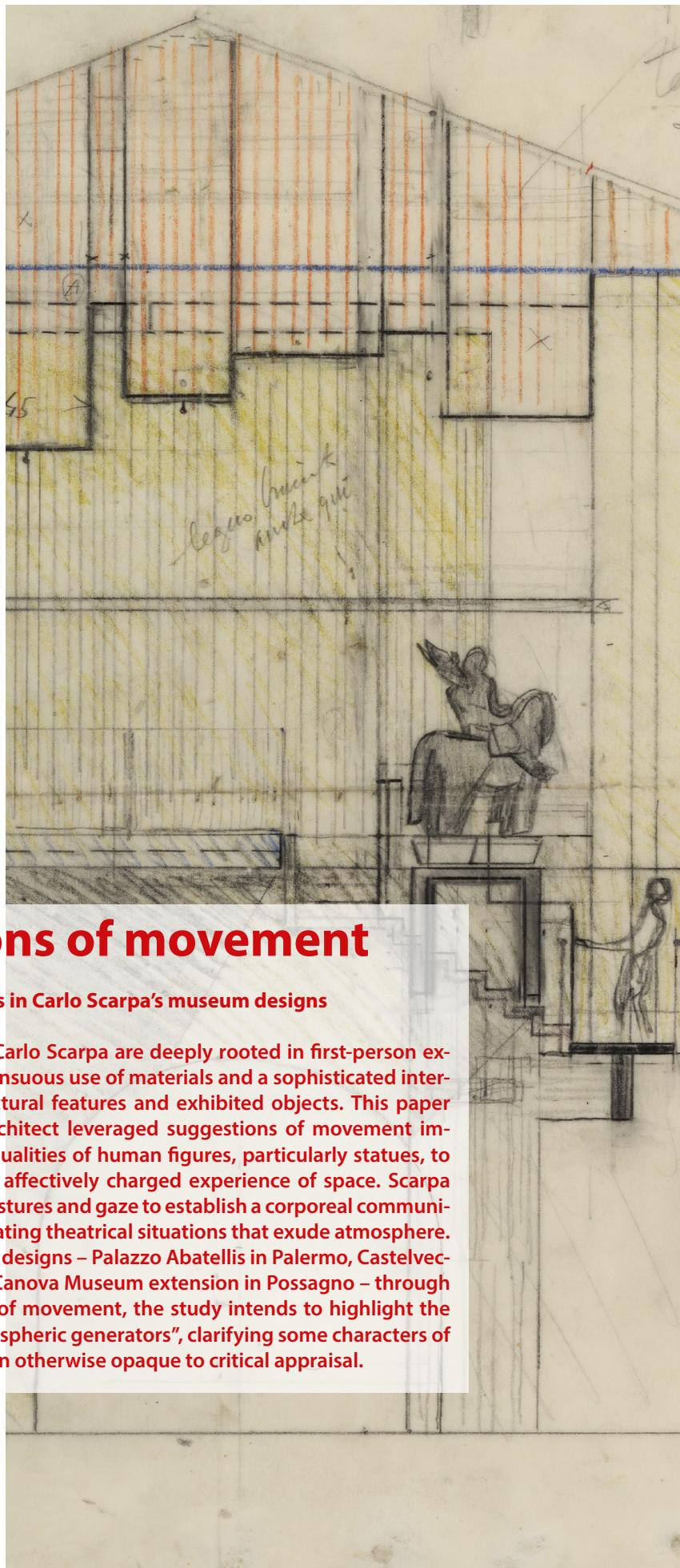




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Suggestions of movement

Atmospheric techniques in Carlo Scarpa's museum designs

The museum spaces of Carlo Scarpa are deeply rooted in first-person experience, through the sensuous use of materials and a sophisticated interaction between architectural features and exhibited objects. This paper investigates how the architect leveraged suggestions of movement implicit in the expressive qualities of human figures, particularly statues, to provide visitors with an affectively charged experience of space. Scarpa exploited the statues' gestures and gaze to establish a corporeal communication with subjects, creating theatrical situations that exude atmosphere. By analyzing three of his designs – Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo, Castelvecchio in Verona, and the Canova Museum extension in Possagno – through the lens of suggestions of movement, the study intends to highlight the dynamics of these "atmospheric generators", clarifying some characters of Scarpa's work that remain otherwise opaque to critical appraisal.

When considering 20th century masters of architecture Carlo Scarpa is among the most impenetrable. Lying somewhere outside recognized schools and movements, his work can hardly be labeled, and critics have struggled to grasp the essence of his spaces. In the early 1980s, with the first wave of studies following the architect's death in 1978, most scholars forcibly attempted to critically frame him by presuming the existence of a hidden *language* within his oeuvre, with no shortage of awkward results. Even Manfredo Tafuri – the sharpest critic of post-war Italian architecture –, when describing Scarpa, plunges into this fallacy: in a single page of his 1982 *Storia dell'architettura italiana*, he applies the terms "language", "sign", "deciphering", "scripture", "sentence", "phrase", "fragment", "word", "metaphor" – clearly pointing at a linguistic interpretation that all but misses the mark.¹

Later authors, such as Polano and Los, relinquish the semiotic approach based on systems of traces and signs, acknowledging the fact that Scarpa's architectural forms are devoid of associative meanings, "signifying only themselves".² Nevertheless, they suggest an hermeneutic reading of the architect's work, investigating his articulated cultural background and the links to various strains of early 20th century masters and movements, from Wright to De Stijl and the Viennese Sezession, as if the ontology of his spatial devices could only be tracked in the genealogy of his architectural precedents rather than in buildings themselves. What emerges is a dense mesh of entangled grammatical references, where even natural light is considered a "cognitive tool", buildings systems of physical objects laden with meaning, and space ultimately an inhabited text.³

A more objective interpretive model is proposed by Anne-Catrin Schultz, who investigates Scarpa's work through the lens of layering, first introduced by Gottfried Semper with the concept of *Bekleidung* and filtered down to Scarpa through authors such as Loos and Hoffmann.⁴ Looking at the complex stratification of materials in the architect's work provides precious insight into his construction techniques; yet the materialistic approach some-

how ends up excluding human presence from the larger picture, leaving aside all that is *not* material.

Contradicting many of these interpretations lies the poetic testimony of Louis Kahn, whose very last piece of writing was dedicated to his friend Scarpa: "*In the work of Carlo Scarpa / 'Beauty' / the first sense / Art / the first word / then Wonder / Then the inner realization of 'Form' / The sense of the wholeness of inseparable elements*".⁵ What Kahn poignantly underscores is the atmospheric quality Scarpa's work elicits, which cannot be subjected to a critical tomography that pulls elements apart, severing the sense-building relationships between things.

That Scarpa's architecture is profoundly rooted in first-person corporeal experience is well highlighted by more recent critics such as Robert McCarter: "*Scarpa's work has proven to be particularly difficult for scholars, as it is largely opaque to traditional scholarly methods of assessment, relying on distanced mechanisms that have no way of grasping the 'corporeal imagination', grounded in the body of the inhabitant, and the nearness of things, in their sensorial richness, that forms the basis for Scarpa's architecture of experience*".⁶ Many today recognize that the sensuous use of materials typical of the Venetian architect's work acts not in a linguistic way, but rather through its ecstatic emanation in experienced space, and that the organizational rationale of the subjects' movement does not follow a stringent functional logic, being anchored to the peculiar spatial constructions that Scarpa investigated through his meticulous sketches.⁷

Yet another aspect of his work that seems to have been largely overlooked is that related to *suggestions of movement* (*Bewegungssuggestionen*), a key concept in various strains of contemporary aesthetics and phenomenology, and directly connected to the atmospheric character of lived experience.

Many of Scarpa's buildings – and his museum designs in particular – strongly rely on such immaterial agents to present visitors living, almost haunted spaces, where exhibited objects collaborate with architectural features, lea-

ding to the emergence of that sense of *wholeness* Kahn termed *beauty* and *artfulness*.

In the following pages, I will describe three of Scarpa's museum designs – the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo (1953-54), the Canova Museum extension in Possagno (1955-57) and Castelvecchio in Verona (1956-64) – to understand how suggestions of movement act as atmospheric generators, by that influencing the subjects' corporeal experience of space. Yet the further scope of this paper, beyond highlighting some characters of Scarpa's work that have not been previously investigated, is to exemplify how the phenomenographical analysis of atmospheric conditions can provide a deeper understanding of spatial dynamics, singling out architectural features and design techniques without contradicting the ontological vagueness and wholeness of lived space.

To move is to perceive is to feel

Architecture *moves* us: this statement is to be interpreted in the broadest possible way. As animated subjects, we engage with the surrounding environment through a constant circle binding perception, motion and affective response, vital dynamics continually causing each other. There is no passivity in this drive, for our sense of presence is articulated in a continuum where we simultaneously sensorially explore our surroundings and respond to what we encounter through our emotional stirrings, from which we derive primary information about the environment's qualities. Architectural space – as a special condition within the wider world – makes no exception: its specific characters prompt us to move *in* and *through* it, to query it perceptually, and to act according to our contingent affective disposition.

The relationship between perception and movement has been a central topic in various fields of inquiry – aesthetics, art history, architecture, psychology etc. – since the late 19th century.⁸ Most approaches revolve around a central consideration: that movement and perception are by no means isolated mechanical processes, but share a common core linked to the indi-

vidual's organic wholeness. More recently, the subjects' affectivity has been incorporated into this notion, bringing to the fore emotional responses and their dynamic collaboration with movement and perception.⁹ The experience of space emerges through corporeal animation, as articulated by these overlapping and synergic processes.

An approach that proves particularly relevant in this sense is that elaborated by the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz. In his complex work he sets forth a phenomenological model centered on the subject's corporeal presence in space, investigating in minute detail how the world we inhabit affectively stirs us.¹⁰ Schmitz eschews a physicalist interpretation of space, considering it rather a dynamic entity acting *between* environment and subject. It is not an empty container that can be filled with objects and things: space is populated by "half-entities", acting forces devoid of physical presence that can nevertheless affect the subject's corporeal response. Among these Schmitz includes "*the wind, voices, the sense of overpowering gravity, electric shocks, pain, melodies, [...] night, time*",¹¹ and, counterintuitively, emotions. He attacks a millenary tradition of Western thought culpable, in his view, of having enshrined feelings in a private, inaccessible black box, the subject's *psyche*: emotions can extend into space, becoming accessible to anyone who encounters and breathes them *like an atmosphere*.¹²

An interesting member of this "family" of half-entities are *suggestions of movement*, a key notion articulating the relationship between the felt body, perception and motion. Primarily, suggestions of movement are stimuli the subject encounters in the environment, as "*anticipations of a movement in resting or moving forms or movements, that exceed the performed motion if this takes place*".¹³ They are not merely perceptual phenomena, for they feed into the experiencing subject's vital drive, prompting a corporeal response, as in the case of a stone hurled towards us that sparks a spontaneous avoidance reaction. They thus become an active part of the subject's corporeity, establishing

a connection between bodies – even when there is no second lived body, as in the case of the stone. It is not a one-way relationship, for a channel of bodily communication is set up, opening to a condition of shared corporeity – *Einleibung*.¹⁴

Schmitz argues that suggestions of movement may be apprehended through any form (*Gestalt*) we encounter, be it endowed with a lived body or not, and regardless of its anthropomorphic appearance. Architectural forms, as an example, variously impact on our corporeal response depending on their inherent geometric structure.¹⁵ In her book *Gestik des Raumes*, architect Angelika Jäkel elaborates on Schmitz's notion and on related concepts presented by other phenomenologists:¹⁶ she describes architecture's faculty of suggesting motion as a *gestural* quality, immediately experienced by the subject and kinesthetically felt in his own movement, thereby influencing his attunement to space.¹⁷

The centrality of motion in the built environment is thus not to be intended in the mere pragmatic sense of displacement: a building's formal character can stir a sensation of movement in the subject's body even when he or she is standing still. The sense of vertigo we experience when peering down a deep chasm, or the awe we feel when casting our gaze up the walls of a skyscraper are both corporeal motions that emerge even without

physical displacement. Buildings continuously suggest movement, and in doing so collaborate with the “un-moving” characters expressed by material qualities such as color, texture and heft to generate the indivisible atmosphere that spaces elicit.¹⁸ The merging of gestural and material qualities, as we will see, plays a fundamental role in the spatial constitution of Scarpa's work.

As acting forces that become perceptually available in space, suggestions of movement become “atmospheric generators”, meaning that they lead to the emergence of an emotional content that the subject experiences at the felt body. Although Schmitz inherits the concept of *Leib* from earlier phenomenology, particularly Edmund Husserl, what makes his account unique is the felt body's intrinsic openness to the world, and, conversely, its ability of extending into space. While the physical body is a hard, impenetrable object, the felt body has a soft and sensible voluminosity that continuously responds to what it encounters, expanding and contracting according to the subject's contingent affective state. A suggestion of movement does not remain external to the felt body: a fusion occurs, leading to the corporeal collaboration between the subject and the spatial entity that generates motion.

Spatial situations thus can be occupied by suggestions of movement, along with a wide gamut of immaterial half-entities that influence both our corporeal disposition and our motion through the environment: as we step into Carlo Scarpa's museums, we will appreciate how he exploited these agents to deeply articulate our experience of his spaces.

About looking: Palazzo Abatellis

Scarpa's three museums that we are placing under the lens largely differ in scope and scale, and in how they interact with pre-existing architectural conditions. Despite coming to life in a comparatively short period of time, their diversity showcases the architect's case-by-case approach, largely detached from preconceived models. Nevertheless, the master's “hand” and style are clearly recognizable, sign

Fig. 1. Carlo Scarpa, sketch for the arrangement of statues in the Laurana room, Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo; alongside the positioning of objects, light streaming in from the windows is sketched as a “blob”. Source: MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma, Collezione MAXXI Architettura, Archivio Carlo Scarpa, inv. 48907.

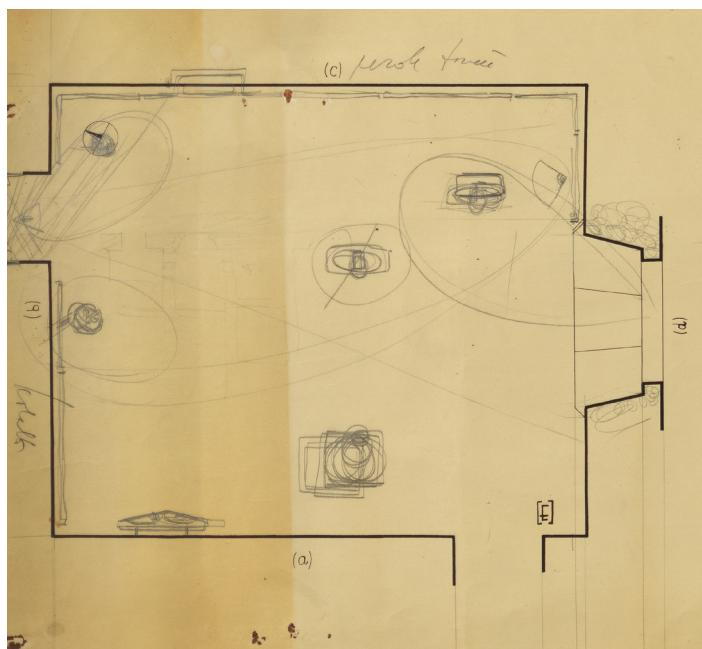
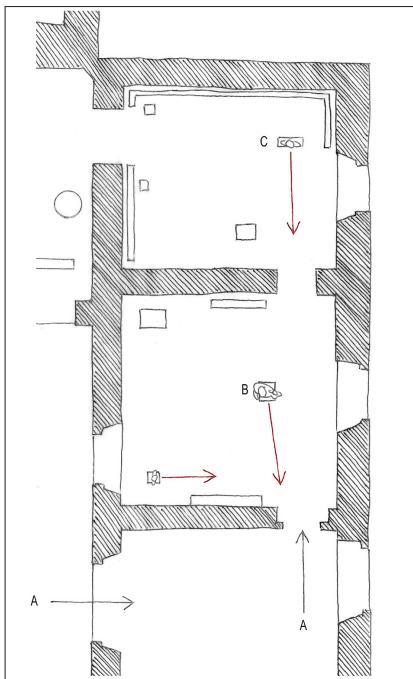


Fig. 2, 3. Palazzo Abatellis, plan detail of the ground floor with arrows showing direction of statues' gaze (left).

- A Entrance
- B Madonna with child
- C Eleanor of Aragon

Source: Federico De Matteis.
Enfilade between the halls of
Gagini and Laurana (right). Photo:
Federico De Matteis.



of a homogeneous spatial imagination subtending all designs. In all three cases humanlike figures – particularly statues – play pivotal roles in the exhibitions' organization: as was common in post-war Italian museum architecture, Scarpa detaches many displayed objects from the walls, arranging them within the rooms to occupy key positions along the visitors' paths.

Quite clearly, Scarpa considers statues not simply as anthropomorphic objects, but takes them up in their full corporeality and expressivity. In many of his preparatory drawings, he would sketch the pieces' outline with precision, pinpointing their exact orientation and position in space (fig. 1). He was intuitively aware that our engagement with artwork is not of a contemplative nature only, but is preceded by an affective response, in an intersubjective sharing of emotional states.¹⁹ More specifically, statues are endowed with the faculty of *looking*, and the fact that they are inanimate matter is marginal, since the visitor's first encounter with them does not imply an immediate recognition of this quality.²⁰ Schmitz considers the other's *look* a central actor in intersubjective corporeal communication and in the dynamics of lived space: it is imbued with a quasi-objective force, bound to motion and directionality.²¹ As a potent affective driver, it feeds into the continuous loop between affect, movement and sensation.

Scarpa adopts various strategies to leverage these figures' presence, creating striking spatial experiences while never considering their gaze as neutral. This continuous experimentation seems to evolve during the decade spanning the conception of the three museums.

In Palazzo Abatellis, Scarpa chooses what seems to be the most elementary trajectory. Antonello Gagini's *Madonna col Bambino* and Francesco Laurana's Portrait of Eleanor of Aragon are located in two adjacent halls in the building's south wing (fig. 2). As the visitor turns to face the portal leading into the first room, he is confronted with two female figures looking towards him, one closer and elevated on a tall pedestal, the second further away and raised to meet the observer at eye level (fig. 3).²² Both statues are slightly offset from the enfilade connecting the two halls, urging the visitor to turn and meet their gaze. Yet the statues' position, distance from the observer and expressive characters are quite different: the child-bearing Madonna bestows her benevolent glance from a height, dominating the onlooker from her hieratic position, while the bust of the Sicilian princess bears an ineffable, sideways look from pupilless eyes.

The beholding subject is engaged in contrasting ways – invited to move forward by the Madonna's welcoming

Fig. 4. Antonello da Messina, *Virgin Annunciate*, 1475. Source: Federico De Matteis.



expression, while swaying away from Eleanor's cryptical, Leonardo-esque visage. Movement here is suggested in a twofold fashion: through the sheer invitation to step closer and explore the figures in their details, and in the corporeal contraction sparked by the surprising encounter. As Schmitz notes, the exchange of gazes between subjects – including those of anthropomorphic objects or portraits – sustains an alternation between contracting and expanding corporeal movements that stirs both onlookers in a dialectic of domination and subjugation.²³ In Scarpa's scheme the statues, before becoming objects of artistic appreciation, are used to spatially "occupy" the galleries, establishing an intersubjective communication that is corporeally experienced, thereby atmospherically tinging the rooms of Palazzo Abatellis with a sense of (almost) human presence.

Fig. 5, 6. Room of the *Virgin Annunciate*. Photo: Federico De Matteis (left). Plan detail of the *Virgin Annunciate* room with arrows showing direction of paintings' gaze (right).

A Entrance
B Virgin Annunciate
Source: Federico De Matteis.

In the museum's upper floor, Scarpa offers visitors a variation of this spatial engagement through gaze with the collection's most celebrated piece, Antonello da Messina's *Virgin Annunciate* (fig. 4). The small painting is embedded in a rather modest easel rotated along the room's diagonal, providing the image with a neutral white background. Before traversing the portal, the figure remains out of view, and only becomes visible once inside (fig. 5-6). At that point, the Virgin's magnetic stare all but "freezes" the visitor, almost providing a sense of trespass into someone's personal space. The eccentric placing of the painting affords the observer a sharp rotation to the right, summing the corporeal contraction induced by the woman's gaze with a sense of slight unbalance and instability.

Comparing the very different visages of the three women inhabiting Palazzo Abatellis, we can sense that Scarpa captures their expressiveness, locating them with the precision of a scenographer constructing the stage for a theatrical play. This dramatic performance is only partially scripted, and is completed through the visitor's corporeal presence in a space made tense by the exhibited objects that exceed their role of pieces of art. As an analogy frequently adopted by the philosopher Gernot Böhme to describe the nature of design work,²⁴ stage sets well represent the idea of architectural space as an open-ended scaffolding for human action, acquiring sense beyond their fixed materiality.

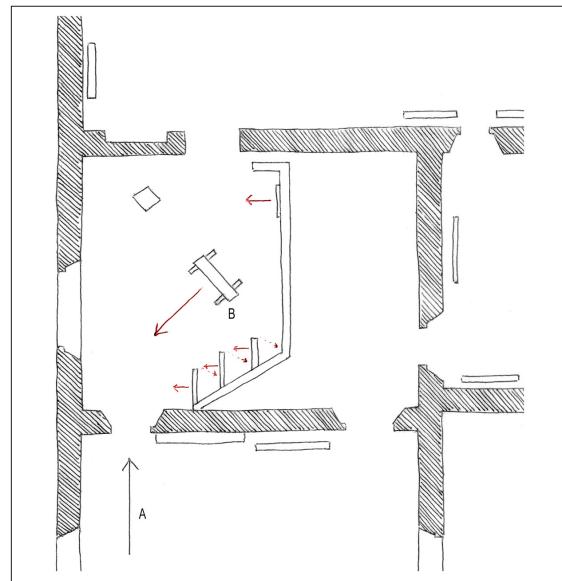




Fig. 7, 8. Castelvecchio, Verona, plan of the hall of 14th century sculpture with arrows showing direction of statues' gaze (left).

- A Entrance
- B St. Catherine
- C St. Martha
- D St. Bartholomew
- E St. Cecilia
- F St. John Baptist

Source: Federico De Matteis.
Hall of 14th century sculpture,
seen from the entrance (right).
Photo: Federico De Matteis.

The presence of others: Castelvecchio

Castelvecchio can be considered the setting for an altogether different play. Again, Scarpa places several statues in theatrical ways, leading them to occupy positions that are strategic to the intended spatial construction. In the ground-floor sculpture gallery, the second room hosts five life-sized statues, but differently from its Sicilian counterpart, none is oriented to look at the visitor as he steps in (fig. 7-8). A St. John Baptist stands distinctly raised on the far end of the room, to the left of the portal; St. Catherine is arranged on the left side of the entrance, at first hidden to the visitor's view; St. Cecilia shows her back, while two more, St. Martha and St. Bartholomew, stand on the right side displaying their flanks (fig. 9). The four latter statues are raised on low pedestals that slightly isolate them, detaching their gazes from that of the onlooking visitor. These personages do not appear to care about the observers: their eyes hover hieratically just above the beholder's head, pointing to some invisible distant view. In this room, it is not the statues that surprise visitors by suddenly casting their gaze upon them: it is the visitors who may feel as if they were sneaking up to them from behind, timidly intruding on the presence of the holy figures. Compared to Palazzo Abatellis, this situation elicits a very different corporeal stirring in those who enter, for it is not the visitors who are being caught in the action, rather the saints themselves.

The arrangement of statues in this room is exemplary of Scarpa's spatial devices. He rejected conventional aca-

demic practices advocating frontality and symmetry but was also critical of the modernist idea of entirely liberating exhibited objects, claiming they would often end up being organized without a clear agenda. Sculptures, he stated, must be interpreted through a "*compositional intuition*", resisting pre-established criteria.²⁵ The organization of statues in Castelvecchio, as had been the case in his previous museum and exhibition projects, is complex and non-linear, and there appears to be a resonance with the Japanese Zen gardens Scarpa was deeply fascinated with.²⁶

It may not be too far-fetched to compare the spatial relations between the various sculptures with the rock-islands of the Ryōan-ji temple in Kyoto (fig. 10). Similarities extend beyond the formal principle, for the dislocation of objects – both statues and rocks – does not allow them to ever come into view all at once. In the Zen temple, the observer must contemplate the mineral landscape from the side, while in Castelvecchio's hall he or she may roam freely between the figures: but in both cases the experienced sensation is that of being surrounded by agents that one cannot steadily keep under visual control. The subject's corporeal response – and ensuing motion – is deeply influenced by the sense of presence of some "other" entity.

The low bases on which the statues rest lead the visitors towards a precise posture, well-recorded in Ugo Mulas's photograph portraying Scarpa in front of St. Cecilia (fig. 11). The architect stands near the pedestal's corner, observing the lady by looking slightly upwards, his body swaying to the



Fig. 9, 10. Castelvecchio, Hall of 14th century sculpture, view towards the entrance (above). Zen garden in the Ryōan-ji temple, Kyoto (below). Photos: Federico De Matteis.

right. Such subtle gesture is not easily decodable to describe the underlying affective response; yet even a minor offset from the body's verticality is expression of a stirring. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone notes, “*emotion arises out of or from motion, motion in the sense of felt dynamic stirrings, felt inner commotions – a bodily ‘earthquake’ as it were, spanning a strikingly varied range of possible dynamics and thereby a strikingly varied range of possible magnitudes or intensities*”.²⁷ The visi-

tors' relationship with these figures allows no passivity: both humans and statues are silently called into action.

Scarpa “humanizes” the sculptures by assigning them roles within the museum's theatrical space, which acquires a performative nature. It is throughout Castelvecchio's exhibition halls that Scarpa experiments with these devices, applying them to statues on the ground floor as well as to paintings in the upper level.

Fig. 11. Carlo Scarpa observing the statue of St. Cecilia in Castelvecchio, 1965. Photo: Ugo Mulas.



Another construction of gazes creates the setting for Castelvecchio's most prominent inhabitant, Cangrande della Scala, lord of Verona in the early 14th century. By suspending his equestrian sculpture mid-air, hinged between two parts of the castle, Scarpa not only attributes it a highly symbolic value, but grants it a spectacular position of control over all that happens in Castelvecchio. The statue is first spotted from the castle's courtyard (fig. 12), later reappearing after one has traversed the ground-floor gallery, when Cangrande's eyes observe him as he exits just below his pedestal. In a spiraling ascent, Verona's ruler is finally confronted close at hand, since Scarpa provides a trampoline-like platform that brings visitors right below his flank, after having caught his eyes from the adjacent platform. His smiling face, now fully revealed af-

ter several circumvolutions, manifests the benign and welcoming nature of his intentions (fig. 13-14).

In this game of hide-and-seek that follows the visitor throughout the museum, he or she continually shifts from being the *observer* to being *observed*, in a ludic engagement with the place's "guardsman". Once again, we face the evidence that Scarpa considered the statue as a living presence capable of animating Castelvecchio's space, and that he displayed it in that unusual fashion *exactly* because it strikes and moves the subject with a specific expressiveness.

Gestures and torsions: Canova Museum

In the Canova Museum, Scarpa invents yet another dramaturgy, to be enacted by the collection of neoclassical gypsum casts. The diminutive addition is nested on the side of the 19th century basilica hall and is articulated by three interconnected spaces.

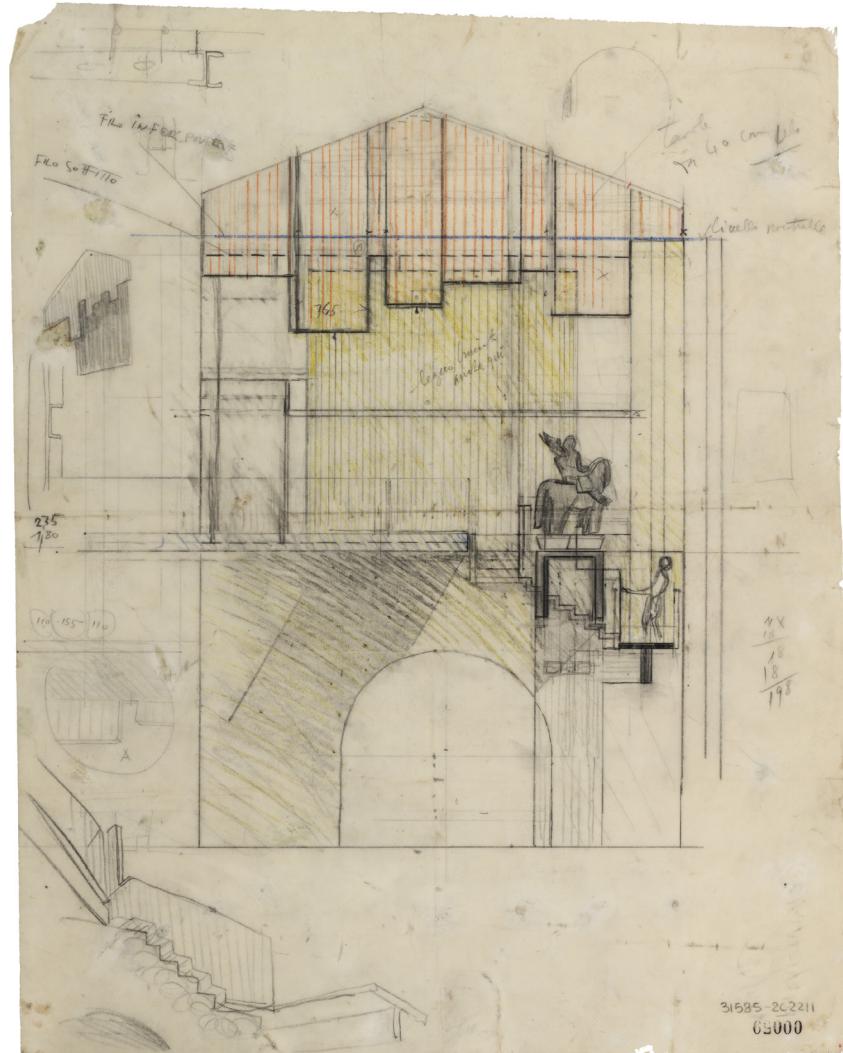
Counterintuitively, the architect finishes most surfaces with white or light materials, thereby reducing the background's contrast with the statues. He claims this choice was dictated by an intuition, and by the desire to produce a vibrating light effect that would have been weakened by dark colors.²⁸ Natural light and the relationship with the surrounding landscape were central to Scarpa's concern in the design of the annex, pursuing the idea of breaking open the conventionally academic box-museum exemplified in the pre-existing gallery.²⁹



Fig. 12, 13. The statue of Cangrande as seen from the courtyard (left). Giovanni di Rigino, Equestrian statue of Cangrande della Scala, 1340-50 (right). Photos: Federico De Matteis.



Fig. 14. Carlo Scarpa, sketch for Cangrande's pedestal in Castelvecchio. Source: Museo di Castelvecchio, Comune di Verona, Archivio Carlo Scarpa, inv. 31585R.



Scarpa positions the statues in the small building in a subtle and clever way, entirely different from the other two museums.³⁰ Direct visual engagement with the visitor is not what happens here: the sculptures do not seem interested in whoever is entering the hall, and rather appear to be looking in disparate directions. The first statue encountered on the right is the armless torso of the *Genio Rezzonico* showing his chest to the visitor, while gesturing and looking towards the interior of the gallery (fig. 15). From there several other statues come into view: in the center the full-figured *Dancing girl* is displayed sideways, while raising both her (once incomplete) arms to the sky. Behind her, assembled in and around the square floor of the museum's taller space, sits a further group of sculptures: the statue of George Washington rises slightly above the others, his eyes turned towards the center of the room, while the *Reclining Naiad* twists her head almost unnaturally to look behind her (fig. 16). On the wall at the

far end of the room, raised above the visitor on a small cantilevered support, is Canova's self-portrait, which at first impression seems to be looking at those who enter the museum, but in reality casts his deep eyes upwards, towards the wall in front of him and the still-invisible corner windows.

What is the logic for this arrangement? Several authors have described the statues as a group of friends engaged in conversation,³¹ or underscored the fact that Washington appears to be admiring the reclining Naiad's feminine figure.³² It is however difficult to imagine a conversation taking place between individuals who are all looking in different directions – the proxemic relationship is just not right. What is more plausible is that Scarpa placed the statues in a way suggesting visitors a specific movement and direction, exploiting their gazes and gestural torsions (fig. 17). The sculptures are looking at the building's interior space: at the light pouring in from

Fig. 15, 16. Canova Museum, Possagno, view from the entrance with the Genius Rezzonico to the right (left). Statues crossing glances (right). Photos: Gipsoteca e Museo Antonio Canova.



the celebrated corner windows in the high cube, carefully devised by Scarpa to bring a “piece of blue sky” into the room.³³ They also gesture towards the tall opening at the far end of the space to the left of the entrance. This transparent partition frames the natural landscape the architect found so charming and provides the *Three Graces* with an appropriately bucolic background evocative of Lorenzo Lotto’s Venetian paintings (fig. 18).³⁴

If in Palermo the statues confront the visitor in a direct relationship based on the exchange of gazes and its ensuing affective response, staging a full drama, things at Possagno work quite differently. The feeling atmospherically infused in space is less intensely emotional, and not only due to the museum’s ethereal whiteness or the supposed coldness of neoclassical sculpture. The statues are largely detached from direct interaction with visitors, being intent in beholding the architecture. In doing so, they guide those who encounter them to do the same. When seeing someone on the street standing still and looking upwards, we are spontaneously invited to turn our heads to discover what he or she is observing, and all the same when meeting Canova’s personages we cannot but pre-reflectively move to follow the motion they suggest: movement revealing the architecture’s articulation and its hidden details, as if the statues were somehow serving as the visitor’s guides. Scarpa’s annex may thus be considered an im-

plicitly narcissistic building, allowing the visitors to enjoy Canova’s exquisite sculptures, but also suggesting the observation of the architecture itself. Despite its ethereal materiality, it is not a neutral container – rather a tense and animated space, exuding a strong sense of presence.

To sound the depth of space

In our virtual walk through Scarpa’s museums, we found that many things we encountered are more than meets the mind. This *calembour* intends to address a critical fallacy so often polluting the description of architecture: that actual facts can only be uncovered through the visitor’s analytical abilities, unearthing hidden meanings and connecting the dots of a larger picture that remains otherwise cloaked. If this may partly be true for works by other authors, with Carlo Scarpa’s buildings we feel that the deepest sense lies already embedded in the space we experience. The information needed to grasp this sense is not to be found elsewhere. It is already there, and the one tool that can extract it is the subject’s first-person corporeal presence.

A common bias that has followed the phenomenological tradition from its incipient moments regards its presumed inability of penetrating beyond the surface of things, missing whatever lies beyond; and that it is more interested in studying the way we access the world than in the world itself.³⁵ But Hermann Schmitz’s pheno-

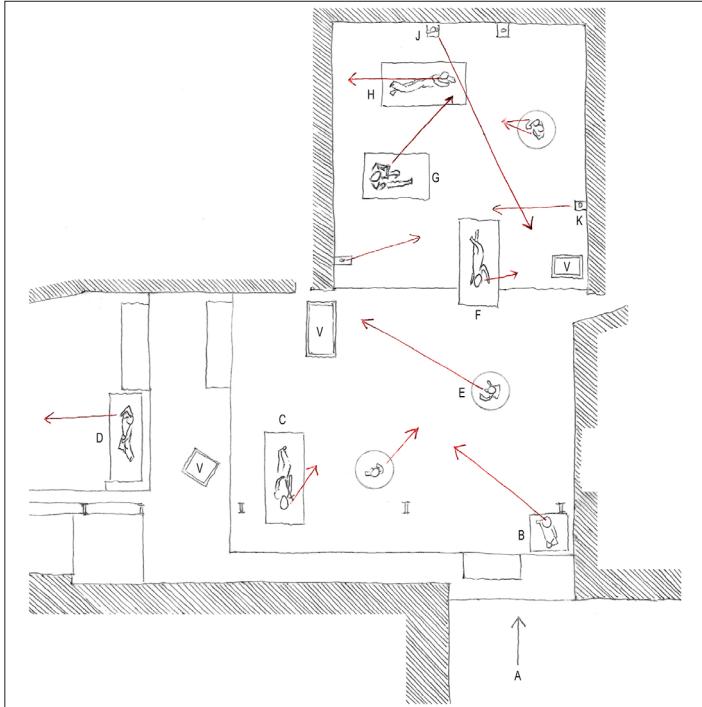


Fig. 17. Plan detail with arrows showing direction of statues' gaze and/or torsion.

- A Entrance
- B Genius Rezzonico
- C Reclining Magdalene
- D Paolina Bonaparte (headless)
- E Dancing Girl
- F Sleeping nymph (eyes closed)
- G George Washington
- H Reclining Naiad
- J Canova's self-portrait
- K Bust of Napoleon
- V Vitrines

Source: Federico De Matteis.

menological system provides a rich array of tools – such as suggestions of movement, along with many more – that are capable of sounding the very depth of spatial experience, clarifying how the primary encounter with the world eventually allows us to make sense of it.

Describing architecture through the lens of lived space can bring us a step closer to understanding in one move *what* we encounter and *how* the architect brought this encounter to life.

Nevertheless, this description must rely on a rigorous, “thick” phenomenographical practice, a form of observation bridging experienced reality and the specific motives subtending architecture. As we visit Scarpa’s museums,



Fig. 18. The Three Graces and the opening towards the landscape.
Photo: Federico De Matteis.

our felt bodies become animated by many spatial agents, from suggestions of movement to affective atmospheres, from petrifying gazes to welcoming gestures: our responses to these encounters – to the emotions, corporeal stirrings and movement we kinesthetically feel – are not just incidental, but rather symptoms of the spatial scenario the architect deliberately installed for us to experience.

This primary evidence extracted from space can serve as a foundation for an analytical method based on a practice of phenomenological observation. Beyond the realm of the subject’s private inner life, corporeal responses are largely transversal, being hinged to spatial features that are immediately accessible to anyone. Undeniably, there is a link between the qualities of a space – as expressed by both its material constitution and immaterial agents – and the way we feel when we are there: the autoethnographic observation of clues emerging from corporeal sensations can ground a method that at least in part overcomes the cognitive impenetrability of first-person experience, allowing a deeper understanding of spatial dynamics and of the human depth these produce. In this sense, we could speak of “atmospheric criticism”. Although it may seem paradoxical to adopt the ontological vagueness of emotions as foundational data, we must keep in mind that the perceiving subject’s corporeal sense is always endowed with authenticity, for feelings – differently from arbitrary interpretations – cannot be falsified.

The ultimate sense of Scarpa’s architecture may lie beyond the reach of conceptual grasp, and it is likely that the only proper way of getting in touch with this profundity is *to be there*. Nevertheless, the careful reflection on our spatial experience appears to be the only way to shed light on the magic that inhabits the architect’s buildings.

Notes

- 1** Manfredo Tafuri: *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1944-1985*. Turin 1986, p. 141.
- 2** Sergio Los: *Carlo Scarpa*. Cologne 1994, p. 23.
- 3** Ibid., p. 31.
- 4** Anne-Catrin Schultz: *Carlo Scarpa: Layers*. Stuttgart, London 2007.
- 5** Louis I. Kahn: *Writings, lectures, interviews*. ed. by Alessandra Latour. New York 1991, p. 332.
- 6** Robert McCarter: *Carlo Scarpa*. London/New York 2013, pp. 4-5. See also Michael Cadwell: *Strange details*. Cambridge 2007, p. 4.
- 7** See Marco Frascari: "The tell-the-tale detail." In: *Via* 7 (1984), pp. 23-37; idem: "The body and architecture in the drawings of Carlo Scarpa." In: *Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 14 (1987), pp. 123-42; George Dodds: "Desiring landscapes/landscapes of desire: scopic and somatic in the Brion sanctuary." In: idem/Robert Tavernor (Eds.): *Body and building. On the changing relation of body and architecture*. Cambridge/London 2002, pp. 238-57; Gianluca Frediani: *Quote e orizzonti. Carlo Scarpa e i paesaggi veneti*. Macerata 2015.
- 8** Among the most relevant contributions on the topic, we could mention Robert Vischer's introduction of the concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*) in art criticism, Gestalt psychology, particularly through Kurt Lewin's concept of stimulus character (*Aufforderungscharakter*), the phenomenological psychiatry of Erwin Straus, mid-century phenomenology in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Otto F. Bollnow, James J. Gibson's notion of affordance in ecological psychology, and more recently Alva Nöe's enactive theory. See Robert Vischer: "On the optical sense of form: a contribution to aesthetics [1873]." In: Harry F. Mallgrave/Eleftherios Ikonomou (Eds.): *Empathy, form, and space. Problems in German aesthetics 1873-1893*. Santa Monica 1994, pp. 89-124; Kurt Lewin: *Principles of topological psychology*. New York/London 1936; Erwin Straus: *The primary world of senses. A vindication of sensory experience* [1935]. London 1963, pp. 185-270; Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of perception* [1945]. London/New York 2002, p. 159. Otto Friedrich Bollnow: *Human space* [1963]. London 2011; James G. Gibson: *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Hillsdale 1979, p. 127; Alva Nöe: *Action in perception*. Cambridge 2004, p. 2.
- 9** See among others Maxine Sheets-Johnstone: *The primacy of movement* [1999]. Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2011; Brian Massumi: *Parables for the virtual. Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham 2002.
- 10** Schmitz's massive oeuvre spans five decades and dozens of books. Among the most relevant are: Hermann Schmitz: *System der Philosophie*. Bonn 1964-80, particularly volumes II.1: *Der Leib*. 1965; II.2: *Der Leib im Spiegel der Kunst*. 1966; III.1: *Der leibliche Raum*. 1967; III.2: *Der Gefühlsraum*. 1969; *Kurze Einführung in die Neue Phänomenologie*. Freiburg 2009; *Der Leib*. Berlin/Boston 2011; *Atmosphären*. Freiburg 2014.
- 11** Hermann Schmitz/Rudolf Owen Müllan/Jan Slaby: "Emotions outside the box – the New Phenomenology of feeling and corporeality." In: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10/2 (2011), pp. 250-51.
- 12** Ibid., p. 247; Schmitz 1969 (see note 10), p. 185. Schmitz is credited to have introduced the notion of atmospheres as spatialized emotions, a concept that has (belatedly) become central in contemporary architectural discourse through the elaborations by Gernot Böhme. See, among others, Gernot Böhme: *Architektur und Atmosphäre*. Munich 2006.
- 13** "Bewegungssuggestionen sind Vorzeichnungen einer Bewegung, die über das Maß der ausgeführten Bewegung, falls eine solche erfolgt, hinausgeht, an ruhenden und bewegten Gestalten und an Bewegungen". Schmitz 2011 (see note 10), p. 33 (transl. by the author).
- 14** Schmitz/Müllan/Slaby 2011 (see note 11), p. 256.
- 15** Schmitz 1966 (see note 10), pp. 37-68.
- 16** Angelika Jäkel: *Gestik des Raumes. Zur leiblichen Kommunikation zwischen Benutzer und Raum in der Architektur*. Tübingen/Berlin 2013.
- 17** Ibid., p. 128.
- 18** Ibid., p. 53.
- 19** See David Freedberg/Vittorio Gallese: "Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience." In: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11/5 (2007), pp. 197-203.
- 20** Tonino Griffero: *Quasi-things* [2013]. Albany 2017, p. 93.
- 21** Schmitz 2011 (see note 10), p. 31.
- 22** Polano describes the physical presence of Laurana's sculpture yet overlooks the fact that it is not perceived in an isolated fashion. See Sergio Polano (Ed.): *Carlo Scarpa. Palazzo Abatellis. La Galleria della Sicilia, Palermo 1953-54*. Milano 1989, pp. 31-32.
- 23** Schmitz 2011 (see note 10), p. 31.

24 Gernot Böhme: *Aisthetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*. Munich 2001, p. 119; idem: “The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres.” In: *Ambiances* (2013), pp. 2-8.

25 Carlo Scarpa: *A lezione con Carlo Scarpa*, ed. by Franca Semi. Venice 2010, p. 189.

26 J.K. Mauro Pierconti: *Carlo Scarpa e il Giappone*. Milan 2007, p. 80. Scarpa’s first trip to Japan, however, would only take place in 1969, after all three museums had been completed.

27 Sheets-Johnstone 2011 (see note 9), pp. 455-456.

28 Scarpa 2010 (see note 25), pp. 198-199.

29 Ibid., pp. 189-192; Frediani 2015 (see note 7), pp. 21-22 and 52.

30 As in any active museum, statues are occasionally moved for special exhibitions, loaned to other institutions or temporarily removed for conservation purposes. The description refers to the original layout by Scarpa, which is largely still extant.

31 McCarter 2013 (see note 6), p. 109; Frediani 2015 (see note 7), p. 121.

32 Guido Beltramini/Kurt W. Forster/Paola Marini (Eds.): *Carlo Scarpa. Mostre e musei 1944-1976. Case e paesaggi 1972-1978*. Milan 2000, p. 138.

33 Scarpa 2010 (see note 25), p. 191.

34 Ibid., p. 197.

35 See Graham Harman: *Guerrilla metaphysics. Phenomenology and the carpentry of things*. Chicago 2005, p. 235.