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CARLO SCARPA IN MAGNA GRAECIA THE ABATELLIS PALACE IN PALERMO

Marco Frascari

‘when my time comes, cover me with these words, because I am a man of Byzantium who came to Venice by way of Greece’

Carlo Scarpa

I don't believe that architects should write history. The role of architects should be to develop tales — perhaps even to fabricate them — because, as Cirolin says in Raymond Queneau's *Les Fleurs bleues*, tales 'reveal what is underneath exactly like dreams do'. My intention is to develop a tale which takes place in Palermo and describes the works of Carlo Scarpa, *dilettante Veneto* of twentieth-century architecture. The tale is about fragmentary architecture, architectural technology, the design of museums, and in particular the restoration and conversion of Abatellis Palace in Palermo.

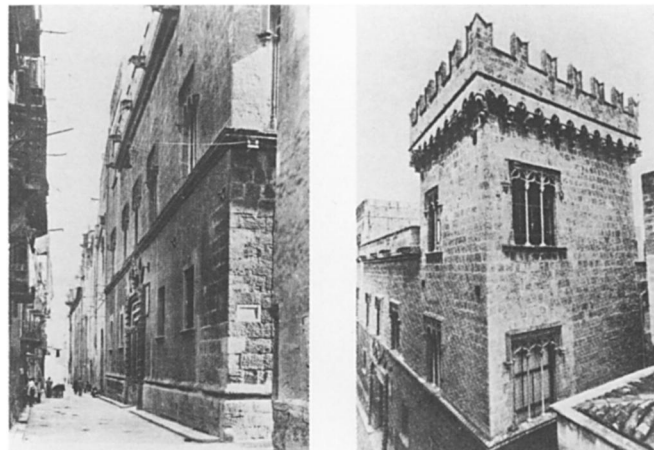
Abatellis Palace was designed and built between 1490 and 1495 by Matteo Carnelivari. The palace was bombed in 1943 and it was subsequently partially and badly restored. In 1953 Scarpa began the work of restoring the palace and transforming it into the National Gallery of Sicily. The work was completed by 1954, and in 1962 it earned Scarpa his first public recognition, the IN-ARCH award. In an interview published by the *Giornale di Sicilia* (22 January 1967) Walter Gropius declared that 'in Palermo I have seen the best museum design that I have ever come across in all my life. The Abatellis Palace is a masterpiece.'

Scarpa was a twentieth-century master of fragmentary architecture, or *architettura di spoglio* (architecture of spoils). This is not an architecture of prefabricated ruins or of 'instant history'. It is an architecture which

is the sum of the artefacts produced within a culture. In this sense buildings are texts which are generated by assembling three-dimensional mosaics of fragments, excerpts, citations, passages, and quotations; and every building is an absorption and transformation of other buildings.

The circumlocution *architettura di spoglio* refers to buildings partly or wholly composed of elements and fragments taken, either literally or conceptually, from buildings produced in other times or in other cultures. This phenomenon has occurred in every age — an example is the Arch of Constantine, which was built of spoils taken from all the provinces of the Roman Empire, a built manifestation of its power. The climax of this mode of building was reached during the Middle Ages, when materials and elements despoiled from ancient buildings were used all around the Mediterranean basin. Columns and capitals of varying proportions and orders would often be combined — with apparent disregard for stylistic unity — in the same construction. Column shafts would be cut down to the required size or placed on bases which were sometimes capitals or other building elements. Architectural critics of the neo-classical era were disdainful of this type of architecture and called it 'fragmentary'.

In Venice this typically Mediterranean practice prevailed for centuries, and reached its most sophisticated expression. Venice was built of fragments carried as ballast in trade ships crossing the Mediterranean from foreign shores. As late as the latter part of the eighteenth century Filippo Farsetti, a renowned patron of the arts, used twelve ancient Roman columns from the Temple of Capitoline Jove in his villa at



Palazzo Abatellis: Entrance façade and tower.

Santa Maria di Sala. In a sense there is a direct relationship between the architecture of 'spoglio' and the Christian tradition of worshipping relics. Indeed the Venetians even stole the Holy Body of S. Marco from Alexandria for their dogal chapel.

In choosing Venice as his spiritual home, Scarpa affirmed his identity as *magister ludi* of fragmentary architecture. In this type of architecture the possibilities of innovation and invention reside in the building elements and in the manipulation of the visual and kinesic relationships among the various fragments and artefacts. Hence this architecture is the product of the resolution, substitution and design of elements, whereas technology, with its double-faced role as *techne* of *logos* and *logos* of *techne*, forms the basis for an understanding of the interplay of elements in the composition. That is to say, both the construction and the construing of the architecture are contained in the making of the elements and in the dialogue set up among them by their placement in the fabric of the building.

In the Mediterranean area, Venice and Palermo are both cultural poles and *polis*. Although their structures and settings are very different, the two cities have in common many cultural and architectural dimensions, and Scarpa found in Palermo the richness of pre-texts of his beloved Venice. Abatellis Palace is not the only building he designed there. Not far from it is Chiaramonte Palace (better known as the Steri Palace), for which he devised the restoration and conversion; he also designed the conversion of Misterbianco Palace in via Etna, though it was never carried out.

The Abatellis Palace is located within the dense fabric of the medieval Arab quarter of shady and narrow streets near the Cala of Palermo, the old harbour where the fishermen still keep up the old Mediterranean traditions. Its plan is square, with a central courtyard, and there are towers at the two corners of the main façade. The palace represents an architecture of transition: parts of it are derived from the Gothic-Catalan style, others from the Renaissance. It was commissioned by Francesco Abatellis (Patella), Praetor of the city and Great Seneschal of Ferdinand II ('El Catolico') of Spain, in celebration and for the delight of Eleonora Soler, his *coniugi dulcissimae*, as is clearly indicated by an inscription carved on the cornerstone and by the Soler family coat of arms used in many of the decorations in the courtyard. However, Eleonora died before the edifice was completed, and upon the death of Abatellis the palace was transformed, according to the terms of his will, into a claustral convent. In 1539 the Dominicans added, to the south side of the palace, a chapel designed by Antonio Belloguardo in the Late-Gothic-Catalan style. In accordance with the tradition of fragmentary architecture, many of its stone elements and mouldings were imported from foreign shores, including the slender columns of the square triforium, which were brought from the Catalan city of Geron.

The collections of the National Gallery of Sicily are displayed on two floors of the palace. On the ground floor there are fragments of sculpture, architectural elements, inscriptions carved in stone, and many other artefacts. On the first floor the collection comprises mostly paintings, frescos, and jewellery. The path of the visitor is organized in terms of a visual sequence devised by Scarpa. It follows the formal relationships between the artefacts and their settings along the axis of circulation, so that the story of Sicilian culture unfolds before the visitor. This path hinges on the *Trionfo della Morte*, a huge painting located in the apse of the chapel that was added to the palace. It is seen twice during the visit, first from the ground floor, then, from a new, dynamic perspective, from a first-floor loggia that protrudes into the chapel. In this device of showing an object from different points of view there is, *in nuce*, Scarpa's concept of the virtual architectural joint, which he was to exploit fully a decade later in his placement of the statue of Cangrande in the Museum of Castelvecchio in Verona.

The next step in this architectural tale is to recall that Raymond Roussel, a precursor of Surrealist literature, died in Palermo in 1933, on

the threshold between rooms 226 and 227 of the Grande Albergo delle Palme. (Wagner also wrote much of Parsifal here, and Scarpa selected it as his residence while working out a 'fast-track' design for the work on Abatellis Palace.) By considering in parallel the works of Scarpa and Roussel, it is possible to ascertain the chiasmic structure and the artistic nature of the process of signification in fragmentary architecture. This is a process based on the Janus-like role of technology in the production of architecture, that is, of factual signification. If we divide the word 'technology' into its original components, *techne* and *logos*, it is possible to construct a chiasmic relationship between the *techne* of *logos* and *logos* of *techne*. This is the basis of Scarpa's method. Two of Roussel's writings contain the formal and conceptual keys to understanding this complex relationship, one a posthumously published essay entitled 'Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres', and the other the novel *Locus Solus*, 'a place apart'. The former explains Roussel's theory of the *techne* of *logos* whereas the latter is a masterpiece of a surrealist *logos* of *techne*.

Scarpa's use of technology, which consists in the surreal manipulation of the real, was at its best in his museum designs. The design of any museum is ruled by the nature of both the building and the collections. The role of the architect is to interweave these elements in a meaningful and memorable way, encouraging perceptions and intuitions of the story told by the dialogue between the objects and the rooms in which they are located. Technology is therefore a powerful device which, by both constructing and construing it, reveals the architectural text.

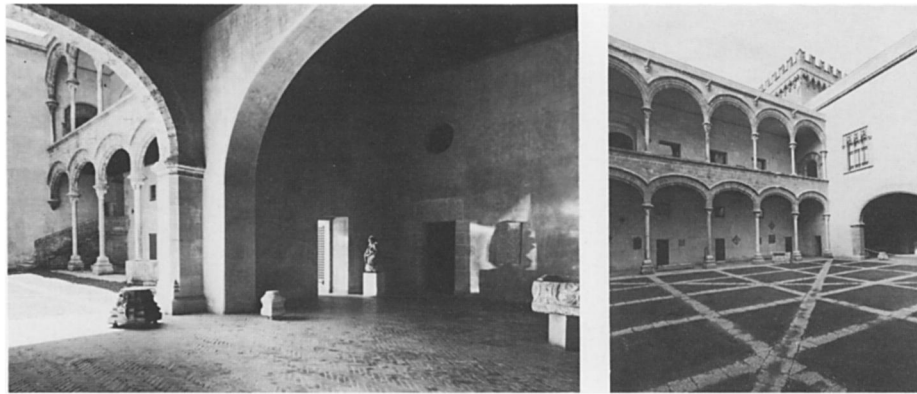
Abatellis Palace is an example of architectural 'picture-writing', which is based on a very simple principle: the designation of things and objects, using the medium of other things or objects — the quintessence of museums and monuments, or of any structure dealing with memory. It contains a visual transcription of the invisible processes of history and culture. The character and effect of Scarpa's architecture reside in his solution to the paradox of comprehending the invisible through the visible.

The fragments collected in Abatellis Palace repeat and interweave tales in the same way that the objects collected by Martial Cantarel on his estate, Locus Solus, repeat and interweave the surreal tales devised by Roussel. The narrative framework of the novel *Locus Solus* is based on a visit by a group of people to view the ingenious marvels on an estate at Montmorency, on the outskirts of Paris, which is owned by Martial Cantarel, a very rich scientist, magician and inventor. The 'game' in the novel is the restoration of things from the past — a *reintegratio in pristinum* — using a sophisticated form of classical technology, a technology similar to that of the Greeks and Romans, who knew the potential of steam for making meaningful toys but were not interested in labour-saving devices such as the steam engine. It is a technology of approximation rather than precision, a technology that enriches the perception of reality, that deals with the 'play' between objects and the parts of a construction rather than limiting the design by accepting the tolerance among the parts. Its meaning and power reside in the surrealist relationship that is set up among materials, which indicates and selects possible realities. In Cantarel's estate iron gates have golden hinges, and in the Abatellis Palace the glass doors have leather handles; these are pristine and allotropic realities.

The descriptions of the marvels in *Locus Solus* are couched in a kind of theatrical framework, and each scene is enriched with many details that at first seem unnecessary and unintelligible but by the end of the narrative have resulted in the fundamental retelling and re-enactment of the tale. The same is true of the design of the Abatellis Palace. The sophisticated details devised by Scarpa are not merely unnecessary decoration; they are fundamental to the stories revealed within the rooms of the palace.

In 'Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres' Roussel describes the formal and cosmetic devices he used in his literary compositions. They are based on a chiasmic semantic structure which determines the relationship

Ground Floor



View from the entrance and the courtyard.



Room I



Room II

Ground Floor

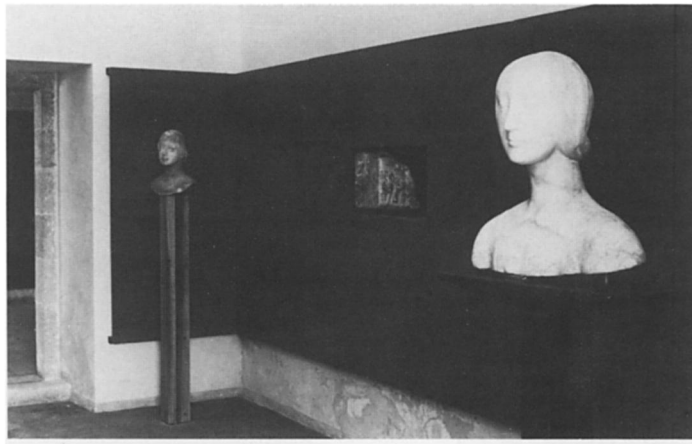


Room II showing the Trionfo della Morte.



Room III

Ground Floor



Room IV

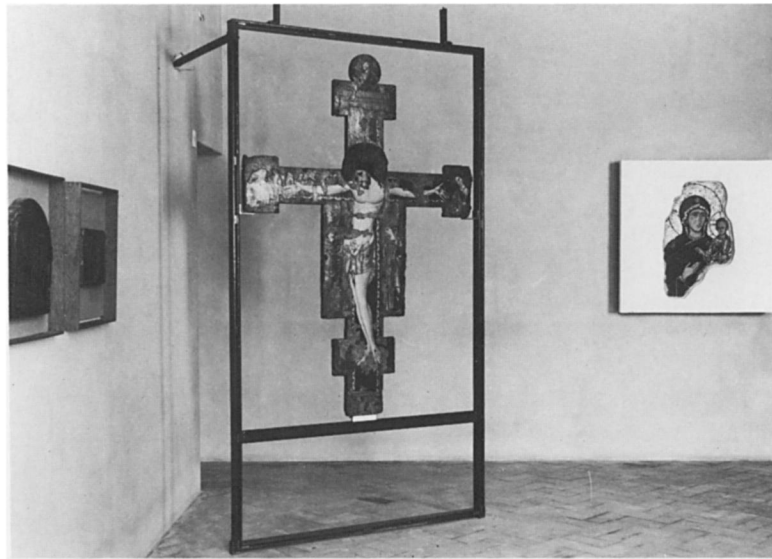


Room V



Room V

First Floor



Room VII



View of the Trionfo della Morte from the first floor.



Room X



View of the courtyard.

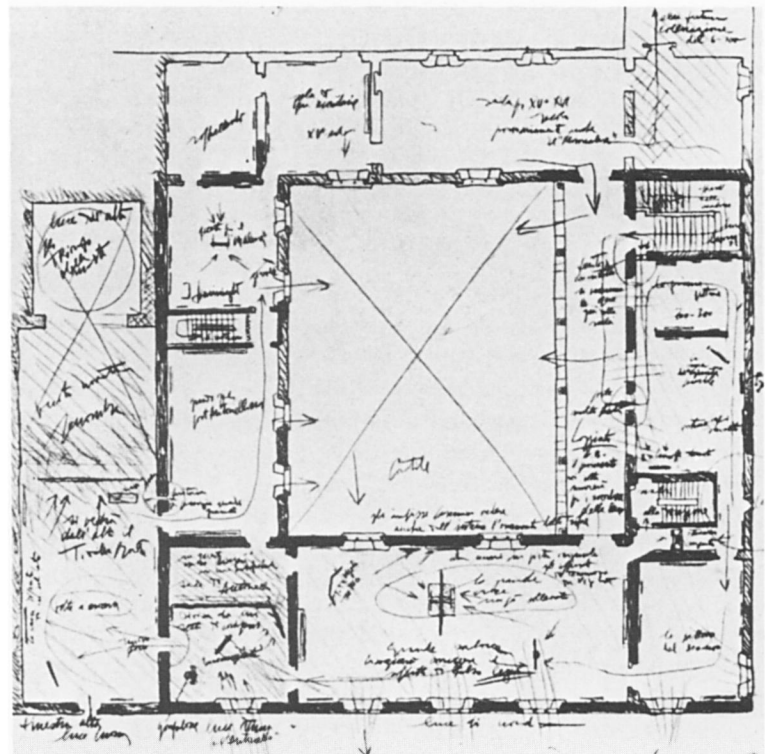
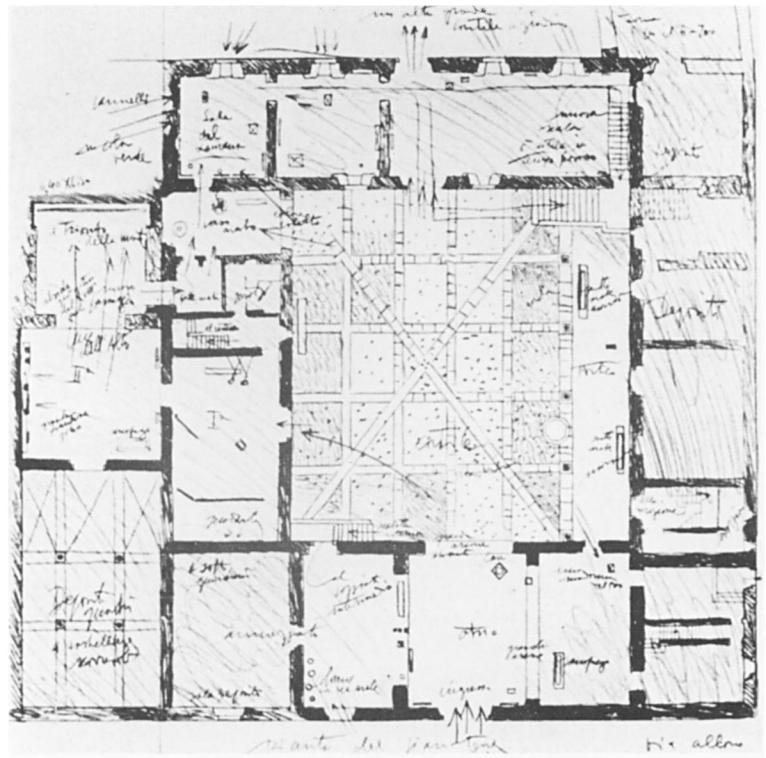
between the different parts of his writing, as well as being a springboard for invention. An instance of this is a story in *Impressions d'Afrique* which begins with the sentence 'La peau verdâtre de la prune un peu mûre' and ends with 'La peau verdâtre de la brune un peu mûre'; in another story the beginning is 'Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard. . .', and the ending is 'Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard. . .'

Scarpa used similar formal devices to resolve many of the relationships among the parts of his architectural compositions. An example of this are the bases of the two crucifixes in the great hall on the upper floor. One is flat and rigorously geometrical whereas the other is a found object from a quarry, but the two are conjugated diagonally in a mirror-like solution within the overall geometry of the room.

The cosmetic treatment of the walls and of the plaster panels which act as backgrounds to the sculptures takes an active part in the ordered relationship among the various objects in the exhibition; the backgrounds are neither too solid nor too transparent, enabling them to assume the 'tone value' of the pieces. The means used to achieve this effect are not those of the 'tolerance' of the mechanical methods characteristic of contemporary interior decoration. The walls have been painted with a brush and then rubbed with wet rags; the panels are finished in *stucco lucido*, a Venetian technique of imitating coloured marble in multi-layered plaster that was transformed by Scarpa into an abstract expression of colour and surface. This 'playful' technology is taken to its limit in the use of colour. The walls of the rooms and the courtyard are divided into sections which are painted in slightly differing shades of the same colour in order to compensate for the play of differences in natural lighting.

As was his wont, Scarpa made many drawings for the transformation of the palace, but the majority will be discovered only at some point in the future when the plaster is detached from the walls to reveal the architectural *sinopia* that he drew upon them. Scarpa worked out the display of every object *in situ* with a charcoal sketch on the wall, and he sketched the *Trionfo della Morte* several times before he could decide the location for this painting, which acts as the architectural 'hinge' between the two floors. Of the drawings done on paper only two survive, sketches of the plans of the two storeys. Both survey and design — and a perfect example of 'architectural writing', they describe the physical and mental weaving of the heterogeneous substances in Abatellis Palace and they contain all the information necessary to develop Scarpa's fragmentary architecture.

To conclude this tale of architecture, and of the work of Carlo Scarpa, it would be useful to reiterate that architecture should be seen not as a summary of totalities but rather as an open collection of fragments assembled to generate a legible text. It should produce a world that is recognizably unreal but ordered, where the technology of architecture reveals the reality being simultaneously surveyed and designed within the cultural memory. As Queneau wrote in *Les Fleurs bleues*, 'rêver et révéler, c'est à peu près le même mot'.



Scarpa's sketches of the plans of the two floors of Abatellis Palace.

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