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In the Steps of Scarpa

Alice Nickell

This article discusses Scarpa's stairs - the materiality and tactility underfoot, the craftsmanship, the ease of movement on some, the concentration required on others. A number of projects are presented as simple line drawings, with supplementary photography in certain instances. By virtue of a close reading of the physical nature of each stairs, the consequential effect on eye movement and the manifestation of tectonics, I hope to present a synthesised understanding of Scarpa's intent in the spatial sequencing of Querini Stampalia, Castelvechio and Brion Cemetery.

Querini Stampalia

Location: Sestiere Castello, Venice

Built: 16th Century

Scarpa renovations: 1961 – 1963

Scarpa was commissioned to renovate and reorganise the ground floor of the Querini Stampalia Foundation, damaged by previous *acqua alta*.¹ Scarpa viewed the flux in levels of the adjacent canal as inspiration. Instead of blocking the flow of water, he allows it to seep deep into the plan. This daily action of the water ebbing in and out 'is a daily reminder

of the recurring *acqua alta* and also a symbol of Venice's "dominance" of the waters.² In the front area of the design, the floor level is raised to that of the neighbouring Campo, creating a floating walkway with a cascade of steps down into the canal. Deeper within the plan, Scarpa treats the main gallery space as a basin, sinking the floor level back down and allowing the floor pattern to wash up the walls.

The floating walkway in the central space has an exaggerated edge of 300mm. This edge emphasises the floating feeling of being raised above the water level. As a result, the walkway feels like a separate and complete element within the room, while similarly highlighting the current water level. The walkway becomes a new insertion into the old building both in plan and section, touching neither the pre-existing walls nor the floor. In the space between this suspended walkway and the original building, mini canals are created where the water is allowed to circumnavigate during the *acqua alta*.

The Istrian stone edge becomes more noticeable as the walkway narrows through the arch.³ The eye is led around the space by this top edge of the walkway until it rests upon an element that cantilevers to the left. Approaching this heavily undercut protrusion, it becomes clear that it is the first step in a set of stairs cascading towards the water. The steps are rarely used to enter from the water, but visually provide a grand entrance from the canal. Materially, the steps are neither a simple extension of the raised walkway, nor the rough concrete below. As well as cascading in form, the materials follow a similar pattern, with Istrian stone covering the top surfaces of each step and the concrete visibly rising from below. The top step is set at the same level as the walkway edge, resulting in a rise of 300mm. It is a high step, and the motion of approach and ascent creates a sense of threshold between the raised walkway and the graded section below. Often Scarpa creates a threshold which,

although visible in the details, is predominantly experienced physically; in this particular instance he presents a step up or down that exceeds a natural or comfortable rise.

On coming to the first step, a notch in the Istrian stone is seen, showing the thickness of the stone. Descending onto the second platform, turning to the right and climbing parallel to the canal, small shadow gaps between each step are noticeable. To the right of the steps a floor level extends, and one becomes aware that the water must flow in and under the raised walkway during the *acqua alta*. Due to the varying heights and the unusual shapes of each level, the gaze is lowered towards the feet, or a little ahead, drawing the eyeline down to where the water begins to lap over the steps. This engages the visitor to physically gauge the water level. The steps are square in plan with 45 degree cuts. This angled climb directs the descent; first right foot, then left, down towards the water, like negotiating boulders down to the beach.

The fourth step is larger and has two notches cut into it. These notches mark the dimensions of the smaller steps in relation to this larger one. At this point there are two routes available, depending on how high the water level is. Continuing to the right, there are two small interconnecting steps, or behind to the left there is a larger rectangular step, and then a large square platform into the water. Clambering down to the right, to the point where the canal water meets the architecture's edge, there are glimpses of the Campo through the gates, and passing gondolas cause gentle waves to lap at one's feet.

During the *acqua alta* period, the water in the morning is level with the top of the second step. This lowers throughout the day to the bottom of the stairs, a change in water level of approximately one metre that happens daily. Turning to climb back up the stairs, the undercut of the walkway is seen and one ponders how far the water seeps into the plan.

The raised walkway extends by one metre into a third room, a side gallery whose floor is at the original level of the Querini Stampalia. This protrusion extends an invitation to enter. Walking through the archway it becomes clear that there is a set of steps down to a lower level. Scarpa did not consider this one of the predominant routes through the building and therefore positioned the steps at the side of the walkway, ensuring an uninterrupted view from the centre of the walkway and maintaining a continuous edge for the eye to run along. It is significant that the edge of the walkway is not broken or corroded away to allow for access to the stairs. The edge is squared off, creating a boundary or threshold to step over. This enforces the feeling of the raised walkway as a separate entity and its elevation above the original floor level is emphasised.

The two steps down to the north-east room are separated from the walkway edge by a small shadow gap of 30mm. This indicates that they are neither attached to the original level of the Querini Stampalia, but nor do they 'belong' to the raised walkway; instead they are an individual element that goes between these two conditions. They are not set alongside the wall of the room, but are placed 270mm from it, creating another canal like space to the right of the steps.

Stepping up and over the raised edge, the gaze is lowered and the eye is caught by the white stucco panels on the wall, which stop at this level. This indicates that the water can flood this room up to this point – a height of 470mm. An awareness of the potential water levels shapes this gallery to feel like a rough concrete basin, with the raised walkway edge and stucco panels being the protected level of the room. The steps down into this space are 230mm and 240mm high, so both feet are placed on each step before stepping down again. On climbing down the gaze is focused on the foot placement. Stepping onto the rough concrete floor, the eye moves to the centre of the room, the point at which the Istrian stone

drainage channels cross, before rising to observe the internal elevations.

The stairs to the library are in a narrow hallway, and are not visible until one is directly in front of them. The original steps of the Querini Stampalia are underneath, with Scarpa inserting new marble treads and risers into the existing. The original Istrian stone stairs are exposed at the edges and in a narrow gap in the centre of the riser. This allows the profiled nosing of the original step to be compared with the unprofiled nosing of the new steps, making clear Scarpa's intervention. The inserted marble slabs are smooth and polished, drawing attention to the differences in materiality and age. The handrails are set into the original holes in the Istrian stairs, creating an undulating shape at the bottom of the handrail. Scarpa also steps the stuccoed panels on the adjacent walls, in an irregular pattern unrelated to the stairs. This exposes the original rough concrete wall surface alongside the stairs, drawing the line of vision downward to the most detailed part of the space. As Scarpa's new additions of marble steps and stucco walls sit proud of the existing structure, a channel or void is created around the new insert, reminiscent of the channels surrounding the raised walkway. By carefully setting his work off the original, emphasis is placed on both what was there before, and what was added later. As Scarpa himself said in an interview, '... I renewed the staircase without destroying it, preserving its identity and its history, increasing the tension between the new and the old.'⁴

The common perception is that Scarpa layered his new steps on top of the original, in the manner of a non-permanent intervention.⁵ However upon closer inspection, it is apparent that the original stair nosings have been cut away to allow the new marble slabs to set into place, a permanent fusion of the two. This appears contradictory, and one could argue that the original staircase has been destroyed; these

new additions, if removed, would not leave a complete staircase. Scarpa uses the terms 'renewed' and 'preserving', but he is selective in his preservation.

Castelvecchio

Location: Corso Castelvecchio, Verona

Built: 1355

Scarpa renovations: 1957-1964, 1968-1969, 1973-1975

Castelvecchio is a complex building, having undergone many transformations and modifications. Scarpa's work on Castelvecchio spanned from 1957 – 1975, with three main stages of intervention carried out. Two sets of stairs within this building are discussed.

Concrete stairs

There are two sets of stairs in the cutaway section where the Cangrande statue is displayed. The first set is from the second floor of the watchtower down to the Cangrande area. The second set is from the Cangrande area up to the walkway along the rampart.

The stairs from the watchtower down to the Cangrande area are concrete, and are partially enclosed within concrete walls that drop and rise to frame or conceal different views: 'Scarpa enjoyed the pattern of steps in section and the potential juxtaposition of other adjacent elements descending in syncopation with the actual steps.'⁶ When standing at the top of the stairs, a view is framed of another set of stairs stepping up to the left, as well as a second route leading off to the right. This invites a descent to see more of what lies ahead. On approaching the base of the steps, the concrete walls on either side extend out as an enclosure. These walls have metal angles set into them, creating notches on the internal side.

There is a shadow gap in the ground marking out the top step and indicating that the staircase is an element in itself.

Stepping down the first few levels, one becomes aware that the concrete enclosure cuts through an old wall. The eye is drawn down and slightly in front of the feet, focusing on a shadow cast across the eighth and ninth steps. This causes the gaze to rise towards the source of the shadow, making one aware of an incision in the concrete wall on the left, which reveals the old Commune wall. This cut and shadow emphasise the thickness and depth of the wall the staircase passes through. The concrete walls enclosing the staircase are vertically board-marked, allowing for a greater sense of descent. After passing through the depth of the original wall, the concrete walls on either side start to step down as 'an essay in how parts of the city and parts of the castle are revealed and others are blocked off.'¹⁷ The step of the wall is not in relation to the stairs, but is choreographed to reveal views beyond the staircase.

The first view is on the tenth step, where the wall to the right drops and curls away, framing the early glimpse of the Cangrande statue. On the next step, this wall blocks off the view of Cangrande, causing the gaze to turn to the left. The concrete wall steps down at this point, allowing a view to the river, bridge and town beyond; a reminder that this wall is at the edge of the building. On the twelfth step, a drop in the wall to the right allows the gaze to turn and lower from the tower to the excavated moat, and the new bridge that crosses it, giving a vertical panorama of the space. Approaching the end of the staircase, the walls on both sides begin to block off external views, focusing the mind on the choice of routes ahead. The last step of the stairs twists slightly to the left, to address the level change opposite; both bottom steps of the staircases sitting parallel to each other.

Diagonal stairs

On the landing between these two sets of steps there is a narrow window cut into the concrete wall on the left, allowing

for a very particular view of where the water of the river meets the base of the bridge. A single platform protrudes out from a diagonally cut set of steps in front, 'pulled out as an invitation to climb a staircase'⁸ and to the right a bridge leads across to the Cangrande statue. 'The simple asymmetrical positioning of the cantilevered square here offers the visitor the chance to step off the 'floating planes' and into the solidity of the wall.'⁹ This step is pushed over to the right of the step above, directing movement; first approach with the right foot, followed by the left. There is a shadow gap underneath – another threshold. The angled steps dictate the foot placement.

The diagonally-stepped stairs are steep and uncomfortable to climb. The steps are built into the thickness of the rampart, and this narrow, dark space requires concentration to surmount. Due to the shape of the steps, the tightness of the space, and the awkwardness of the climb, vision tends to focus directly at the placement of feet, while holding on tightly to the handrail. The board-marked concrete wall to the left of the staircase ends level with the top step. It is horizontally board-marked, giving the appearance that it is part of the staircase insertion. On the right-hand side, the wall extends upwards and is vertically board-marked concrete, increasing the sense of the depth of the space, and the heaviness of the rampart walls. Approaching the top of the stairs, it starts to get brighter, but the gaze is still drawn downwards. Upon reaching the top, the eye rises to discover wide, bright, open views across the river and to the town beyond. It is a surprise and contrast to the staircase, each spatial experience heightening the other.

Brion Cemetery

Location : San Vito d'Altivole

Built : 1969 – 1978

When Giuseppe Brion died in 1968, his wife commissioned

Scarpa to design a memorial to him on an L-shaped plot of land wrapping around an existing cemetery. The plan consists of a small chapel to the northwest, an arcosolium set in the corner and a water pavilion at the southern end. Scarpa raised the ground level by 75cm and placed an inclined wall at 60 degrees around the perimeter, to maintain privacy but to allow views of the surrounding countryside. Brion Cemetery can be thought of as a series of thresholds; the manipulation of ground level, the ambiguity between internal and external spaces, and the metaphorical boundary between this life and the next. The steps discussed bridge the change in levels from the raised grass surrounding the arcosolium to the path leading to the chapel.

Overlapping steps

The steps are set into a niche in the low wall, 'four, overlapping, square steps, the borders of which, from above, form a cross.'¹⁰ The steps are constructed from metal-trimmed concrete and are formed of two squares, set above and below two rectangular steps. The poetic 'cross' is a consequence of the positioning of the steps within the recess. This overlapping allows one to climb the required height difference of 705mm within a small area on plan. As with the diagonally cut set of steps in Castelvecchio, Scarpa dictates foot placement. As these steps are close together and unusual, the eye is forced to look down at the feet, emphasising the height climbed to the grass. The flight is pushed back into the grass via a niche in the wall, so from further down the path leading to the family tomb, the steps are not visible and the wall reads as a continuous element. They are, however, positioned directly in front of the path coming from the chapel, thereby giving a clear line of sight along this route. Each footfall mounting these steps is audible, each emitting a different tone, announcing an arrival into the main contemplative space.

Conclusion

'Stair: Series of treads and risers, the two making a step, in a flight of stairs, usually enclosed in a structure or cage (staircase), providing access from one storey or floor to another.'¹¹ These are the fundamentals of stairs. Carlo Scarpa takes each of these elements and manipulates how the individual engages with them. Some of his staircases facilitate a flow through, others lead you to climb in a specific way; some extend the gaze, others focus on foot placement. Scarpa was more than a master of details, he was a choreographer of spatial sequence; leading the visitor through a space or staircase, directing gaze and movement.

Some staircases are set pieces that are suspended in space, not touching the surrounding walls or floors. Others are more ambiguous about their role as ground and have more to do with spatial continuity. Some staircases arrive all at once; others layer over the existing and imply a chronology. Scarpa carefully considers how a staircase begins and ends – often extending an inviting step in order to lower the gaze and emphasise the experience of stepping up and onto a platform. This creates a boundary, or makes the stairs feel like a 'room' in themselves; sometimes disengaging from the space they lead from and to, and becoming another place. On other occasions the start of a staircase is not exaggerated and the intention is towards an awareness of the broader enveloping space.

All the staircases are well crafted, resolved and considered. However, there is an implied ad hoc composition to some. It can feel like there is a mediation between two found conditions. Scarpa creates these found conditions, making fictitious narratives, yet treating them as long-standing fact. For example, the two steps up onto the raised walkway in the Querini Stampalia feel quite makeshift, similar to a rural stile. The overlapping steps in Brion Cemetery are similarly ambiguous in their origin and age.

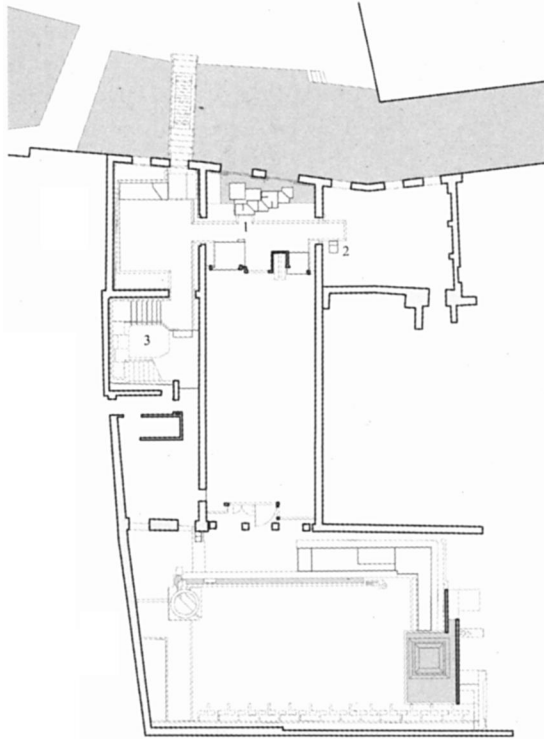
Here, the ground continues underneath while the steps become protrusions in the niche of the wall. These steps are of the wall rather than the ground. This sense of the ad hoc is deceiving – everything is controlled by Scarpa. The stairs are both generative and an afterthought; they feel consequential to the floor but the floor also feels consequential to the stairs.

When a staircase mediates between two actual found conditions, the result is more obviously coherent. The staircases in Castelveccchio are each clear and distinct interventions, which create specific spatial effects. This coherency may be due to the presence of full flights of 14 steps or more, as the further you move vertically the more consistent the spatial experience becomes.

The way in which Scarpa designed within ‘found’ spaces, such as Castelveccchio, and in ‘made’ spaces, such as Brion Cemetery, are quite similar. In both situations, everything is made to feel like an intervention or a discrete piece in a found space. The lack of differentiation between the two conditions is intriguing.

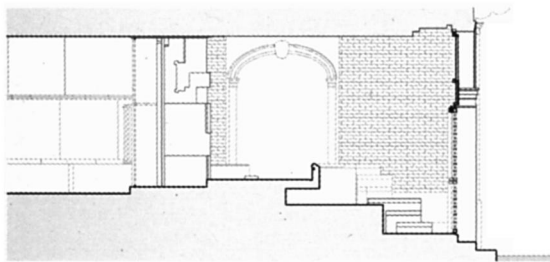
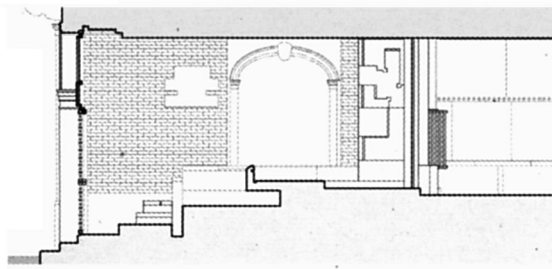
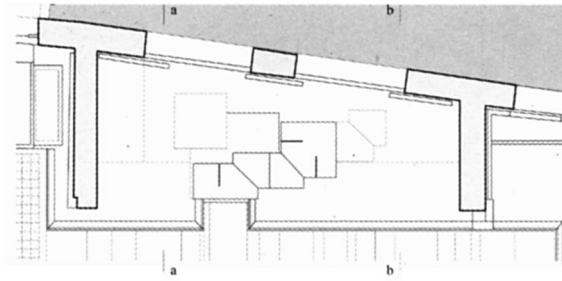
Scarpa’s ability to conceive both space and detail is made explicit in his stairs. Scarpa rarely drew completed or final drawings and instead illuminated the risk involved in the translation from concept to construction by working closely with craftsmen and adjusting designs on site. ‘He was one of the very few architects in the Western world for whom the link between the designer’s conception and the craftsman’s executing hand was indissoluble.’¹² His control over detailing and his collaboration with craftsmen produce highly tactile and sensual spaces, ‘it is quite impossible to visit a work of Scarpa with [your] hands in your pockets.’¹³ Carlo Scarpa created architecture for the senses; you cannot help but reach out and touch as you step through these spaces.

Images



Querini Stampalia, plan.

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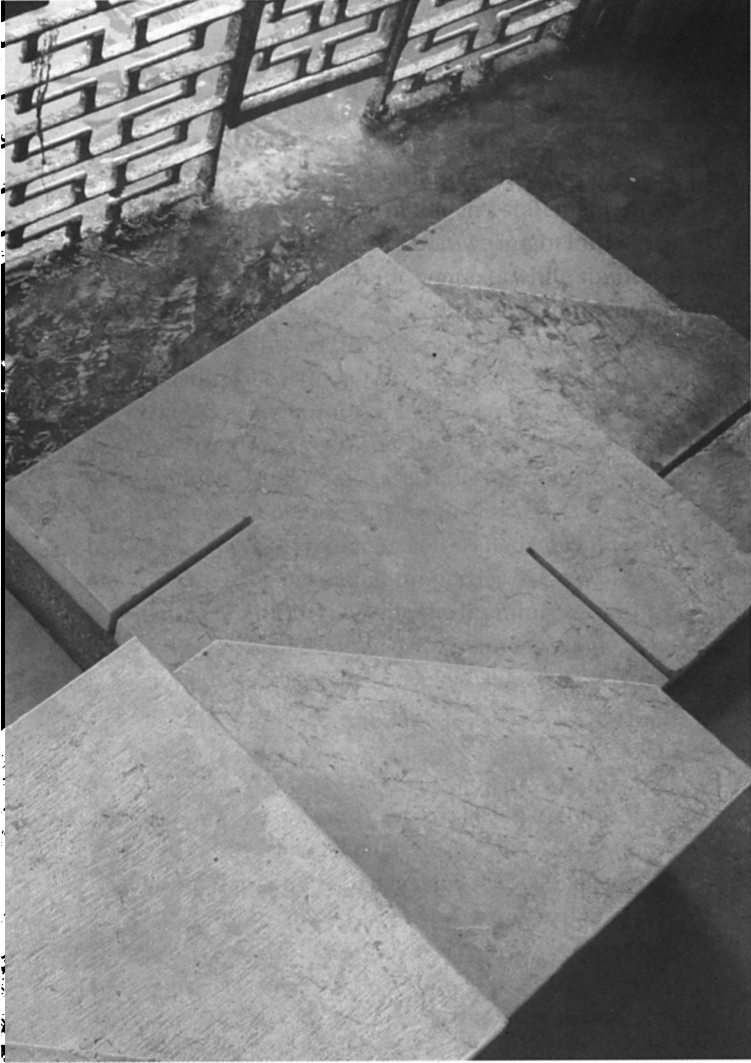


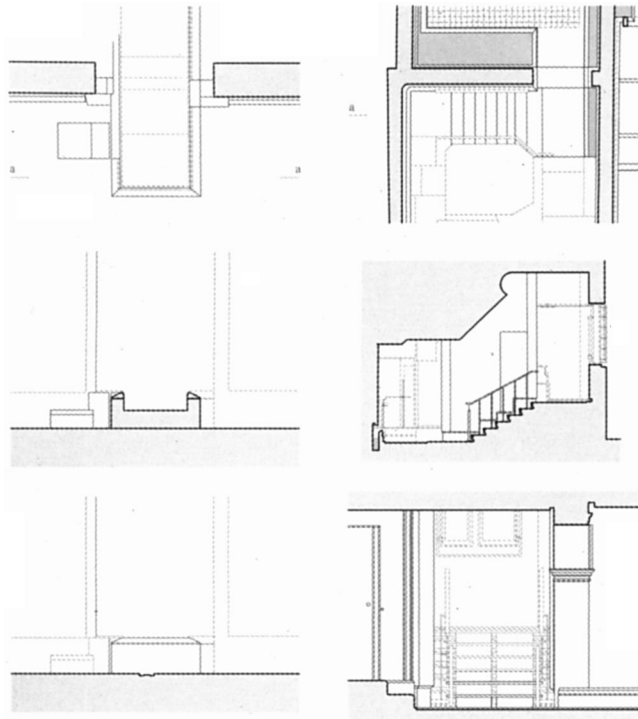
Querini Stampalia, cascade of steps to the canal.



Querini Stampalia, cascade of steps to the canal.

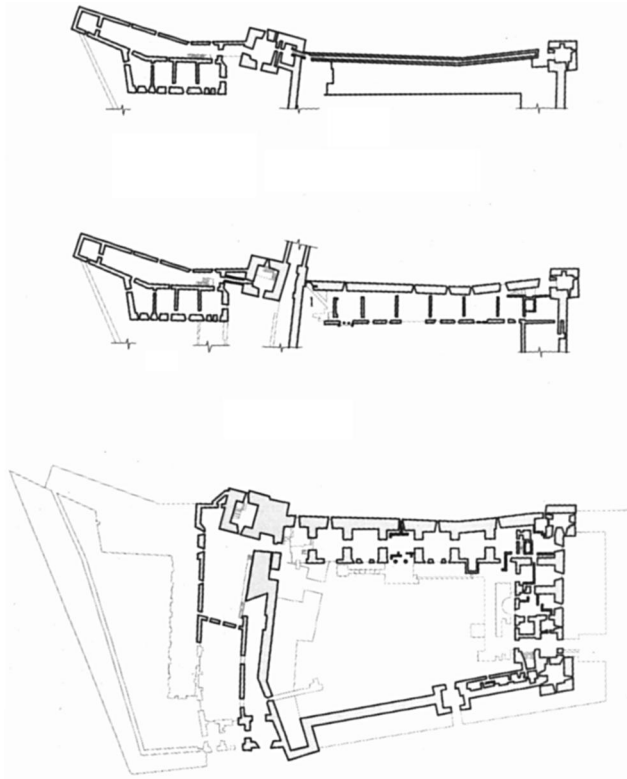
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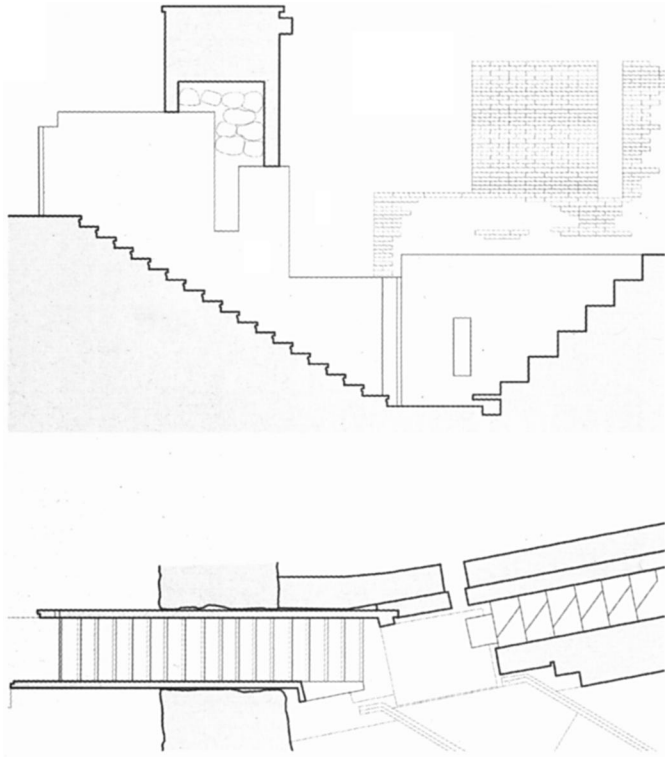


Left - Querini Stampalia, steps to the north east room. Right - Querini Stampalia, stairs to the library.

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Castelvecchio, plan.

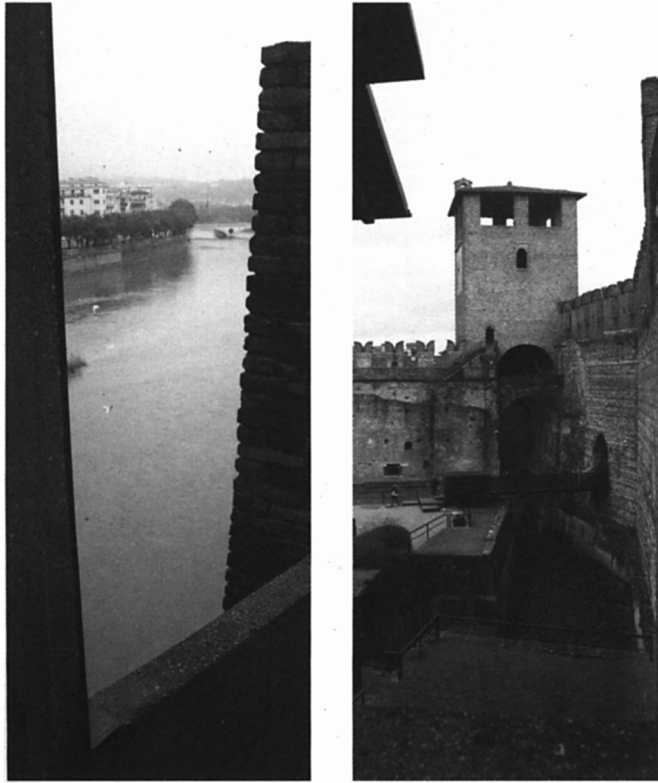


Castelvecchio, concrete and diagonal steps.

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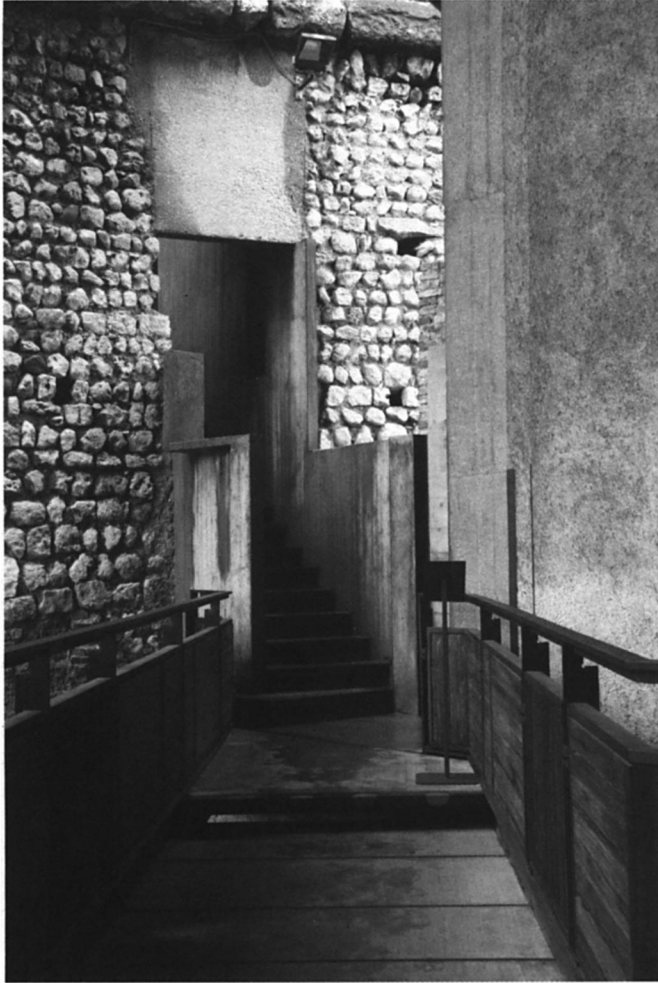


Castelvecchio, concrete and diagonal stairs, photographs of views.



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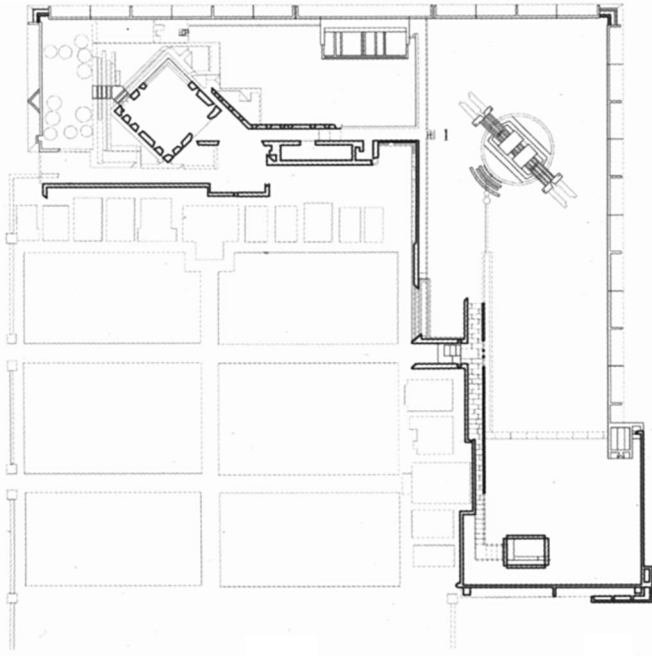


Castelvecchio, concrete stairs, view from Cangrande bridge.

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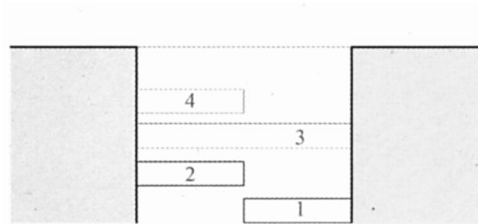
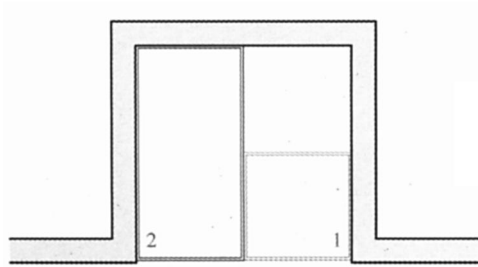
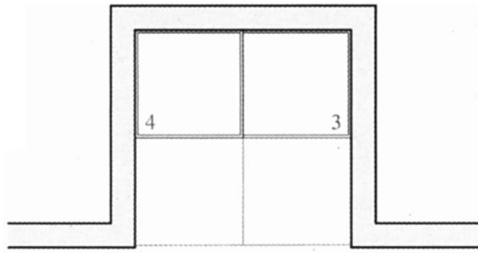


Castelvechio, concrete and diagonal stairs, view from top of the diagonal stairs.



Brion Cemetery, plan.

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Brion Cemetery, overlapping steps.



Brion Cemetery, plan.

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Notes

- 1 *Acqua alta* is the high water in Venice that most commonly occurs between autumn and spring, causing the canals to overflow.
- 2 R. Murphy, *Querini Stampalia Foundation*, London, Phaidon Press, 1993, p. 12.
- 3 Istrian stone is a white, durable stone quarried outside of Trieste.
- 4 F. Dal Co and G. Mazzariol, *Carlo Scarpa: the complete works*, New York, Rizzoli, 1985, p. 197-198.
- 5 Exploded axonometric drawings of the stairs intact with slabs laid on top can be found in R. Murphy, *Querini Stampalia Foundation*, 1993, and A. Schultz, *Carlo Scarpa Layers*, 2010. However R. McCarter in *Carlo Scarpa, 2013*, corrects this misconception.
- 6 R. Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa and the Castelvechio*, London, Butterworth Architecture, 1990, p. 99.
- 7 R. Murphy in *Carlo Scarpa – A Profile*, dir. Murray Grigor, UK, Viz production for Channel 4, 1995.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 R. Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa and the Castelvechio*, London, Butterworth Architecture, 1990, p. 100-101.
- 10 G. Pietropoli, E. Renai and C. Zanarotti, *Carlo Scarpa La tomba Brion*, Comune di Altivole, Grafiche Vincenzo Bernardi, 2008, p. 24.
- 11 J. Stevens Curl, *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 735.
- 12 M. Antonietta Crippa, *Carlo Scarpa Theory Design Projects*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1986, p. 6.
- 13 A. Rudi in *Carlo Scarpa – A Profile*, dir. Murray Grigor, UK, Viz production for Channel 4, 1995.