

THE BRION CEMETERY,

S. VITO, ITALY

1970-72

BY GEORGE SEDDON

THE BRION CEMETERY, one of the best known works of Carlo Scarpa, is a site of pilgrimage for young architects and architectural students from all over the world, as the Visitor Book shows well. It is discussed and illustrated in several books and articles on Scarpa, including the splendid photographs of *Global Architecture* (Futagawa 1979): but there is nothing on the garden or landscape, which forms an integral part of Scarpa's design, as does the relation of the built environment with the landscape outside. The landscaping was a co-operative enterprise between Scarpa and Pietro Porcinai, one of the very few eminent Italian landscape architects (who took his professional training in Germany, as there was — and still is — no full professional course available in Italy.) Porcinai has also been the subject of a fine monograph (AIAP 1986) but it is not readily available to students and overseas visitors.

Thus this composition of buildings and landscape is worth recording more fully for several reasons. The first is that the design cannot be understood simply in 'hard' architectural terms. Plants were seen to have architectonic forms and uses by both Scarpa and Porcinai, for whom they also had strong symbolic associations, so that a part of the meaning of the composition is expressed through the plants, which therefore cannot be fully comprehended without them. In the case of Porcinai, some of these meanings are indicated in his own articles reprinted in the monograph (1986). In the case of Scarpa, it can be confirmed from his other work, such as the garden of the Palazzo Querini-Stampaglia in Venice. The Brion cemetery is highly symbolic in both architectural and landscape detail, and very intimate to Scarpa. Consider his own tomb, very simple, in a space protected by a clean white wall to the north and east, open to the sunny south, flanked to the west by a grove of strongly aromatic *Libocedrus* — and beside the low grave, against the plain wall, the only *Forsythia* in the grounds, Scarpa's companion, the first to bloom in very early spring, its clear yellow flowers borne profusely on bare branches. This is a very personal statement.

1. This short paper has four components. First and foremost, it is a factual record of the plants in the landscape as of July 1989, with a plan showing their location.
2. Secondly, it is an attempt, necessarily subjective, at an interpretation of the symbolic significance of the design. This constitutes a 'reading' of the landscape itself by Seddon, supplemented by knowledge of Scarpa and his work (Andretta, who worked with Scarpa) and of Porcinai and his work (Gasperotto, who worked with Porcinai).



Yukio Futagawa

View to the north in 1979, some ten years after completion (reproduced from *Global Architecture*, 1979).

Below: The main entry to the Brion cemetery in 1979, with the magnificent weeping cedars that drew a veil of mourning across its face (reproduced from *Global Architecture*, 1979).

Right: The main entry to the Brion cemetery in 1989. Note the trailing cotoneasters above the portals — but the weeping deodars that framed it so well have gone; this is by far the most significant change to the gardens.



Yukio Futagawa



George Seddon

Inset: View to the north, showing the village church and the foothills of the Dolomites in the background, with the arc in the middle ground and the still puny weeping spruce behind it. (Recent photograph)

3. This leads to a critical assessment of the landscape design and its contribution to the total statement. Although this is a work of distinction, there are some apparent design failures, and the perception of these led us to ask questions about change in the plant material.
4. Thus there is also an analysis of *change*. This was based initially on a comparison using Scarpa's design drawings, photographs from various publications, especially Futagawa (1979) and the landscape as it is now in 1989. Unless he has close and continuing control over maintenance, the landscape architect may find that his intentions are not fully realised and the product in twenty years' time might be hardly recognisable. A fully professional landscape architect like Porcinai is able to anticipate the natural change of growth, and to choose plants well adapted to site and climate so as to minimise loss, and thus design a landscape that requires little more than routine maintenance, and in this he has succeeded at the Brion cemetery, with only a few exceptions, which nevertheless we found very puzzling at first. Later discussion with the gardener, who maintains the cemetery for Signora Onorina Brion, the widow of Signore Brion, solved all but one of these puzzles. The details are discussed later. However, the changes in twenty years also raise questions about the future of the complex, which will no longer represent the intentions of its two designers if the landscape undergoes substantial change, either outside the walls to the north, where the 'borrowed landscape' of the village of St Vito in the middle distance, with the mountains behind and open fields in the foreground, is an essential design element, or within the walls, where plants, stone and brass make such an eloquent joint statement. We hope that this record will help to clarify that statement for future management.



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Plants and symbolism

The attached list shows the plants in the garden as of July, 1989, and the plan shows their location.

The *choice* of plants reveals some obvious preferences.

Death: 1

Funerary associations: the Italian cypress and the yew ('l'albero della morte' in Italian) give a sombre emphasis at two critical points: the entrance for funeral services and the Brion tomb. They are both traditional, but here they also seem to be a part of the male-female, yang-yin symbolism with which the design is enriched elsewhere. The cypresses give a strong vertical accent, while the clipped yews make sensuously rounded recumbent forms.

Sorrow: 2

There are many weeping, trailing and cascading plants, for example, the weeping spruce, jasmine, and several different species of *Cotoneaster* planted in the roof of the chapel, over the entry porch, over the Brion tomb, and elsewhere, to cascade downwards from above eye level. This symbolism seems trite when expressed in words, but on site it is visually effective.

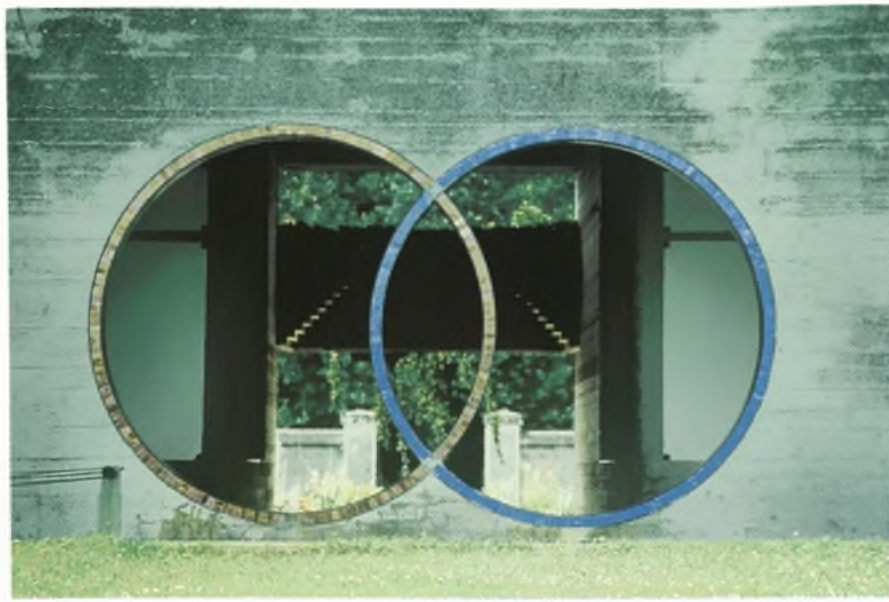
The Sacred: 3

There are also plants with sacred associations, for example, the Japanese sacred bamboo (*Nandina domestica*, not in fact a bamboo); and the water lilies and lotos.

Life, growth, renewal: 4

The associations of death, sorrow and the sacred seem to be consciously balanced by the strong links with life and renewal. Consider, for example, the *Forsythia* and the *Jasminum nudiflorum*, both of which have vibrant, clear yellow flowers, blooming very early on bare branches. The *Mahonia* also has very early clear yellow flowers. Later, there is the sumptuous display of wisteria. ►

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The linked rings, male and female, looking out, west to the public cemetery.

Perfume: 5

Many of the plants are strongly perfumed, so that this is almost a scent garden: *Libocedrus*, the lilac, roses, *Pittosporum* etc.

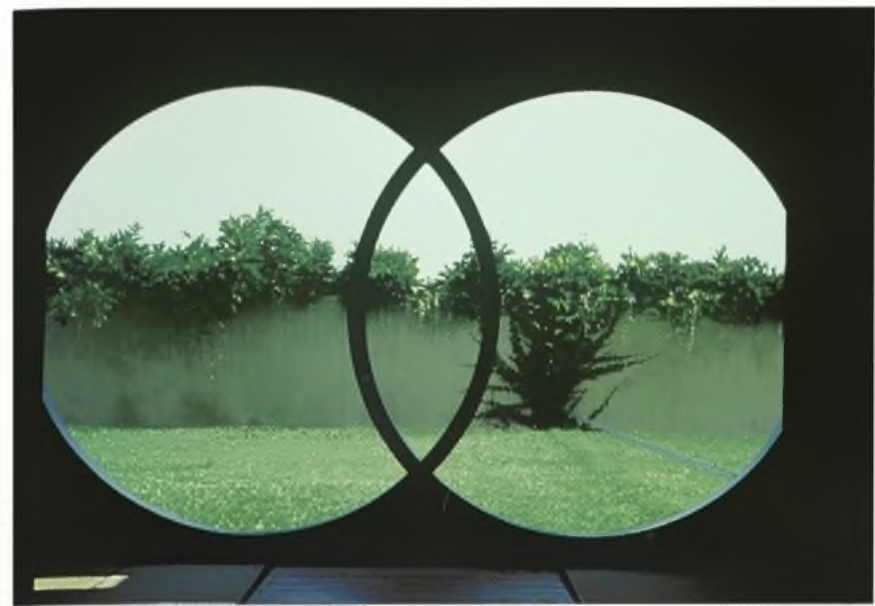
Fertility: 6

Many of the plants bear fruits, especially berries, and there are so many that it can hardly be an accident. They are an outstanding food supply for birds in the autumn and winter, and the same species (especially *Cotoneaster* spp.) are strongly bee-attracting in the spring.

Change and eternity: 7

The architecture is notable for its solidity and the use of materials that will endure, especially brass, stone and mosaic. The plants are

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The linked rings looking in to the private cemetery.

chosen to dramatize *change*. There is a solid background of evergreens, but there are also many deciduous and semi-deciduous plants, especially the Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus*) which colours brilliantly in the autumn, emphasising the change of season. The red berries and the leaf colouring in *Cotoneaster*, which Scarpa/Porcinaï have used prolifically, with five different species, also give a strong note of colour in autumn and winter, followed by the early spring flowers.

Balance: 8

The balance of the indigenous and exotic seems to be calculated with some care. There are many plants indigenous to the Mediterranean (Italian cypress, tamarisk, ilex, yew, ivy) but there

The sarcophagi of Honorina and Guiseppe Brion lie beneath this ark, or arch, or bridge, or concrete fly-over. In my view, Scarpa handles rectilinear forms with supreme confidence, but his curvilinear forms are less secure. Note the rather straggly red rose, not a satisfying form here, although the bright splash of colour makes a symbolic point. Note also the cotoneaster thriving on the roof, and the corn doing likewise over the quite high wall.

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are also many plants from Japan and China (*Wisteria*, *Libocedrus*, *Acer palmatum*, *Pittosporum tobira*, *Rhododendron*, *Nandina*, *Parthenocissus*, *Bambusa*, *Abelia*). Most of these plants are in common cultivation around the world and perhaps one could make a similar list from many domestic gardens innocent of any symbolic intent. There is nevertheless a predominance of oriental plants; certainly the oriental influence is obvious in many features of the design, especially Persian (the water channels) and Chinese-Japanese. The intersecting circular window openings from the main entry both frame the view as the Chinese so often did, and introduce the yang-yin theme of male and female.

The internal spatial balances are achieved through rhythms that avoid geometric symmetry; although the architectural *detail* is often rigorously geometric, the spatial masses are related by subtle balance. The balance between the internal and external environment is also very carefully considered. The environment to the south is excluded, and substantially also to the east and west.

The external view is directed north – to the village church of St Vito, which is a vital part of the composition, and to the hills and mountains beyond. Brion is in his tomb, but the view extends outward towards the home where he lived. Scarpa was about 1.75m in height: from most points the wall is just high enough to reveal the roofs of the houses at St Vito, outlined against the violet hills, but *not the walls* (you only see the walls if you are 1.8m or more).

Critical analysis and change in the landscape

Before critical analysis is attempted, we need to know how far the landscape in 1989, or at any other point in time, represents the intentions of the designer, and also to understand how change has come about. The major changes noted are as follows:

1. The weeping conifers (there were two of them, a variety of *Cedrus atlantica*) that so beautifully frame the main entry in photograph No. 1 of *Global Architecture* (GA) have gone. According to the gardener, they died three years ago. They should surely be replaced.
2. In the southern 'pool with aedicule' (H on the plan), there was tall bamboo shown in GA 1979. This too has gone, and only the dwarf bamboo remains. The tall bamboo would have helped focus attention on the significant bonzai, smaller than either the tall bamboo to the east, or the lotos to the west. This focus is now lost. It is interesting to note that the form of the bamboo island, which is hexagonal, and the bed that contains the lotos, do not show on the Scarpa structural plan. They were undoubtedly added by Porcinai, who was 'specially consulted on the water plants' (pers.comm. Sgra. Brion).
3. Two items that show in the GA photographs have mercifully disappeared – a row of begonias down the sides of the Brion tomb, and a plant (it looks like a *Chrysanthemum*) in the elegant marble cylinder that adjoins the circle containing the spring. This construction of the two circles and the narrow linear channel for the water is so chaste in conception – more Persian than Japanese in its precise geometry – that the plant seemed inexplicable. A chance conversation with the gardener revealed that both this and the begonias were his own initiative.
4. A further initiative of the gardener, but this time successful and necessary, has been to clip the yew, which was unclipped in 1978. It now has a very Japanese quality, appropriate to its context by the Brion tomb, which much resembles the stone bridges at Kyoto (although it suggests several other readings, like most strongly symbolic structures).
5. Most of the surviving plants are healthy and effective, which indicates that they were chosen and planted with professional ►

The entry to the chapel, very Japanese in feeling, yet uncompromisingly contemporary in the use of materials. The grass between the paving slabs and the wisteria on the wall are typical of the delicacy and restraint that characterizes the best work of Porcinai.



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skill. There is some weed infestation with bindweed (*Convolvulus*) and blackberry, but it is not serious. The *Pittosporum tobira* and the white fir are somewhat sickly — and the two roses at each end of the tomb, one red, one pink, are an eyesore. Porcinai rarely used bush roses, and never like this, with their meagre, unlovely form fully exposed, so they are not likely to be the product of his planting. They may represent Scarpa's taste. The gardens in the Castel Vecchio at Verona, one of Scarpa's first finest architectural achievements, are not a success: they suggest that Scarpa needed Porcinai to work alongside him.

There is also one major design failure in our view: the weeping spruce has not grown, and it also seems slightly misplaced. The spruce should grow to a height of around 8-10m: it is a considerable tree. When fully grown, it should balance the distant campanile of the church of St Vito by having a similar apparent height, mark the tomb strongly, and complete the triangulation with the small fir at the south end under the aedicule (fir-campanile-spruce). This appears to be the designed intention, but in 1989 the tree is still only about 2.5m in height, and it appears to have grown little since 1978. In being itself out of scale, it fails to give scale to the tomb, which surely should not have its present prominence. The arc is Japanese in form (among other things) but it lacks the delicacy of a Japanese stone bridge, for example. It is gross, however, only because of the failure of scale. In brief, the tree needs horticultural care to resume growth and thus complete the evident design.

The position of the tree is also a puzzle, centrally placed to bisect the arc, where the principle of spatial organization elsewhere always works through asymmetrical balance. In Scarpa's plan it is shown roughly where it is planted, so it is no accident — but one would expect to find it a couple of metres further east. The probable explanation for its position can be found in the 1979 photographs. There seems to have been only one substantial new house in the village of St Vito, where now there is a whole string to the east along the road. The tree blocks out the view of this house from much of the southern end of the garden — so its placement was probably a compromise.

Despite these relatively minor problems, the landscape and its built components form a strikingly harmonious whole, an unusually powerful combination of the skills of the architect and the landscape architect.

Postscript:

Since this was written, I have been in Italy again (June 1990), and made two further discoveries. The first is that the red and white roses were also added by the gardener. The second is that Gasperotto and Andretta have been able to recover the original Porcinai design drawings, courtesy of his daughter, from his studio near Fiesole. They show the following differences from the plan as executed.

1. There was more richness and diversity in the use of water-plants. Our guess is that Scarpa simplified this.
2. The largest expanse of mown grass is shown in the drawings as a 'meadow' with grasses and the common white marguerite of the area. This would have been more rustic in feeling, and is typical of Porcinai's allusive manner, offering reminders of an earlier, rural land-use.
3. In place of the weeping conifers, it shows the tortured (or corkscrew) willow, *Salix matsudana*, equally symbolic, but less visually effective. Our guess here is that Porcinai made the change himself during supervision of the planting. Landscape design is, and should be, to some extent opportunistic, and on-site experience can change plans.

G.S.



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The two tombs, and the most successful curvilinear composition within the complex, complemented by the clipped yew on either side. The central cylinder is the origin of a small fountain of water which circulates through the stone channels.



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Paolo Scarpa's own grave and tombstone, almost ostentatious in its simplicity.



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The southern boundary, with a line of glazed ceramic tiles in the wall, an island of dwarf bamboo, and the pond with water lilies (all the work of Porcinai).



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Within the Brion private cemetery, looking west from a point south of the Brion tomb towards the chapel (left and centre) and the family tomb (rear right).



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A view of the arc and the two sarcophagi, with the assured geometry of the right angle in the foreground, which demands uncluttered landscaping.

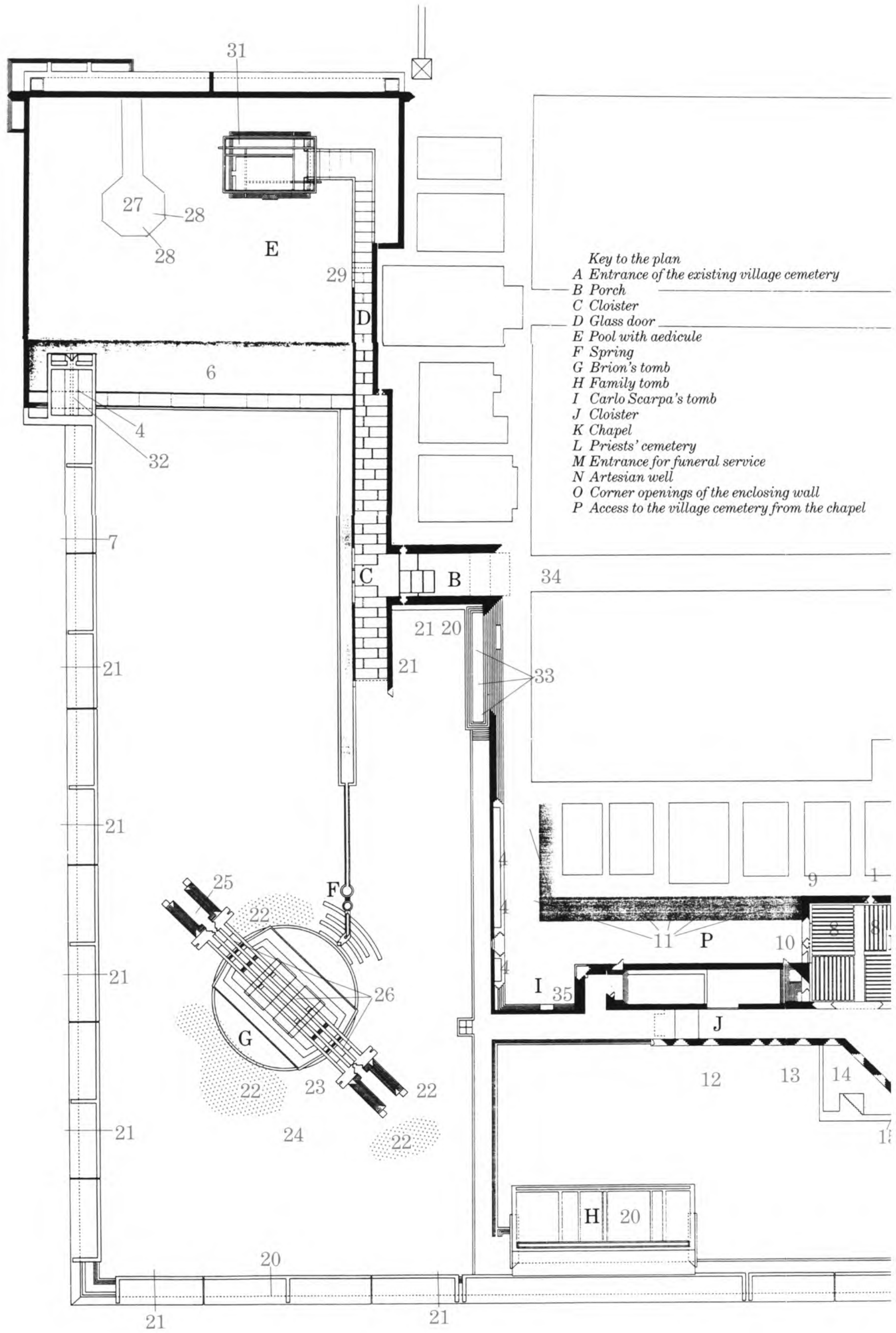
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* Note: This title, although much quoted in English, is incorrect. The village is, in full, S. Vito di Altivole, and it is the Brion cemetery. 'Brion-Vega' is the name of the company established by Brion to manufacture electrical appliances, and it does not (yet) have a tomb.

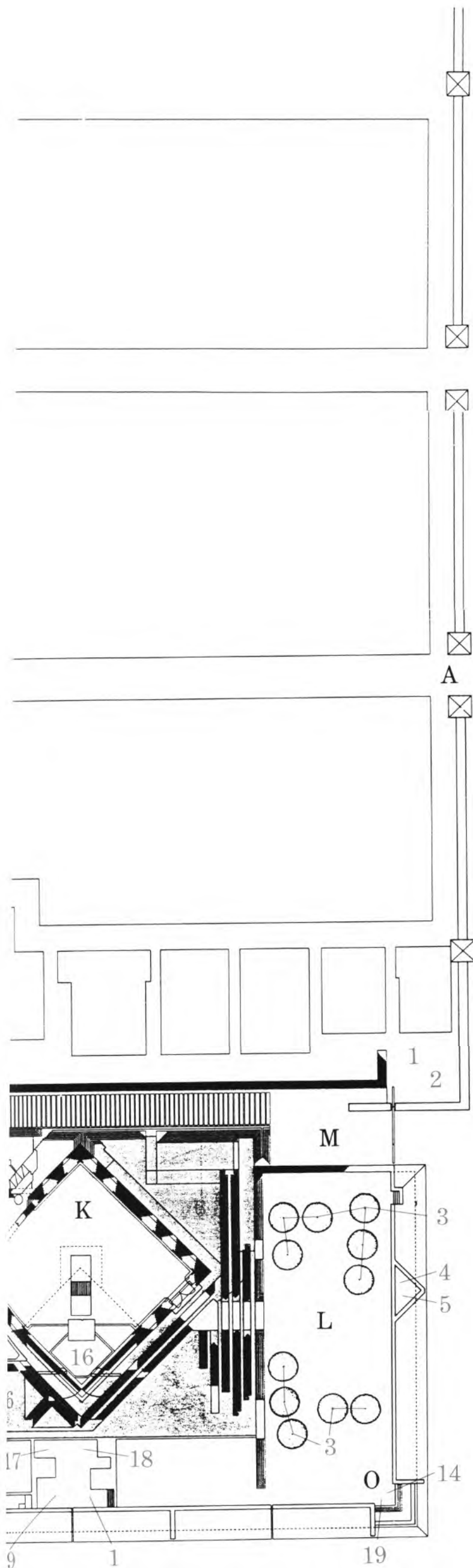
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Plan and plant list next pages. ►



Key to the plan

- A Entrance of the existing village cemetery
- B Porch
- C Cloister
- D Glass door
- E Pool with aedicule
- F Spring
- G Brion's tomb
- H Family tomb
- I Carlo Scarpa's tomb
- J Cloister
- K Chapel
- L Priests' cemetery
- M Entrance for funeral service
- N Artesian well
- O Corner openings of the enclosing wall
- P Access to the village cemetery from the chapel



Plant list

Plant list, numbered from the west wall, circulating east, then south and west.

1. *Cupressus sempervirens* (Italian cypress: eleven specimens; evergreen, indigenous).
2. *Cotoneaster salicifolius* (rather long narrow leaves with pronounced veins, berries in autumn, trailing branches).
3. *Jasminum nudiflorum* (Jasmine; yellow flowers in early spring on bare branches which trail downwards).
4. *Tamarisk gallica* (Tamarisk: pale pink flowers in spring, more or less weeping habit; coastal Mediterranean).
5. *Quercus ilex* (Ilex; the evergreen oak of the Mediterranean macchia).
6. *Nymphaea rustica* (waterlily with leaves that lie flat on the surface, with white or pale pink flowers).
7. *Wisteria sinensis* (a liane, profusely blooming, with pale violet racemes, pendant, in spring).
8. *Hemerocallis fulva* (day-lily orange-yellow lily-like flowers on spikes in summer. The individual flower is ephemeral, but there is a steady succession of new flowers).
9. *Pyracantha coccinea* (small white flowers in spring, bright red berries in autumn and winter).
10. *Rosa* hybrid (a white climbing rose, strongly perfumed: two plants. In the photographs of 1978 it was much bigger).
11. *Libocedrus decurrens* (Tone) (a 'cypress', or cedar with book leaves, strongly aromatic; there are 75 specimens of this tree, close planted in an L-shape, two or three rows thick).
12. *Forsythia* hybrid (clear yellow flowers on bare branches in early spring, the first spring flower).
13. *Acer palmatum* cultivar *atropurpureum* (Japanese maple, with dark red purple leaves).
14. *Syringa vulgaris* (common lilac; strongly perfumed lilac flowers in spikes, from the eastern Mediterranean).
15. *Mahonia aquifolium* (Oregon Grape: dark green, holly-like leaves, yellow flowers in early spring, followed by dusty blue grape-like fruits).
16. *Pittosporum tobira* (very sweetly perfumed, profusely flowering in spring, evergreen shrub — common and tough in Italy, but this specimen is sick).
17. *Cotoneaster salicifolius parkteppichi* (this is planted in the roof of the chapel, to hang down. It is not strictly evergreen, but has persistent leaves, abundant small white-pink flowers in spring, and red berries in autumn. Strongly attractive to bees and birds).
18. *Rhododendron* hybrid.
19. *Nandina domestica* (The Sacred Bamboo of Japan, but in fact a member of the family Berberidaceae, and not a bamboo. Graceful foliage, white flowers, red berries, autumn colour).
20. *Cotoneaster franchetti* (a tall shrub species, about 2m high: 20, 21 and 22 are close planted and the three are growing together).
21. *Pyracantha* sp.
22. *Eleagnus reflexa* (an evergreen shrub with rough foliage, rather yellow in colour; indigenous to the Mediterranean).
23. *Hedera helix sagittifolia* (common ivy).
24. *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* (*Ampelopsis veitchii*) (commonly known as Boston Ivy in the USA, and as Virginia Creeper elsewhere, although this latter species is Chinese. A vine that colours brilliantly in autumn).
25. *Taxus baccata* (common Yew — three bushes, clipped into informally rounded cushions).
26. *Rosa* hybrid (Rose, red flowers).
27. *Picea excelsa* 'inversa pendula' (weeping spruce, evergreen and weeping. This specimen is only about 2.5m in height, and appears not to have grown at all since 1978).
28. *Rosa* hybrid (Rose, pink flowers).
29. *Cotoneaster dammeri* (planted in the arc or bridge: small leaved and pendant).
30. *Abelia* hybrid (evergreen tall shrub with fine glossy leaves and white perfumed flowers, from China).
31. *Cotoneaster* cf. *franchetti* (a tall cotoneaster interplanted with *Abelia* and *Cotoneaster salicifolius*).
32. *Bambusa nana* (*Sasa pumila*) (a dwarf bamboo, safely contained in an island).
33. *Mora selvatica* (blackberry, a dangerous weed, growing into the bamboo).
34. *Nelumbium nucifera* (lotus, with leaves on stalks raised above the water, rose and white flowers).
35. *Abies alba* (White fir, although the species identification is not confident. This species grows to a substantial size, but the specimen was planted as a mature bonzai that had been subject to years of root pruning).
36. *Ficus carica* (common fig of the Mediterranean, outside the wall, but visible within).
37. *Cotoneaster horizontalis* (fine dark leaves in flat glossy sprays, profusely flowering, followed by red berries, very attractive to bees).
38. *Cotoneaster* cf. *franchetti* (a hybrid with fairly small leaves, trailing from above the door).

