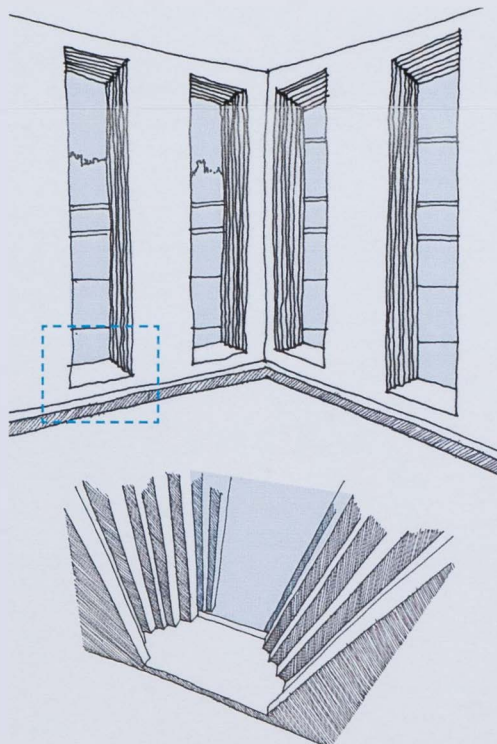
< Chapel, Brion Cemetery

Behind the altar of the chapel are a series of small apertures. Eight square apertures on the northwest and northeast walls are inlaid with thinly sliced onyx to allow faint light to filter through, revealing the beauty of the material. When opened, visitors get glimpses of the garden outside, or of the skies when kneeling in front of the altar. At floor level between the two abutting walls are a pair of windows that open onto the pool, bringing in air and a view of water. The intimate size and locations of these tiny apertures also beckon us to come nearer and study closely the surrounding subjects that they carefully frame.

Receptacles of light

< Chapel, Brion Cemetery >

According to Yutaka Saito, the chapel of the Brion cemetery is placed at a 45-degree angle to the east-west axis to take full advantage of the qualities of light from all directions. The narrow vertical glass apertures in each of the chapel's wall, edged with a zig-zag motif that creates a gradation of light and shadows, further enhance the internal light quality, which Saito likened to "divine light" that ceremoniously pays tribute to death.²² These receptacles of diffused light, with their multifaceted edges, also register and amplify the slightest fluctuations in daylight.

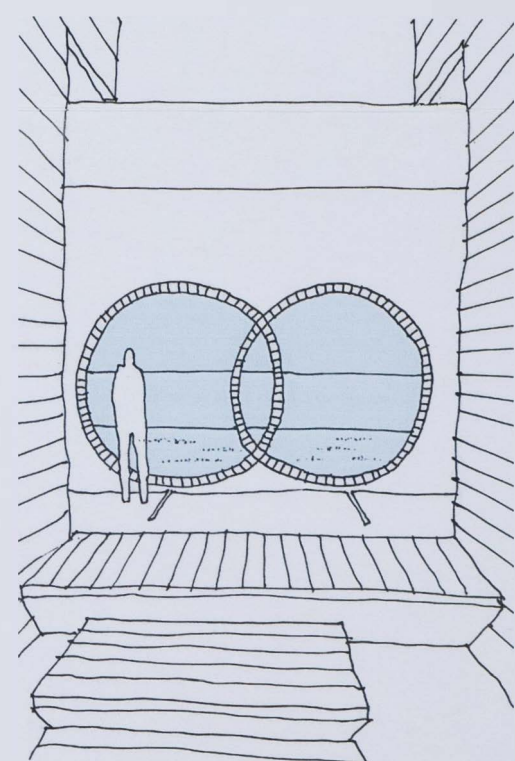


The vesica piscis

< Grass lawn, Brion Cemetery >

No one truly knows what the two intersecting circular openings are or mean. They may represent the union of husband and wife, both buried here, or a viewing device or a portal into what Scarpa calls a "garden for the dead." Regardless of its true meaning, its gravity, derived from its location, purity of form, and scale, of the *vesica piscis* seems to be felt and understood, as Saito observes:

Although there is a water tap at the entrance to the cemetery, I have often seen people pass through the overlapping circles of the entrance wing to obtain water from the small stream that runs below in order to water the flowers on their family graves.²³



CORRIDOR

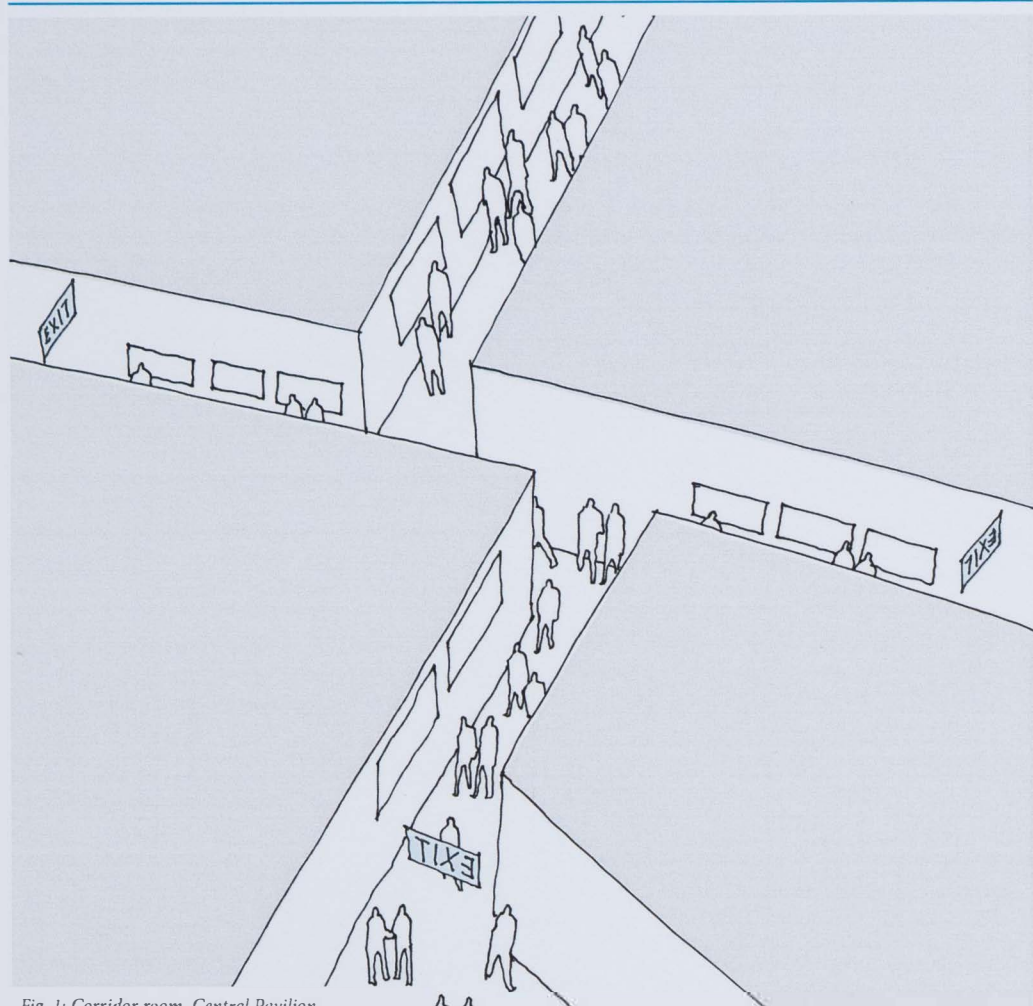


Fig. 1: Corridor room, Central Pavilion.

“In the 20th century, confronted by the imperative of the open plan, the corridor is forced to retreat to the backstage of architecture. Dictated by safety codes, and meant to be used only in a state of panic for exiting a building, the contemporary corridor is ironically a confirmation of our worst fears of the corridor as a lonely, blank, interminable passage.”²⁴

A browse through the history of corridors reveals a far richer past. From the temple complexes of India to the shrines of Korea, corridors are holy passages that orientate devotees to the world and to more sacred realms;²⁵ in traditional Chinese residential complexes, interconnecting corridors around courtyard gardens become intermediate spaces between buildings.²⁶

In more recent times, the corridor has taken on a more utilitarian role in giving order to and connecting rooms in mansions, social housing, prisons, hospitals and hotels. It is often designed simply as a means to get from A to B, rarely as a space for occupation; this could not be truer for the ubiquitous egress passage. Lost to a variety of items like exit signs, smoke detectors, fire resistance doors, fire hose reels, evacuation maps etc., the sole purpose of this element is to funnel you out of buildings as quick as possible. The slide in the corridor’s popularity is understandable.

Without surprise, the Corridor exhibition takes place in a series of narrow corridors (fig. 1). Visitors, whose discomfort were

palpable, had to be constantly on the move in these congested, spartan passages, much like the faceless figures in evacuation simulators playing on screens. Yet corridors can be more than mere passages for egress.

Floor pavements, metal floor strips, raised grassy lawns, polished plaster bands on concrete walls, and openings at the end of paths offer glimpses of and/or guide visitors towards the focal point of the cemetery – the tomb of Brion. Scarpa’s perceptiveness in using paths and corridors may have been influenced by the city of Venice, where he was born and bred, which abounds in charming lanes for strolling.²⁷ Besides choreographing the movement through the cemetery and inviting visitors to study the building’s surroundings, these corridors and paths also link and unite all other elements (walls, floors, windows etc.), achieving, in McCarter’s words, a “wholeness of inseparable elements,”²⁸ and a highly place-specific identity.

