

## Water Shapes: The Influence of Water on the Architectural Philosophy of Carlo Scarpa

BEVERLY L. FRANK  
University of South Florida

*The hidden, unseen part of reality is no less important than the visible portion.*<sup>1</sup> – Carlo Ginzburg

### WATER SHAPES: MYTH

There may be more than a little truth that helps to shape any myth and more than a little myth in any reality. In the mythology of the city of Venice, several elements remain constant; that Venice is often conceived of as poetic and ephemeral; that experience and time are marked by vivid contrasts; and, more germane, that the myth and reality of Venice are shaped by water. Although water and Venice seem inseparable in the imagination, it was Water that preceded Venice and Water that will be there when Venice is no more than a shadow.<sup>2</sup>

Many myths surround the shaping of Venice – myths that represent a struggle, a triumph, or both – linked to an ancient heritage, and always linked to the sea. The most celebrated vision of Venice, inspiring centuries of art and verse, has the city rising from the water “...fully-formed and [a] perfect fabrication...” – just as Venus rose, fully formed from the foam of the sea.<sup>3</sup> The image of perfection, Venus represents romantic love, aesthetic beauty, and sensual pleasure. However, Venus is also etymologically connected to the concept of veneration – “to regard with respect, reverence, or heartfelt deference.”<sup>4</sup> As such, Venus is a dualistic embodiment of the feminine. Consequently, when allegorically referencing Venus in depicting Venice and Venetian identity, there is an inherent dualism of love and beauty ranging from the profane to the transcendent.

In the same mythologizing vein, and in contrast to the Venusian myth, Venice originated on the foun-

dations of an ancient temple built by the mythological poet and musician Orpheus. In all legends surrounding Orpheus, he is revealed as “the seducer at all levels of the cosmos and the psyche – Heaven, Earth, the ocean and the Underworld; the subconscious, the conscious and the super-conscious; he enchants.” By enchanting the sea and seducing the stones to stack upon one another, Venice was conceived. But the myth of Orpheus also has a melancholic side. He charmed the gods of the Underworld to release his wife, Eurydice, who had died by snake-bite. Ignoring the condition that he not look at her until she had returned to “the light of day”, Orpheus turned at the half-way point and lost Eurydice forever. He therefore also represents an inability to “resolve the contradiction between his yearning for both the sublime and the common place.”<sup>5</sup> As a result of looking backward rather than forward, Orpheus lost his will to live and his tattered remains were discarded into the water. Poet or illusionist, like Venus, Orpheus has a dual nature. The consequences of his self-interest ultimately led to the destruction of both himself and what he loved.

The potential of both myths lay in the power of poetic will with negative consequences threatening in the face of absolutes. On one hand, the relationship of Venus and Venice suggests a connection with the concept of veneration. On the other, the esotericism of the Orpheus myth suggests the need for the power of poetic will. He is a reminder that holding on to what is left behind, risks the future.

The contrasts and contradictions represented by Venetic myth are symbolic of the dualistic nature of water as well as qualities embedded within Venetian culture. It is Venice’s unique relationship

to the sea which engenders this inscrutable mixture of mystery and isolation, but consequently forms a paradox. The very forces that have contributed to its label of “*miracolosissima civitas*” – miraculous city<sup>6</sup>, also contribute to very realistic struggles within a millennium long marriage to the sea.<sup>7</sup>

#### WATER SHAPES: REALITY

*Time has a different dimension in Venice. ...Eternity is a dimension that suits Venice very well, part and parcel of her own special brand of real life. ...And yet what shapes life here is an ever-present dualism, the clash between this unsuppressable idea of timelessness and an ominous sense of ephemerality that soon rears its ugly head...[In Venice] Eternity and fragility cohabit like love and death in a tender embrace romantically immortalized by poets and writers through the ages. Eros and Thanatos, love and death. ...Her entire existence is conditioned by the dualism rooted in her soul, every aspect of the city helps create her magic: joy and sadness, meeting and separation, chaste love and licentious, sacred and profane....<sup>8</sup>*  
- D. Reato

The symbolic nature of water is such that it is ambivalent, fluctuating between destructive and generative forces.<sup>9</sup> Water also “stand(s) for the infinite nature of the possible, containing all that is potential, unshaped, the seed of seeds and all promises of evolution, as well as all threats of absorption.”<sup>10</sup> Water regulates the daily lives of Venetians and these definitions exist in their collective conscious. Everything depends on water. Harvests come from the sea, transportation and commerce are conducted through the canals, mists are a regulatory reminder of the rising and setting of the sun, and the *aqua alta* – or “high waters” each year is a cyclical reminder of the city’s fragility and vulnerability. The image of water relative to Venice is dualistic. Water vacillates between a vision of beauty and an element of destruction.

Containment and boundary are typically prescribed upon water. However, for the islands of the Venetian lagoon, water delimits implicit and explicit boundaries and has shaped a culture of isolation. This isolation is felt more strongly as one moves from the “historic” center of Venice – a euphemism for the “touristic” center of Venice –

and farther afield to the smaller, detached lagoon islands. In this environment of isolation, and of necessity, has been cultivated a strong tradition and care in craft as well as care for the meaning in the seemingly mundane aspects of the everyday.

The tension and poetry existing within the intrinsic qualities of water, between Venetic myth, and the historic actuality of Venice’s conception and emergence from the sea, also provide some context in which intellectual and political forces emerged to shape the Venetian reality. Non-Venetian influences – Byron, Ruskin, Sartre, Sargent, to name a few – validated and immortalized these allegorical representations of Venice in art and literature. The more recent invention of Venetian identity, relative to her over millennium long existence, has transformed the identity of the city to a stereotype. The idea of Venice as fully formed and perfect represents the idealization of the city and a historical imperative on the part of the establishment to keep the city frozen in an idealized state. This image of Venice left for mass consumption has, in the last century or more, been based on what Venice should “look like” rather than the significant contributions that can be made through appreciation and re-birth of a more authentic Venetian culture. As a consequence the conception of the “perfectly formed” city or sacred and ancient heritage shifts to form a new myth based on sentimentality and nostalgia.

Prophetically, the foundation for the new Campanile in the Piazza San Marco was laid in 1906 – the year of Carlo Scarpa’s birth. It had been decided that an exact replica of the Campanile would be built where it had once stood and fallen four years before. Strongly objecting, the first superintendent of Monuments, Massimiliano Ongaro wanted to expose the “falseness” of the act and the “danger” it represented for architecture in overlooking the present for the past.<sup>11</sup> This would become Scarpa’s legacy.

#### WATER SHAPES: PHILOSOPHY

*The reason for all this is very simple: essentially I am a Byzantine.*<sup>12</sup> - Carlo Scarpa

Carlo Scarpa said, “I’m fond of water, perhaps because I’m a Venetian....”<sup>13</sup> Fondness, it would seem, is an understatement. Margaret Plant, in

*Venice: Fragile City*, describes Scarpa's "inevitable" use of water as "sweet evidence of his poetic *venezianità*" – or Venetian identity.<sup>14</sup> As in Venice, the ubiquitous presence of water within Scarpa's work would suggest that water is far more intrinsic to his architectural language and philosophy – something shaping "his poetic *venezianità*". Scarpa's Byzantine heritage – including all that is mythic and intellectual as well as artistic and crafted, provided him with the insight of a collective memory. This collective memory helped Scarpa to communicate ideas poetically and in-depth, rather than superficially, and is ingrained in his *venezianità*. Plant further elaborates on this characteristic in relation to the historic context of Venice: "[here is] a dialogue with history in which Scarpa demonstrates the persuasive contextualism of his architecture within Venice, proving that such a dialogue is possible."<sup>15</sup>

Recent studies suggest that the field of architecture, has taken the lead in determining the role that context plays in the shaping of Venetian identity.<sup>16</sup> While some of these contextual analyses couch the context in political terms, Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan suggests that the role of water has too often been ignored and subjugated to imagery. In her article "An Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice", she voices a critique that reflects a view most likely sympathetic with Scarpa's: "In many prominent works of [Venetian] history the water, tamed and reduced to a mere element of the marvelous Venetian décor, figures only in discussions of the urban aesthetic and theatricality or in meditations on the city's magic. Thus the lagoons have been relegated to oblivion. ...Images, in other words, have again shaped historical thinking, ensnaring it in redundant representations."<sup>17</sup>

Modernism was most appealing to Scarpa in that it advocated the design of work fit to the time. Venice's isolation – which preserved its tradition of craftsmanship and provided fruitful ground for Scarpa to engage in such stunning interventions – also became a source of frustration for him. The city's planning rules, represented an establishment concerned with maintaining homogeneity of "Venetian style" based on sentimentality and nostalgia in order to perpetuate an idealistic view of the city. Unlike many Modernists, Scarpa was quite concerned with historic context. His ap-

proach was to acknowledge the historic value of a site, building or surrounding materials, but in a metaphorical and phenomenological sense. His solutions revolved around emphasizing detail and decoration through materials and elements rather than copying what was existing. "Buildings that imitate look like humbugs," he said, "and that's just what they are. No one is fooled."<sup>18</sup>

Scarpa had a deep appreciation of modern architecture. Its redeeming value did not lie in its formal qualities, but in how technological innovation could be applied to addressing commonplace issues, contemporary challenges and historic context. In this regard, however, Scarpa was truly a rationalist. Never disregarding experience for progress or preservation, Scarpa refined his palette in order to best express the formal characteristics suited to the physical, historic and psychological context of place.

Scarpa also professed concern over what he called, "the problem of historical materials".<sup>19</sup> Rather than disregard or imitate the use of traditional materials, Scarpa looked for innovative ways to combine their use with new materials, in particular concrete. In its fluidity and "spirituality", water shares characteristics with concrete – the most plastic and essential materials of Scarpa's palette. The interplay of the two materials represents another juxtaposition – the universal and timeless quality of water with the use of concrete, the material of the Modern movement.<sup>20</sup> Combined with more traditional materials used in unique and innovative ways, creating a language that suggests individuals can create their own experiences – water as the universal allows for unique interpretations of experiences and changes from one visit to the next. The fluidity of concrete provided Scarpa with a spiritual medium which could be formed and adapted imaginatively rather than "imitatively".

Just as Scarpa saw Traditional views as failing to look beyond mythic or nostalgic views of perfection, reproduction and similitude, and despite its appeal, he saw Modernism as "abstractly stero-metric" and failing to "redeem the form of humble, every day things."<sup>21</sup> In this way, Modernism was at odds with his Byzantine sensibilities. Decoration and ornamentation were taboo or atypical in the Modernist vocabulary, yet Scarpa challenged

the extremes of both Modernist and Traditionalist sensibilities to produce a language that placed expression above all else. "The value of a work lies in its expression," he said, "when a thing is well expressed, its value is high."<sup>22</sup>

Scarpa's well-known use of Venetian craftsman, sensitive to the potential and limitations of materials, is also a reflection of the boundaries set by water. The isolation of Venice due to geography, helped to produce a tradition and reliability of craft to be envied. No doubt inspired through his own engagement with traditional Venetian crafts and craftsman, Scarpa found the redemption he sought in his Byzantine heritage and the context of Venice.

For Scarpa, it was the poetry of process rather than a prescribed style that provided unlimited potential for the creation of his own formal language. The utilization of water is critical in the expression of this language and the experiential quality of Scarpa's spaces. When Scarpa says, "I draw in order to see", he does not simply refer to a pictorial representation.<sup>23</sup> Instead, his identification of material relationships and metaphorical juxtapositions represent a synesthetic exploration, resulting in expression transcending merely the visual concept of sight. Marco Frascari articulates this concept most clearly:

*Synesthetic inter-sensory associations are emotional states of affairs appreciating that there are ineffable things you hear, invisible things that you see, and impalpable things that you touch, that are describable but beyond words. Nevertheless, these experiences are accompanied by a sense of certitude (the "this is it" feeling) and a conviction that what is perceived is actual and valid.*<sup>24</sup>

Water is shaped as the spaces are shaped and "expressed" rather than represented or depicted in Scarpa's drawings. The use of water as a material is validated when its inherent and symbolic qualities, juxtaposed with other materials, details and spaces, are experienced. Neither leftover space or superficial, water brings expression and understanding of the ineffable intentions of the architect.

## POET SHAPES: WATER

*Water is the source of life.*<sup>25</sup> - Carlo Scarpa

In instances where water was already present on a site for a Scarpa intervention, it was thoughtfully and meaningfully integrated into the experience of spaces. But, in the majority of Scarpa's works, the experience is enhanced with the material and spatial addition of water in dialectic with existing water features or other materials.

Even, outside of Venice, Scarpa exhibited sensitivity to the symbolism and sensorial potential of water. When used in a dialogue with light, water transforms the perception of colors, shade and shadow and animates – creating spatial events. When shaped by Scarpa, water also reflects rhythmic and carefully articulated details giving added depth to both structure and material. Combined with the water's movement, sound and touch (and in the case of the fountain at Castelvechio – taste), its application provides a common vocabulary for a wholly sensual experience.

In most of Scarpa's works, an aqueous vocabulary was also used in translating the historic context. Always respectful of the most unique layers within a historical intervention, Scarpa celebrated elements like existing walls, openings, and stairs by using reveals or wrapping with new materials or innovative applications of traditional ones. Rather than placing sculptures directly on the floor or on a traditional plinth in the Castelvechio, for instance, Scarpa was inspired by the river on which the castle sat to design an elevated platform. The platform and sculptures appear to float giving the impression of an island set in the sea of space. This same inspiration suggested "individuation" of walls from floor and the use of contrasting colored stones to elicit a sense of "modulated" movement in the tessellated stone façade of the Sacello, or even the floor at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia.<sup>26</sup>

Water presents an animated presence with Scarpa's architecture. Like light, the qualities of water are subject to changed based on natural forces. The interplay of wind, clouds, rain, dawn, sun, dusk, and moonlight act as eternal agents, working on the surface or depths of the water to transform space and create individual sensorial mo-

ments. Even in new interventions without a site context including water, Scarpa orchestrates duets between light and water so that one plays on the surface of the other – changing the experiential dimension of the spaces around it. The Canova Plaster Gallery is an exquisite example – where light refracts and reflects off the surface of a pool of water at the base of a wall of glass, delicately articulated with mullions in a manner suggesting the *fall of light* into water. Scarpa's masterful choreography also pairs water with the statues of the Graces. As light plays on the rippling surface of the pool, the graces and their silhouettes become animated.

At Brion Cemetery, the use of water is incredibly profound, not only in the metaphor of crossing the mythical river into the afterlife but also because it is a place designed for the living. The work is frequently cited as Scarpa's opus and Scarpa himself said that it was "the only work [he went] to look at with pleasure" because he had captured the sense of *place* and it seemed to fill others with contentment.<sup>27</sup> Having designed tombs in the cemetery island of San Michele, Scarpa was aware of the allegorical significance of crossing the water after death and, especially, its ritual significance in the funeral rites of Venice. These concepts are poetically articulated in his handling of a series of spaces where water alternates between reflective surface, path, submerged structure and threshold.

Scarpa's work shows an acute awareness of shaping place and a keen sense of creating dialogues with a palette consisting almost always of water as well as concrete. More traditional materials, such as stone, wood and glass are combined with non-traditional materials – brass and steel, in innovative ways. For example, an aggregate of regional stone is added to concrete at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia and left to weather under the forces of rain and running water, another aspect of historic context. Francesco Dal Co referred to such acts as "empathetic" and with an "intention to guide those who come to those works of [Scarpa's] towards an understanding of the secrets of Venice."<sup>28</sup>

Each composition based on the combination of materials and formulation of space, regardless of scale, presented an opportunity to create a new

history. It is well documented that Scarpa admired the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright's own philosophical understanding of context and place, rooted in the United States and producing his philosophy of "organic architecture", shares similarities to Scarpa's identification with the uniqueness of Venice and its relationship to water – to his *venezianità*. This affinity and sensitivity to the essence of place is articulated by Scarpa himself in discussing the work of Wright and the proposed Masieri Memorial on the Grand Canal: "Wright didn't copy the windows next door. He proposed a work for his time, without forgetting that *the essential feature in Venice was and is water*."<sup>29</sup>

Water is elemental and in its commonality may be disregarded or "relegated to oblivion". In the didactic forces related to the myth and reality of water, Scarpa found an endless language with which to shape an experiential and reverential dialogue. For Scarpa, the palette of water was rich: symbolic, ubiquitous, metaphorical, mythological, transformative, reflective, timeless, constant, a boundary, a surface, a material, spatial, creative, destructive, ephemeral, universal and poetic. Water may have shaped the myth and reality of Venice, and in doing so, inadvertently shaped the philosophy of an architect and artist who was compelled to poetic will rather than sentimental discourse. Scarpa, himself, best summarized this endeavor: "History is followed and created by struggling with the present toward the future, not with nostalgic memories."<sup>30</sup> Rather than take context, including the "inevitable" presence of water for granted, Scarpa has shown that it is possible to "resolve the contradiction between...the sublime and the commonplace" in the poetic shaping of water.

## ENDNOTES

1. Philippe Duboy, "Scarpa/Matisse: Crosswords," in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, ed. Francesco Dal Co and Guiseppe Mazzariol (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1984), 170.

2. John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, ed. J.G. Links, 2<sup>nd</sup> Da Capo Press ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2003; Da Capo Press, 1960; 1873), 13. Ruskin pens a haunting and romantic description of Venice in the opening paragraphs: "...in perfection of beauty, (Venice) is still left for our beholding in the final period of her decline: a ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak – so quiet, – so bereft of all but her loveliness, that we might well doubt, as we watched her faint

reflection in the mirage of the lagoon, which was the City, and which the Shadow."

3. In addition to the myths of the founding of Venice, there is also archeological evidence to suggest connections between the Veneto – including Venice and the surrounding islands, dating back to Roman and even Greek civilizations. Historical documentation of the foundation of the city of Venice dates back to the beginning of the eighth-century. Ennio Concina, *A History of Venetian Architecture*, trans. Judith Landry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-3.

4. "Venerate," *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000); available from <http://www.dictionary.com> (accessed 29 Mar 2007)

5. Ennio Concina, *op. cit.*, 4. "In Venetic texts, the figure with the power to charm the elements and raw forces of nature is also the originator of the urban idea, the first builder of cities and walled villages. The divine and sanctifying power of musical harmony, which is Orpheus' prerogative causes stone to rise upon stone, brings about the building of his city, the first in history; and causes previously brutish humanity to acquire the habit of living together." See also, "Orpheus" in *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, ed. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, trans. John Buchanan-Brown, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 725-726.

6. Ennio Concina, *op. cit.*, 1.

7. Caroline Fletcher and Jane Da Mosto, *The Science of Saving Venice* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 2004), 9. In the opening paragraph: "Centuries ago, on each Ascension Day, the Doges of Venice would perform a ceremony called 'the marriage to the sea'. Dropping a consecrated ring into the waters of the Venetian lagoon, they declared, 'Desponsamus te mare' – 'We wed thee, Sea.' "

8. D. Reato, *Venice: Past and Present* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2001), 8-10.

9. Hans Biedermann, "Water" in *Dictionary of Symbolism*, trans. James Hulbert (New York: Meridian, 1994), 373-375.

10. "Water" in *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, *op. cit.*, 1081.

11. Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City 1797-1997* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 239.

12. Carlo Scarpa, "Can Architecture Be Poetry?", *op. cit.*, 283.

13. Carlo Scarpa, "A Thousand Cypressess" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 286.

14. Margaret Plant, *op. cit.*, 349. The term "venezianità" is used to describe characteristics or identity uniquely Venetian in several texts regarding the culture or history of Venice. See also, John Martin and Dennis Romano, "Reconsidering Venice", *op. cit.*, 25.

15. *Ibid*, 349.

16. John Martin and Dennis Romano, "Reconsidering Venice" in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 27.

17. Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, "Toward an Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice" in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, *op. cit.*, 39-64.

18. Scarpa as quoted in "Interview with Carlo Scarpa" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 297.

19. *Ibid*.

20. Carlo Scarpa, "Letter of the Venetian Rationalists" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 279-280. "The great artist will be he who uses reinforced concrete and in adapting it to the rational purposes and functions of a building is capable of including the spiritual and imaginative element, thus creating an artistic expression....It is precisely through this spiritual element, that animates brute matter that the future work of art will spontaneously enter into the sensibility of purest traditions."

21. Carlo Scarpa, "Furnishings," *op. cit.*, 282. Scarpa said, "...the sense of space is not communicated by a pictorial order but always by a physical phenomena, that is by matter, by the sense of mass, the weight of the wall. This is why I assert that it is the apertures, openings and orifices that create spatial relationships."

22. Carlo Scarpa, "Can Architecture Be Poetry?" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 283.

23. Carlo Scarpa, "Furnishings," *op. cit.*, 282.

24. Marco Frascari, "Architectural Synaesthesia: A Hypothesis on the Makeup of Scarpa's Modernist Architectural Drawings", available at [http://art3idea.psu.edu:16080/synesthesia/documents/synesthesia\\_frascari.html](http://art3idea.psu.edu:16080/synesthesia/documents/synesthesia_frascari.html) (accessed 29 March 2007)

25. Sergio Los, "Carlo Scarpa" (Köln: Taschen, 2002), 132.

26. Scarpa as quoted in "Interview with Carlo Scarpa" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 298.

27. Carlo Scarpa, "A Thousand Cypressess", *op. cit.*, 286.

28. Francesco Dal Co, *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 53.

29. Scarpa as quoted in "Interview with Carlo Scarpa" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 297.

30. Carlo Scarpa, "Letter of the Venetian Rationalists," *op. cit.*, 279-280.