A Small Pavilion for Books

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ABSTRACT
The Book Pavilion in the gardens of Biennal in Venice was the first building designed by Scarpa that was ever built. This ‘tempo-
rary’ architecture is now demolished.

The Scarpa's Pavilion represents the ‘perfect fusion’ of different architectural themes joined forever by the remarkably laborious
personal study carried out playfully with all possible means of the discipline: shapes, materials, geometry, light and shadow.

Keywords: Carlo Scarpa: Art Biennal Venice: Books Pavilion.

1. INTRODUCTION

After the fire on May 12, 1984 and the demolish in 1988, a small patch of green grass and a flowerbed are all that
remain in the gardens of Biennal in Venice of the Book Pavilion which was designed by Carlo Scarpa in 1950 for the
Galleria del Cavallino of Carlo Cardazzo.

Many experts on the work of Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa have already focused their studies on this minor ex-
ample of ‘temporary’ architecture whose appeal can be seen in the foreshadowing of the works that were to follow.

It represents, without a doubt, the starting point for a more in depth historical study of the complex body of Scarpa’s
architecture. In fact, the Book Pavilion was the first building designed by Scarpa that was ever built, after a series
of restoration projects, interior design projects and studies for new buildings. The latter were never carried out. [1]

Through the interest of the architectural historians Bruno Zevi and the laudatory remarks made by Giuseppe Mazzariol in the article, which appeared in the third edition of the magazine “L’Architettura” in 1955, [2] Scarpa was to be
brought to the attention of the Olivetti Foundation and given the commission for his undisputed masterpiece – the
Olivetti shop in San Marco Square. [3]

2. THE PAVILION PROJECT

In the fall of 1949 discussions and preparations for the 25th Art Biennal in Venice, to be held the following summer,
were well under way. After having been one of the most prestigious cultural events of the previous regime, the Bien-
nial was now attempting to represent, with a wider perspective and greater authority, an artistic world in which it had
played a marginal role for too long on the international scene. There were some who had very clear ideas about the situation and did not hesitate to carry them out. Among these where the scientific directors of the Art Biennial, Giovanni Ponti and Rodolfo Pallucchini, who had organized a retrospective exhibition of paintings by Carlo Carrà, Giorgio Morandi and Giorgio De Chirico for the 24th edition in 1948. A few of the works exhibited had been loaned by Carlo Cardazzo, who was the owner of one of the most important private collections of Italian modern art. Scarpa was selected as curator of the exhibition due to his cultural background and his close friendship with Cardazzo.

After a decade or so as a collector, Cardazzo decided to become a gallery owner and art dealer. It was at this time that he began to work closely with his friend Peggy Guggenheim. In 1942 he opened in Venice the first Galleria del Cavallino, which was strategically located at the beginning of Riva degli Schiavoni, just after the Prison building. His friend Carlo Scarpa had carried out the adaptation of the pre-existing unadorned building into a gallery successfully, and without unnecessary embellishments. Opening during the war, its simple, yet interesting design reflects the period in which it was conceived. [4]

For Cardazzo the return of art to the centre of general interest after the long years of the Fascist regime presented him with two different opportunities. On one hand it meant the opening of international markets for artists who had been forced to accept the limited circulation of their work for years. On the other, it gave the bloodless artistic culture of the lagoon the possibility of having an international dialogue.

The building project, financed by Cardazzo, was to interpret this need in a relatively short time and with the limited means available at the time. It was to be the repetition of what Scarpa had done with the two installations at Galleria del Cavallino.

Perhaps Cardazzo decided the general plan for the Pavilion together with his friends who were art critics and painters. The construction of the concrete structure was entrusted to the family construction company. The building itself was to have the feel of a temporary structure. Due to the complexity of the protocol surrounding property on the grounds of the Biennal, a concession period of ten years was stipulated after which time the Biennal would have disposed of the building. The only thing missing was a definite project with which to give form to the general functions previously discussed. Once again his unquestionable respect for Scarpa made the choice of an architect quite simple.

The first drawings were presented that winter. Pressured by his friend, Scarpa had agreed to complete the work by the following June. He approached the project as if it were a true impromptu exercise, like an essay during his studies at the Accademia – following, however, his own personal research. The temporary nature of the building lent itself to such an approach while at the same time entrusted efforts to affirm a more complete idea of his personal style to other occasions. It is evident, however, that as time went on the project took hold of Scarpa in a more decisive statement of his own compositional convictions, which went beyond a mere formal study.

It gave him the opportunity, which he had missed on so many other occasions, to test out, in a very 'real' setting, his studies of Frank Lloyd Wright’s complex projects, which had fascinated him when they appeared in the first European publications of Wright’s work. Many of the texts on architecture and art, which he had studied over the years together with the painter Mario Deluigi, he had received from his friend Cardazzo. Thanks to Cavallino Editions, Cardazzo had been importing literature and art books since the 30s for a number of his bibliophile friends. [5]. The Pavilion opened,
with some difficulty, in conjunction with the inauguration of the XXV Biennial on June 24, 1950 (fig.1). The work proved somewhat controversial, not with regard to its formal characteristics – which were absolutely free – but rather for the projects solutions which varied from the more familiar Venetian building tradition. The complexity of the project, especially the wooden structure, had forced the workers to accept the difficult task of decoding and adaptation. Vincenzo Cardazzo, Carlo’s father, was an experienced builder and had no intention of allowing the project to become an on-going experiment without end. The precise calculations and careful planning of costs and supplies meant that they would not follow the architect in all his subsequent formal developments. Furthermore, there was a deadline to be met. Fortunately the building was completed in time for the opening, with the exception of a few minor details carried out a few days later. A series of changes done for maintenance reasons would follow in the years to come. “Here it should have been done differently, but I got tired... Yes, because I never finish my projects...” (From the conference “Mille cipressi” given by C. Scarpa in Madrid in the summer of 1978.)

**3. EUTECTIC ARCHITECTURE**

Needing approval from the Board of Directors of the Biennial and the City Council, Carlo Cardazzo managed to obtain the preliminary drawings of the general project from Scarpa in record time. It was agreed, however, that the preliminary drawing would only be the general outline of the actual construction. Although the drawing, located today in the archives of the Biennial, was quite different from the completed work, it foreshadows the design idea that characterizes the remarkable originality of the pavilion. [Fig. 2]

Situated at the end of the Grand Viale, the Book Pavilion was on the right and set slightly at a diagonal with respect to the entrance to the Italian Pavilion. The plan of a building is usually invisible to the untrained eye, however one can usually perceive it intuitively from the volumes arising up from it. In the case of the Book Pavilion, it became extremely difficult to see the plan because of the absence of homogeneous surfaces in the formation of the building space. As a result, the plan is only comprehensible when reading the project drawings.
In 1948, during the XXIV edition of the Biennal, Scarpa was curator for a retrospective exhibition of Paul Klee’s painting, for which he financed a part of the expenses. The exhibition was held in one of the rooms in the Italian Pavilion. This was an example of his interest in the figurative studies being done by the German artist. [6]

In the previously mentioned essay by Mazzariol, a full-page reproduction of the prospective drawing of the Venezuelan Pavilion designed by Scarpa in 1954 was published. (Fig. 3)

At the bottom of the page there is a curious drawing of a broken arrow, placed diagonally. One can just imagine the source of inspiration for the drawing. Scarpa’s arrow is undoubtedly a reference to Klee. (Fig. 4)

Reference to that particular symbolic form, which was a characteristic of Klee’s work in the 20s, was perhaps the same that motivated the choice of layout plan for the Book Pavilion. Seen from the drawing plans, the building appears as a giant arrow pointing towards the entrance of the Italian Pavilion. In the design of both pavilions, then, silent tribute is paid to Klee’s work through the use of the arrow symbol.

Scarpa creates, in this way, an underlying personal ‘map of invention’ for the works he designed for the Biennial, which we will find again – or variations thereof, in many of his future projects. [3]

If the outline of the plan seems to follow a single hidden reference, the body of the small pavilion reveals a two-fold composition, which was immediately noted by Bruno Zevi in “Metron”: “… he appears to have exchanged Mondriaan for Wright.” None the less, the shift towards the organic architecture of the ‘American master’ is still not as complete and definitive as Zevi would have liked. [7]

The entrance block made of solid brick follows a compositional plan that is clearly derived from a neoplastic sensibility. The general plan is formed by a large equilateral triangle that forms the arrowhead in which a series of superimposed equilateral triangles lightens the stereometric consistency of the block. Thanks to the refined “origamic” quality of the shapes geometric play, the opening for the main entrance corresponds exactly to the apex. In contrast with this volumetrically compact block is the main volumetric space of the exposition pavilion made up of a series of wooden beams that curve to form the walls and floor of the pavilion. Moving forward they open up progressively to rest finally above a small terrace. See in its entirety, the structure takes on the almost unreal shape of a giant insect with a large head whose mouth is opened wide. A series of abdominal rings follows, which is interrupted by a tail-like end appearing vaguely defensive. And yet, perhaps such a grotesque ‘organic nature’ was never the author’s conscious intention.
Fig. 5:
- Plan
- Main elevation
- Lateral elevation

Drawing by architect Dario Assante
Analyzing the pavilion’s cross-section, we notice that it is made up of two angular beams united to form a severely lopsided parallelogram. This solution proved to be statically difficult and caused more than a few problems for the calculations of stress points. The necessity for such a form seems incomprehensible with regard to the formal composition. For many, the two beams are merely the result of the intersection of two triangles, the first being an isosceles and the other a scalene triangle obtained by the angles of a common set square used for drawing. This is the factual reality. When compared to Wright’s numerous ‘inventions’ we realize that they are the same angles marking the slopes of the roofs on the buildings at the Ocatillo Desert Camp designed by Wright in 1928-29 in Arizona. These were small...
pavilions designed as a work place for his own students for the project San Marcos in the Desert, a hotel complex commissioned by Alexander Chandler. [8]

“So, there should be no obvious symmetry in the building in the desert.... The hard straight line breaks to the dotted line where stark necessity ends and thus allows appropriate rhythm to enter in order to leave suggestion.” From the barren desert landscape Wright had captured an idea of spatial volume that was almost transparent. This idea will be taken up again in the large studio room of Taliesin III in Spring Green, Wisconsin [8] [9] and definitively in the design of Taliesin West in Scottsdale in the Arizona desert. [8] [9]

The common thread uniting the three projects seems to be the framework of wooden beams resting on a base of natural stone and the inclined ceilings covered with large cloth drapery. Wright's idea to use light from above as a means of incorporating nature can perhaps be found in the 1927 project of six Beach Cottages built in Dumyat, Egypt. [8]

The main characteristic of the accommodation at Ocatillo Camp, used by Wright for only four months during the winter of 1928-29, was that it was constructed in only six weeks. Using only wood, the buildings had no real roof. Instead, there were prisms placed with different inclinations made from composite beams covered by sheets of glass and simple cloth drapery. Due to these construction characteristics, the overall project cost was particularly inexpensive. I believe that formal and constructive comparisons between these projects and the Book Pavilion are objective and can be further highlighted by the repeated use of the triangle as a simple form whose function is to create a complex spatial volume. Scarpa was obviously familiar with Wright's work long before Wright's trip to Italy in 1951 among general enthusiasm for Italian architectural culture.

The prairie houses and projects from Wright's first period had been published in Europe for the first time by the German editor Wasmuth in 1910 for an exhibition in Berlin. Another exhibition of Wright's work was later held in Brussels, Amsterdam and Berlin in 1931. From that moment on Wright's work began to influence northern-European architects and Scarpa was one of them. In Scarpa's personal library there were monographs and reviews of German and French architecture from the 20s and 30s. At his death over 21 texts about the work of Wright were catalogued.

Scarpa surprises us for the courage with which he embraced a seemingly inadequate project theme and for how he adapted it to his own functional interpretation which he derived from a specific formal reference. That meant that each text was assessed carefully for its figurative content and the numerous projects were used for further study. It is also probable that the projects found to be the most interesting were re-drawn, as only the ‘drawn’ knowledge of a project can determine its immediate practical application and allow for appropriate variations.

In this case the entire structure is made up of wooden beams whose extreme lightness form the body of the Pavilion. Scarpa, moving away from the models, changes the width of the structure. This particular constructive formation allows the entire interior space to be flooded with light in the precise spot where the books will be displayed. It also offers a dynamic perception of the entire building due to the inclination of the roofline. The variation in width of the beams is therefore in function of the overall volumetric study of the Pavilion and allows for the placement of the more compact block at the entrance.

The desert light in which Wright wanted to immerse himself is opportunely filtered here by Scarpa in order to prevent damaging the books on display. On the south side a large, semi-circular panel filters natural light and the four openings, wisely conceived as ellipsoidal shapes, look out onto the garden behind. On the opposite side, facing north, the
The wall does not provide any protection against the diffused light and to the view from the interior. It is easy to deduce the intention to cover the entire space with glass panels and drapery. A solution, however, is found with the use of a light sheet of okra coloured steel, a colour that is like the light that penetrated through the drapery in Wright’s architecture, an example of which can be seen in the drafting room in Taliesin West. The fact that it followed this model generated some rather ironic functional similarities. The Book Pavilion had issues with the roof and frequent leaks, as did many of Wright’s projects. [8]

The wide roof lightly covers most of the space leaving the side walls and back wall completely free. On studying the pavilion from the entrance of the garden, one notices that the upper triangular beam is reflected in the similar wooden structure below in the shape of a trapezoid, which is left incomplete on the right side. Ideally our eye completes the form as it follows the line of the equilateral triangle supporting the beam from below. At the same time one can infer that in the area delineated by the protruding upper arrow the presence of the perfect outline of a large upside-down equilateral triangle. This play of shapes continues incessantly in every detail, on the horizontal and vertical planes, transforming itself into a labyrinth-like combinatorial art of invisible triangulations.

The relationship the Pavilion has with light seems to be another principle theme, from both a formal and compositional standpoint. Therefore, it is probable that the small external terrace, placed on a slightly lower level and with unusually sharp edges, is the tangible form of the projection of the shadow cast at sunrise by the roof, while the small triangle which completes it is the shadow at sunset from the furthest triangle of the arrow.

Scarpa does not hesitate to emphasize the differences existing simultaneously among the different spatial volumes of the pavilion even through the use of light. Originally the Pavilion did not have artificial lighting. It was to be open from ‘morning till night’ and illumined only with natural light. The large triangular-shaped roof contrasts with the spatial volume of the entrance, which is flat and surrounded by windowless quadrangular walls. The light, which reaches the Pavilion laterally, descends from above at this point creating an unexpected spot light from above. Three openings, formed by three equilateral triangles, emphasize the three levels that close the roof plane. The intersections, both between the vertical planes and horizontal planes, become further openings which allow the oblique light to fall onto...
the solid wall surfaces.
The observer’s point of reference inverts here and shifts from the vertical plane of the room to the horizontal one. Looking up towards the ceiling the building plan finally becomes explicit in a recurring drawing of triangles that form the complex door opening as well.

4. CONCLUSIONS
With his first ex novo building, I believe it is evident that Scarpa managed to fully express the reference points for his work. The eutectic, creative and compositional process of the Pavilion represents the ‘perfect fusion’ of different architectural themes joined forever by the remarkably laborious personal study carried out playfully with all possible means of the discipline: shapes, materials, geometry, light and shadow.

Bruno Zevi astutely recognized the itinerant and complex nature of Scarpa’s search. The body of his work was characterized from the very beginning as a lively and curious ‘journey’ without, however, a final destination and those steadfast certainties attainable only by others.

With this first work, Scarpa deployed a creative process based on “contamination”, a virtue necessary for a restorer. This, however, was rendered consciously prolific through the classical harmony of the “concinnity”. It becomes clear then that for Scarpa no detail can be a ‘fragment’. It belongs to and envelops the same founding principles. The gruelling attempt for coherency to an equally laborious procedure corresponds with what he would declare much later at the conference organized by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in November 1976: “We might say that the architecture we would like to be poetry should call itself harmony instead.” And he concluded saying: “The value of a work consists in its expression - when something is expressed well, its value is magnified.”
Of course this is true, - and it might be pointless to add - only for those who are able to appreciate it.

REFERENCES
1 – Controspazio (3-4) 1972. Issue on Carlo Scarpa, edited by Manlio Brusatin.