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Scarpa's Castelvecchio: A Critical Rehabilitation

Tamara Coombs



❶ Scarpa demolished part of a barracks added by the occupying French during the nineteenth century.

The first time I visited Verona's fourteenth-century Castelvecchio, I was ignorant of the castle's history and both puzzled and delighted by Carlo Scarpa's 1958-64 rehabilitation of the art museum within it. I was delighted by the rare sensual and cognitive experience he had created, puzzled because there seemed to be more going on than the obvious juxtaposition of new against old. The new seemed to comment on the old, at times intentionally detracting from the beauty of the historic forms.

I later learned that my instincts were right: Scarpa was offering not only a rehabilitation of the castle but also an interpretation of its complicated history,¹ which I believe includes a critique of the Fascist myth of Italy's past. Scarpa's Castelvecchio has caused me to question the assumption (common in historic preservation) that architectural preservation should take precedence over consideration of the social or political history of a place.

Scarpa's work became compelling to me when I stumbled across a reference to the trial of Count Ciano, Benito Mussolini's son-in-law, which had been staged at Castelvecchio. Mussolini came to power in 1922 in an



❷ Cangrande against backdrop of the Commune wall.

Italy that had existed as an unified nation for only 50 years. He celebrated imperial Rome as a glorious model for future expansionism, invoked Dante to justify Fascist imperialism and touted the exceptional artistic contributions of the Italic peoples as cultural proof of their national superiority. Respected archaeologists and art and architectural historians provided evidence of the far-flung presence of Italic peoples, arguing that on the basis of art, architecture and artifacts, Malta, North Africa, Crete and Nice should be returned to Italy; the entire Mediter-



ranean, they implied, could be considered *Mare Nostrum* for Italians.²

Count Ciano was a member of the Grand Fascist Council, which caused Mussolini's fall in 1943. The successor Italian government became a "co-belligerent" with the Allies, who soon held all of southern Italy; Mussolini, meanwhile, was rescued by the Germans and installed as the leader of a newly formed puppet government,

the Fascist Republican Party. In November, 1943, the party held a congress in the large hall at Castelvecchio, the Sala Boggian. Two months later, Ciano and his co-defendants were tried for treason in the same hall. The Council members' actions had been wholly constitutional, the charges and the trial dishonorable. The trial ended with guilty verdicts for those tried in absentia; Ciano and four others were executed on January 11, 1944, four days after the trial began.



3 Napoleononic and Gothic windows. Also, exterior plaster has been stripped from wall to reveal underlying materials.

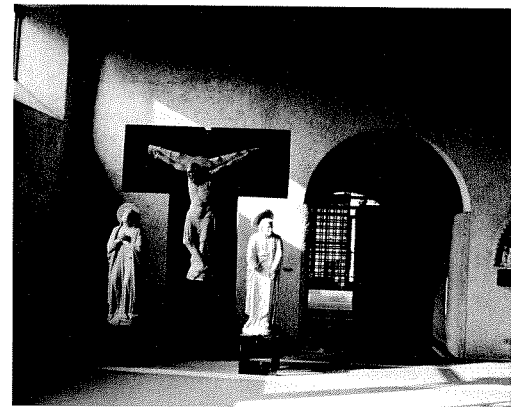
Castelvecchio before Scarpa

The Castelvecchio Scarpa found had already undergone four major periods of construction. The original construction, the wall of the Commune and Republic of Verona, was built in the twelfth century. In 1354, the della Scala family, the Lords of Verona, incorporated the Commune wall into their compound, Castelvecchio; the wall separated the compound's residential and military compound functions.

Napoleon's troops occupied the area in 1797. They left their utilitarian barracks along the north and east walls of the military compound, as well as a grand staircase built against a covered-



4 Scarpa backed the Gothic windows, added during a 1920s renovation, with modern windows.



Interior exhibition space.



Photos by Channell Graham.
Elevation courtesy Richard Murphy.

over Commune wall. The French also demolished part of medieval Castelvecchio, lopping the tops off all five of its handsome towers as an act of retribution for a 1799 citizens' uprising against French occupation.

Castelvecchio was rehabilitated in 1923-6 by museum director Antonio Avena and architect Ferdinando Foriati. Avena and Foriati's ideological intentions remain unclear, but the end result supports the Fascist myths of Italian cultural pre-eminence. The towers were rebuilt and the utilitarian barracks was reinvented. Many of its simple openings were replaced by Gothic door and window surrounds salvaged from a local *palazzo*. Rooms that the French had added for soldiers' cots were transformed into lavish seventeenth- and eighteenth-century-style rooms, complete with fake fireplaces that covered the gun embrasures and ceilings embellished with elaborate fake beams. Outside, a medieval fountain was installed in the facade, and the military courtyard was turned into a courtyard replete with fountains,

grass and narrow pathways. When Avena and Foriati were done, Castelvecchio's history appeared to consist of the della Scala castle as later modified by Gothic additions and Renaissance art, as if the subjugation by the French had never taken place.

Scarpa's Commentary

In 1957 Licisco Magagnato succeeded Avena as museum director and arranged the appointment of Scarpa as architect for another rehabilitation of Castelvecchio. The Commune Council funded the project but left all design decisions to Magagnato and Scarpa, who shared the same vision of the museum Castelvecchio could become.

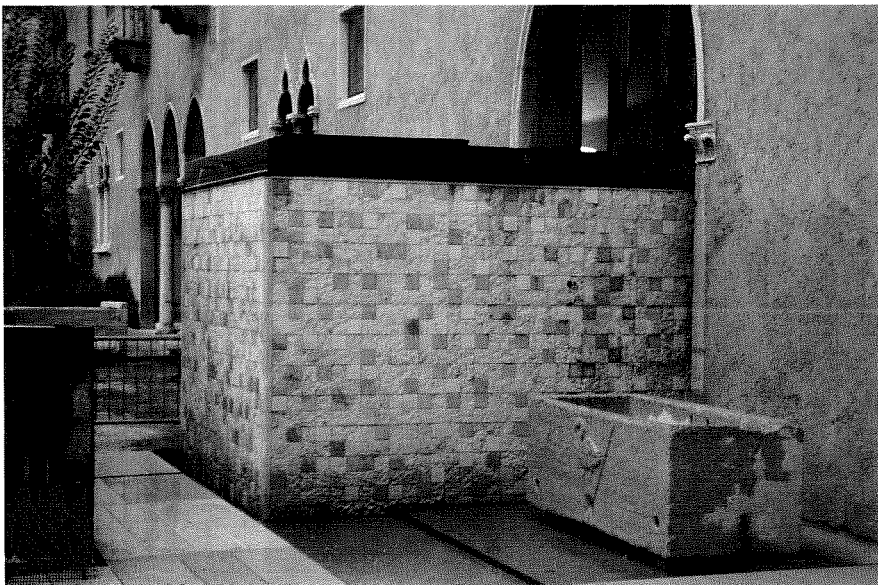
In Scarpa's hierarchy of architectural values, the Commune wall came first. To him, the wall was the foundation of what followed and a symbol of a time during which Verona, in contrast to the feudal countryside, offered its inhabitants a measure of individual freedom. (Those who were enfranchised in twelfth-century Verona

enjoyed individual freedoms that were denied under Fascism's societal controls, a point that surely was recognized by Scarpa.)

To reveal the full sweep of the Commune wall, Scarpa demolished the Napoleonic staircase and one bay of the barracks (perhaps also engaging in some ironic retribution of his own). The roof of the demolished bay continues but is peeled back to reveal layers that seem temporally reversed: Roman tile on top, then copper, then steel beams — the modern steel resting on the medieval Commune wall, upon which all else depends.

In the space created by the demolition, Scarpa both honors and critiques the Lords of Verona. Beneath the roof is a statue of Cangrande, the greatest of the della Scalas, the one to whom Dante dedicated the *Paradiso*. The statue is cantilevered one story above ground, as if held out at arm's length to be viewed from all sides. It is best seen from viewing platforms that bring visitors into intimate proximity with the sculpture; previously, the statue had been placed on a high pedestal, from which it could be viewed from a respectful distance.

Cangrande, seen against the backdrop of the revealed Commune wall, hangs suspended above the material evidence of the ignoble side of the della Scalas (which was uncovered by archaeologists during Scarpa's rehabilitation). A corner of the statue's base overhangs the cantilevered support, emphasizing the seeming precariousness of Cangrande's position. Castelvecchio itself was built to protect the increasingly tyrannical Lords of Verona from disgruntled Veronese, not foreign invaders. At the base of the Commune wall is a protective moat, dug for the della Scalas. Within the Commune wall is a doorway that was



5 Sacello exterior.

used by local citizens until it was covered over when the della Scalas built the approach to their private bridge. Indeed, the della Scalas' military courtyard was open to the river; its high walls and moats were barriers only against attack from the city.

Scarpa draws attention to historical fact — the presence of the Commune, of the French and even of those who left no architectural remnants on the site — and alerts the visitor to the fakery of the 1920s rehabilitation. He visually undermines the Gothic door and window surrounds by backing them with separate windows with discordantly modern mullions.

From one Gothic door surround, a modernistic cube the size of a large closet appears, as if extruded into the courtyard. Scarpa called this a *sacello*, or shrine; some Italian architects had designed shrines called *sacrarios* for fallen Fascists. This shrine holds artifacts from Longobardic tombs, evidence of the presence of Teutonic tribes around Verona in the long centuries between the Romans and the Renaissance. The Germanic tribes are now thought to have played an important role in the reinvigoration of the north and the development of a system of law that led to the communes. This view contrasts the Fascist lack of interest in the period, which was regarded as a dark age of Germanic barbarians.³

A visitor who steps between the two parallel hedges that traverse the courtyard enters an axis. The tall hedges focus the visitor's view upon the entrance to the Sala Boggian, where Ciano's trial was held. Scarpa's studies of the courtyard explored the use of the double hedge as the main approach to the museum entrance: The visitor who enters the axis today initially is unable to see anything on either side — experiencing the single-

minded forward movement, the lack of choices, the limited vision that are analogous to Fascism itself. But as the visitor walks forward, the ground slopes downward and the museum is gradually revealed, as is Scarpa's visual interpretation of Castelvecchio.

Within the museum there is an interior axis that echoes this exterior one, but it is broken by the incursion of art objects. Instead of authority, directionality and efficiency, Castelvecchio invites thoughtful observation and individual judgement. Each visitor is encouraged to pause and consider, to participate, as architect Richard Murphy commented, in an "... act of discovery ... the antithesis of the mute observer of the prewar era."⁴ Scarpa's critique is contained in the individual's experience of architecture, landscape and museum exhibits.

Castelvecchio Today

Today the pressing concerns at Castelvecchio are additional exhibit space, improved lighting, handicapped access and the problems of environmental pollution. The emphasis in the literature is on the formal beauty of Scarpa's design, not on its ideological content. Ironically, this appreciation of the formal qualities of Scarpa's Castelvecchio means that his rehabilitation will be treated more respectfully than he treated what preceded his work.

Scarpa viewed the past without nostalgia or exaggerated respect and left a mark on Castelvecchio that is more than the usual functional or stylistic imprint of rehabilitation. Castelvecchio is significant more for its history than for its historic architecture; in buildings of greater artistic value such interventions could be questioned.

Scarpa's commentary through design is a provocative and welcome

alternative to the usual practice of preserving the architectural form and fabric of a historic place without considering that place's social and political history. His rehabilitation of Castelvecchio shows the force of preservation work that incorporates a critique of the past, particularly a past in which that historic building played a role. And it suggests that projects that do not consider this broader historical context are conveying a message of their own.

But as our world again turns upside down; as issues of myth and history, fiction and fact are argued once more, it is well to consider this issue. As Milan Kundera writes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*,⁵ the struggle of the individual against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. It seems important that sometimes clues to that memory are visible in stone and concrete, awaiting the curious visitor willing to exchange myth for reality and to cast a critical eye on visual history.

Notes

1. Richard Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa and the Castelvecchio* (Boston: Butterworth Architecture, 1990), 4-9.
2. Henry A. Millon, "The Role of History of Architecture in Fascist Italy," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24 (March 1965): 53-59.
3. W. F. Butler, *The Lombard Communes: A History of the Republics of Northern Italy* (New York: Haskell House, 1967), 37.
4. Murphy, 60.
5. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 3.