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Re:Reading Scarpa

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Some books are to be tasted, others swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.
— *Sir Francis Bacon*

Abstract

During the 1985-86 academic year Italo Calvino gave the Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University. In his third talk on “Quickness” he declared, “I do not wish to say that quickness is a value in itself. Narrative time can also be delaying, cyclic, or motionless. In any case, a story is an operation carried out on the length of time involved, an enchantment that acts on the passing of time, either contracting or dilating it.”¹ Umberto Eco, a decade later, referenced Calvino in the third of his own lectures at Harvard entitled “Lingering in the Woods.”² In that essay, Eco described a number of temporal strategies employed by various authors who explore the pleasures of lingering.

In this short essay I will show that such temporal tactics described discussed by Eco and Calvino share uncanny similarities Carlo Scarpa’s architecture. It is my wager that a careful reader of Scarpa’s work will, inevitably, linger. I will discuss two museum projects in particular—the extension to the Canova Museum in Possagno and the renovation of the Castellvechio Museum, in Verona—in both of which Scarpa intentionally posits disruptions in the uniform nature of processional time through the work and location of art. Indeed, Scarpa’s work is full of delays, distractions, and redirections that, if followed, pres-

ent enchanting experiences not unlike those described by Calvino and Eco in their own work. Thus I hope to demonstrate that the similarities between architecture and narrative are not only topical, thematic, or even spatial, but temporal as well.

Narrative Time

Stories have the ability to situate oneself in another time and place. “Once upon a time” or “It was a dark and stormy night” indicate that the story is not “here and now” but rather “then and there.” An additional and perhaps distinct temporal space opens up when one opens a book. Joyce and Proust, to name only two exemplary authors, have explored such temporalities in their wonderful and provocative work. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on the relationship between temporality and narrative discourse.³ Rather than making a general comparison of approaches, I will look to Umberto Eco’s discussion of narrative time to develop a framework through which I will then investigate Carlo Scarpa’s approach to museum design.

Eco, building on the work of Paul Ricoeur, named three variations of time found in fiction: story time, discourse time and reading time. Story time is the amount of time that takes place in a story. Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, for example, takes eighty days of story time (actually eighty-one for Phileas Fogg as he travelled eastward). This can also be referred to as the plot. Discourse time is the time needed to tell the story of those eighty days in the balloon. Reading time is simply how long it takes one to read the text. Dialogue may align discourse and reading times, but the three times are rarely in sync. This lack of correspondence implies that the author may employ various temporal tactics that serve to make the act of writing and reading more than the simple transmission and reception of events. Each of the times may, for example, be paced differently and for various effects, e.g., foreshadowing plays with plot and the reading time by giving the readers a hint of what they will soon read. The plot may unfold quickly or be extended, and, in effect, affect the readers’ experience of duration.

The relation between story time and discourse time often affects our reading time. Description, tone, word count, and pacing can affect this. Reading the machine-gun-like staccato of a hardboiled novel by Mickey Spillane has a different pace than, for example, the slow droning on of a Don DeLillo novel.⁴ An author may offer an abundance of detail or a mass of particulars that are less a representational device than a strategy for slowing down or speeding up the reader. Eco refers to this as hallucinatory time, and the work of Robbe-Grillet is offered as an example. Eco also mentions circumnavigational time in which the author adjusts points of view in both time and space. Here, time can be varied through detail, complexity of reference, or a variety of paths. The work of Calvino and Borges offers such an approach. Typically an author employs a combination of these strategies. In the lectures on lingering mentioned above, Eco describes and then diagrams the various temporalities in the novel *Sylvie* by Gerard de Nerval and shows

that the author does indeed utilize a variety of tactics to tell the tale. After Eco's analysis it is clear that the manner in which the plot is told is as important as what the story is. In *Sylvie*, for example, a typical reader will most likely get lost in the remembrances and flash-forwards. These dream-like temporal digressions, however, are intentional and a key element in the narrative.

From this analysis it is clear that there are more and less appropriate ways to read. Eco recognizes the open nature of any work, but this does not mean that the reader is free to interpret at will, but rather that the reader observe the rules of the game. Eco describes a model reader: "I call the model reader—a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create."⁵ In a way, the reader is implicit, or may at least be an active agent, in the meaning of the text. There is also an important balance between the model reader and the model author. Eco further explains that, "The model author, on the other hand, is a voice that speaks to us affectionately (or imperiously, or slyly) that wants us beside it. The voice is manifest as a narrative strategy, as a set of instructions which is given to us step by step and which we have to follow when we decide to act as the model reader."⁶

Though tempting to conflate, the reading of a building is not the same as the reading of a book. That said, there are ways in which one can be a model reader of architecture. Much as in Eco's evaluation, it is important that both the reader and author collaborate. The architecture of Carlo Scarpa is not often easy to read. At moments his work seems timeless and at others quite dated. His intentions are difficult to uncover as he did not often speak about his intentions and wrote even less; we can, however, as model readers, attempt to make a close reading to uncover the instructions for reading the spaces.

Carlo Scarpa

According to his friend Aldo Businaro, Carlo Scarpa described himself as "a Man of Byzantium who came to Venice by way of Greece."⁷ His words seem to imply that Scarpa was a traveler; however, he rarely left the Veneto, and indeed much of his work is rooted there. He was born in Venice in 1906 to an elementary school teacher and a dressmaker. In 1926 he passed with full marks from the Academy of Fine Arts and began teaching architectural drawing at the Istituto Universario d'Architettura di Venezia (IUAV), where he would teach in various capacities throughout his life. Although careful monographs exist, Scarpa's oeuvre is difficult to comprehend. Much of the work was temporary, partial, or renovated beyond recognition. Scarpa's projects are typically noted for an obsessive relationship with materials and craft, an extreme attention to detail, and a focus on the fragment.⁸ Kahn and Wright are often mentioned as influences, but so too is Scarpa's fascination with Japanese culture. Often noted is the timelessness of the work. Other critics note the "Proustian" nature of the architecture without fully explicating what this might mean.⁹

During the late 1920s and early 1930s Italy saw the rise of fascism, especially in the north, and there was not much work for a young architect such as Scarpa. Most scholarship points to this and describes how the social and economic conditions led him into collaboration with the well-known glassmaker Paolo Venini. His designs for Venini, some of which are still in production, redefined ways of working with glass. While this is certainly an important influence in Scarpa's work, it should also be noted that at this time he also began to develop relationships with many important artists in the Veneto at this time and that he did find work designing exhibitions. All told, Scarpa designed at least sixty exhibitions, and many of his most well known commissions were for museums. Later in his life he reflected on the importance of museum work. From Scarpa:

I have a great passion for works of art, as you know. I have always taken the trouble to learn, to know, to understand, and, it seems to me, to have a real critical awareness. I would not be able to write, to produce a critical article; but I have a lively sense of critical values and how they move me. Indeed, I would rather, on the whole, build museums than skyscrapers – though logic may say otherwise. Since the former may be perhaps creative, while the latter requires one to adapt and subordinate oneself to things as they are.¹⁰

This creative and critical approach guided the work of many exhibition spaces. I will discuss two examples in which Scarpa is seemingly more concerned with the nature and consequently the location of each piece rather than the room as a whole. This approach, begun in a series of exhibitions, was more fully developed in his museum designs.

Canova Plaster Museum

Opened in 1955 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Canova's birth, the Canova Plaster Museum houses Canova's plaster casts and study models used in the fabrication of the larger marbles. Scarpa's project is an extension to the existing museum designed by Giuseppe Segusini between 1831-1836, the one that houses marble Canova sculptures. The original proposal was to relocate all of the work. Though he was not required to make an extension, Scarpa decided to keep the existing building, and the differences are marked. The first thing a visitor notices in the original gallery is the severe axis. All of the pieces, except one at the conclusion of the axis, are mirrored on either side of the gallery. Each is placed on a pedestal of similar height. Each is spaced evenly apart. Each is to be viewed frontally. One can imagine that Segusini intended that a person view the work in a linear manner, pausing at each piece for a similar amount of time before moving on to the next. Standing at the entry of the older museum and looking to one's right, a visitor encounters a decidedly different approach to the setting out of objects of art.

Entering into the gallery the visitor is greeted by a collage of fragments. In the distance a bust slightly pulled off the wall is framed by a figure seated but looking away, but set at a height in which you notice the sculpture's footwear first. To the right and much lower is another sculpture. You are, however, looking at the side of the piece, and to view the front of the work requires that you circumnavigate to the front. In doing so, you also see the front of two other pieces, though at different heights. Once around the work, and in your peripheral vision, you begin to see the full length of the second gallery. To view each piece in the gallery requires an active looking at various heights, scales and, indeed, a mix of temporalities. In a rare television interview Scarpa described his approach, explaining that, "By paying close attention to how one arranges a plastic object, whether it be sculpture or painting, it is possible to intensify certain qualities of the work."¹¹ This intensification, say, of a Roman sandal, the fall of fabric in stone, a profile, force the visitor to move around a work, to scrutinize closely, and to survey from a distance in a way that intentionally affects the temporal experience of the work.

Scarpa's gallery follows the existing topography, sloping down slightly. At the end of the gallery, the visitor is greeted with a collage, this time framed by a full-height glass wall over a small pool of water, the conclusion of which is the famous study of the three graces. A set of long, low, shallow stairs leads the visitor down one side of the gallery. The scale of the work in the second gallery is even more varied, and at each landing one is tempted to linger around a piece or perhaps to look back. At this point the visitor may also begin to notice the care and craft displayed in the vitrines, also designed by Scarpa to hold the smaller and more delicate pieces. The three spaces, the entry, and the first and second gallery, are each scaled and lit differently, and they also offer a surprisingly varied set of experiences for such a limited space.

A comparison between the two approaches – Segusini's and Scarpa's – is telling. Relating back to Eco's discourse, the story time of each gallery is similar, that is, a series of sculptural pieces displayed for viewing. The narrative time, however, is quite different. Segusini's gallery is much more temporally uniform. He organizes the work in a manner consistent in plan and section, even in elevation. Although visitors are free to linger, it is completely their responsibility to do so. Scarpa's approach is much more temporally varied – a garden of forking paths. He adjusts the organization in plan, section, elevation, and even type of object to set up a conversation between the objects on view as well as such objects and the visitor.

Castelvecchio Museum

Similar tactics are present at the renovation to the Castelvecchio museum in Verona. The site is a complex layering that dates back to a 12th century communal wall, the Castelvecchio proper, built by the Scaligeri family. It was altered in the 19th century for use as a military barracks. In 1924 the building was transformed into a civic museum to house a mix of sculpture and painting from the 12th through 19th centuries. In the

early 20th century Ferdinando Forlati plastered a historicist “Venetian Gothic” façade over the interior of the courtyard. By the time Scarpa was involved, a good portion had been destroyed in the bombings of World War 2. Forlati’s façade remained. Scarpa’s renovation began in 1956 as the design of a temporary exhibition (*da Altichiero a Pisanello*), then continued to include a structural shoring of walls and, finally, the reorganization of the entire collection that occupied Scarpa for at least an additional twenty years.

One of the most daring design moves here was to place the statue of the Cangrande to the far left of the courtyard, where it is somewhat precariously raised up on an exterior platform. Arguably the most symbolic piece in the collection, the Cangrande becomes the keeper and guardian of the museum and, indeed, this is how Scarpa referred to it. In counterpoint to the Cangrande is the actual entry, located on the right side of the façade. Scarpa moved the entry from the center of the façade to the far right. A double row of hedges, however, forces the visitor from a direct route to the entry. The axially of the hedges foreshadows that of the galleries – the interior enfilade is parallel to the landscaping. Entering underneath a bell tower, one makes a quick right and then left, goes past and around a small fountain with another right then left, and, finally, enters into the museum. The entry half wall directs the visitor to the museum and away from the exit stair descending from the second level. The entry is certainly intended to slow the pace of the visitor prior to entering the museum and also to offer a variety of perspectives. Indeed, George Dodds in his own analysis of the garden notes that the visitor makes no less than seven changes of direction and even more changes in elevation prior to entering the museum.¹²

Once in the museum the visitor is on axis with an enfilade that cuts through five galleries on the lower level. The organization of the floor existed prior to the renovation, and rather than deconstruct the centuries-old building, Scarpa chose to leave the organization of the rooms intact. In each of the rooms, however, Scarpa organizes each piece in very particular ways. Work is placed so that one rarely confronts sculpture frontally. Moreover, one is not able to walk into a room and quickly survey all of the work at once. Work is placed at differing heights and even on the floor. One enters and might notice the fall of a fabric in a light set against another color, or perhaps the profile of a sculpture framed in the next room. One’s interaction with the work is temporally varied and not equidistant; in a way it is more dance than wandering. One can see this in an early sketch showing a visitor’s movement through each room.

At the end of the first floor of galleries, one emerges outside and under the Cangrande statue, crosses a moat (unearthed during construction) and enters into another series of galleries. The visitor now sees the Cangrande closer than from the entry, but partially and from below. In the next series of galleries, as with the sculpture, paintings are pulled off of the wall and placed on easels, almost as if the artist were simply pausing to take a break. As a result of this positioning one begins to notice the frame, and the back of the painting (rarely ever seen) is now available for view. Continuing through the gallery, one is led back outside and over a bridge. The Cangrande is now seen at the same level, but from behind. One then enters into the next row of galleries and can, if one dares, go back outside to inspect the sculpture frontally and in much more detail.

From his drawings we can see that Scarpa intended that the Cangrande be viewed from a number of positions and over time. No one view is privileged, but rather the visitor's experience combines to form his or her own whole. Essential is the fact that the experience of the work unfolds and occurs in time. The second floor galleries mimic the organization of the first, but Scarpa moves the circulation to the exterior wall, alongside the river. At the conclusion of the galleries is a stair that leads the visitor down to the entry, where the one-point perspective of the first floor galleries is again presented.

The renovation to the Castelvecchio is interesting in that multiple times exist. To refer back to Eco's classifications, the story time is not unlike that of many civic museums. The narrative time, however, the time it takes to tell the story, operates at a number of levels. From the multiple views of the Cangrande to the collaged planning of the art, and even the severe axial organization of rooms, a visitor is allowed to walk quickly through the museum, or to linger around any detail. While I am not prepared to claim a normative museum design, rooms designed according to chronological, typological, stylistic, or other taxonomic interests, it does seem that Scarpa is proposing something distinctive. In both the extension to the Canova gallery and the renovation of the Castelvecchio, Scarpa proposes an interaction with art that is inherently temporal. It is active and engaged but also allows one to slow down, linger, and perhaps take an inferential walk.

Postscript

Sverre Fehn was in Venice intermittently from 1958-62 while working on the Nordic Pavilion for the Biennale grounds. While there he met Scarpa. The meeting, as described by Fehn years later, was not exactly rich in dialogue. As Fehn recalled, "I remember my short meeting with Carlo Scarpa in Venice. I had an appointment, but he arrived very late. I talked about Oslo, but for Scarpa it was somewhere beyond the Alps, and he remarked, "For me, there is no culture north of the Alps."¹³ That said, Fehn was a very good student of the Venetian's work. Fehn returned to Oslo and began work on the Storhamarlåven in Hamar – a museum/archeological site not completely dissimilar in terms of program to the Castelvecchio.

Comparable in terms of site, program, and theme, Fehn's work in Hamar also offers a very particular approach to objects on display. The setting of individual pieces was undertaken almost exclusively by Fehn – his office at that time consisted of himself and one assistant. Just as at Castelvecchio, where Scarpa directs your gaze to the fall of a fabric in stone on the back of a sculpture, Fehn presents a visual dialogue with the work: a necklace that is set on leather to replicate the touch of skin, a scythe that casts a similarly slender shadow, a plow that cuts through a steel plate, a boat that is set on the opposite side of a balustrade so it can be seen from above as if it were in the water, and then, seen from below so as to notice the construction of the boat. Many other examples exist.

Movement through the Storhamarlåven is also similar to that in the museum in Verona. Directly inside, a concrete ramp dissects three concrete boxes, inside of which are the objects excavated from the Bishop's manor. The concrete bridge also allows the visitor to observe the walls of the original structure from an elevated perspective. Here, in a manner similar to the enfilade at Castelvecchio, one can choose to walk quickly through the exhibits or to pause and linger amongst the artifacts. Continuing along the ramp past the three small concrete rooms and turning right into the northern wing, one finds artifacts unearthed from the period after the site had been converted to a working barn. Objects in the north wing of the museum vary in size – from a boat to utensils – and allow for a much more varied display. The floors are pulled away from the existing walls and are cut away so that the floor only occupies half of the area, thus allowing for double height spaces adjacent to each floor. Similar to the arrangement at Castelvecchio, the circulation loops back around to the entry. In both museums the choreography of movement and the interaction with specific objects opens up to multiple readings of the same work; the visitor has the rare experience of seeing the familiar in an unfamiliar way. As Fehn stated, "It is the object that is constant, but the visitor experiences the exhibited object differently...The exhibitor injects a new personality into the object, but it is the visitor who decides if it is understood."¹⁴

Many other similarities exist, so much so that one that one could argue that Fehn's Storhamarlåven, is a direct translation of the Castelvecchio museum. But that is a story for another day.

Notes

- 1 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 2 Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- 3 In addition to the work by Eco Calvino referenced above, Paul Ricoeur's writing and specifically the three volume set of *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88), is particularly relevant to this topic.
- 4 Punctuation, location of text on the page, and even various strategies for footnotes may affect the manner in which a reader reads. David Foster Wallace's use of footnotes in *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996) is a particularly interesting example.
- 5 Eco, *Six Walks*, 9.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 15.

- 7 Aldo Businaro restated this unreferenced but often quoted bon mot. See Giuseppe Zambonini, "Process and Theme in the Work of Carlo Scarpa," in *Perspecta* 20 (1983), 22. Zamboni references a 1981 interview in which Scarpa quotes Eugenio Montale and then says "when my time comes, cover me with these words because I am a man of Byzantium who came to Venice by way of Greece." The words to which Scarpa references to be placed on his epitaph are Montale's. Montale's writing is quite similar to the poem *Sailing to Byzantium* by W. B. Yeats, a poem Montale translated into Italian.
- 8 Manfredo Tafuri discusses Scarpa's relationship to the fragment as well as others who have framed the work as such. See Manfredo Tafuri, "Carlo Scarpa and Italian Architecture" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, eds. Francesco dal Co and Giuseppe Mazzariol (New York: Rizzoli), 70.
- 9 M. Dalai Emiliani, "Musei della ricostruzione in Italia, tra disfatta e rivincita della storia," in *Carlo Scarpa a Castelvecchio* (1982), 164.
- 10 Carlo Scarpa in "Incontri a cura di Gastone Favero: un'Ora con Carlo Scarpa," Radiotelevisione Italiana documentary, 1970.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 George Peter Dodds, "Landscape and Garden in the Work of Carlo Scarpa," Unpublished dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania (January 1, 2000).
- 13 Per Olaf Fjeld and Sverre Fehn, *Sverre Fehn: The Pattern of Thoughts* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2009), 64.
- 14 Ibid., 127-28.

About the Author

Marc J. Neveu graduated with a professional degree in architecture after which he went on to complete a post-professional M.Arch and Ph.D. at McGill University in Montréal. While working on his dissertation Marc was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship for study in Venice and a Collection Research Grant at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Neveu has taught history / theory and studio at universities in the United States and Canada. He has published on issues concerning architectural pedagogy in the Italian eighteenth century as well as our contemporary context. In 2014 he was named as the Chair of the School of Architecture at Woodbury University in Los Angeles. Neveu is the current Executive Editor of the *Journal of Architectural Education*.