Passages in the Garden: An Iconology of the Brion Tomb

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Abstract: *Considerable study has been devoted to Carlo Scarpa's design for the Brion family cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole, Italy, because of its poetic imagery and the beauty of its ornamentation, detailing, and construction. The cemetery has not, however, been investigated fully as an example of the philosopher's or poet's garden where a narrative and its associated iconography structure the experience of the work. This paper examines the Brion tomb as a work of garden architecture in the tradition of the Italian Renaissance garden and the Chinese-Japanese stroll garden where a distinct narrative, in this case the passage from life to death, organizes the entire design. This narrative and its manifestation in the design are discussed, as well as Scarpa's use of precedent and symbolism.*

In one of those rare instances when an artist is given the opportunity to create a public and private monument, and at the same time make a summary meditation on his own work, Carlo Scarpa spent the last ten years of his life designing and building the Brion family tomb (Figure 1). In the twenty years since its completion, this work has attained a nearly universal iconic status among the design community. The richness of its integration of space, material, and detail, fused with narrative and symbolism, has led to its recognition by many critics as Scarpa's most complete and mature work (Crippa 1984; Dal Co 1984; Nicolin 1983).

Much of the previous writing on this topic has focused on an examination of the work either as the culmination of Scarpa's stylistic evolution or as the very personal poetic meditation of the architect (Portoghesi 1979). Other studies (Frascari 1984; Albertini and Bagnoli 1988) have examined Scarpa's design method, which was idiosyncratic and highly focused on the drawing and design of details and their assemblage into the larger composition. Clearly, these aspects are integral to a full understanding of the project, but I believe it can also be understood in analytic terms that address the garden's narrative and associated iconography as examples of more generalized concepts that are cross-cultural in nature, as well as specific to the architect and Venetian culture. Earlier studies such as those of Dal Co (1984) and Portoghesi (1979) have touched on the universality of much of the symbolic imagery of the Brion tomb, particularly the use of water and images of caverns and water journeys as emblematic of an Orphean passage. They have not focused, however, on how a governing narrative might actually be structuring both the totality of the plan and the movement sequence through it, rather than constituting a set of allusive vignettes without a coherent order. What this paper suggests is that there *is* a clear and comprehensible narrative structure, based on the funerary ritual, which organizes the plan of the cemetery and provides clues to a fuller understanding of the design and its text in the semiotic sense.

This thesis is proposed in contrast to Frascari's (1984) suggestion that it is the incomplete assemblage of the details that governs Scarpa's work:

> These [detail] drawings are never fully rendered. Only fragments and parts of them are. This practice shows by analogy that while it is whole, Scarpa's architecture cannot be characterized as complete. An architectural whole is seen as a phenomenon composed by details unified by a "device," a structuring principle. This principle, in Scarpa's architecture, is the order generated by the use and the understanding of classical architectural ideas such as façade design. (p. 31)

In the instance of the Brion tomb, I will argue that Scarpa's architecture is complete, but that the organizing principle is a narrative that is quite different from the one commonly ascribed to the term *function* in design. This narrative relates to the ritual process of the funeral itself, as well as to the broader cosmological ideas embodied in the Catholic liturgy.

Anthropological research into the common patterns of rituals or "rites of passage," particularly the research of Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969), has shown that, among widely disparate cultures, there is a striking similarity in the basic structure of rituals such as weddings or funerals that mark major life transitions. These ritual structures also tend to conform to theological and cosmological ideas; thus the stages and transitions within the funeral rite will tend to be analogous to the progress of an individual from this world to the next according to that culture's religious beliefs.

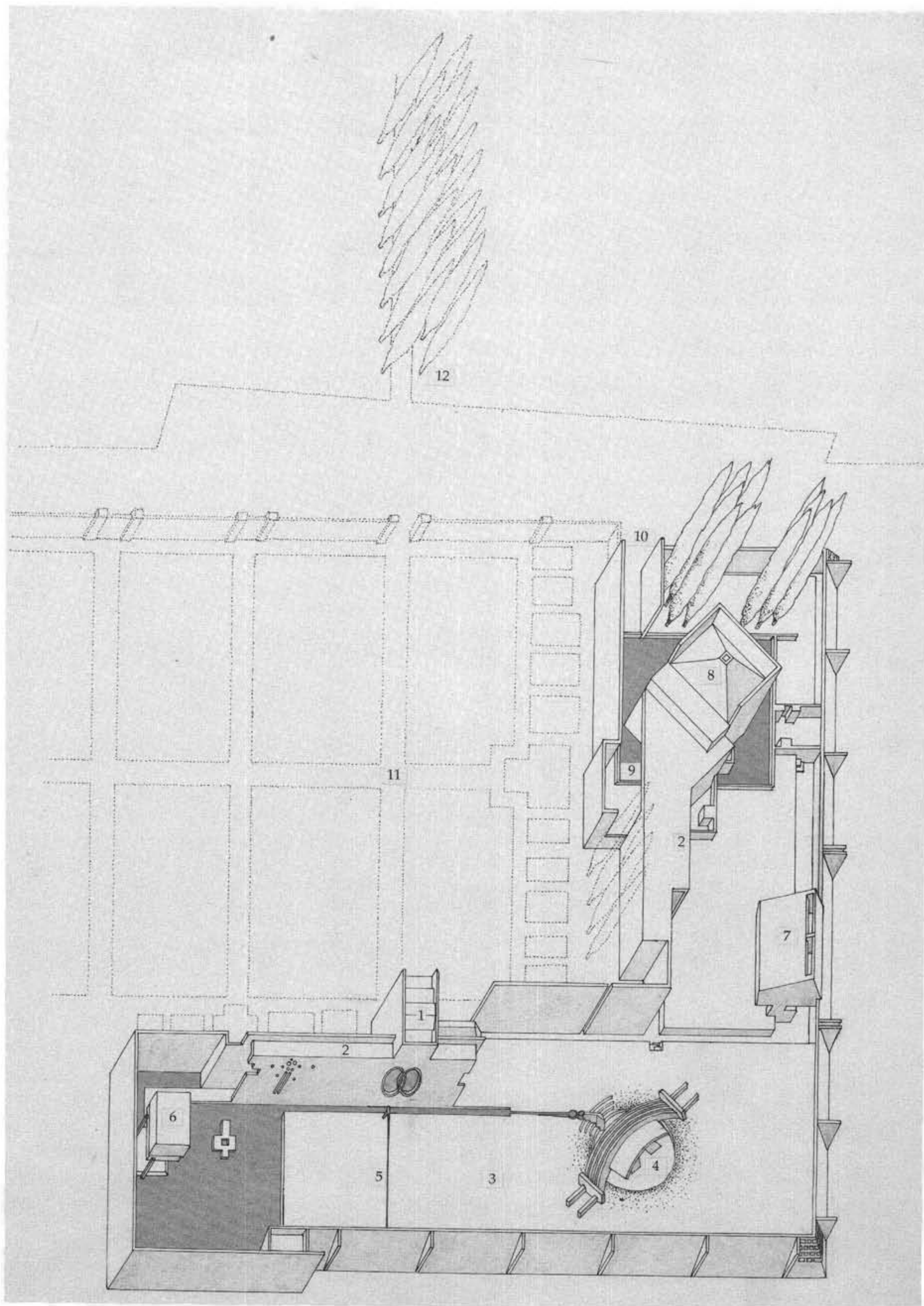

Figure 1. **Axonometric Projection:** 1. Propylaeum, 2. Cloister, 3. Prato, 4. Graves and arcosolium, 5. Cable "fence", 6. Meditation pavilion, 7. Family graves, 8. Chapel, 9. Artesian well, 10. Funerary gate, 11. Existing cemetery, 12. Cypress allée. Drawing by Glen Valentine.

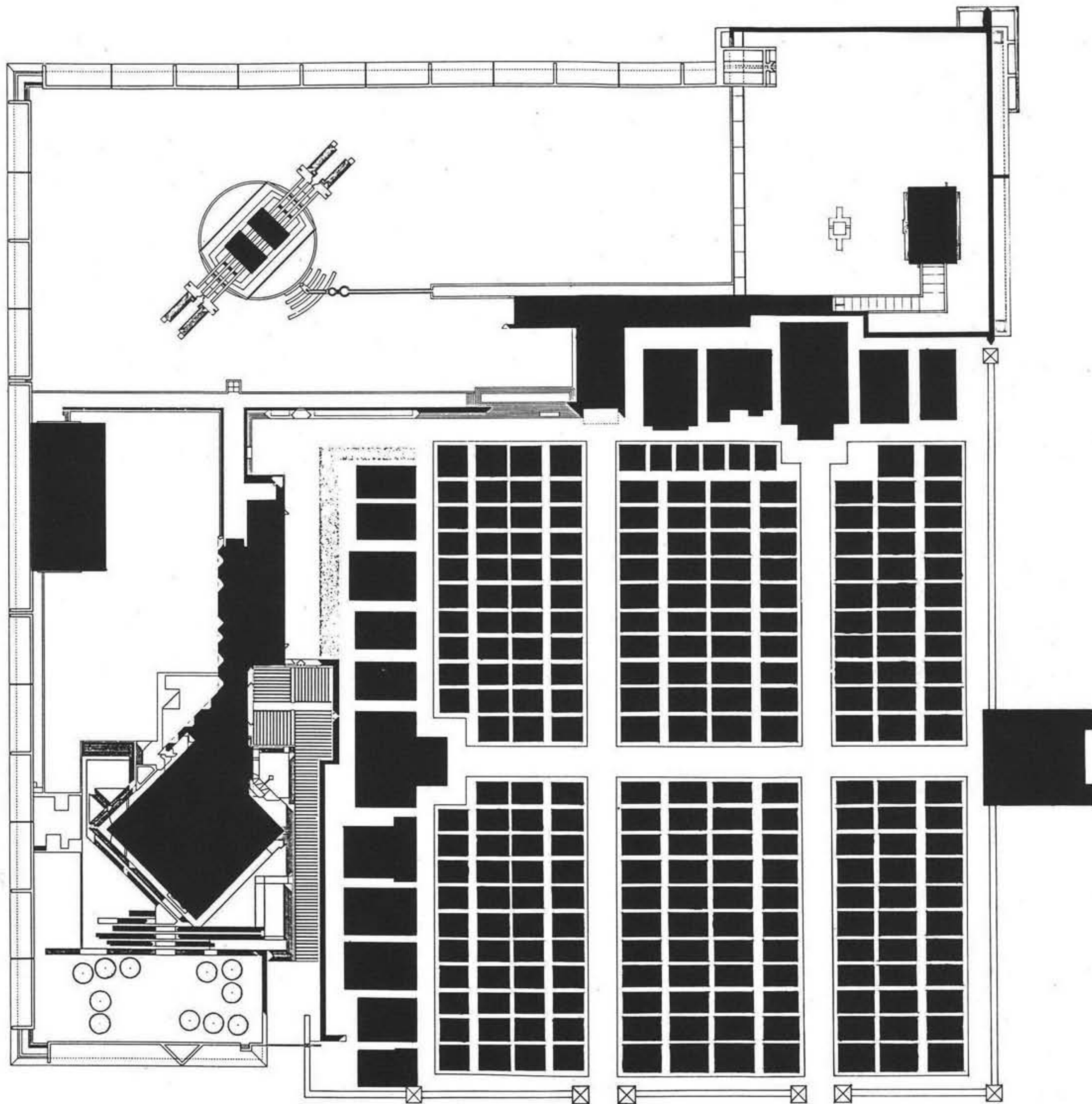

Figure 2. **Figure-Ground.** The street and block pattern of the existing cemetery is much more urban in character than that of the Brion tomb, which is more gardenesque, containing the graves and pavilions as freestanding elements surrounded by lawns and pools of water within the enclosing wall. Drawing by Helen Wilson.

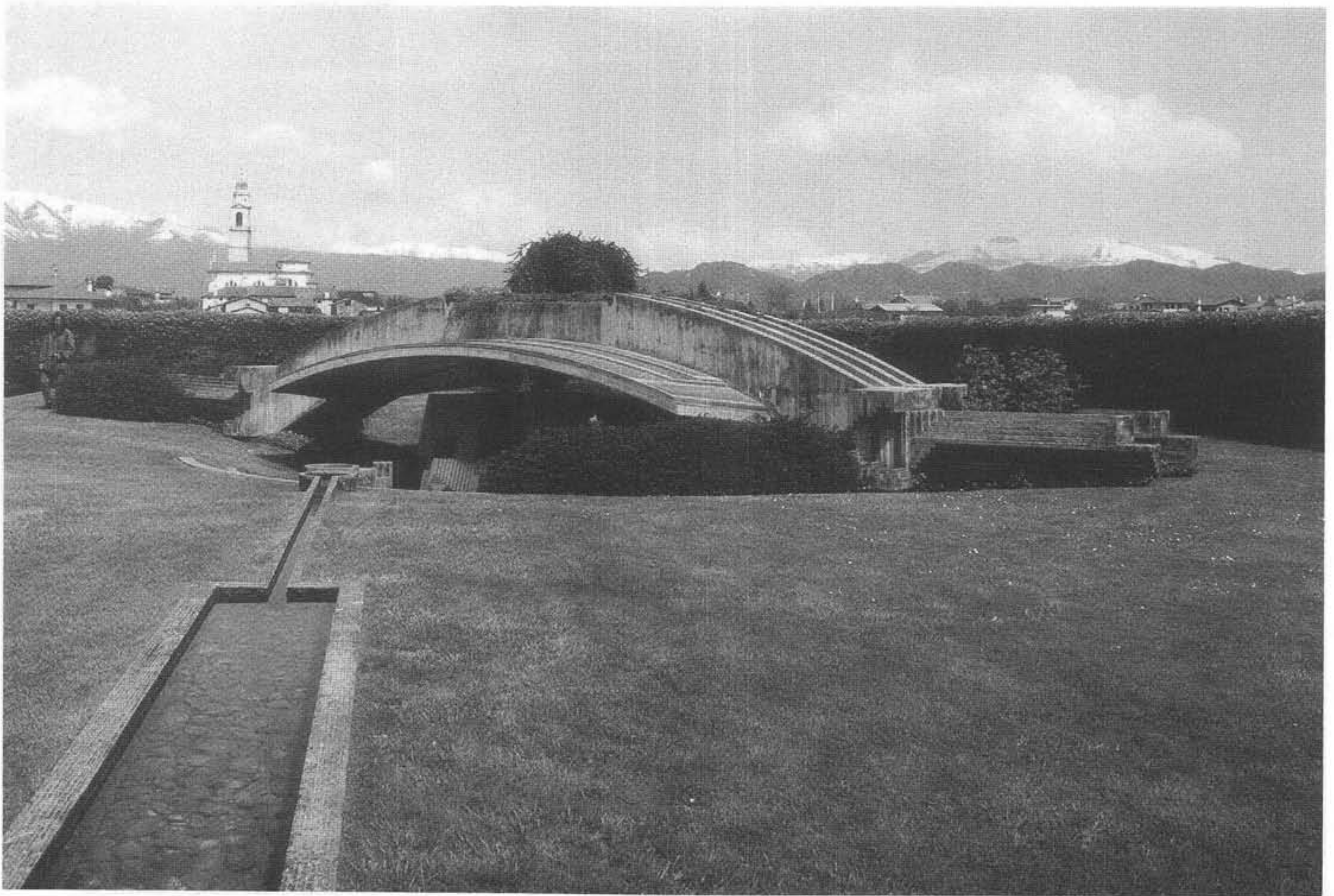

Figure 3. From the *prato* at the center of the cemetery with the gravesites covered by the arcosolium in the foreground, the village of San Vito and the Alpine foothills are the "borrowed" landscape. Photograph by the author.

I am proposing that the Brion tomb, constituting as it does Scarpa's philosophic colloquy on death and the funerary ritual, conforms to these basic patterns in a very literal way. These ritual and theological processes are directly used to structure the plan of the garden and in conjunction with other associations construct the vivid experience of the cemetery. An understanding of these fundamental ritual motifs as they are used to organize the design provides a key to unlock a work that might otherwise be personal, eclectic, and secretive and renders a comprehensible order to an otherwise fragmentary work.

This interpretive methodology is essentially a phenomenological one based on the work of Kevin Lynch (1960) and Christian Norberg-Shulz (1971), in which the spatial-temporal aspects of the tomb are analyzed as a set of *environmental images* that together constitute a *coherent pattern* that is *legible,* to use Lynch's terms. In this instance, though, a recognition of the narrative text as it structures and accompanies the spatial experience will, I believe, contribute to the full "legibility" of the cemetery. Through an analysis of the spatial sequence of the tomb as the visitor experiences it, I hope to arrive at an iconology of the project in the sense used by Panofsky:

> Iconological interpretation, finally, requires something more than a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources. When we wish to get hold of those basic principles which underlie the choice and presentation of motifs, as well as the production and interpretation of images, stories and allegories, and which give meaning even to the formal arrangements and technical procedures employed, we cannot hope to find an individual text which would fit those basic principles as John 13:21 ff. fits the iconography of the Last Supper. To grasp these principles we need a mental faculty which I cannot describe better than by the rather discredited term "synthetic intuition" and which may be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar. (Panofsky 1955, p. 38)

Uncovering the Narrative

I suggest that the Brion tomb can be viewed as a didactic landscape and that Scarpa is operating firmly within the traditions of both cemetery design and garden design, and

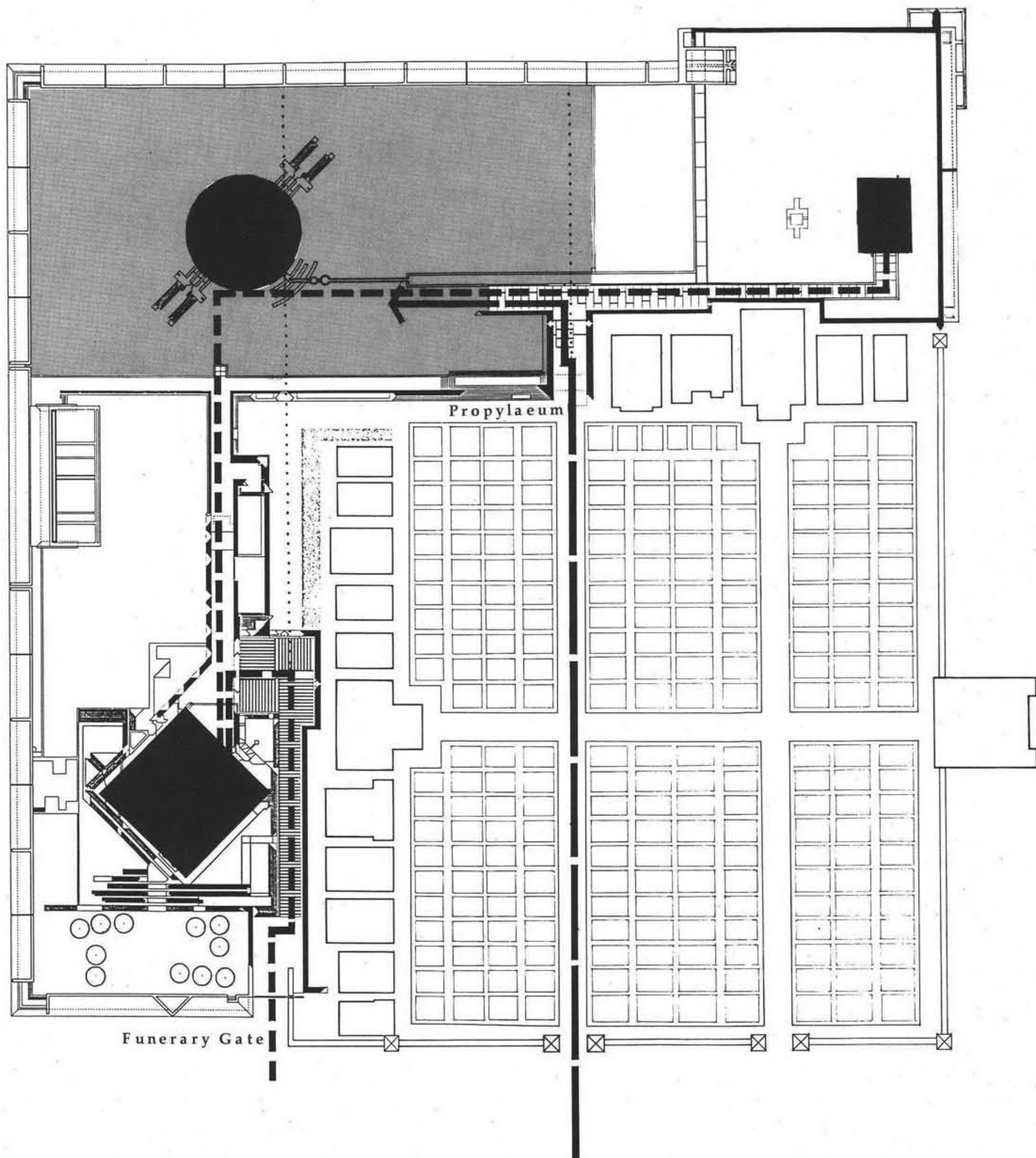

Figure 4. **Dual Narrative.** The two paths through the project are indicated by the dashed lines; the longer dashes indicate the public entry through the propylaeum, and the toned area is the public zone of the cemetery. The short dashed line which begins at the funerary gate and ends at the meditation pavilion traces the funerary narrative. Drawing by Helen Wilson.

Figure 5. The propylaeum is placed at the end of the main avenue of the existing cemetery and is treated urbanistically with a formal façade like the other family mausoleums that line the edges of the cemetery. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

in particular the philosopher's or scholar's garden. This approach to design, in which an overriding narrative and its associated images are used to create a garden as a meditative environment, occurs in numerous design traditions. Two of the strongest of these as well as the most relevant to Scarpa's project are the Italian Renaissance garden and the Chinese scholar's garden. Garden design was a longstanding interest of Scarpa, particularly the gardens of China and Japan, whose rich compositions within very confined spaces he found especially compelling as one who dealt largely with the equally confined spaces of Venice (Semi 1979, p. 23; Dal Co 1984, p. 68). Likewise, Scarpa is drawing upon that Oriental (and Italian) tradition of the garden as a venue of meditation and philosophic contemplation and speculation, both for the inhabitant and the designer.[1]

Scarpa conceived of the Brion tomb primarily as a garden—whose program was that of a cemetery—rather than the traditional Italian model of the cemetery as a city. The vernacular cemetery of San Vito, to which the Brion tomb is attached, follows that Italian model of the cemetery as necropolis—the city of the dead, more recently used by Aldo Rossi in Modena (Arnell and Bickford 1985)—in which graves, tombs, and crypts are arranged in an urban figure-ground pattern of architectural mass and city streets. The Brion tomb inverts those figural relationships and presents the main architectural elements as free-standing pavilions within the garden, which can in fact be considered the public garden for the adjacent city of the dead (Figure 2).

Scarpa was also cognizant of both the private and the public connotations of the garden, of the private contemplations of the solitary poet as he wanders in the garden and the sensual pleasures of social gatherings in the same setting: "He even suggested jokingly [of the Brion tomb] that one might just as well lie on the lawn of the cemetery with a good glass of wine and from there enjoy the view over the fertile landscape and the village of San Vito" (Noever 1989, p. 9) (Figure 3). In this vein, Scarpa also suggested that the Brion tomb ought to be considered as a type of public garden or park; he made this suggestion at least partly in response to the reaction his lavish and costly design for a rich family's tomb

provoked from his radicalized students of 1970 (Noever 1989, p. 19).

These two aspects of the Brion cemetery—that of the private, introspective meditation of its author and that of a public realm of social interaction and enjoyment—are at the heart of a dual reading of the spatial organization of the project. The former accounts for the power and clarity of its narrative discourse on life, death, and eternity and the latter for its connection to society at large. These two issues are explicated in the plan and composition of the project, primarily through the control of circulation (Figure 4).

The Brion tomb occupies an L-shaped parcel of land immediately outside the walls of the existing cemetery for the village of San Vito d'Altivole, which is the familial home of Giuseppe Brion, a wealthy industrialist who had amassed his fortune in the Brion-Vega company. In the long Italian tradition of wealthy patrons of the arts, his widow commissioned the cemetery from Scarpa as an autonomous work of art largely free of programmatic (or budgetary) constraints. Initially, the site consisted of only one leg of the L, but the decision to include a mortuary chapel in the program led to the expansion of the site to two sides of the old cemetery. The three major programmatic elements are disposed along the L-shaped site, the mortuary chapel at one end, the graves at the center and the meditation pavilion at the other end.

The L-shaped configuration of the site allowed for the possibility of more than one entrance, and in fact there are two. The main public entrance is at the end of the main avenue of the old cemetery, which also extends out beyond the cemetery walls to a farm road allee of cypress trees. The other, funerary entrance, which gives direct access to the chapel, occurs at the end of the other leg of the garden along the road leading to the cemetery from the village. This entrance also has a public aspect because the chapel is used for village funerals. The chapel is in fact considered public property and is built on public land, but it is intended only for the ceremonial functions of funerals.

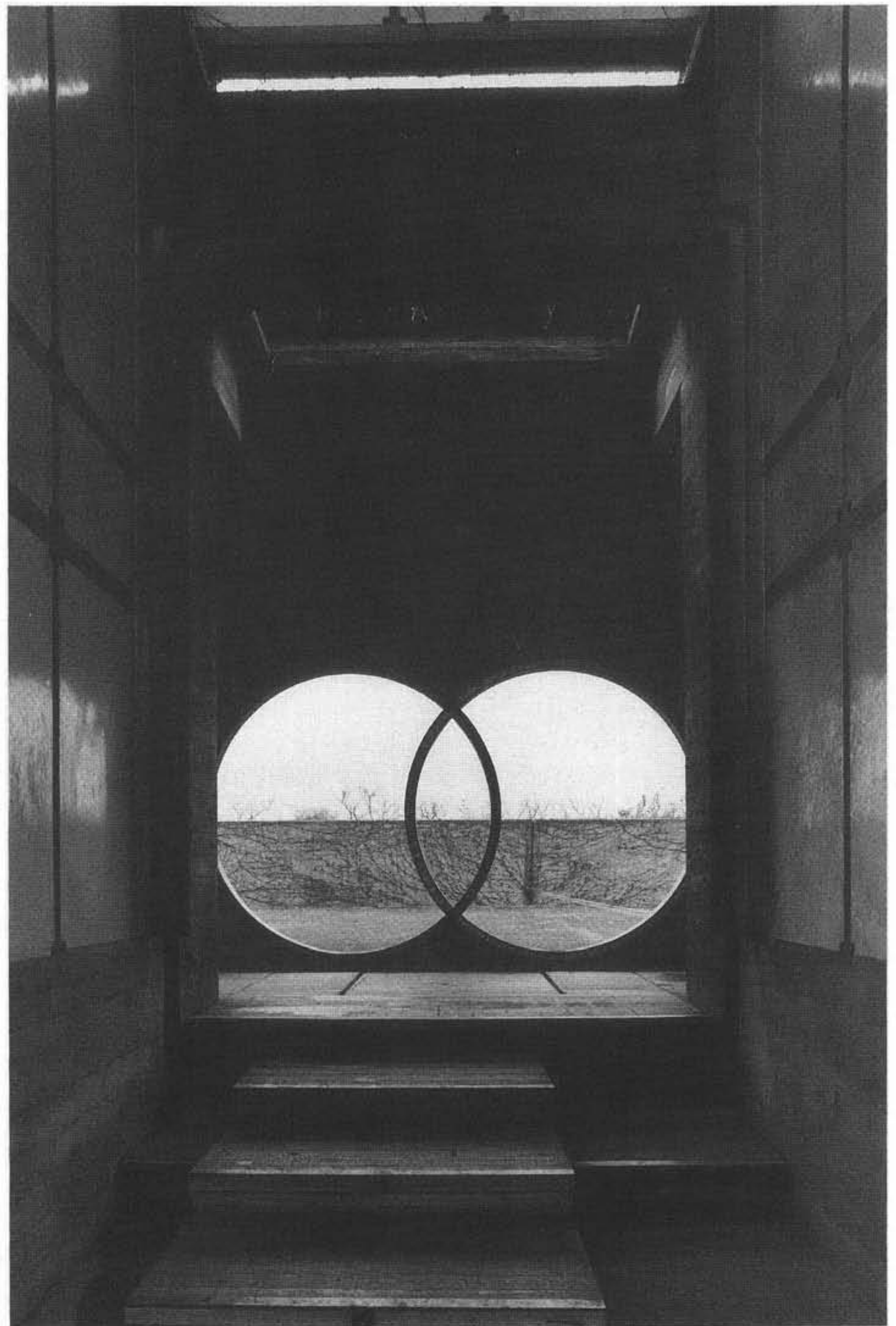

Figure 6. Standing inside the propylaeum the circular windows frame our view into the garden and the flight of four stairs draws us in and to the left. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

Understanding the distinctly different programmatic functions of these two entrances is key to reading the two overlapping narrative paths of the project. One entrance functions as the portal that connects this sacred precinct to the realm of human social interaction, and the other initiates a solitary journey of the soul through the stages of existence by providing access to the first stage of the ritual process, the mortuary chapel. It is

Figure 7. From inside the entry cloister the public lawn occupies the foreground, the gravesite the middle ground and the "borrowed" landscape the background. Photograph by Richard Hansen.

this overlap of the two narratives that lends some confusion (or as I prefer, mystery) to the project because the main architectural statement of entry does not correspond to what is actually the dominant narrative in terms of the overall structure of the composition and the significance of its parts.

Tracing the Narratives

Pulling aside the veil of a weeping cedar, hanging as a curtain over the entrance vestibule, or propylaeum, one enters the public gate[2] (Figure 5). The term *propylaeum,* as used by Scarpa, is an allusion to the entrance pavilion of the Acropolis, and it highlights his view that this is the ceremonial and public entry to a sacred precinct. Once inside, standing in the half-darkness, one sees what has become the most recognized element of the project, the open window of two interlocking circles that frames our first view into the garden (Figure 6). To arrive there, however, one must first mount four steps to reach the level of the cloister, which is perpendicular to the propylaeum. As Guido Pietropoli (1990) has observed, the leftward shift of the stairs inside this otherwise symmetrical space is the first indication given to the visitor of the direction of travel. Inside the cloister there is a choice of direction, right or left, but because one is already on the left side and because the tunnel is much shorter there and the light of the open lawn much nearer, one is naturally drawn in that direction (Figure 7). On stepping out of the cloister, one arrives in the central garden space of the project facing the graves, with the village and mountains visible over the top of the encircling garden wall. This *prato,* or lawn, is the main public space of the garden, the one that Scarpa glibly proposed in the previous quotation as a suitable venue for a picnic or a glass of wine.

This subtle orchestration of movement emphasizes the *prato* as the public zone over the other possible direction leading to the meditation pavilion, which ultimately proves to be the most private zone. From the vantage on the *prato,* visitors have a view not only out of the garden, but also back whence they came. Just at this point there is a break in the high wall that separates the Brion tomb from the old cemetery, opening a view back in that direction (Figure 8). Two other small elements help to reinforce the definition of this public realm: one is the rather odd, low fence of wire cables that lies between the *prato* and pool, and the other is the low retaining wall that creates a level change between the *prato* and the area of the chapel. Taken together, these moves reinforce the public

reading of this portion of the project and help to resolve some of the tension between the overlapping narratives by delineating what constitutes the public precinct.

The other entrance to the garden is, I believe, actually the governing one in terms of the narrative that is structuring the organization of the plan. Although much more understated as an architectural expression, this funerary entrance establishes the beginning of a figurative journey of the soul corresponding to the three stages of passage in the funeral ritual and the three stages of existence in Catholic belief: earthly existence, purgatory, and heaven.

The formal difference between these two entrances is largely an architectural response to site conditions. The public entrance can be seen as a classical civic gesture providing a termination to the main axis of the town cemetery and creating a monumental façade; the funerary entrance occurs at the end of the site adjacent to the public street and is thus the logical place to initiate the linear narrative that is disposed along the L-shaped site. The funerary entrance is understated architecturally because it is infrequently used and would provide a confusing reading of the public entry if it were more assertive.

Posing the funerary entrance as the initiation of a directed and linear chronicle requires the consideration of the ideas that structure and underlie it. An analogy is proposed between the organization of the ritual of the funeral and the plan of the Brion tomb and its spatial sequence; understanding this ritual process will help to clarify the design's formal order and the meanings intrinsic to it.

Arnold Van Gennep, one of the seminal figures in the development of the anthropological analysis of ritual, posited that all of the major transitional phases in a person's life are characterized by ceremonies or rituals that should be considered "rites of passage" from one state of social and cultural life to the next (Van Gennep 1960). Furthermore, each of these rites can be described as consisting of three stages with a transitional or liminal phase between them. These stages are characterized as separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (postliminal), and each type of rite of passage can also be characterized as having its primary emphasis on one of these three phases. Van Gennep saw that funerary rites were primarily rites of transition, or liminal:

Figure 8. An opening between the high wall separating the Brion tomb from the old cemetery frames a view back to the entrance. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

> On first considering funeral ceremonies, one expects rites of

Figure 9. **Three Stages.** The plan of the Brion tomb subdivides clearly into the three stages of the *rite of passage* as defined by Van Gennep, starting at the funerary gate and moving in a linear sequence that follows the progression of the mortuary ritual. The plan's circulation spaces (indicated in black) correspond to the transitional zones between each of the three stages. Drawing by Helen Wilson.

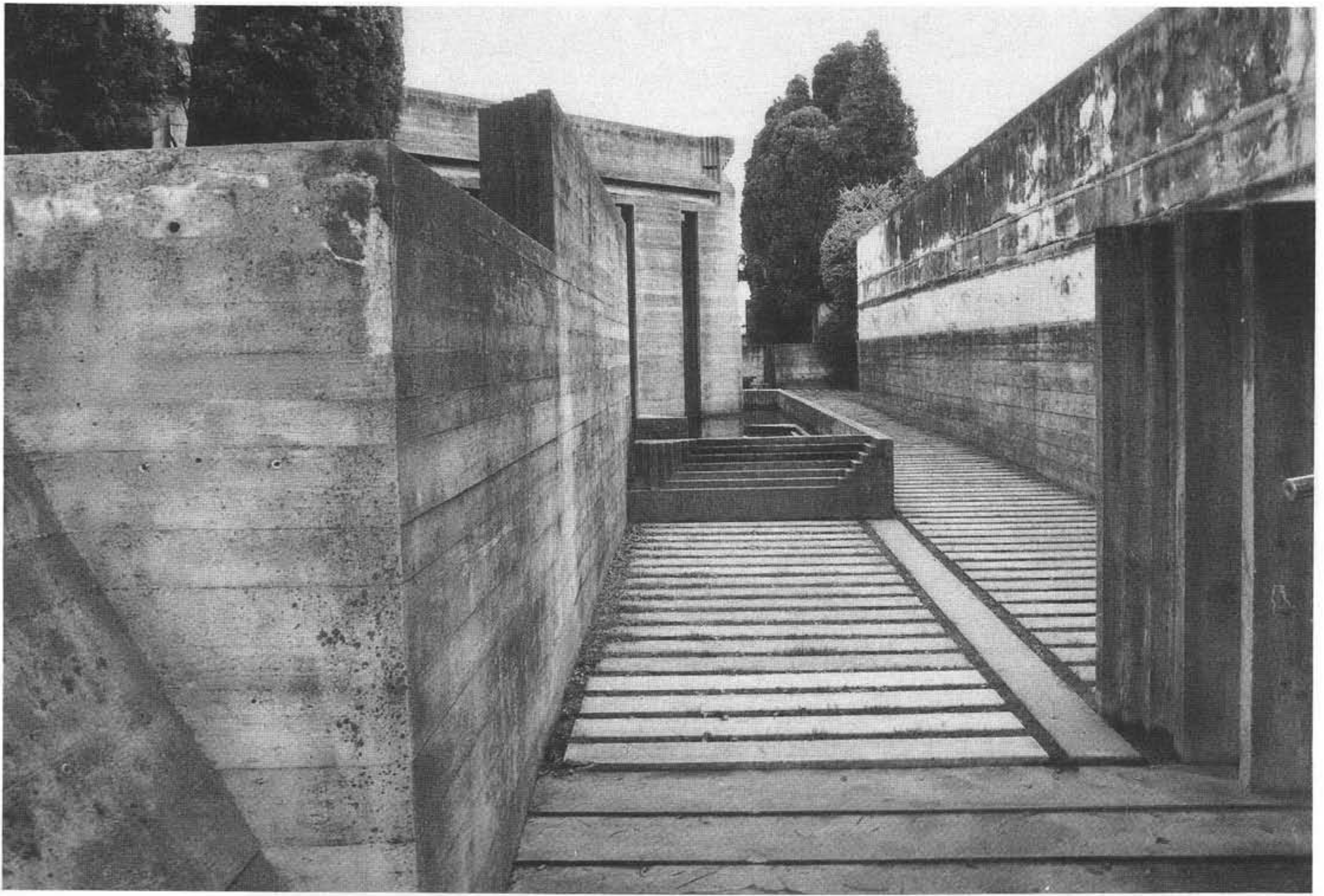

Figure 10. The funerary gate is located along the short side of the cemetery garden and allows direct access to the mortuary chapel. As an architectural statement it is much more understated than the propylaeum, in keeping with its secondary role in the public expression of the project. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

> separation to be their most prominent component, in contrast to rites of transition and rites of incorporation, which should only be slightly elaborated. A study of the data, however, reveals that the rites of separation are few in number and very simple, while the transition rites have a duration and complexity sometimes so great that they must be granted a sort of autonomy. (Van Gennep 1960, p. 146)

The etymological definition of the term *limen:* "The threshold of a physiological or psychological response [from Latin limen, threshold, akin to limes, boundary, LIMIT]" (New American Heritage Dictionary 1981) indicates how such a ritual structure could be readily translated into spatial design.[3] Threshold and boundary are two of the essential components of any spatial composition, and if we add to them path (or passage), we have assembled the three primary elements of a work of landscape or architecture. Analysis of these elements as they are used in the composition of the Brion tomb suggests reading it as an architectural manifestation of Van Gennep's funerary rite of passage whose narrative is that of the individual's (in this case the Brions') liminal passage from life to death.

First we can divide the plan into three zones: the chapel (zone of separation), the graves (zone of transition), and the pavilion (zone of incorporation) (Figure 9). Each of these zones, of course, is coincident not only with Van Gennep's distinctions, but also with the Roman Catholic tripartite division of earthly existence, purgatory, and heaven. The path through and between each of these zones is an extended and circuitous series of passages, thresholds, and places that create a theatrical spatial sequence, beginning with the entrance through the primary boundary of the garden wall that encircles the entire precinct.

The funerary gate consists of a long slab of concrete mounted on bronze rollers and standing approximately four feet tall, slightly higher than the garden wall that separates the cemetery from the adjacent farm fields (Figure 10). To open it, one must push hard against its massive weight; as it is closed, behind it sounds a low, chthonic tone that echoes within the passageway. Ap-

Figure 11. The refined little stairway and low wall define the threshold between the zone of separation and the zone of transition. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

proaching the chapel, one passes the artesian well, source of the water that accompanies the journey at every juncture, and anticipation is created by a narrow sight line through two slots in the walls, allowing a glimpse of the arch over the graves. Another threshold confronts us here as we must turn left and enter the cloister, which links the chapel to our left and graves to our right; the two cloisters, one on each leg of the L of the plan, are the connective liminal elements linking the three zones. Direction is indicated towards the chapel, however, by its 45 degree rotation from the orthogonal and the resulting splay of the cloister at this point.

From this space of ceremonial separation, one must return to the cloister to continue following the narrative path leading to the next major threshold, the emergence from the contained space of the cloister and the stairs leading to the level of the lawn surrounding the tombs; the lawn is elevated about a foot and a half above the level of the chapel (Figure 11). This zone between the emergence from the cloister and the top of the stairs can be considered another transitional space similar to that between the funerary entrance and the entrance to the cloister. Upon ascending the steps, we have entered the second of Van Gennep's three phases of the rite of passage, the liminal or transitional stage, which also corresponds to the public precinct, as previously described. Intermediary between the chapel and the pavilion, it is tied compositionally to each of the other two realms in different ways.

The *arcosolium*,[4] a term borrowed by Scarpa from the crypts of the Roman catacombs, and the graves it covers are rotated to the same 45 degree axis as the chapel, allowing them to relate to both legs of the L, but to have a stronger geometric relation to the chapel (Figure 12). Furthermore, the circle surrounding the graves has the same diameter as the side of the square plan of the chapel and can be inscribed within it. The visual relationship between the graves and the third zone of the meditation pavilion is, however, much stronger. There is a near alignment of the centers of the pavilion and *arcosolium* (although there is no true centering), and the water that surrounds the chapel now reemerges from a small font on the edge of the circle around the graves and flows from this source through a narrow runnel (which becomes engaged to the cloister wall) to the pool surrounding the meditation pavilion (Figure 13).

To arrive at the pavilion, one must enter the other cloister; it is the one perpendicular to the propylaeum,

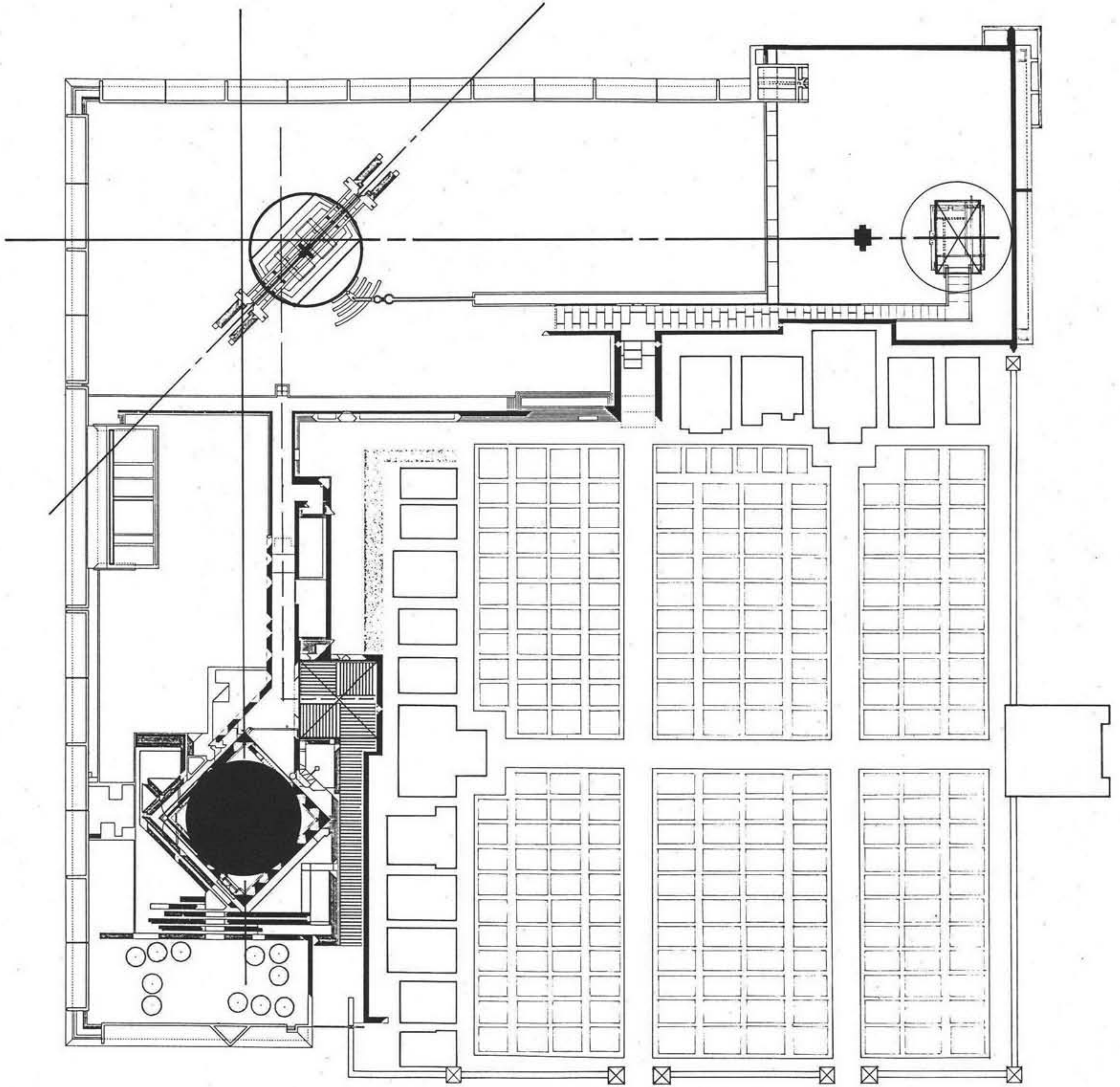

Figure 12. **Geometry.** An analysis of the geometric relationships between the elements of the composition reveals the avoidance of centered axial relationships, but the consistent use of pure geometries (circle and square) in a consistent and repetitive manner. Drawing by Helen Wilson.

but there are no stairs here to accentuate the transition, and one steps directly from the lawn into the cloister. Here again we have entered a transitional space between two of the three phases of the rite of passage; this transitional space also functions as part of the public entrance, as already discussed, and thus can be considered to have overlapping transitional roles serving the two sequences. Walking through the tunnel in the semidarkness, we can hear our footsteps reverberate in the chamber; the floor is constructed of concrete slabs suspended above the water that now flows beneath our feet. Narrow slits in the floor permit a view of the water and form a line that directs us forward. The next threshold encountered is perhaps the single most evocative element in the entire complex: a glass and bronze door balanced by pulleys

Figure 13. The water that first emerges on the site at the artesian well and surrounds the chapel reemerges at the small font by the gravesite and flows in a widening channel to the large pool. The natural metaphor of a river which flows to the sea and its formal expression in the water element reinforces the life-to-death narrative of the entire project. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

and counterweights, which must be pushed down into the floor (and the water) and stepped over (Figure 14). As the door rises and closes behind the traveler, water sheets across the face of the glass. Ironically, or perhaps by design, this final door is normally kept locked, preventing the casual visitor access to the ultimate goal.[5]

The path now changes to a concrete boardwalk across the water as one emerges from the cloister and approaches the pavilion. A final act of humility is required of the traveler as the roof of the pavilion hangs down, obliging one to bow in order to enter and obstructing one's view out (Figure 15). Only from the solitary seat inside the pavilion can one attain the full, expansive view back across the garden to the graves and the village and mountains beyond the garden wall, and contemplate the path just traveled and what might lie beyond.

Precedent and the Narrative

For an architect as notably diverse in his influences and interests as Scarpa, a discussion of precedents in the design of the Brion tomb would seem redundant and superfluous, given the depth of scholarship on the subject, were it not for the issue of the narrative and its structuring role in the composition. In its role as a cemetery garden, the Brion tomb inserts itself into the tradition of the metaphoric garden, the inherent issues of the cemetery arguing for a philosophic text to accompany the formal exercise in garden design. Moreover, I believe that the formal order of the design, as informed by the proposed narrative, bears a close affinity to certain particular design traditions.

The metaphoric path as the element that governs the design of a garden has been shown to occur in numerous Italian gardens of the Renaissance and the Baroque (Rainey 1981; Comito 1978; Lazarro 1990). Given Scarpa's thorough knowledge of Italian architectural history, he was likely familiar with the general principles of the classical Italian garden. In the case of the Brion tomb, however, it appears that he is more directly influenced by the Chinese-Japanese stroll garden to which he made frequent reference, and in particular the Chinese garden.

In an early influential work on the Chinese garden, known to have been in Scarpa's collection (Dal Co 1984, p. 68, note 131), Osvald Siren describes the general principles of the Chinese garden in terms remarkably evocative of the Brion tomb:

> The Chinese garden can never in the same way as the parterre garden, be completely surveyed from a certain point. It consists of more or less isolated sections which though they succeed one another as parts of a homogenous composition, must nevertheless be discovered gradually and enjoyed as the beholder continues his stroll: he must follow the sinuous paths as they take him past mountains and lakes, wander through tunnels or winding galleries, linger for a while to ponder the water which flows under stone bridges, to reach finally, perhaps, on steps of unhewn stone a pavilion

on a height from which a fascinating view unfolds between the trees. (Siren, 1949, p. 4) (Figure 16)

The use of the episodic strolling path not only ties the Brion tomb to the classical Chinese stroll garden it also links it to the Japanese garden of the Edo period. Scarpa is known to have been greatly enamored of Katsura (Albertini and Bagnoli 1988, p. 14). However, the Brion tomb is tied more strongly still to the classical Chinese stroll garden in its architectural definition of that path by a series of galleries and pavilions which connect a series of gardens within an enclosing garden wall (Figure 17). The two cloisters, as Scarpa calls them, which are the liminal elements connecting the three major places of the composition, show a clear relationship to the galleries that typically form the edges of a Chinese garden. In the Chinese scholar's garden, these walkways function, in a manner identical to that of the Brion tomb, as the main organizational element of circulation:

> The covered walkways, the most unique of Chinese garden elements, were the main arteries of the garden and within each walled enclosure formed its skeletal structure. . . . In this way they formed a linear pattern which, from above could be seen to penetrate and embrace all other parts of the design, much as the lines of a Klee drawing join together the nodal points. The parallel is not accidental, for both are concerned with the dynamics of movement. (Johnston 1991, p. 87)

The covered walkways are what organize the movement sequence through a series of miniaturized landscapes meant to evoke images of idealized scenes of mountains, lakes, caves, and pastoral realms. The persistently popular Chinese fable of the Peach Blossom Spring, which is "the locus classicus of the ideal of the garden as timeless paradise" (Barnhart 1983, p. 15), perhaps best summarizes the intended allusions of such gardens. The story recounts the journey of a fisherman who, in travelling along a stream, encounters a grove of blossoming peach trees whose beauty leads him to the discovery of a spring flowing from a cave. Following the faint light in the end of the cavern, the fisherman emerges at the other end to discover a pastoral realm of well-kept fields, impressive buildings reflected in serene ponds, and a contented populace (Barnhart 1983, p. 16) (Figure 18).

The Brion tomb bears a marked relationship in both conception and morphology to this fable and the Chinese garden. The painting of the

Figure 14. The bronze frame, but glass panels, of the door permits the visual extension of the cloister space out into the light of the pool. The mechanism of the door is concealed as much as possible on the inside of the tunnel, but the pulleys and counterweights become decorative elements on the exterior wall. Photograph by Richard Hansen.

Figure 15. The meditation pavilion visually floats on the surface of the pool; access is provided only by the boardwalk along the side that emerges from the cloister. Photograph by Felice Frankel.

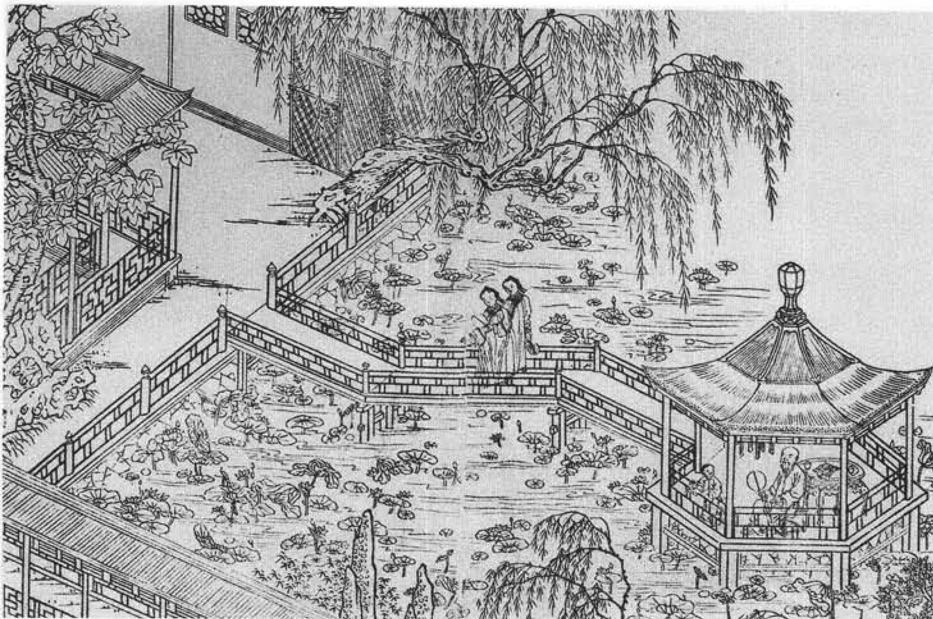

Figure 16. Chinese water pavilion. Drawing from O. Siren, *Gardens of China,* plate 97. (© 1949, Ronald Press, New York. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)

Peach Blossom Spring is strikingly similar to the section of the Brion tomb between the *arcosolium* and the meditation pavilion in its depiction of a passage through a watery cavern to an ideal miniaturized landscape of paradise corresponding to the third stage of incorporation in the described rite of passage. The image of the grotto in association with water and its connection to both the underworld and paradise of course occurs in many cultural traditions and is persistent in Western as well as Eastern literature (starting with Orpheus) and in garden history.

In an approach reminiscent of Paul Klee's landscape paintings, Scarpa depicts this landscape of transition and paradise through abstracted and fragmentary forms that, while drawn from nature, are part of a personal language rather than based upon a particular tradition or myth:

> The extension of memory [by Klee] and the contraction of experience into choices that are necessarily definite yet open to concatenation become translated into enigmatic forms, not out of any love of esotericism but in order to permit a dialogue with future experiences, to create breaks in the continuity of space-time. . . . It is this very point that links Scarpa with the Swiss artist. (Tafuri in Dal Co 1984, p. 89)

Scarpa uses the elemental spatial qualities of light and enclosure, movement and threshold, in conjunction with geometry, to create what might be called "symbolic settings" that aspire to timelessness and can thus be simultaneously a modern and classical, Eastern and Western experience. These experiential qualities of light, space, sound, and movement are organized in a studied and theatrical way using materials such as concrete, water, and plants to create the setting that might be described as pictorial, but is in fact the *environmental image* of Lynch's terminology.

Some of these symbolic settings, such as the two gates (the rumbling funerary door and the shimmering glass one at the pavilion entrance), are so theatrical as to be quite obvious; others such as the narrative path itself are quite subtle. Geometry is used as a structuring strategy from the basic 5.5 module that governs the design of the stepped ornamental motif, to the design of key elements such as the chapel, *arcosolium*, and the interlocked circles; but the overall organization is episodic in nature (as in the Chinese garden) and determined by the experiential sequence. A narrative rooted in fundamental human experience is fused with a wide range of sources of cultural appropriation and inspiration to create a work of garden architecture that, while a highly personal artistic statement, aspires to connect to more universal values.

Conclusion

> I want to make a confession; I'd like some critic to discover in my works certain intentions I've always had. I mean an immense desire to belong inside tradition, but without having capitals and columns, because you just can't do them any more. (Scarpa in Dal Co 1984, p. 287)

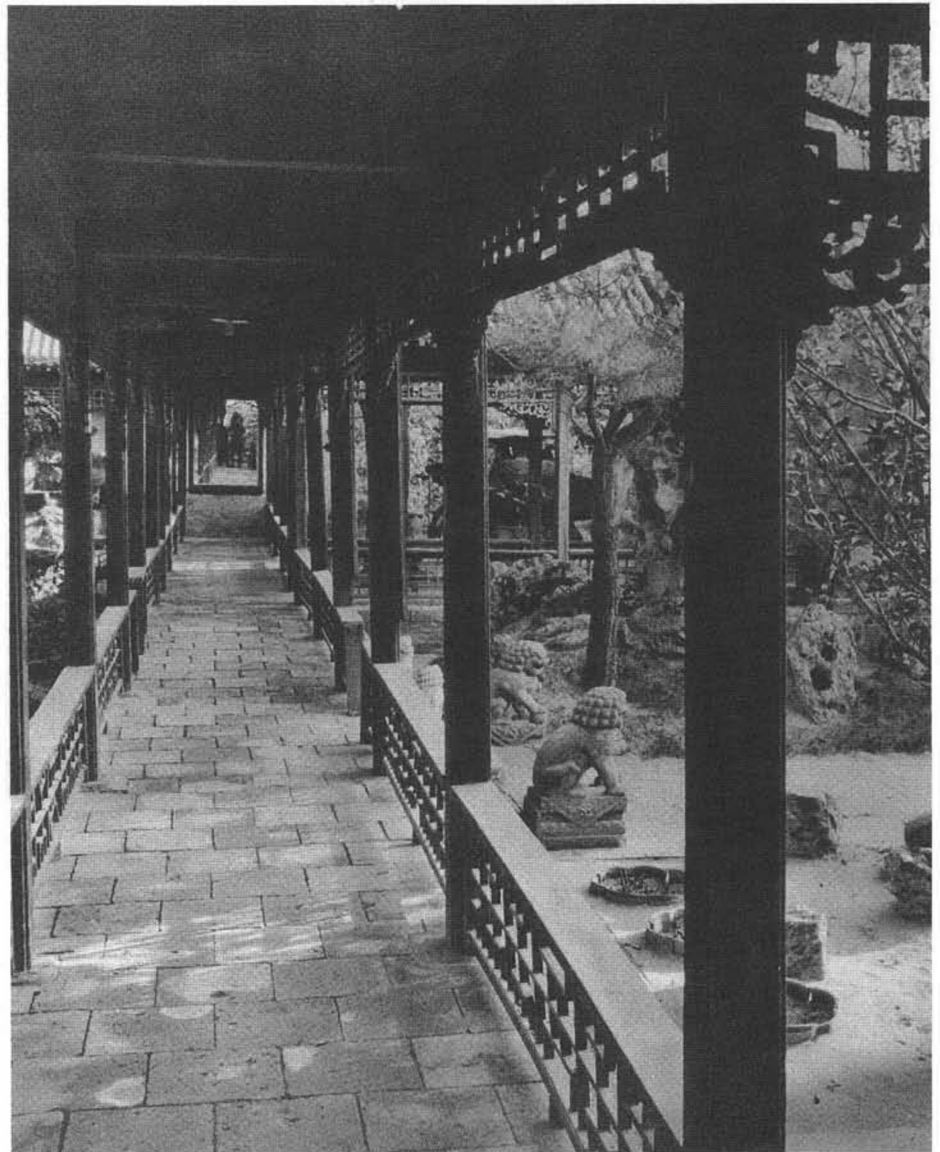

Figure 17. Chinese garden. Photograph from O. Siren, *Gardens of China,* plate 58. (© 1949, Ronald Press, New York. Courtesy of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm, Sweden.)

In this paper, I have attempted in a small way to address that request of Scarpa's, to suggest that a coherent narrative program based on the common ritual imperatives of the "rite of passage" governs the organization of the plan of the Brion tomb and that by closely reading this narrative one can more fully understand the significance of all the parts of the design and the role they play in relating the story. Perhaps the most telling example of this is in the detail of the low (one-foot high) fence constructed of six strands of cable strung across the lawn between the graves and the pond (Figure 19). A seemingly anomalous and arbitrary gesture, it takes on far greater significance in the context of the preceding discussion as the demarcation of the boundary between the second and third phases of the rite of passage and one of the definers of the public precinct. The empirical sensation of trespass that even the casual visitor experiences in stepping over this line is reinforced by the interpretation of the whole. The posited interpretation has the

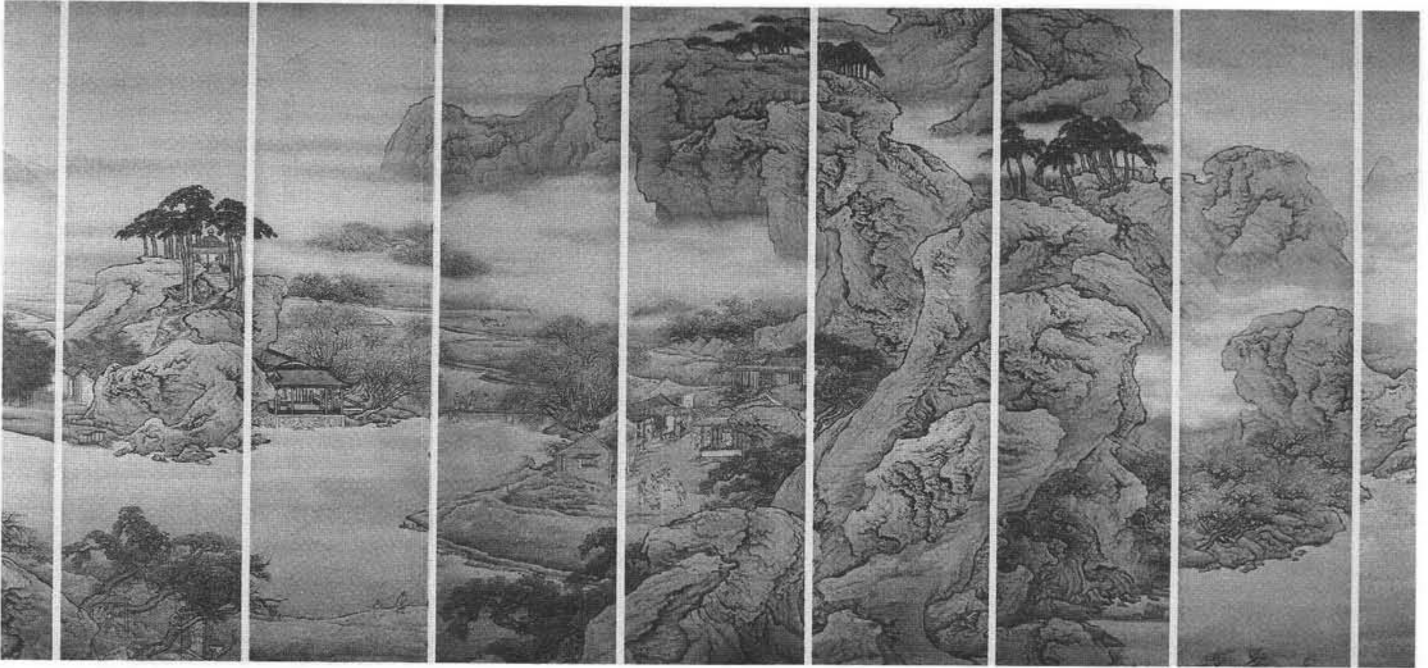

Figure 18. "Peach Blossom Spring," painting dated 1719, by Yuan Chiang; detail view. The fisherman's boat, beached at the mouth of the cave leading to the paradisical realm, is visible on the right. From Richard M. Barnhart, *Peach Blossom Spring*, plate 41. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1983. Reproduced with permisison.)

ability to make more comprehensible and coherent many of the disparate parts of this fragmentary and at times kaleidoscopic work, but it also helps to explain why it is so immediately powerful in its impact on the imagination. It is the essential nature of its underlying theme that brings together and makes whole all of its eclectic references and seemingly anomalous elements.

The work is particularly important to the development of current landscape architectural theory because it illustrates the ability of a designer to draw from a wide range of sources and inspirations and yet express complex philosophic issues through imagery and symbolism rooted in common human experience. If the critique of the postmodern movement has been strongest in attacking the use of pastiche and the glib use of antique symbols, it has not succeeded in neutralizing its pluralism and eclecticism. As semioticians such as Umberto Eco assert, we live in a world of images and signs derived from a tremendous diversity of sources, and it may take an artist of Scarpa's skill to combine so many of them into a coherent work of art, but the broader aspirations of the Brion tomb continue to be relevant. By using the most fundamental set of experiences to provide the narrative, Scarpa allows his voice to be expansive within a very personalized vocabulary and communicate to the participant on an almost emotional level.

By its very nature, a cemetery is a landscape type that has the potential to address the most profound ideas, and the best of them such as Mt. Auburn and Woodland surely do that. But what is perhaps most moving about the Brion tomb is the way Scarpa joins such sober reflection with sensual delight and personal emotion. It is clear that for him this was a most personal endeavor, the making of this garden, and it included for him the full spectrum of religious, intellectual, emotional, and physical pursuits.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the University of Virginia Small Grants Program for its assistance in the preparation of the illustrations for this paper.

Notes

1. In an interview conducted at the Brion cemetery, Scarpa responded to a question about the relationship between his architecture and literature in this way: "The question of the pavilion . . . which I said is for repose; to take stock of death, think, meditate, maybe that is a little bit of literature; a little. But I think it is necessary to do it. In our house we never do it; and in a certain setting we can do it; do you understand?" (Véry 1979, p. 52; my translation).

2. This cedar, so potent in its poetic and symbolic impact considering the long association of cedars and cypresses with cemeteries, is now sadly absent. It is visible in older photographs, but no longer exists. It has been replaced by vines, which hang down from a planter in the lintel of the door, giving the same formal, but not symbolic effect.

3. "The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshhold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are

neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun and moon" (Turner 1969, p. 95).
4. "arcosolium—arco + solium (sarcophagus); An arched cell in a Roman catacomb, esp. one designed to receive a sarcophagus" (New American Heritage Dictionary 1981).
5. I have visited the garden twice and both times found the door locked and the gardener unwilling to open it.

Figure 19. Detail view of one end of the cable "fence." Photograph by Richard Hansen.

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