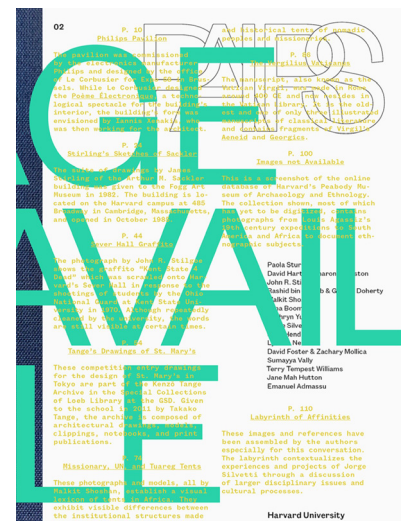
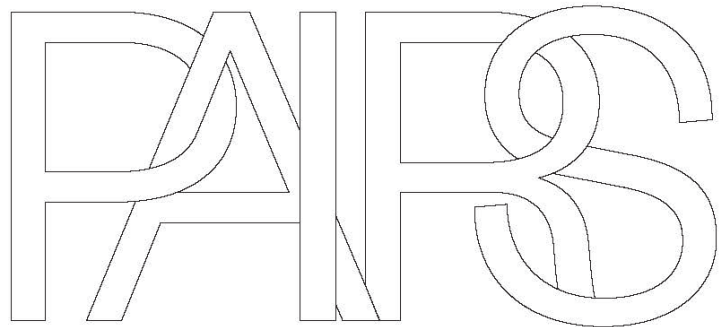


“SKETCHES FOR A SCARPA SHOW”
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Paola Sturla
David Hartt & Sharon Johnston
John R. Stilgoe
Rashid bin Shabib & Gareth Doherty
Malkit Shoshan
Irma Boom
Kathryn Yusoff
Jorge Silvetti
Sara Hendren
Lyndon Neri
David Foster & Zachary Mollica
Sumayya Vally
Terry Tempest Williams
Jane Mah Hutton
Emanuel Admassu

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Sketches for a Scarpa Show

On Placing Ourselves in the Field

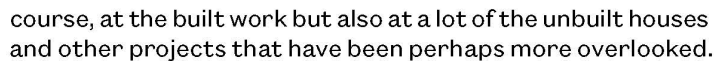
NICOLÁS DELGADO ÁLCEGA Let's start by talking about the work you are doing with MAXXI in Rome. From the material you sent over, I got the sense you were using the Carlo Scarpa archive at the museum to develop a new reading of his work. Is the intent to curate a selection of drawings for a show based on your perspective?

LYNDON NERI We are working on the fourth in a series of exhibitions that happen every year at MAXXI where a designer is invited to look into the archive of the museum. The primary goal is for the designers to glean from it and present what inspires them to the public.

We started by making it very clear that we wanted to focus on the more architectural material, since we are architects. We quickly narrowed it down to two architects in MAXXI's archive: Aldo Rossi and Carlo Scarpa. Although Scarpa and Rossi have been widely exhibited—even in just the last decade—we thought there was something original that we could bring to the table through this show. Thankfully the archive was all digitized, since we were not able to travel to it due to COVID-19 restrictions. It wasn't the same as seeing and touching it physically, but it allowed us to quickly hone in on Scarpa.

Above all, we felt we should look for new revelations in the archive. Our practice deals a lot with Rossi's notion of the urban artifact: the idea that the act of building is part of the way a city gives continuity to its collective memory. That is important to us, especially in light of what's been happening here in Shanghai in the last 20 years. But the Rossi archive was focused on different facets of the earlier work.

Soon after looking through everything, we started to hone in on Scarpa's domestic spaces and the unique way in which he understood the concept of the threshold. The archive has a lot of material that refers to this. We will be looking, of

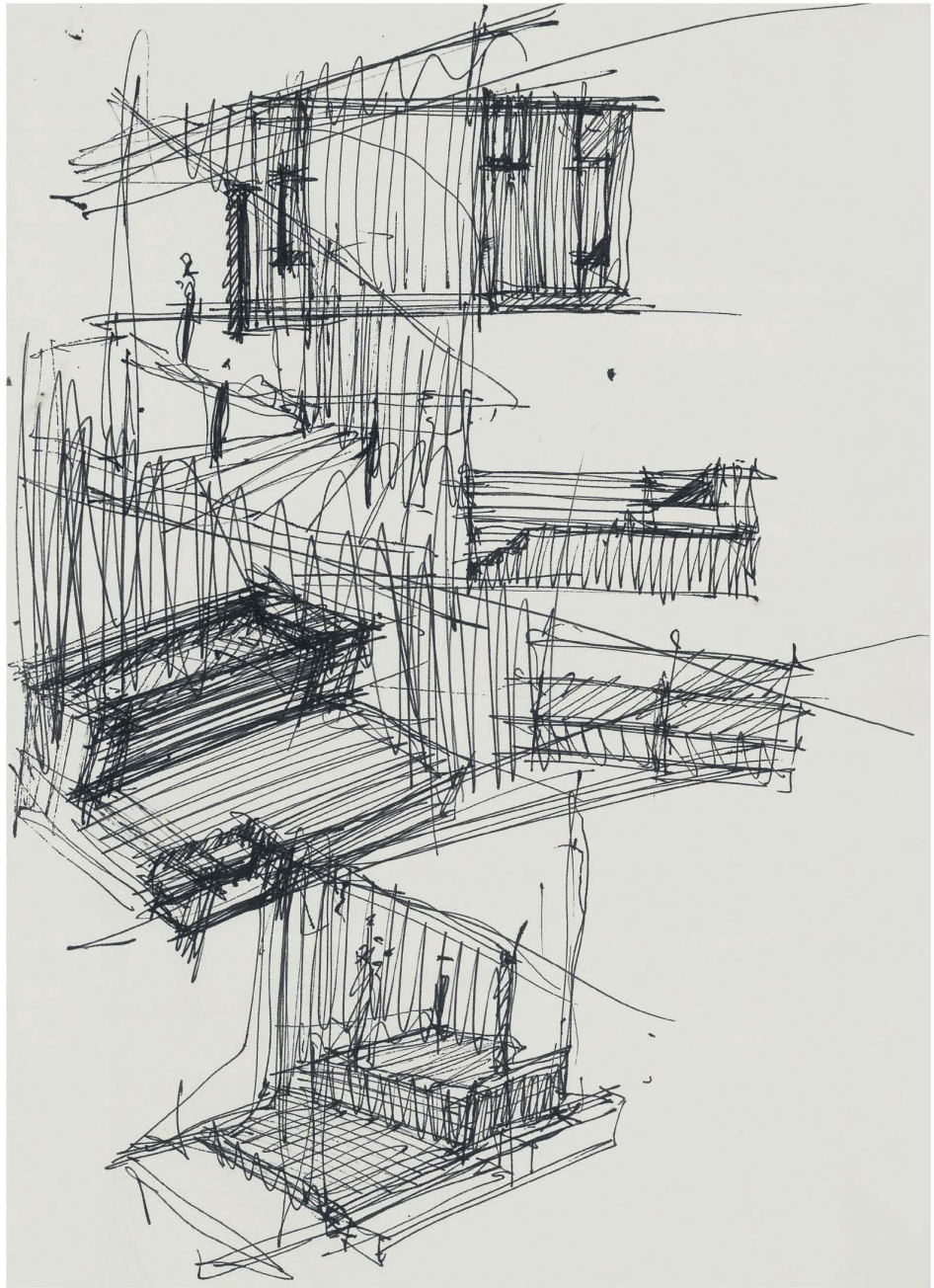


LN Yes, yes, that's a very good point. But it's the opposite of what we feel Scarpa's relevance is to our work. What interests us about Carlo Scarpa is this understanding of thresholds. So, the show is not so focused on *Gesamtkunstwerk*, because we don't see him as that type of individual. We are working with the way he dealt with tension from a spatial, visual, and tectonic perspective.

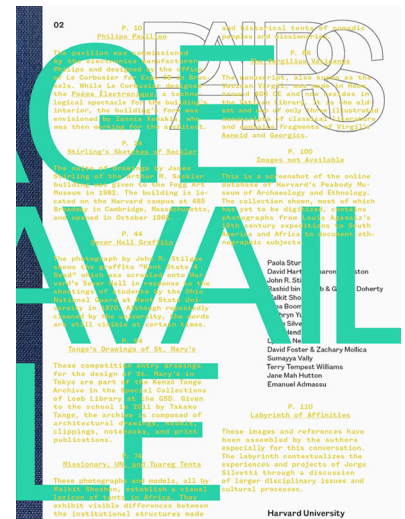
NDA The use of an architectural element like the threshold in Scarpa's work to propose an alternative reading of his oeuvre seems to me closely linked to your perspective as a practitioner. What do you think Rossana and yourself are uniquely equipped to do as architects, in stating a position through a museum exhibit, as opposed to a curator or historian?

LN Well, we are actually working very closely with a curator at MAXXI, Domitilla Dardi. It has been a very fruitful collaboration because we were initially very focused on the narrative of the exhibition, and less concerned with the curatorial consistency of our argument. And Domitilla has been instrumental in bringing that kind of clarity and robustness to the table.

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Sketches by Lyndon Neri for *Traversing Thresholds*, an exhibition opening November 2021 at MAXXI in Rome.



I think what we offer here, Nicolás, is the capacity to do something that is very obviously an interpretation. And we are doing that through the capacity to shape space and materials in a new way within the walls of the museum. We are proposing a reading of the work through a series of spaces that highlight a distinct way in which Scarpa was dealing with the threshold. What you are seeing in this document is a list of some of those: the datum line, the eroded corner, the expanded field, etc.

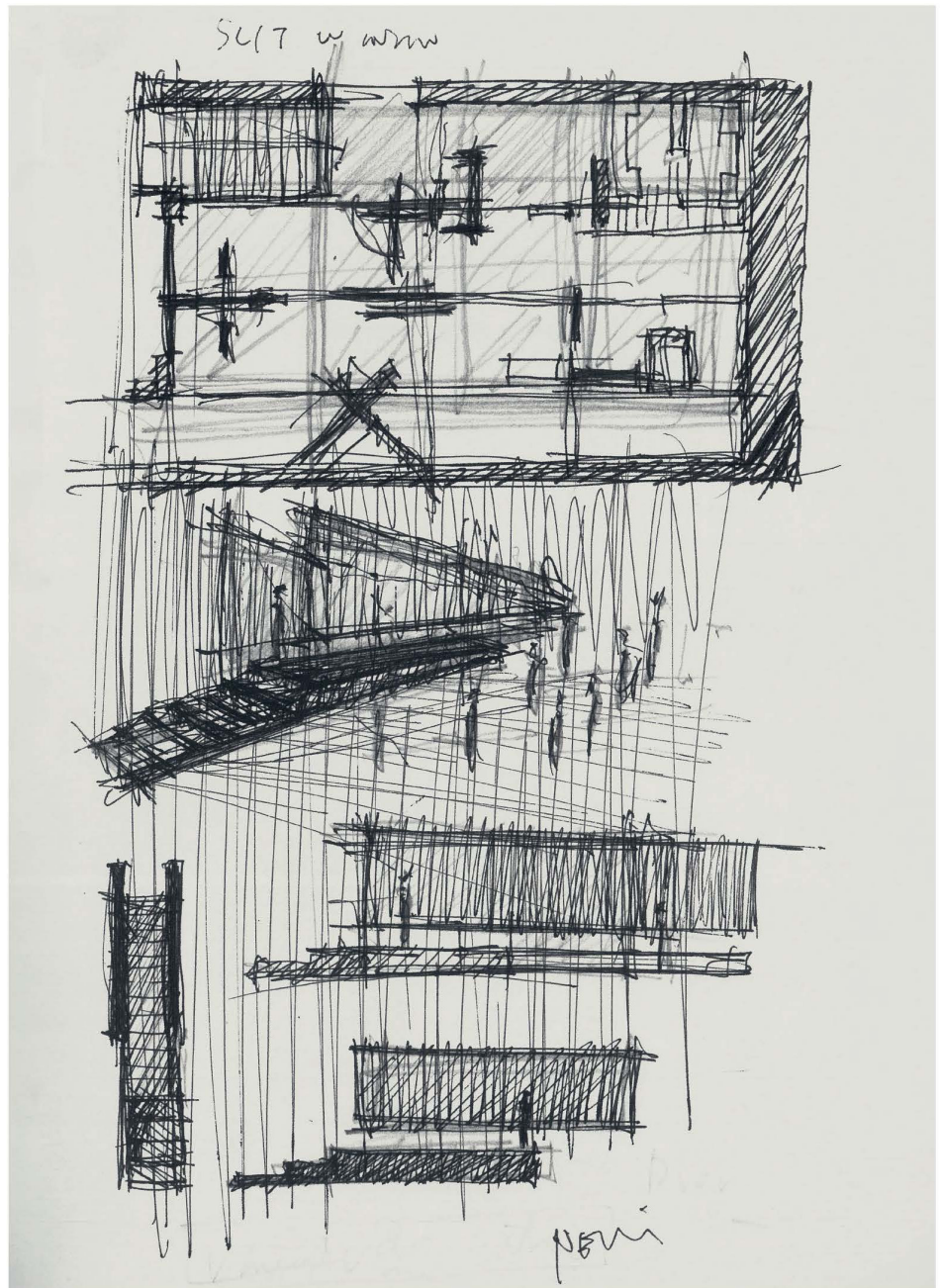
So, for example, when you enter, the opening room deals with hardware; the pulling, pushing, and touching involved in the hardware that Scarpa designed to deal with the sense of entry. You then move on to a room that deals with the eroded corner, where we made a sort of chamber to be by yourself. Scarpa made a lot of these moments in his work, where you enter a space that can't really hold more than one person, where you have to get out to let the next person in.

Ultimately, I think we are proposing alternative ways of reading architectural devices that are very present in Scarpa's work. This is what we have been looking for through the sketches you are seeing. Hopefully by articulating them spatially in an alternative way, we can all of a sudden make the work more obvious and legible to the audience.

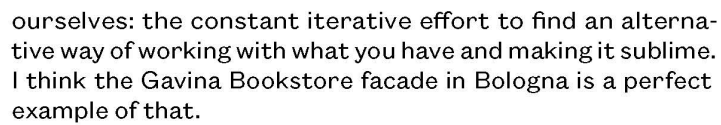
- NDA What are you doing differently from the way Scarpa might have done it?
- LN It's totally different. I mean, just to give you an example, we are collaborating with the microfiber manufacturer Alcantara to see how we can use their material for the show. And we are approaching it in quite a radical way. We didn't want to use just fabric, so we will take all of their old catalogs and will splice and stack them to make them into bricks. They're old catalogs, so they are already part of history. So just like mud, we are going to compress them, make bricks, and then stack them. And then we will take the Alcantara felt itself and use it as grout, which is the most important thing. In a way, it's about producing something that is closely related to both the sacred and the profane.

We are working with our present reality but bringing to it a certain resonance with Carlo Scarpa. He worked on a number of projects that were not just about precious materials, and he used pretty poor materials to create what I consider to be a new sublime. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposes the idea that pursuing the immensity of possibility is so much better than pursuing the solution. And I think that is a new sublime we read in Scarpa's work and are looking for

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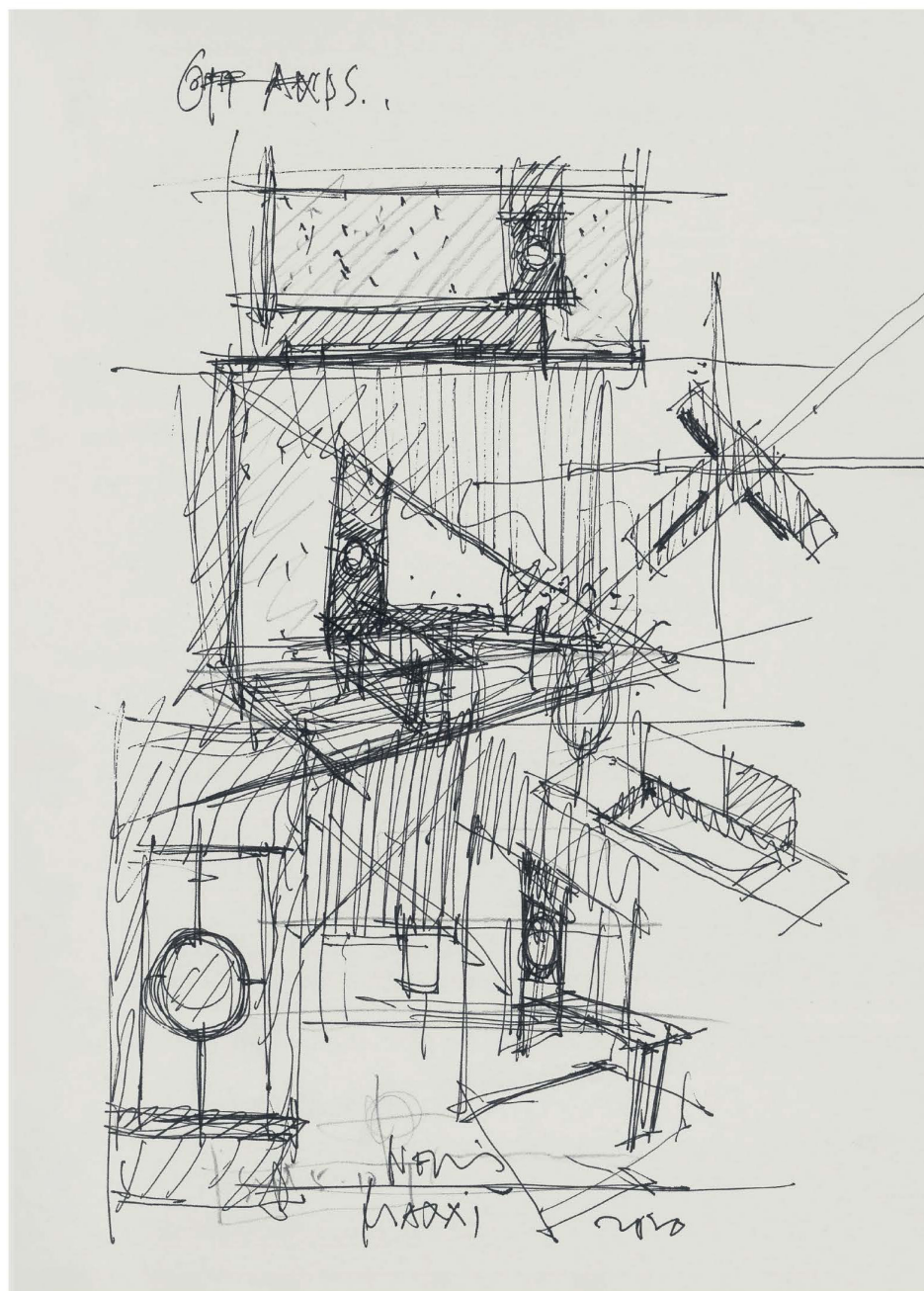
Sketches by Lyndon Neri for *Traversing Thresholds*, an exhibition opening November 2021 at MAXXI in Rome.



- It must have been hard for him. I can only imagine the struggle that he had to deal with. I believe Gio Ponti and Ettore Sottsass were in their younger days at this same time. They would look at Scarpa and say, "Well, he's an architect trying to do product design." The architects would look at him and say, "Well, he's not really so much of an architect; he's just an interior designer glorified as an architect." I mean, in the archive we saw letters of architects just outright dismissing him. And the interior designers looked at him, even in his hometown, and said, "Well, he's really just a product designer."

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many other figures from that time, he was never taken seriously. However, we argue that there were moments through which he was influencing a lot of architects, which should make his work more broadly relevant to our discipline.

NDA I think Scarpa remains quite cryptic for many. I remember as an undergraduate student trying to understand why I was being referred to Scarpa's work and not being able to extract a larger logic from the moments and details that images relate. Perhaps this was partly because his work particularly requires being seen in person. But I think that's a big part of the challenge with Scarpa and with comparing him to figures whose work had much clearer manifestos or positions behind them.

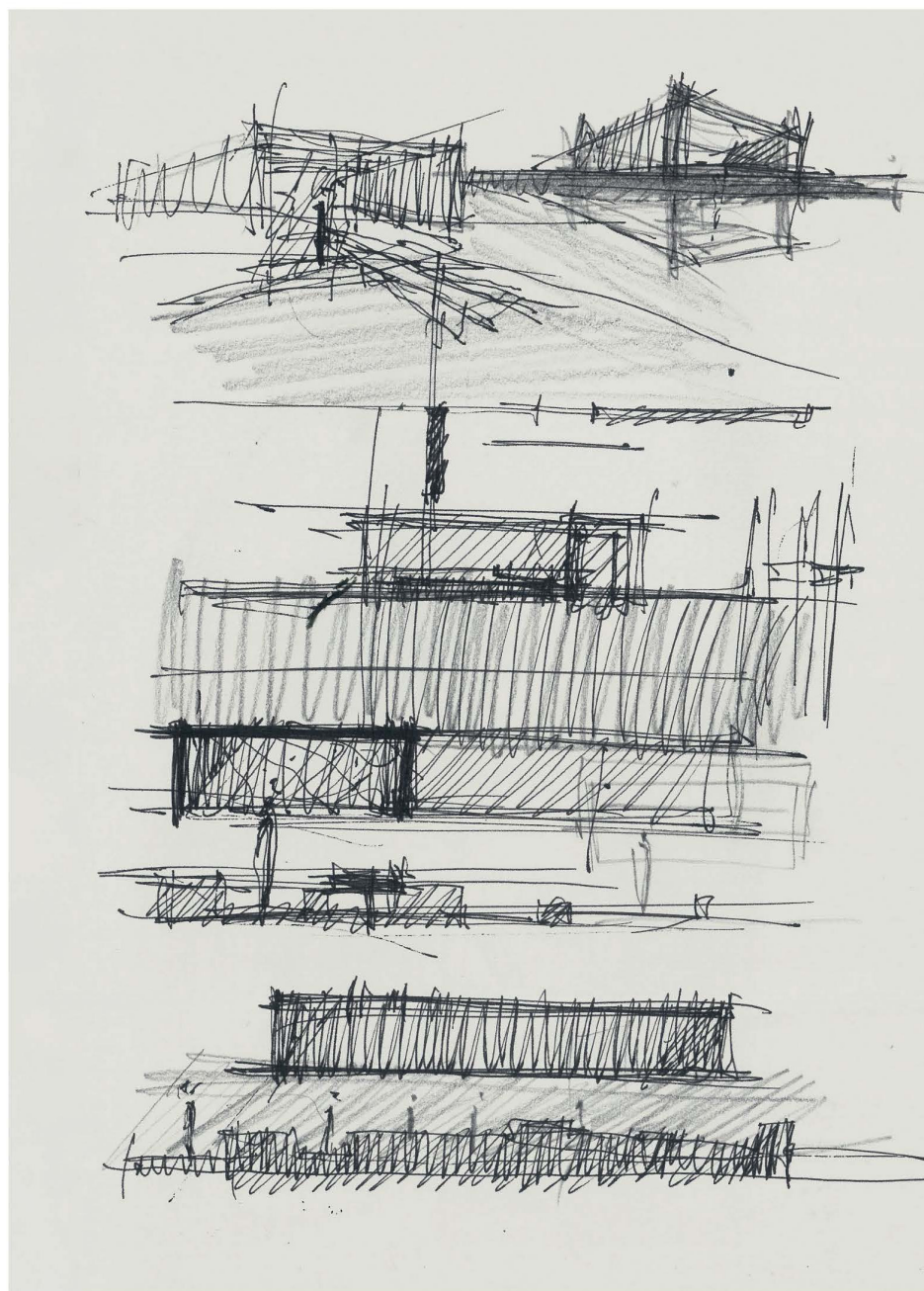
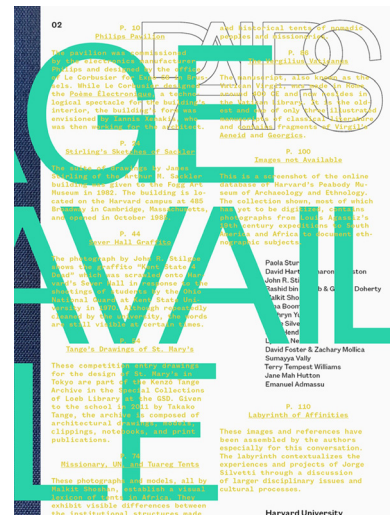
One of the things I find interesting about Scarpa now is that he was a person that was reflecting early on about what modernism was in relation to the rest of architectural history and different architectural traditions. And I think his reading was very mature for his moment because it had distance from the dogmatism of the period. If you look at some of the things Scarpa was interested in and looked up to, like Josef Hoffman and the Vienna Secession, many of them belonged to a much more fertile period of modernism, right? I see Scarpa as someone with an outsider's perspective to his time.

LN Yes, we are going to be giving a lecture that accompanies the opening of the show, and this is actually something we will deal with in the introduction. Scarpa was in fact caught between the ending of that period of Loos, Hoffmann, and others, and the rise of a more dogmatic and established modernism. Our argument is that, if you have a calling that is "incompatible" with the seemingly established forces of the present, you have to continue doing what you think is right. And we say this because we see it today. There are groups of architects that actually suffer under the plight of a certain dogma, and they will never be recognized, Nicolás. They will never be heard of because it is not within the discourse of academics, for instance.

NDA Is there something autobiographical about this assertion?

LN You know, several people have brought up this question in relation to the show. I don't think it was our intention, but maybe there are parallels. After we went to Shanghai, it took us a bit longer than some of our peers to enter into the field of discourse and debate that academic institutions create. So, we'd question ourselves and the relevance of what we were

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doing. But we ultimately found that you have to stay true to yourself and to the decisions that you think are right. Even though Carlo Scarpa was not without fault, he did that.

NDA Absolutely. You know, I never considered Scarpa a bold architect, but now I find him very bold. I've read some of the lectures that he gave in the 1960s where he said something like, "I can't escape that I was the best student of the best student of the architect of the Monumento a Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome." No one would admit to being a part of that lineage at that time! I think accepting this as part of who he was, just like Venice might have also been a part of who he was, is quite simple but striking for the discourse that we are used to reading from that period.

I find Scarpa to be a very interesting model right now. For better or worse, we are back to a world of the personal, even in teaching. As Jorge Silvetti discussed in his AIA Topaz Medalion lecture in 2018, personal pedagogy dominates curricula today and makes the idea of a school of thought increasingly difficult to foster in departments. The mania with visiting critics increasingly makes it so that schools represent little other than a diversity of fashionable positions.

I think Scarpa is very attractive in relation to this. He is absolutely personal, but at the same time, deeper readings reveal more. There are relationships between what is biographical and historiographical in his work and between his obsessions and the way they intersected larger issues more broadly relevant to his time. I think this gives his work relevance while also making it accessible to the present situation.

LN I agree. A lot of architects who come to work at our office, especially the Europeans, dismiss Carlo Scarpa very, very fast. But there is a lot in his work that is more broadly relevant to our discipline than what our eyes catch at first sight.

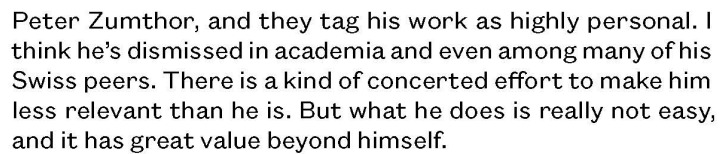
The process that you see in Scarpa's drawing in the archive, of going over and over five or six schemes to address an issue, is something I appreciate immensely because our practice does it too. Scarpa obsessively goes over and over a very specific issue or condition in a project until he finds the solution that is just right for it. I think practice is ultimately about this. And so many times you try over and over again but miss the mark. You build something, and it is absolutely wrong in proportion or scale. But you still try again the next time.

I find that process kind of interesting, and that's why today I'm looking closely at Valerio Olgiati's work and, to a certain extent, Peter Zumthor's. People don't understand

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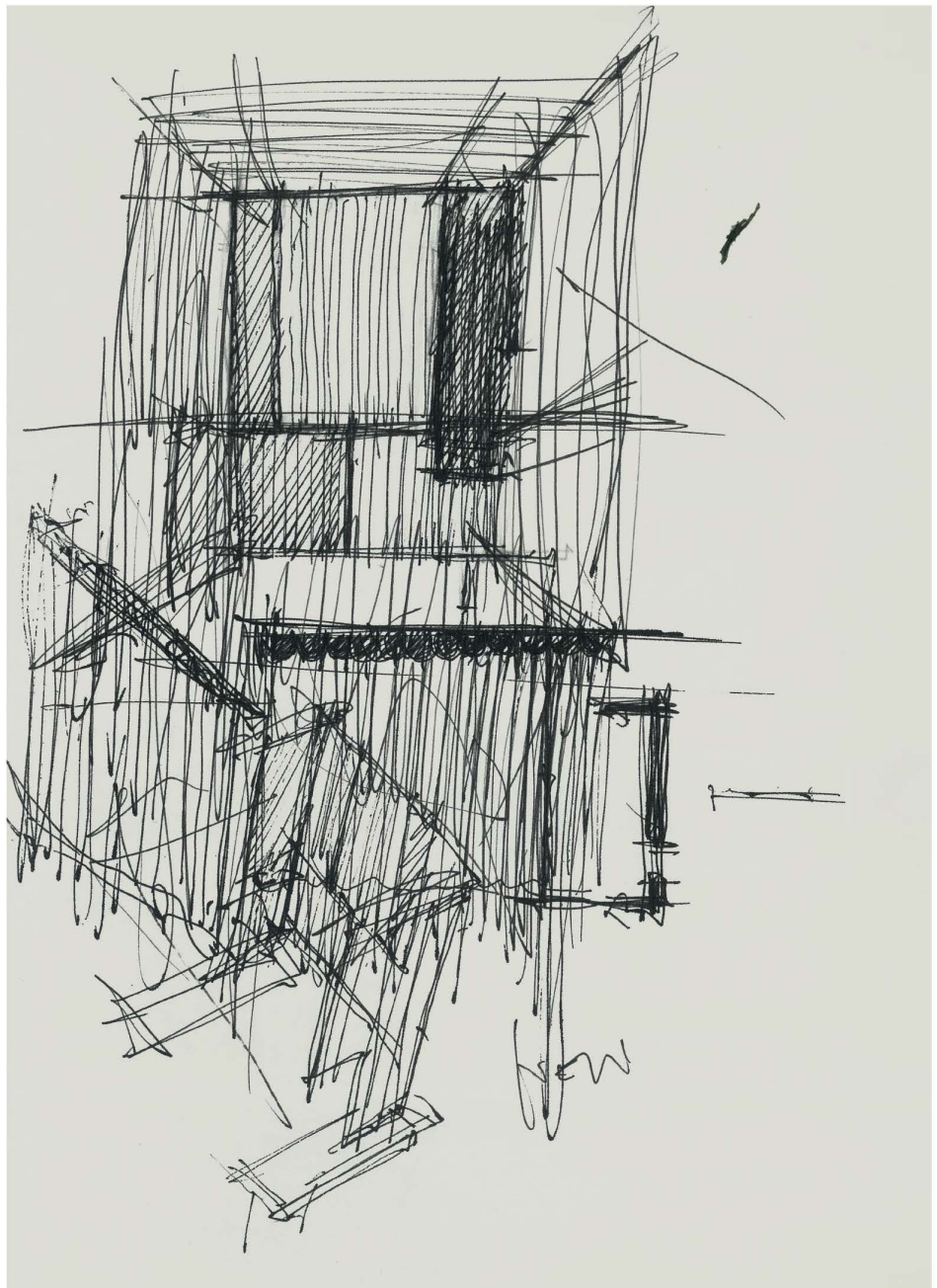


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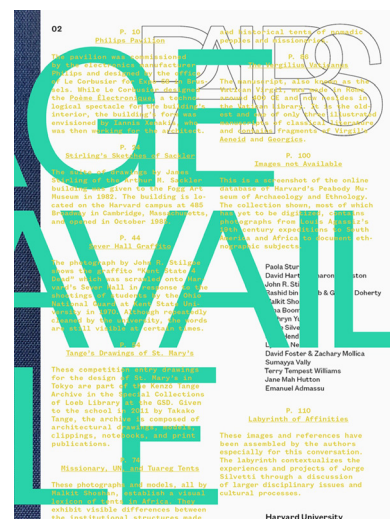


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rework architecture's relationship to the city and to history. There is a translation of his rhetorical thinking that comes into architecture too directly. Architecture is a completely different form of cultural expression than writing.

Scarpa feels a lot more accessible right now, maybe because his translation of ideas into buildings is more attuned to what buildings can actually communicate and do.

LN Yes, interesting. I hear you. And don't get me wrong, it's also something we struggle with.

I just presented a project yesterday for a resort. The project is as commercial as commercial can be. And I got so lost in the conceptual rhetoric of the work I was showing that by the time the meeting was over, the client said, "Oh Lyndon, can we ... give us two weeks to digest."

After the presentation Rossana told me, "Lyndon, you were in your own world in that presentation. You were in your own world. You have forgotten that you are designing for a client." Which was true.

I'm not saying we shouldn't continue to pursue what we are interested in—what will remain of purely disciplinary concern—but I think the good thing is the built work will force you to deal with what is of today and to reflect on how you can actually make a difference in this world with these interests.

Imagine if we didn't have the practice to tie us down. The bottom line is that if we don't deliver value to the world out there—to a client—we won't get paid. I think ultimately that's a reality that is often good for us as architects. It balances everything.