



Giuseppe Rosin

# King of the castle

It took 17 years for Carlo Scarpa to convert a castle in Verona into an art museum. The great Italian designer's ideas about **museums in historic buildings** continue to be felt, says *Calum Storie*

## MUSEO DI CASTELVECCHIO

It is almost impossible to imagine the Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona emerging from the current climate of museum design. There was no competition to appoint the designer, and the project took more than 17 years and went through continuous development. Looking back from an era in which star architects are parachuted in to produce signature buildings, the whole design process, stretching from 1956 to 1973, was overseen by a single man: Carlo Scarpa. Furthermore, it is a museum with, effectively, a finite collection. So, with all these elements at odds with the contemporary museum scene, why should we look back on it now and why should we

consider it important? It is a museum that does not even have a cafe.

Some background: Castelvecchio is seen as the most important work of the Italian designer Carlo Scarpa. He had made his name first as a glass designer and then in creating exhibitions. In 1953 he was commissioned to plan the Galleria Nazionale in Palermo despite having no formal architectural education. This project involved the

conversion of the small Palazzo Abatellis in the narrow streets of the Sicilian capital, and it informed all of his subsequent work in historic buildings.

As a designer of new buildings he was enthralled by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, but a different sensibility came into play when he worked with existing, 'found' structures. Broadly speaking, Scarpa engaged with built history by at once respecting it and

confronting it. In Palermo, Scarpa was able to undertake a small-scale experiment in a language of architecture that made narrative legible, though by no means straightforward, and played with the viewer's expectations of display.

In 1956 Licisco Magagnato, the director of the Castelvecchio, approached Scarpa to design an exhibition for the museum and to

Above: sculptures carefully placed within the grand enfilade of galleries are typical of Scarpa's approach to display

Opposite page: the original castle had been altered many times and was damaged during the second world war



Václav Seidý

plan repairs of the war-damaged building. As this was a castle, it was not the first time it had suffered in conflict. The medieval core of the building had been altered in many ways: parts had been destroyed, wings had been added, staircases inserted. In the 1920s the interiors had been 'gothicised' to make what was thought to be suitable rooms for the display of artefacts. The facade of the main building had been treated in a similar way, with Venetian gothic elements being dropped into the otherwise plain walls.

The castle complex straddles the city walls and perches on the edge of a river, at once both fortified and vulnerable. Scarpa's job developed into a project that would make sense of this meandering series of spaces and would house the city's collection of art spanning ten centuries. The process began by clearing a series of the 1920s rooms in the main building for the temporary exhibition. As part of this work he undertook an archaeological exploration of the spaces' possibilities, which ultimately led to a strategy for the whole museum.

This manifested itself in various ways. By making a hole in the floor of one room, exposing a section of the moat and covering it in glass, Scarpa instituted something of a museological tradition by using the space under the building to look back in time. This view serves to remind the visitors of the ambiguous role of the museum as both container and object.

In the grand enfilade of the first rooms Scarpa used the accident of the temporary position of a threshold slab to make new doorways. One day, seeing one of these stones with its unfinished underside exposed and resting vertically within the doorway's reveal, he decided to make use of this inversion as a marker in each opening. It was as if he were addressing his own curiosity about the space under the stone while simultaneously subverting the expectations of the architecture.

Elsewhere his interventions are a more straightforward reaction to the



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Above: the Sacello, a new space near the entrance, is a microcosm of the museum's combination of new and old

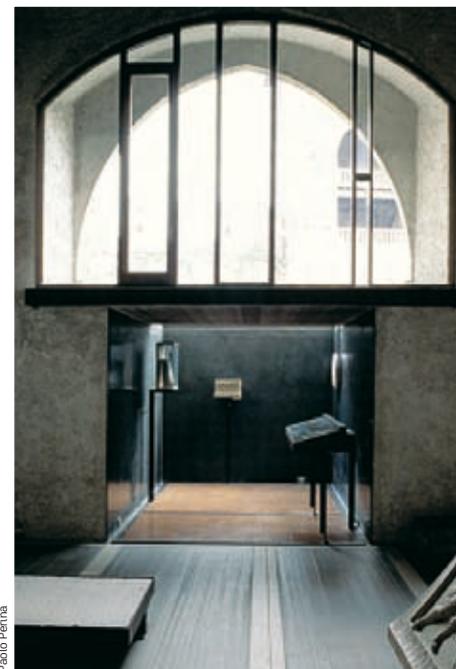
Opposite page above: a view of the Sacello from the inside

Opposite page below: taking paintings off walls to display them on freestanding easels was a radical move in the 1950s

## 'The visitors travel through the first part of the museum as if on a river'

collision of the historic and the modern. To make a small room near the museum's entrance, he pushed a box out beyond the existing castle walls into the courtyard. This box, while helping to define the entrance, also used a wall finish of a grid of small textured stones to assert its difference from the rest of the structure. The resulting room, called the Sacello, is a statement of intent for Scarpa, a microcosm of the whole museum.

Here he sets out the language of display to be employed elsewhere in the building: clearly delineated supports for museum objects set against highly polished plaster surfaces and the rough vestigial structure of the original building. The new floor floats over the exposed foundations and is separated from the walls, making a kind of gutter running around the edge of the space. This device is continued throughout the ground floor. The visitors travel through this first part of the museum as if on a river. It makes for an easy 'way in' to the collection and it is as if the building is saying: 'let yourself be taken on a journey.' Of course, what this does



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not reveal is the delirium of the encounters to come. As well as the calm shallows along the journey, there are precarious bridges and rapids.

The ground floor rooms of the museum are devoted to sculpture, and here Scarpa experiments with various techniques of displaying the work.

Many of the pieces are shown on flat polished slabs that appear as rafts; others sit on square stone columns rising above the floor's striated surface. A crucified Christ is shown, not on a cross but on an overscaled 'T'. On the top edge of this support mechanism there is a notch where the upper

vertical of a cross should be attached, its absence reinforced by this discreet reminder of form. On each side of this figure, two saints stand on their own small, precarious-looking plinths. Instead of making solid blocks for these figures, Scarpa suggests an element of uncertainty by making framed metal supports that appear to split in the middle. In fact, they are composed in an elaborate geometry that conceals, rather than exposes, their own structural integrity.

From this first set of rooms the route traces a jagged path over an excavated moat, around corners, up staircases and into linked buildings through the base of a tower. At each step, Scarpa brings new architectural effects and techniques of display to bear. These vary from intriguing to unsettling. The lintels of doorways into painting galleries are cut to make a narrow space just above head height. This goes against the grain of structural logic but it emphasises the passage from one room to another by mimicking the human form in negative.

Some paintings sit over the corners of rooms instead of occupying the 'neutral' space of the wall. The most dramatic installation of paintings is in a room where the faces of the pictures, mounted on easels, are turned away from the doorway. This is justified by positioning the paintings so that they catch sidelight from existing windows, but it also serves to draw the viewer into a particular relationship with the paintings. The viewer here is asked to travel a little further to complete the experience of looking.

There is a degree of manipulation in the way that Scarpa employs these tricks but their overall effect is to avoid a closed narrative. The journey that is suggested for the viewer by Scarpa opens up the possibilities of the castle and its objects. Scarpa utilises a level of control and attention to detail common to many architects but the cumulative effect of this is not the Zen-like interiors of minimalism. In some ways Scarpa's obsessions actually

Main picture: the statue of Cangrande on his horse sits on a high plinth at a complicated junction of bridges, and is a focal point for the Castelvecchio

Inset: overlooking the Sacello and museum entrance

undermine his desire for control. The scenarios that he creates are ambiguous and multi-faceted.

Scarpa would exploit these ideas in other projects that came about during the course of his work on the Castelvecchio. At around the same time, he was commissioned to extend the galleries housing Antonio Canova's working plaster models at the Gipsoteca Canoviana in Possagno. The resulting building is squeezed into a small, wedged site that largely defines the plan form of the architecture. This was Scarpa's only 'new build' museum, and it is interesting to see how ideas begun in Palermo and developed simultaneously in Verona are used in this space. There is the same sense of separation between wall and floor, the same unorthodox placing of objects with portrait heads high up on the walls, and the same idea of the journey revealed slowly for the visitor.

Between 1961 and 1963 he designed and built the Querini-Stampalia Foundation in his home city, Venice.

#### CARLO SCARPA: SELECTED PROJECTS

**Galleria Nazionale di Sicilia** in the Palazzo Abatellis, 1953

**Gipsoteca Canoviana** (Extension), Possagno, Treviso, 1955-1957

**Castelvecchio** (Renovation and rearrangement), Verona, 1956-1973

**Querini-Stampalia Foundation** (Renovation), Venice, 1961

**Florentine Frescoes**, temporary exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, 1969

**Brion Family Tomb**, San Vitale d'Altivole, Treviso, 1969-1978

**Giorgio Morandi**, temporary exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, 1970

**Aspects of Italian Sculpture**, Venice Biennale, 1972

**Carlo Scarpa** temporary exhibition in London, Vicenza and Paris, 1974-1975.



Luciana Mietto



Paolo Perina

## 'Visitors are given numerous glimpses and partial views from unexpected vantage points before reaching the statue face-to-face'

This was put together almost like a piece of furniture apparently standing free of the host structure. The minutely-detailed moving parts, such as intricate marble- and brass-covered doors and the jewel-like quality of finishes emphasised the differences between the existing building and the new elements. Here the floor floating free of the walls has a practical motivation, as the space is vulnerable to flooding.

In Verona the positioning of the equestrian statue of the medieval hero Cangrande exemplifies Scarpa's approach and intention, and it sits at the heart of the castle. The statue stands on a tall plinth at the culmination of an elaborate series of paths and bridges. Each view of the statue – an iconic object for the city of Verona – heightens the expectation of the viewer's final encounter with it. Visitors are given numerous glimpses and partial views from unexpected vantage points before reaching the statue face-to-face. This last encounter is a delight as it is only at this point that it is clear that both the armoured rider and his horse are graced with large smiles. But what is most striking about the mise-en-scène of this work is that it is sited at the junction of buildings in a space opened up between the courtyard and the river. There is no conventional architectural resolution to this space; bridges and staircases seem to disintegrate, and the roof has the look of something still under construction. The statue is, as it were, suspended in a gap created by the passage of time as elements of the building fly apart.

Looking beyond the built work, the drawings made by Scarpa hold an unusual importance. Few of his drawings show finished designs, and they were not intended for

presentation. Instead they show his process of thinking through the design with overlays and corrections layered on the paper. In this they reflect the work itself – forever unfinished, a palimpsest of overwritten texts.

**Many architects working in museums** see Scarpa as an important influence. I have worked in at least one exhibition space where the malign influence of Scarpa can be felt – not every space benefits from expensive and inflexible finishes. But does this mean that he is merely an architect's architect? This would be to seriously undervalue Scarpa's work.

The Castelvecchio is a building that questions the viewer on so many levels that to marginalise it as worthy only of architectural tourism would be a loss for everyone who is interested in museums. Scarpa's work challenges how we read history, how we use the 'theatre' of display and even how we look. Simultaneously, it upsets the view of the museum as product. The museum wears process on its sleeve and makes a virtue of the unfinished, the fractured and the unanswered question. This museum is like an itinerary for one person's journey through a city. The route might be planned, but what the visitor encounters along the way is impossible to predict. This makes the Castelvecchio one of the most important museums of the 20th century. And it is this sense of discovery that provides lessons for museums in the 21st. **MP**

**Calum Storie** is an exhibition designer and author of *The Delirious Museum: A Journey From the Louvre to Las Vegas* (I.B. Tauris, 2006)