Scarpa’s Castelvecchio: A Critical Rehabilitation

Tanara Coombs

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 raw 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 distracting 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, 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 Giano, Benito Mussolini’s son-in-law, which had been staged at Castelvecchio. Mussolini came to power in 1922 in an 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 Italian 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 Mediterran-
ranean, they implied, could be considered *Mare Nostrum* for Italians.\(^3\)

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 Boglione. Two months later, Ciano and his co-defendants were tried for treason in the same hall. The Council members’ actions had been wholly unconstitutional, 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.

**Castelvecchio before Scarpa**

The Castelvecchio Scarps 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 1314, 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-
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 1921-6 by museum director Antonio Avena and architect Ferdinando Foristi. Avena and Foristi’s ideological intentions remain unclear, but the end result supports the Fascist myths of Italian cultural renaissance. 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 palace. 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 Foriata 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 Lissino 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. In 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 Fascist societal controls, a point that 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 peeked back to reveal layers that seem temporally reversed. Roman tile on top, Gross Coppie, glass 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 honours and critiques the Lords of Verona. Beneath the roof is a statue of Can Grande, the greatest of the della Scala, the one to whom Dante dedicated the Paradiso. The statue is castleveld on one story above ground, as if held out at arm’s length to be viewed from all sides. It is best seen from the 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. Can Grande, seen against the backdrop of the revealed Commune wall, hangs suspended above the material evidence of the ignoble side of the della Scala (which was uncovered by archaeologists during Scarpa’s rehabilitation). A corner of the statue’s base overhangs the castleveld support, emphasizing the seeming precariousness of Can Grande’s position.

Castelvecchia 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 Scala. Within the Commune wall is a doorway that was
used by local citizens until it was cov-
ered over when the della Scala built
the approach to their private bridge.
Indeed, the della Scala’s 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 fals-
crty of the 1920s rehabilitation. The
visually undermines the Gothic door
and window surrounds by backing
them with separate windows with dis-
cordantly 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 salvato,
or shrines; some Italian architects had
designed shrines called sacrario for
fallen Fascists. Thin shrines hold arti-
facts from Longobardic tombs, evi-
dence of the presence of Teutonic
tribes around Verona in the long cen-
turies between the Romans and the
Renaissance. The Germanic tribes are
now thought to have played an impor-
tant role in the reidentification of the
north and the development of a system
of law that led to the communes. This
view contrasts the Fascist lack of inter-
est in the period, which was regarded
as a dark age of Germanic barbarians.
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 stud-
ies 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 Fascisti 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, Castel-
vecchio treats 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.” Scarpa’s
critique is contained in the individual’s
experience of architecture, landscape
and museum exhibits.

Castelvecchio Today

Today the pressing concerns at Castel-
vecchio are additional exhibit space,
improved lighting, handicapped access
and the problem of environmental
pollution. The emphasis in the litera-
ture is on the formal beauty of Scarpa’s
design, not on its ideological content.
Interestingly, this appreciation of the
formal qualities of Scarpa’s Castelvecchio
means that his rehabilitation will be
trusted more respectfully than he
worked what preceded his work.
Scarps viewed the past without nos-
talgia or exaggerated respect and left a
mark on Castelvecchio that is more
than the usual functional or stylistic
imprint of rehabilitation. Castelvec-
chio 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 con-
sidering that place’s social and political
history. His rehabilitation of Castel-
vecchio shows the force of preserva-
tion 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, the struggle
of the individual against power is the
struggle of memory against forgetting.
It seems important that sometimes
close to that memory are visible in
stone and concrete, awaiting the curi-
ous 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
Architects, 1990), 4-9.
2. Henry A. Millon, “The Role
of History of Architecture in
Fascist Italy,” Journal of the
Society of Architectural Historians
3. W. E. Barks, The Lombard
Commune: A History of the
Republic of Northern Italy (New
4. Murphy, 60.
5. Milan Kundera, The Book of
Laughter and Forgetting (New

Places 8:1