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1 STRATEGIES OF DESIGN-DRIVEN RESEARCH



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RESEARCH**

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Selected fellow presentations

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The following studies are, like others I have previously undertaken, “historical”, due to the sphere they deal with and the references they utilise; they are not, however, the work of a “historian”. This does not mean that they summarise or synthesise work which may have been done by others; they are – in one wishes to regard them from a “pragmatic” point of view – the record of a long and groping exercise, one which has often had to be revised and begun anew. It was a philosophical exercise; its stakes were to find out the extent to which the effort of thinking about one’s own history can liberate the thought of what one thinks in silence, and to allow one to think in a different way.¹

With archaeological caution, the research aims to find in the practices, in the material vectors of the works or drawings, a form of tacit knowledge, a design attitude outside of a historiography, as restitution of an interpretative orientation, (in)actual and extensible methodology of analysis and design. Rereading our architectural history, starting from the years of post-WWII reconstruction, a common thread seems to interconnect a small group of European architects who work on a Barthesian form of re-writing on the existing, a reading of the artifact (physically present or only ideal) as a critical text or, better, a proper construction paradigm.²

Lessons of balance, the works of masters such as Carlo Scarpa, Dimitris Pikionis, Sigurd Lewerentz or Sverre Fehn seem to move from the fragment, from a work on the detail where each singularity participates in the organisation of the organism-architecture.

The projects of those authors of the other modernity seem to work seamlessly between the interior and exterior, by starting from the small scale and then rediscovering an idea of unity – perhaps more than in the overall composition of the structures – precisely in the design process or in a particular attitude, revealing a possible form of tacit knowledge in the “veiled messages” mostly identifiable in their drawings rather than in writings or declarations.

In fact, we can describe them as a generation of silent masters, who rarely published treatises and

writings about their project methodology, or created “schools”, rather leaving us works and drawings as materials from which we can draw a reflection on their poetics. Even the European architectural culture, which on the one hand has exalted the great quality of the works, has often avoided dealing with a wider reflection, relegating their works and identities to “historiographic cabinets” that have accentuated their isolation, thus attributing the success of their works to a particular talent or a form of genius that was impossible to imitate.

An in-depth analysis of their working method shows instead of a disciplined design coherence where, even if the work is set in motion by personal drives, a particular process of research of the origin seems to free them initially from an idea of form, subsequently found among things through a patient research.

That genius is (also) discipline can be demonstrated by investigating the work on the physical matter operated by Carlo Scarpa, architect who in Italy paradigmatically inaugurates a design practice that has as its principle a careful re-reading and re-writing on the existing, a “conscious manipulation that continuously transforms”.³[FIG. 01]

The ongoing indexing process of the huge archive of preserved drawings, offers us the opportunity for a study and a reinterpretation, precisely through the drawing,⁴ of some of his paradigmatic works, allowing us to find also in detail, in its execution, the research for a *point of onset*.

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Ibid.
The inventory work is currently being carried out by the ‘MAXXI Architecture Archives Center’ (Rome, IT) which manages the Carlo Scarpa archive acquired in 2001, by the ‘Archivio Carlo Scarpa-Museo di Castelvecchio’ (Verona, IT) and the ‘MAK – Museum of Applied Arts’ (Vienna, A).



FIGURE 1.

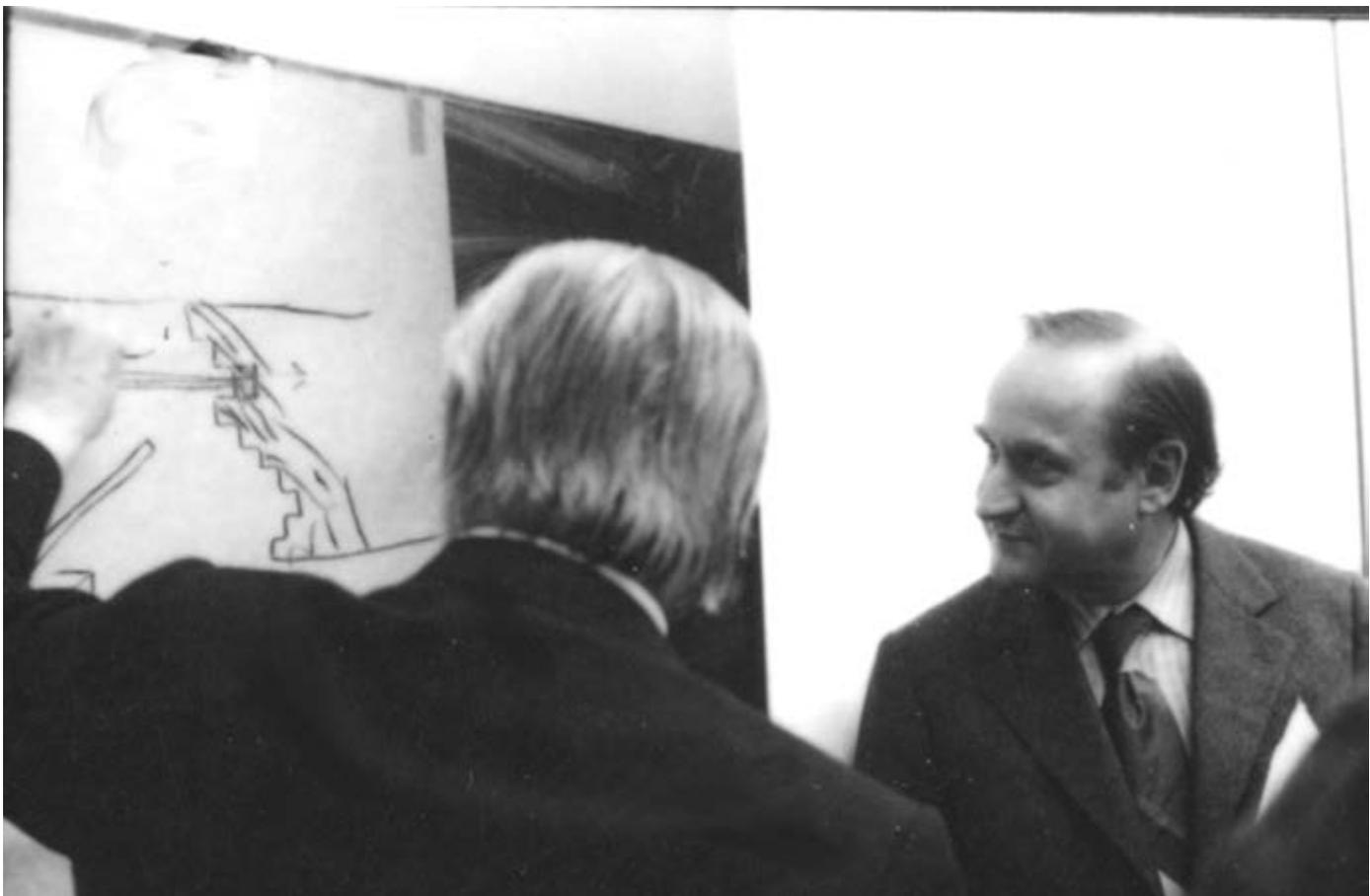
The work that can be considered the author's testament is certainly the Brion Cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole (1969-78). Thanks to the full design maturity, the presence of an enlightened client and a considerable financial availability, the exceptional sequence of artefacts and built spaces seem to be suspended between several times, born from a stratification of subsequent interventions and connected by an uninterrupted narrative.

The investigation of the initial ideographies, the sketches and the drawings that precede a finished draft, can possibly reveal an extensible methodology.

MOVING FROM THE FRAGMENT:
THE EXCAVATION

For Scarpa, to each phase of the design process corresponded a drawing method, a scale and a technique. For the initial studies the drawings were made in charcoal on heavy paper prepared according to the Beaux-Arts technique of the *stretcher*, in order to allow a quick and continuous modification of the same design while keeping a trace of the previous ones.

The working method is first and foremost a selective practice that seems aimed at isolating: to the interrogation of matter corresponds a process of extraction of the detail, of the “fragment” (material or immaterial) that defines a first separation, a boundary.^[FIG. 2]



The intent seems to research what Goldschmidt would define as “form-element”, a paradoxical structure, both sensitive and mental, which somehow contains the *éidos*, and it is produced through a “lay alongside”, a “join together” and, above all, a “exhibit” and an “expose”.⁵

The author seems to be tracing an excavation perimeter in preparation for his investigation campaign, as an archaeologist delimits the area by initially defining a hypothesis of the artefacts to be revealed. Drawing is, in fact, always the projection of a program of uses to be developed as construction but, at the same time, a measure of one’s own obsessions, a primordial act.⁶ Intended in its broadest sense as an instrument of knowledge, it forces to question the structure of appearances, placing the author in direct comparison with the “vagueness” of observation. Thus, even the simple operations of measurement and annotation, of redesigning a terrain, can be productive processes.

Starting from a repertoire of simple geometric shapes (the square, the circle, the rectangle) he seems to build a topography of interconnected signs, to be investigated later and of which he always keeps track during the process. From its venetianity he “derives a perverse dialectic between celebration of form and the scattering of its parts, between the will to represent and the evanescence of the representation of its parts”.⁷ In a certain way, he does not take pieces from Venice but totally reconstructs his idea of the city, of rela-

5 V. Goldschmidt, *Le paradigme dans la dialectique platonicienne*, Paris, Vrin, 1985: 53.

6 As in 1945 A. Giacometti wonderfully describes “In every work of art the subject is primordial, whether the artist knows it or not. The measure of the formal qualities is only a sign of the measure of the artist’s obsession with his subject; the form is always in proportion to the obsession”, quoted in: J. Shatzky, M. Taub (eds). *Contemporary Jewish-American Dramatists and Poets: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, Westport (CT), Greenwood, 1999: 302.

7 M. Tafuri, ‘Cultura e Fantasia di Carlo Scarpa’, *Paese Sera*, December 3, 1978.

tionships between spaces, paths and atmospheres. In a sense it can be seen as landscape-recall from memory that, more than to a form of contextualism, can be assimilated to what Michael Heizer does in his *City* project, an attempt to synthesise its *lume materiale*, ancient monuments and industrial technology.^[FIG. 3 + FIG. 4]

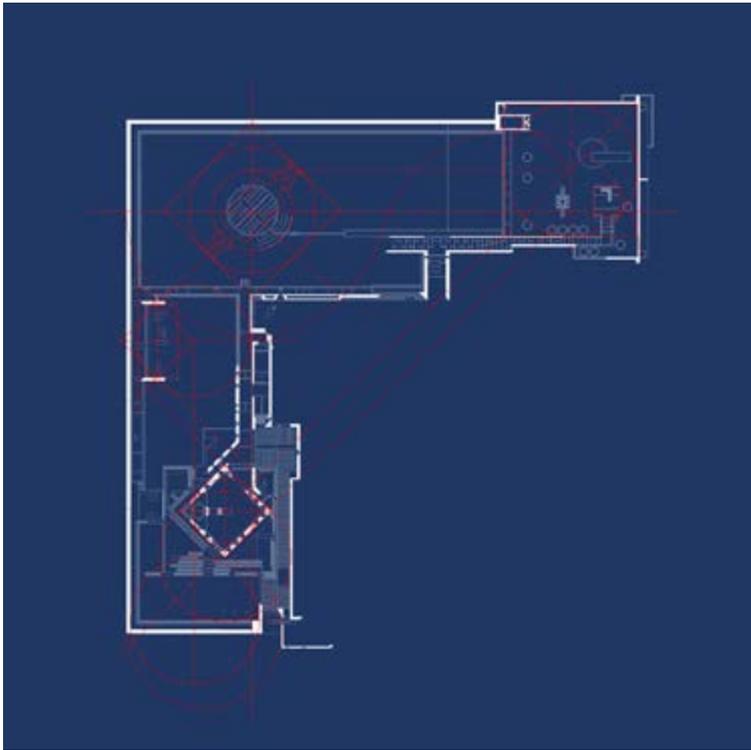


FIGURE 3.

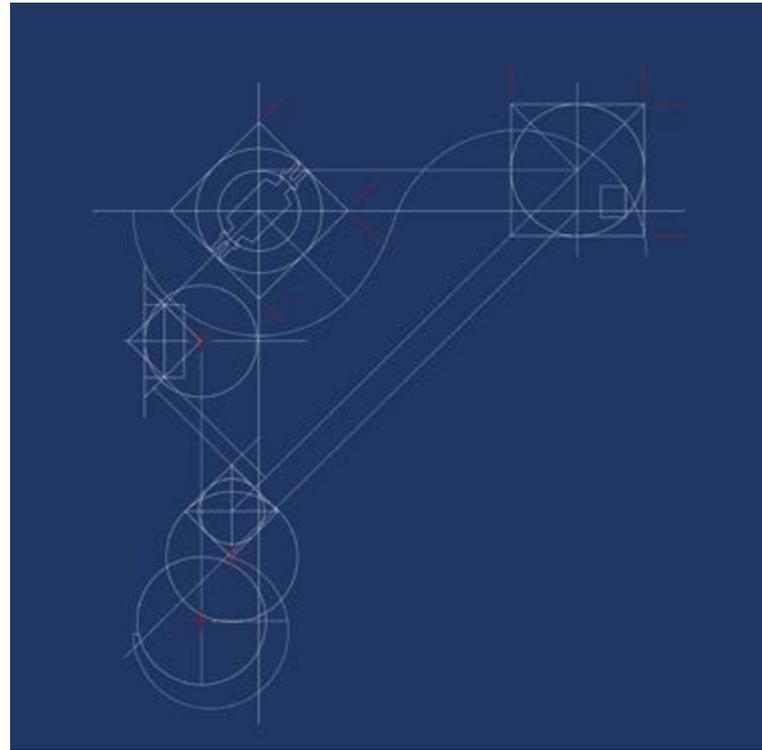


FIGURE 4.

The countless tests, modifications and stratifications of drawings thus outline an aphoristic and systemic inclination, which is not in itself conclusive. That “unruly magician” that is involuntary memory⁸ has yet to elaborate the experience precisely through the trace.

As Tafuri already pointed out in his essays about Scarpa, it would indeed be wrong to speak of a fragmented architecture, with a nostalgic charac-

ter, as this tendency to isolate and the regard for the artefact does not exclude his “playful game” with the same. It seems to be taking place, instead, through an elaborate use of geometry as a remeasuring element, a “poetic made of “figures” [...] as to indicate the traits of possible happiness even in a “time of crisis””.⁹

The artist’s initial *segnatura*, the use of the famous 5.5 x 5.5 cm module, is in this sense a form of pre-understanding of the material, not an ideal abstract. The same, rooted on a personal and specific idea of community, derives from this its system of proportions, to then build up the whole. Techné is *construction* on and not *creation of*, it is not the *art of memory* but *memory of art*.

The joint as onset point of form: the exposure
We can therefore define as an archaeological attitude, to say it with Agamben, that practice that deals not so much with a generic “origin” of things as with their *point of onset*, in the grounds of technics, in which the architect experiences history deconstructing its paradigms.¹⁰ What seems to be of interest to the architect in the subsequent design phases is precisely the interstitial, the link between the various elements arranged on the table. In fact, we can see in the joint a sort of “primary particle” of architecture and its construction process.

Making poetry of the jointing also requires discipline. The increase in the hardness of the pencil corresponds to the use of different drawing techniques; on Scarpa’s *cartoni*¹¹ the permanence of the

9 M. Tafuri, ‘Il frammento, la “figura”, il gioco. Carlo Scarpa e la cultura architettonica italiana’, in F. Dal Co, G. Mazzariol (eds). *Carlo Scarpa: 1906-1978*, Milano, Electa, 1989: 79; 86.
10 Cf. G. Agamben, *Signatura rerum: Sul metodo*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2008.
11 The term refers to the way Carlo Scarpa used to call his cardboard flats.

different lines, erasures and overlaps highlights the history of the project. The choice of the orientation of the drawing is also fundamental as it will be the same maintained during the construction phases.

The drawings seem to be permeated by vector intentions: always aimed at resolving the details, the joints, the moldings, the architect does not work scaling down from a general drawing but, as Zevi perfectly describes “he would reverse the process, attacking with ferocious inventiveness and extraordinary tension of energy each and every detail, in order to make them signifying, in the certainty that from their dialogue and interlacement it would spontaneously spring the message of the whole”.¹²

[FIG. 5 + FIG. 6]

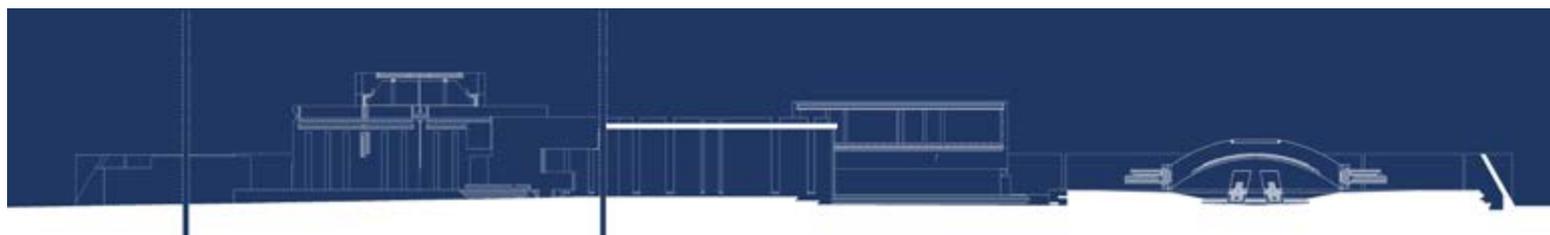


FIGURE 5.



FIGURE 6.

It is in this process of (re)signification of detail that formal (re)emergence is played: detail becomes the generator of architecture as “*construction* and *construing* of architecture are both in the detail. Elusive in a traditional dimensional definition, the architectural detail can be defined as the union of construction, the result of *logos* of *teckné*, with construing, the result of the *teckné* of *logos*. The *teckné* of the *logos* becomes the manner of production of the detailed design and *logos* of the *teckné*, which is the expression of the Venetian craftsmanship, becomes the dialectical counterpart in the physical generation of the details”.¹³

The method used for managing of such a complexity perhaps resembles that of the drawings of small objects (certainly mastered by Scarpa given his experience in botteghe and ateliers in the youth years), the use of overturned sections, of different colors, layers of tracing paper, allows him total control – and codification – of the complex spatial dynamics that gradually forms, showing on paper not only what is visible but also what is behind the observer or the represented structure.¹⁴

We can extract from these tomographies not only a way of representing but a proper way of conceiving the project – therefore the space – in which unity will have once again to be sought in the binder and not in the parts, and its forming in their polarization.

13 M. Frascari, 'The tell-the-tale detail', in P. Behrens, A. Fisher (eds). *VIA 7: The Building of Architecture*, 1984: 23-37.

14 G. Zambonini, 'Process and Theme in the Work of Carlo Scarpa', *Perspecta*, 20, 1983: 24.

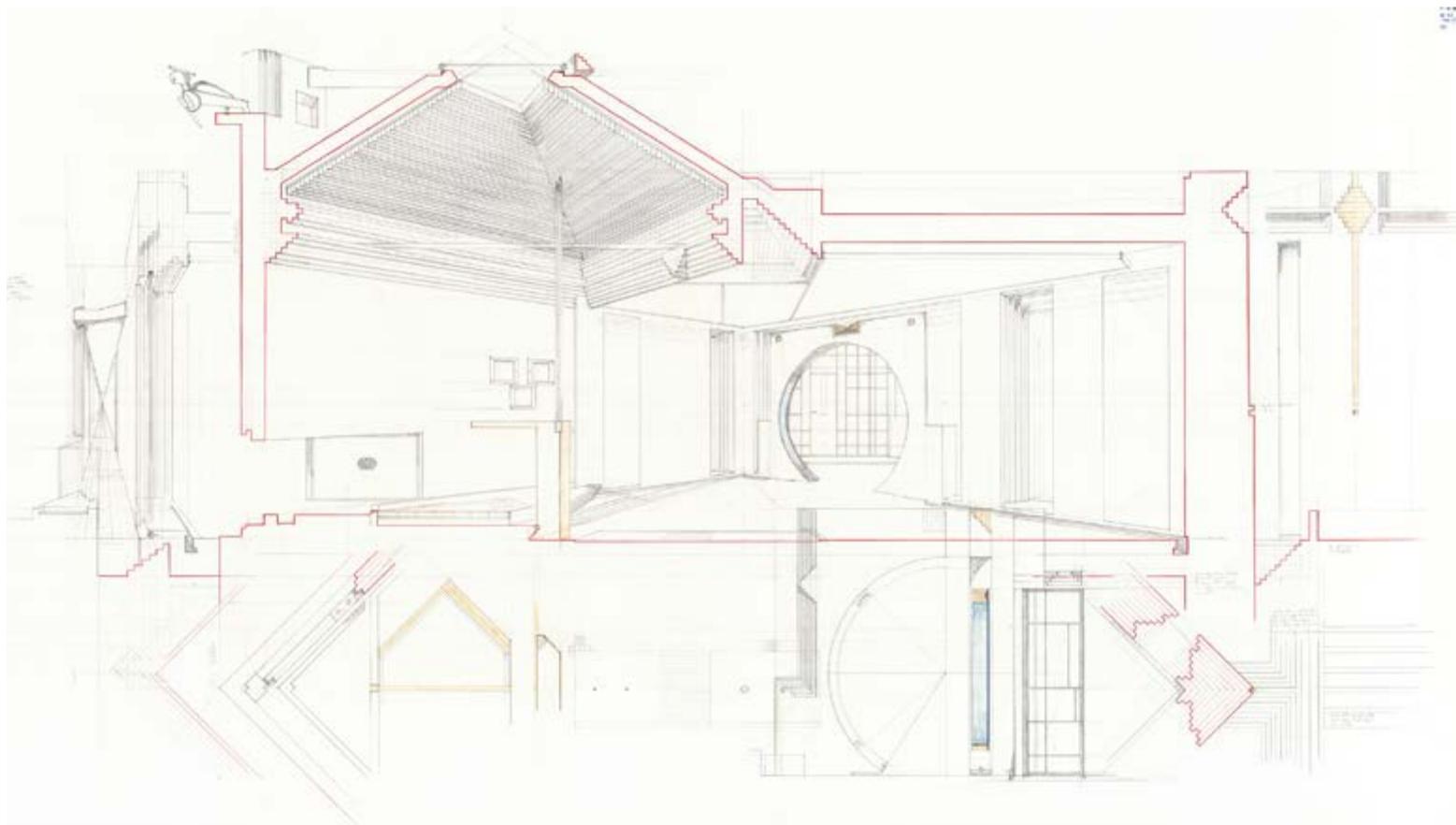


FIGURE 7.

This form of exposition, observed in its various depths, takes on narrative features precisely where the gesture, measured, becomes a sign, therefore meaning.

The drawings seem to be permeated with movement: in the technical plans or sections, pervaded by an incredible number of stratified details, construction notes and human figures scrutinize the process, as a dance of allusions and references in which “thought and design coincide, sensations and figures overlaps”.¹⁵ There is no clear final destination but a path made of attempts and uncertainties, an experimentalism where a rationalist and a pictorial-expressionist component seem to

alternate. The joint becomes narrative path, making those Focillonian families of spirits close in harmonious and long-lasting relationship.

We can find in the design process a vector intention that articulates the whole in function of a moving spectator, guided through the paths – albeit with ample freedom of movement – to the contemplation of an open space inserted in the Venetian countryside.¹⁶ The restitution of a path through the context generates experience: among image and reality, it seems to dissolve the relationship between revealing what exists and transcribing a program through the project of use, an action that sets the experience in motion through the various architectural devices by activating original narrative configurations.

Thus, the forms that emerge from the basin of water in which the Chapel is inserted seem to represent the foundations of ancient buildings in dialogue with the reflection of the built, in anachronistic continuity. Precisely through this connection, Piranesian rummaging through the ruins, that *other City*¹⁷ is slowly being built, consisting of stratifications, pieces, paths and references in which the architect has chosen to be buried. The *arché* towards which this archaeology regresses cannot be located chronologically but, precisely through this phase shift – a peculiar relationship with Time – the (personal) stories can finally enter into dialogue with History, thus managing to transform it. For the dweller, the recognition of a personal (and

16 V. Zanchettin, 'Tomba Brion, cimitero di San Vito d'Altivole (Treviso), 1970-78' in G. Beltramini, K.W. Forster, P. Marini (eds). *Carlo Scarpa. Mostre e Musei 1944-1976, Case e paesaggi 1972-1978*, Milano, Electa, 2000: 362.

17 Cf. P. Noever, *The other city / Die Andere Stadt. Carlo Scarpa: The architect working method as shown by the Brion Cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole*, Berlin, Ernst & Sohn, 1989.

collective) spatio-temporal identity in order seems possible: it is the art of exhibiting, of recognizing through the timelessness of what is offered to the eye. [FIG. 8]



The possibility of reading the project, of the space as a place of the gesture, allows its transmission and testimony, precisely starting from its material and its relationship with time, through its overall narration. A succession of figures populates the architect's drawings as if they want to scrutinize the process, try to understand how each part connects to the others by interrogating it in different ways, wanting to verify its premises. In fact, the faces, the figures are “metonymically embodied”¹⁸ in the artifacts: as ghosts they wander within the space using it in a poetic way, in a synchronic exchange in which man measures space, man himself coincides with the idea of space.

The lesson derived from Scarpa's work, from the observation and rereading of his drawing process, is that of a slow way of working, made of overlaps, in which the details lead to proximity and, in fact, are a way to *take care* of its users.¹⁹ [FIG. 9]

In the same way they offer the starting point for a possible definition of a work methodology, which investigates the chronosyntheticity of his designs by comparing it with a series of works by contemporary masters and architects, in order to grasp the connections and, possibly, formulate a systematized work methodology proposal. The same can result in an open, inclusive process that can be used regardless of formal and stylistic choices, in its whole or in parts. A guideline therefore for that “imaginative process of thinking”²⁰ that can make it

18 M. Frascari, 'A New Corporeality of Architecture', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 40-2, 1987: 23.

19 A. de Curtis, E. Miglietta, 'Muovendo dall'interno. Il lavoro dell'architettura: contenendo, esporre', in *Costruire l'abitare contemporaneo. Nuovi temi e metodi del progetto contemporaneo*, in G. Cafiero, N. Flora, P. Giardiello, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2020: 296.

20 J. Van Den Berghe, 'The Imaginative Process of Thinking', in T. Taura, Y. Nagai (eds), *DS 66-2: Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Design Creativity (ICDC 2010)*, 2010: 5.



FIGURE 9.

became a responsible practice, disciplinary foundation that is established right from the tools of the practice to be investigated, a test field for decisions made beyond the single project.

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