Carlo Scarpa's Re-design of Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy

SAMIA RAB University of Hawaii at Manoa

This paper examines the re-design of Castelvecchio in Verona by the Italian architect Carlo Scarpa. An analysis of this project suggests that monuments may play an active role in the critical interpretation of regional history.

Scarpa's re-designing of Castelvecchio adapts a monument to the new use of a museum in which individual works of art are arranged to enrich the visitor's experience from both an artistic and historical viewpoint. His interventions create deliberate breaks between different historical parts of the building, each of which is designed to create an "authentic" historic experience. He rhythmically marks the different stages and layers that were added at different times in the history of Castelvecchio. It is in this way that he reveals the inherent discontinuity of time in his selective narration of Verona's past. As visitors to the museum, we are directed towards an understanding of the multiple moments and the infinite voices of history. As we walk through the museum, we listen to Scarpa's narration of the diverse history of Verona, as he reads this history from the physical elements of Castelvecchio. A vital insight in Scarpa's Castelvecchio Museum is that extending the life of monuments can efface just as much history from memory as is left recorded in them. Monuments, in this scheme of thought, do not just represent and immortalize historical figures, political events, or architectural styles; they have an active figural significance for the present state of architecture.

INTRODUCTION

Until very recently, architectural theorists and historians appraised Carlo Scarpa's work as craft-intensive, low-tech, small-scale, and anachronistic.' According to Manfredo Tafuri, Scarpa's work is "aperverse dialectic between the celebration of the form and the scattering of its parts."²Sergio Los was the first to uncover the "poetic" dimension in Scarpa's architecture.³ In his latest publication, he vaguely links Giovanni Vico's maxim**"verum** ipsumfactum" (the true is interchangeable with the made) to Scarpa's fascination with reaching truth through manual construction.⁴ In this book, he compares Scarpa to a number of modern architects, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, Mies van der Rohe. Unfortunately, Los' work mystified Scarpa's approach in such a way that most subsequent interpretation remains concerned with the architect's novelty rather than his originality.⁵

The idea of truth in manual construction motivated Bianci Albertini and Sandro Bagnoli to explore how Scarpaachieved "order and articulation in his architecture through a descending sequence of details."⁶ Since then, theorists have established Scarpa's reputation as the "master of detail." This aspect of his work has attracted Marco Frascari and Kenneth Frampton in recent years, but from different perspectives.

Frascari focuses on Scarpa's design of details, which he defines as "the unit of architectural production." He appreciates the "conception of architectural space" in Scarpa's projects and, from his interpretation of these projects, advances a perceptual definition of architecture.8 Frampton, in contrast, notes that "spatial interpretation is largely absent in his (Scarpa's) work." Instead, Frampton maintains that throughout Scarpa's work "the joint is treated as a kind of tectonic condensation."9 The tectonic in architecture, according to Frampton, is the art of joining,¹⁰ rather than detailing. And, to him, "Scarpa's work serves not only as a demonstration of tectonic authenticity but also as a critique of the two main utopias of our time; the organic utopia of Wright and the technological utopia of modern functionalism."" Through a study of Scarpa's work, Frampton pursues a search for the theory of making architecture that is potentially separate from thinking about and perceiving architecture. He claims to shed a "cognitive and critical discursive light" on Scarpa's architecture¹² when, in fact, he is concerned with the process of making in Scarpa's architecture. Together, Frascari and Frampton present two distinct aspects of Scarpa's approach to architecture: the perception of space by the five senses and the construction of objects that constitutes the space. But, read alone, each advances a single-sided interpretation of Scarpa.

The British architects, Richard Murphy, stands out for meticulously studying Scarpa's work to understand it, rather than use it to justify his own approach to architecture. He is especially impressed by Scarpa's re-design of Castelvecchio to a museum in Verona. His recent book gives a detailed

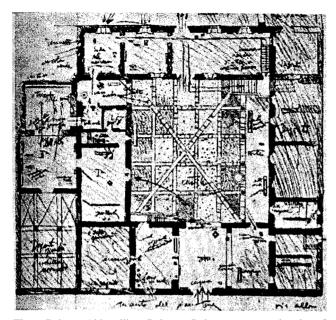


Fig. 1. Palazzo Abbatellis in Palermo, Italy. Scarpa's re-planning of the main level which emphasizes the north-south axis of the court. This is one of his early projects in which he re-defined the relationship between the court and the rooms that are now used for museum display.

inventory of the project and includes over 500 drawings from the Scarpa collection.¹³ It is a document and guide indispensable to anyone who wishes to understand and interpret the artistic approach of the Italian architect. It reconstructs the itinerary of Scarpa's work and interprets his design moves in the Castelvecchio project. It also illustrates the influence of Venetian architecture on Scarpa's design of details, specifically, on the way in which the architect incorporates water channels into his design.

These major publications document and interpret Scarpa's work and are successful in paving the way to study the critical position implicit in his work. However, no one has yet made a serious attempt to discuss Scarpa's work as a response to the several artistic and urbanistic movements that surfaced in Italy between the years 1910's and 1960's.

This paper discusses Scarpa's attitude to history and the role of the monument in his architectural projects within the context of post-World War II Italy. According to Murphy, Scarpa's aim is "to lead the visitor by the hand through the collection," to communicate between object and visitor by all available devices and not only to display the art object.¹⁴ This paper suggests that Scarpa, by selective excavation and creative demolition, attempts to achieve more than just to "clarify and expose the layers of history" for the viewer.¹⁵ He composes the remnants of different historical periods with his additions in a way that each element retains its uniqueness yet forms part of a harmonious whole. This paper concludes that monuments may play an active role in the critical interpretation of regional history, and in the portrayal of cultural diversity in a region's past.

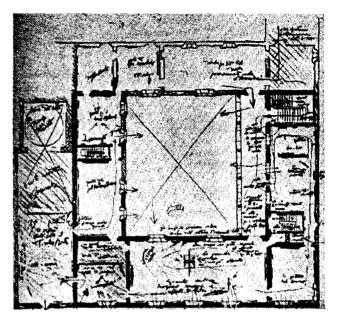


Fig. 2. Palazzo Abbatellis in Palermo, Italy. Scarpa's re-planning of the second level which significantly changed the configuration of the original palace.

THE RE-DESIGN OF CASTELVECCHIO OF VERONA

In 1947, Carlo Scarpa gave a lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts on the European Art Nouveau style and on the artistic and moral values that the nineteenthcentury theorist, John Ruskin, found in the medieval cities of the Veneto region.¹⁶ Ruskin's writings and William Turner's paintings had focused new attention on the historic cities of Venice and Verona. Scarpa believed that the construction of new buildings in the cities of Veneto did not benefit from the celebrated works of Ruskin or from their passionatedepiction by Turner. Therefore, he set a goal for himself which he pursued with conviction throughout his career: to recognize the Venetian monuments as a critical source for most of his architectural projects.

Scarpa re-designed several existing buildings in the region of Veneto and imposed his marks forcefully but critically on these buildings. In these projects he attempted to revive the ancient splendor of these cities through his own novelty. In his earlier work, for instance in the re-planning of Palazzo Abatellis at Palermo, he kept the exteriors intact and only reordered the interiors according to the new function. But after the 1960's, he started moving in a new direction toward achieving a balance of three distinct approaches: i) his interpretation of the history of the building, ii) highlighting the architectural value of its original components, and iii) satisfying the new requirements that initiated the entire process."

Before Scarpa worked on Castelvecchio, the city fort of Verona had already undergone four major periods of construction. The original construction, including the wall of the

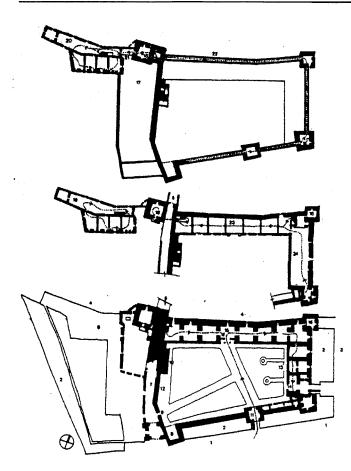


Fig. 3. Plan and circulation system of Avena's restoration of Castelvecchio.

Commune and the Republic of Verona, was built in the Twelfth Century. In 1354, the Lords of Verona incorporated the Commune wall into their compound, Castelvecchio; the wall between the two compounds separated the residential and themilitary functions.¹⁸ In 1797, when Napoleon's troops occupied the Veneto region, they added the barracks to Castelvecchio, along the north and east walls of the military compound. They also constructed a grand staircase against the Commune wall. In 1799, as a penalty for the citizen's uprising against the French occupation, the troops demolished five medieval towers.¹⁹

In 1923-6, during the Imperial Regime, museum director Antonio Avena and architect Ferdinando Foriati rehabilitated Castelvecchio. According to Coombs, nationalistic ideals "support[ed] the fascist myths of Italian cultural pre-eminence" and guided their rehabilitation.²⁰ This interpretation of their work is far from accurate. Avena and Foriati rebuilt the medieval towers and re-invented the utilitarian barracks. They replaced the several small openings in the Castelvecchio by Gothic doors and windows, which they salvaged from a local palazzo. Even though their modification did not obliterate the traces of the French occupation, it did glorify the Gothic period far more than either the Roman or Renaissance periods.

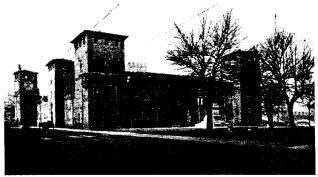


Fig. 4. Castelvecchio of Verona, Italy. Photograph showing the southeast side before Avena's restoration. Napoleon's troops, in 1799, had removed the battlements and the top of the towers.



Fig.5. View of courty ard looking northeast, showing the Napoleonic barrack as left by the military.



Fig. 6. Courtyard facade, looking northwest, showing Avena's restoration. The Napoleonic staircase still exists in the background.

In 1957, Licisco Magagnato succeeded Avena as museum director and appointed Scarpa as architect for another rehabilitation of Castelvecchio. Scarpa persuaded Magagnato to demolish the staircase and the barracks builtduring Napoleon's rule. Then, he proceeded by excavating the ancient moat discovered during the demolition. He re-articulated the lawn, paving and fountains in the great courtyard and added a bridge

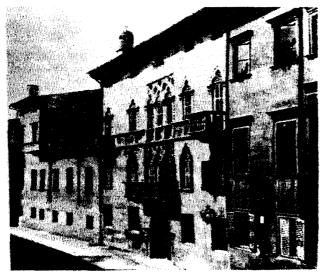


Fig. 7. Palazzo di Camerlenghi at San Tommaso Cantuariense, Italy. This palace was demolished in 1882 but the door and windows were salvaged and later used in the main court of Castelvecchio during Avena's restoration.

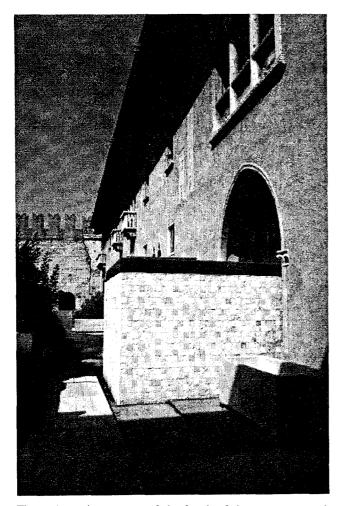
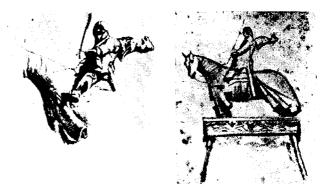


Fig. 8. Scarpa's treatment of the facade of the great courtyard, showing the detail of the new screens juxtaposed with older windows.



Figs. 9 and 10. Ruskin's drawing of the great equestrian statue of Cangrande which depicts the Lord of Verona. At the time, the statue stood on the spire of Santa Maria Antica.

across the moat. He also remodeled the ground floor gallery and installed new screens, windows and doors.

The statue of the Cangrande is one of the most significant objects in the museum collection. It depicts the most celebrated member of the Della Scala family, the fourteenth century Lord of Verona. During his visits to Verona, Ruskin drew the Cangrande statue, when it was on top of the spire of the church S. Maria Antica. This statue was placed in the Castelvecchio during Avena's conversion of the fortress to a museum. Scarpa critically relocated the Cangrande next to the new staircase that he introduced during his demolition of the Napoleon's stair and barracks, adjacent to the Commune wall.

Both Murphy and Coombs have commented on Scarpa's critical re-location of the Cangrande and his re-design of the space around the moat, the courtyard and the commune wall. According to Murphy, Scarpa "embarks on clarifying and exposing the layers of history by selective excavation and creative demolition.?' Coombs claims that by demolishing the Napoleonic barracks and staircase, "Scarpa was offering ... a critique of the Fascist myth of Italy's past."22 Mussolini had conducted a trial of Count Ciano, his son-in law, at the Napoleonic staircase. Count Ciano was a member of the Grand Fascist Council, which caused Mussolini's fall in 1943. The succeeding Italian government became a "cobelligerent" with the allies and soon held southern Italy under their control. However, the Germans rescued Mussolini and helped him recover his leadership of the "puppet government."?'

While these interpretations are certainly valid, they do not explain Scarpa's intentions completely. In relocating the Cangrande statue Scarpa had four concerns in mind. First, to keep the statue outside the museum but in a semi-enclosed space, protected from rain and direct natural light. He cut the roof back in order to introduce sun light into this space, as well as to separate the statue from the east wall of the court. Second, he promoted multiple viewing points for the statue, from below, from above, and at close quarters. While the statue's original sculptor had visualized the work to be seen about fifty feet above ground, Scarpa's design of the Cangrande



Fig. 11. Tomb of Cangrande della Scala, S. Maria Antica, Verona. This was the original location of the statue before relocation to the Castelvecchio Museum in 1923.

space and the museum circulation provided multiple viewing of the equestrian statue, making it the centerpiece of the collection. Third, the repeated presentation of the statue to visitors reinforced their focus on the symbol of Verona without being distracted by any other work of art. Fourth, and probably the most critical of all, Scarpa clearly intended to glorify the rule of the Lord of Verona much more than any other historic period. It is this aim that guided Scarpa's decision to demolish Napoleon's staircase which, in turn, led to the discovery of the Roman moat and foundations that lay underneath these stairs.It is only after this discovery that he could justify removing one layer of history and exposing an older strata.

The criteria for Scarpa's demolition not only shed light on his attempt to create harmonic relationships between the eastern and western parts of the museum.²⁴ It also reflects a unique dimension of Scarpa's attitude towards new architecture as it relates to existing buildings. In redesigning Castelvecchio, he critically composed select elements of the past with new ideas at three different levels. At a programmatic level, he maintained a balance between existing spaces and their potential use, available floor area and the requirements of the program, the configuration of the building and its re-articulation. On a purely stylistic level, he composed the *original* appearance of the castle and its *new* image. And, at a critical level, he experimented with the new urbanism that

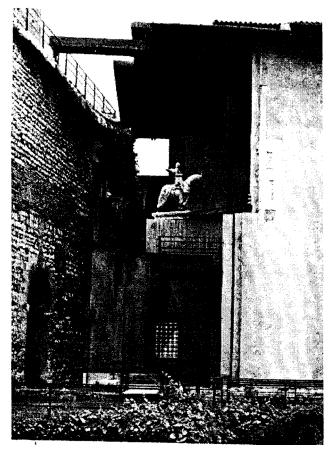


Fig. 12. Scarpa's design of the Cangrande space in which he creates multiple viewing of the equestrian statue.

was grounded in the notion of contextualism in architecture.

L'ambientismo was, as Giovannoni explained, "the correlation between a work and its surrounding; the artistic harmony between individual works and the whole."²⁵ As early as 1916, Piacentini had written an article "On the Conservation of the Beauty of Rome and the Development of the Modern City."²⁶ The conflict between the old and the new — between progress and tradition — was an age-old issue in Italy.

Even earlier, in 1913, Giovannoni had published his famous article on Diradamento, which meant the "thinning out" by selective "pruning." At an urban level, both these activities were essential to adapt the old city centers to modern life. Therefore, "demolition here and there of a house or a group of houses and creating in their stead a small piazza with a garden, a small lung in an old quarter... (would add)...a variety of movement, associating effects of contrast with the original setting such that everything will be infused with a character of art and/or setting."27 The concept of the piani regolatori in Italy was a direct outcome of the philosophy of contextualism, which expanded the concept of a monument from a building to "those essential conditions of context that constitute its setting." And, sometimes, explained Giovannoni, "one can say that the monument is the entire setting."28 Similarly, in defining the character of the Veneto region and in converting existing buildings to museums, Scarpa found

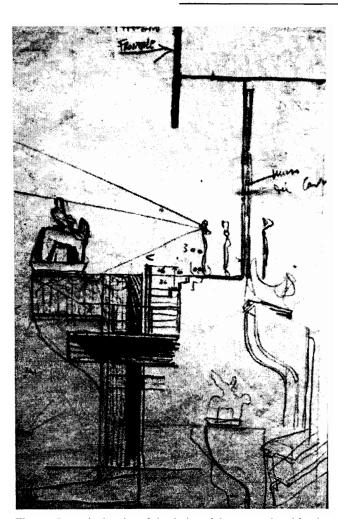


Fig. 13. Scarpa's drawing of the design of the new pedestal for the Cangrande

the opportunity to create new forms that were inspired by the historic and artistic significance of existing structures.

At Castelvecchio, Scarpa provides a specific method of rearticulating the existing space to provide a critical route for the visitor. The arrangement and grouping of exhibits and lighting assert this path. Moreover, he allowed the components of the original building to activate the sequence of spaces. Yet, on entering the Castelvecchio Museum, one is far more aware of Scarpa's "touch" than the architectural significance of the original castle. At the threshold between entrance room and the sculpture gallery, Scarpa details the paving edge by separating the old walls by a tiny cascade of levels formed from white Prun stone. Here, his intention is to simultaneously address two factors: the old wall and the visitor's route through the museum. He is both connecting²⁹ and separating³⁰ them. His main aim was to create new forms in a way that brought attention to the existing structure, without impinging on its historic and artistic value. In an interview he stated his intention as follows: "to allow it (the old fragment) to maintain its own identity, its own history... (In this way), you increase the tension between the new and the old."31

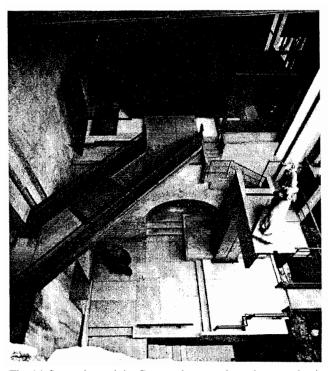


Fig. 14. Scarpa located the Cangrande statue in such a way that it became the centerpiece of the museum's collection.

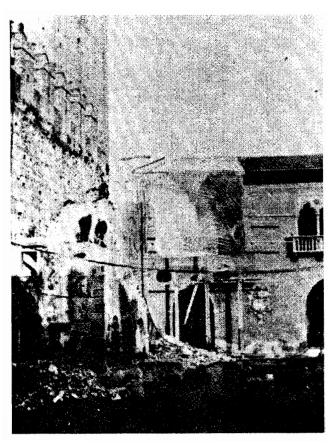


Fig. 15. Scarpa's demolition of the final bay of the Napoleonic barrack and the excavation of the Roman moat.

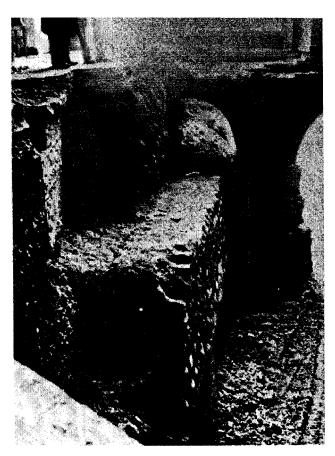


Fig. 16. Excavation of the Scaligeri moat under the fifth room of the gallery. The arches carrying the wall of the Napoleonic barracks were constructed in the nineteenth century. Scarpa introduced the foundations.

EXPLORING POLYPHONIC INTENTIONS IN THE RE-DESIGN OF MONUMENTS

Even though a metaphoric application of the term "polyphony" to understand architectural activity might ensue certain problems, this particular intention in musical composition can reveal the unfulfilled, but clearly stated,³² dimension in Scarpa's design philosophy. Polyphony in music is the simultaneous presentation of two or more voices that are perfectly bound together but still keep their relative independence. It is the texture formed by the interweaving of several melodic lines. Each line, melody or voice is independent but, together, sound harmonically. The contrasting approaches in music are "homophony," wherein one part dominates while the others form a basically choral accompaniment, and "monophony," wherein there is but a single melodic line. Polyphonic forms were given a most brilliant and sophisticated expression during the Baroque era in the works of J. S. Bach.33

One of the fundamental principles of the great polyphonic composers was the *equality of voices:* "no one voice should dominate, none should serve as mere accompaniment."³⁴ Scarpa acknowledged that, in adapting monuments to new functions, the old fabric should be allowed to maintain its

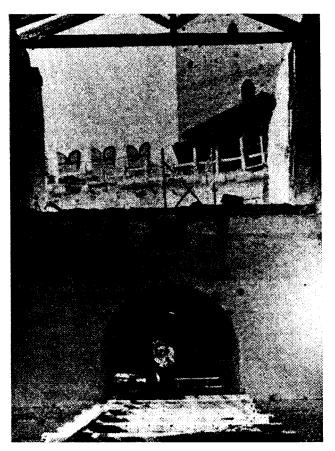


Fig. 17. View looking west from the fifth room of the gallery, after demolition of the barracks and removal of the first floor. The roof between the Commune wall and the Torre del Mastio, seen in this photograph, was also demolished during Scarpa's re-design.

identity. But, he did not elaborate, verbally or in writing, how to choose or assess these elements. In the previous section, a critical reading of the re-design of Castelvecchio has revealed Scarpa's preference in singling out some historical elements over the other. He retained the elements of two distinct historical eras: the fourteenth century statue belonging to the Lord of Verona and the Roman foundations. And, he erased the barracks and the stairs constructed during Napoleon's regime; an act that resulted in his discovery of Roman ruins. It is here that he deviates from the polyphonic intentions, which he may have aspired to but did not achieve, at least in the historical aspect of his design.

In Scarpa's hierarchy of architectural and historical value, the Commune wall and the Statue came first. To him, both these elements represent a time during which Verona offered its inhabitants a measure of individual freedom. He viewed Napoleon as an outsider and his conquest of Italy as paving a way for the later suppressive control by the Fascist Regime. Scarpa was convinced that those who were enfranchised during the rule of the Lords of Verona enjoyed individual freedom. Therefore, he liberated the wall from the Napoleon's construction — the staircase and barracks — and placed the Cangrande statue at this critical junction between the two sections of the museum.

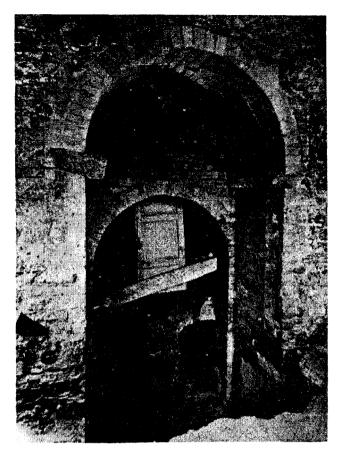


Fig. 18. The Porta del Morbio during Scarpa's excavation. The original gateway is in the inner arch. The bridge beyond the arch was buried during the nineteenth century but exposed by Scarpa during his re-design.

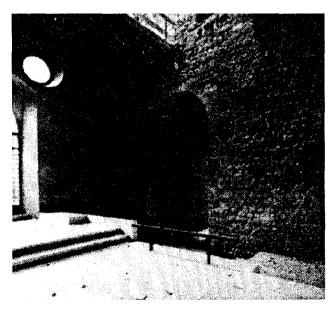


Fig. 19. The ground floor of the Cangrande space as between 1959-1962. The paving and route to the Porta del Morbio have been installed. The hole in the ceiling indicates the exact position of demolished Napoleonic staircase.

By making the Cangrande statue the most significant feature of the museum he did not relegate to the statue the role of mere "accompaniment." The statue, in fact, threatens the other historical voices that were a part of the original building. But, once selected, the manner in which he composed these elements and his additions reinforced the identity of each component.

This approach to design allows conflicting elements to coexist — separated yet connected. To interpret that "his interventions act as mere connectors the same way as a capital in the classical orders resolve the vertical and the horizontal elements"³⁵ reduces Scarpa's intention to only one of its many facets. This explanation ignores Scarpa's attempt to compose the original and the novel in a way that each is an independent part of the monument.

SUMMARY

Scarpa balances three approaches in re-designing the Castelvecchio: his interpretation of the history of the castle, highlighting the architectural value of its original components, and satisfying the new requirements of the museum. Approaching design in this way would vary from one project to another and would be naturally specific to existing buildings, their architectural and historical settings. But this approach relies on a critical selection of the building's existing components and the history that is voiced in these elements. Only then could one compose these elements and the creative additions.

His re-design of Castelvecchio reflects his critical view that new design offers a reinterpretation of the value of a monument. This approach points to a critical aspect in the concept of monuments; the significance of a monument can only be interpreted and never determined through fixed criteria. This is most obvious in Scarpa's critical selection of the components he erased and those he retained. Selective demolition prepared the ground for his creative additions. The original components of the Castelvecchio serve an active figural function, which he demonstrates by singling out and playing down certain features that represent specific historical events.

Interpreting Scarpa's intention at Castelvecchio, I would rephrase Murphy's observation withwhich hedefines Scarpa's attitude to history and museum design. According to Murphy, Scarpa "clarifies and exposes the layers of history by selective excavation and creative demolition."³⁶ At Castelvecchio, Scarpa's demolition is far more selective than creative and his additions are far more creative than critical. Therefore, a vital insight in Scarpa's Castelvecchio Museum is that extending the life of monuments can efface just as much history from memory as they record in them. Monuments, in this scheme of thought, do not just represent and immortalize historical figures, political events, or architectural styles, they have an active figural significance for the present.

- ¹ Leonardo Benevolo. The History of Modern Architecture. (Laterza, Bari, 1971); M. Tafuri and F. Dal Co. Architettura contemporanea. (Milan: Electa, 1976); Bruno Zevi, "Un Piranesi nel XX secolo." L'Espresso 17 (December 1978).
- ² Manfredo Tafuri. "Les 'muses inquiétantes' ou le dessin d'une génération de' Maitres," L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 181 (1975): pp. 14-33.
- ³ Sergio Los. Carlo Scarpa: Architetto Poeta. (Venice, 1967).
- ⁴ Sergio Los. Carlo Scarpa, Benedikt Taschen. (Trevignano: Italy, 1993).
- ⁵ With the exception of Maria A. Crippa, who mentions, in passing only, Scarpa's ability to "assimilate both ancient and modem artistic forms through a creative process of profound mimesis." Crippa, M.A. Carlo Scarpa: Theory, Design, Projects. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).
- ⁶ Bagnoli Albertini. Carlo Scarpa: Architecture in Details. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
- ⁷ Marco Frascari. "The Tell-Tale Detail." Via 7 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), pp. 28, 4f.
- ⁸ According to Frascari, Scarpa's architecture, "feeling a handrail, walking up steps or between walls, turning a comer, and noting the sitting of a beam in a wall, are coordinated elements of visual and tactile sensations. The location of those details gives birth to the conventions that tie a meaning to a perception." Frascari. (1984), p. 28,
- 9 Kenneth Frampton. "Carlo Scarpa and the Adoration of the Joint." Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 299.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Frampton. (1995), p. 4.
- ¹¹ Kenneth Frampton. (1995), p. 322.
- ¹² Kenneth Frampton. (1995), p. 332.
- ¹³ Richard Murphy. Carlo Scarpa & Castelvecchio. (London: Buttenvorth Architecture, 1990).
- ¹⁴ Richard Murphy. (1990), p. 18.
- ¹⁵ Richard Murphy. (1990), p. 4.
- ¹⁶ M.A. Crippa. (1986), pp. 41-2.
- ¹⁷ Crippa and Murphy have given detailed historical and architectural accounts of Scarpa's work at Castelvecchio. Instead of describing the project in detail, this paper focuses on Scarpa's selective additions and careful demolition. It illustrates the relationship between Scarpa's interpretation of the architectural and historical value of existing buildings in the context of his proposed interventions.

- ¹⁸ Tamara Coombs. "Scarpa's Castelvecchio: A Critical Rehabilitation." Places 8 (Summer 1992), p. 5.
- Henry Millon. 'The Role of History of Architecture in Fascist Italy." Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 24 (March 1965), p. 54.
- ²⁰ Coombs, Tamara. (1992), p. 6.
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- ²³ Henry Millon. (1965), p. 59.
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- ²⁷ G. Giovannoni. 'Il 'diradamento.'' (1913). Later published as "Nuovi contributi al sistemadel diradamentoedilizio." Relazione tecniche al 11 Congresso Nazionale degli Ingegneri Italiani, April 8-15. (Rome, 1931), p. 75. In Giovannoni's own words: "che il monumento sia tutto
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- ²⁹ As suggested by Kenneth Frampton. (1995).
- 30 As suggested by Tamara Coombs (1992).
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