

# The Brion Cemetery and the Narrative of Redemption

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Italian cemeteries provide striking examples of indigenous urban principles, positing discrete narratives of collective dwelling and civic form. The island cemetery of San Michele in Venice, for example, presents a wide range of urban possibilities, condensed within a walled "utopic" precinct. Villas, apartment buildings, streets, squares and gardens are arrayed for appreciation. More recently this urban metaphor has been examined in such works as *The Modena Civic Cemetery* by Aldo Rossi. Here the cemetery addresses the city and its future in full contemporary honesty. Stark perhaps, and even nihilistic, the project is striking in its clarity and power. Rossi's urban vision, articulating a space of silence and loss, may not be an optimistic one, but it is, perhaps, an accurate portrayal of our contemporary state. Yet other narratives of human futures exist, distinct from Rossi's post-humanistic city. Indeed different cemeteries present different stories, or different "cities" for reflection. The Brion Cemetery by Carlo Scarpa establishes one such contrasting narrative. In a subtle way the Brion Cemetery posits the presence of the mythological city, and its continuing presence within architectural thought. In doing so, the project reveals the narrative approach which operates within Scarpa's work, and its potential for expressing mythic concerns within architecture in general.

## FRAGMENTS OR STORIES?

Carlo Scarpa is traditionally celebrated as a master of materials and details, and this phenomenal aspect takes precedence in the reception of his work. Indeed, his projects present essays on material potential, as provocative confections of fragments which are powerful in their own terms. Evocative in their experiential presence, these figural collections participate easily in arguments favouring the specific and idiosyncratic, or even the anti-rational, perhaps in reaction to overarching schemes of abstract order prevalent elsewhere in contemporary architectural production. Yet this polemic is unfair, privileging the current desire for sensual richness and apparent disorder over the recognition of the conscious and significant narrative which operates within Scarpa's projects. Clearly his details and their material expression are significant, but they serve a larger and structured whole.

The Brion Family Cemetery, in San Vito near Asolo in northern Italy, provides striking evidence of this narrative intent. In a literary or episodic way the cemetery uses passage as a structuring principle, creating the thread of a plot. The idea of plot is understood here, however, as the gradual unveiling of the intent or "message" of the project, rather than a linear story. In this case the narrative is an eschatological one; the cemetery, like the city, creating a foundation for a vision of the future.

This question of one's relation to the future, both bodily and symbolically, is explored in different ways, and with differing degrees of physicality within the project. They centre, however, on

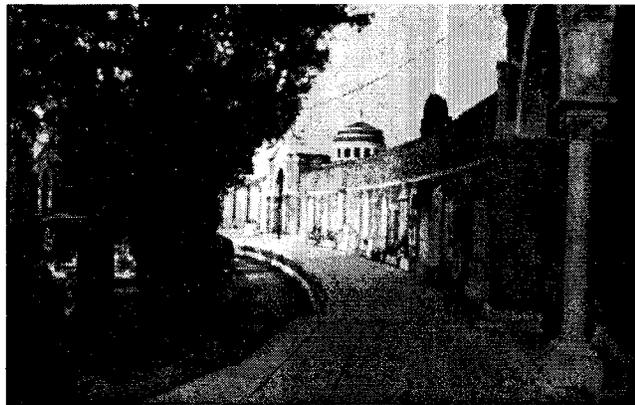


Fig. 1. The Cemetery of San Michele, Venice.



Fig. 2. Modena Civic Cemetery.

three specific forms of travel: the physical, visual, and mythical. The latter, positing an imaginary voyage through time, points to the relevance of the plot as well as the ultimate role of narrative within Scarpa's work.

## PHYSICAL TRAVEL

Physical travel through the cemetery encounters a rich set of architectural events, providing narrative clues for the definition of different episodes. Of particular significance are the points of rupture and threshold, articulating shifts in the plot as well as providing opportunities for material and figural clarification. These thresholds are independent but they also, more significantly, create

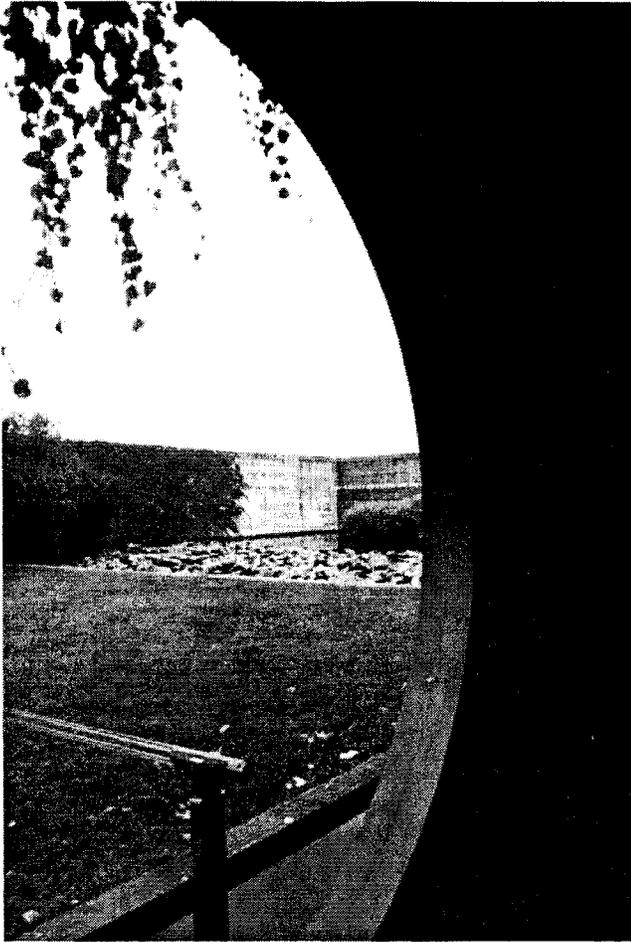


Fig. 3. Entry window.

defining edges, outlining and clarifying appreciable spatial figures, and provoking possible symbolic associations.

In addition to conventional means such as changes in level (steps) and horizontal definitions (walls and doors), there are a number of specific events articulated in complex rhetorical ways. Upon entry to the family precinct from the public cemetery direct passage is blocked. An opening created by two intersecting circular figures is set within a transverse wall. It provides a view but prevents physical access. This creates a T junction, with a view to the lawn beyond framed by the choice of physical passage: left or right. The latter decision, however, is (normally) blocked by a glass gate. Although this gate clearly does open (a slot in the floor is visible, along with a rather exotic controlling mechanism set on the outside wall), the path leads in the other direction into the garden. Through the blocked corridor and window a destination is teasingly presented, but rendered inaccessible.<sup>1</sup> The entry route runs alongside the transverse wall, until it opens into the space of the garden. At this point the journey follows a narrow watercourse, which directs passage towards the tombs of the patrons. Meeting the mausoleum precinct the water disappears into the ground while the path descends to a sunken platform level with the base of the tombs. This transformation of water consistently acts as a clue within the cemetery. Here it disappears into the earth, reminding us of its absorptive density. Water reappears elsewhere to define areas of inaccessibility and special significance. From the tombs it is possible to climb back to the lawn originally viewed on entry. A simple plane of grass, the lawn inhabits one wing of the basic L shape of the cemetery. Though in plan the end of the L appears to be the beginning of the composition, the real entry is at the centre, by the tombs, from where the space

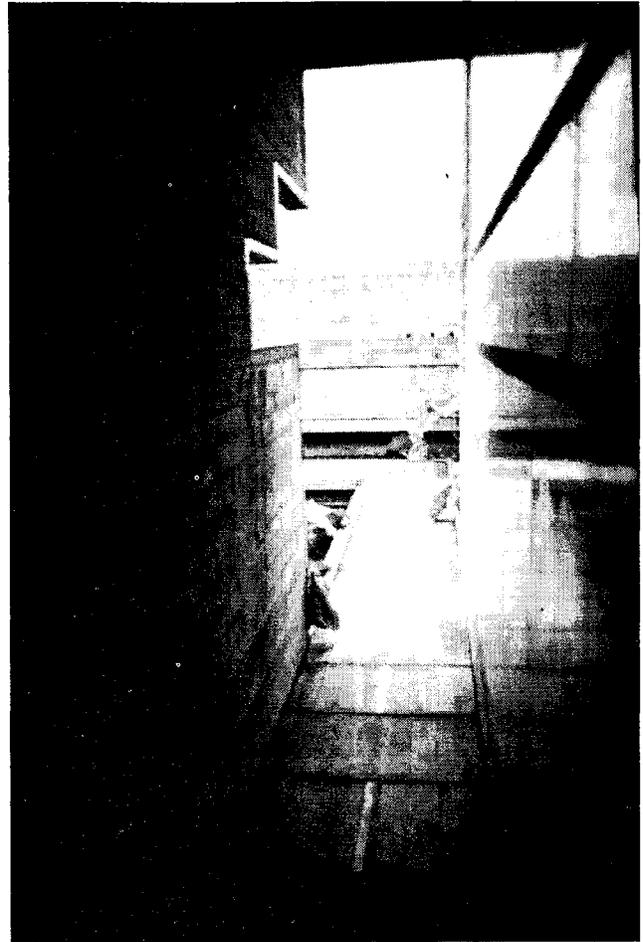


Fig. 4. Transverse entry corridor (to the right).

opens up visually backwards and forwards. Like the intersection of the two circles viewed upon entry, the central area is defined, or even created by the intersection of two more perfect ends.

Viewing back across the lawn leads to an island pavilion, the choice originally presented but blocked by the glass gate. Here an additional architectural marker subtly breaks the line of physical passage. A wire construction crosses between the parallel walls of the garden, dividing the lawn into spaces of physical and visual travel. Beyond the wires the island pavilion rests within its pool. Though only accessible by the path beyond the glass gate, the island is inhabited visually; separate but clearly present. The cables thus physically foreshadow the water's edge. Both wire and water allow uninterrupted views, but reinforce the inaccessibility of the island.

The threshold between the tomb precinct and the second wing of the cemetery, looking forward, is also subtly articulated. A change in level is transversed by a narrow set of steps. The steps are toned, each footstep sounding a different pitch, which creates a phenomenally distinct moment. They mark a shift in the ground plane and identify the path towards an additional set of tombs and the chapel beyond. The bridge leading from the second lawn across a pool into the chapel denotes another significant physical threshold. Water again acts as a defining element though here, as at the pavilion island, it is a barrier rather than a guide. Perhaps more precisely, it identifies a changed state. The chapel rests within this pool, the bridge physically crossing the aquatic threshold, though in articulated steps. From the chapel one either returns across the bridge to the exit or passes through a door into the hidden garden beyond, a simple lawn surrounded by cypress trees.

In each case physical movement is extended and made special.

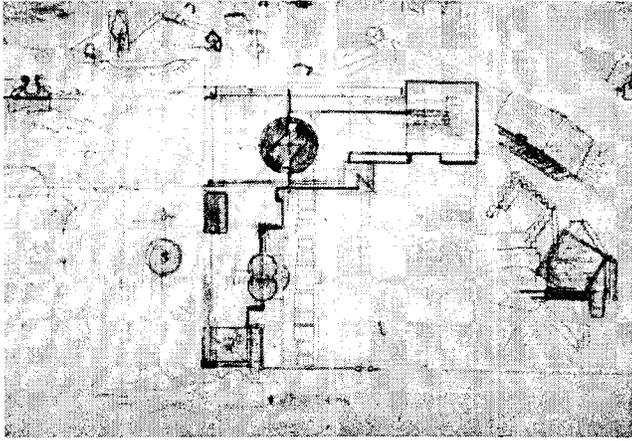


Fig. 5. Plan.

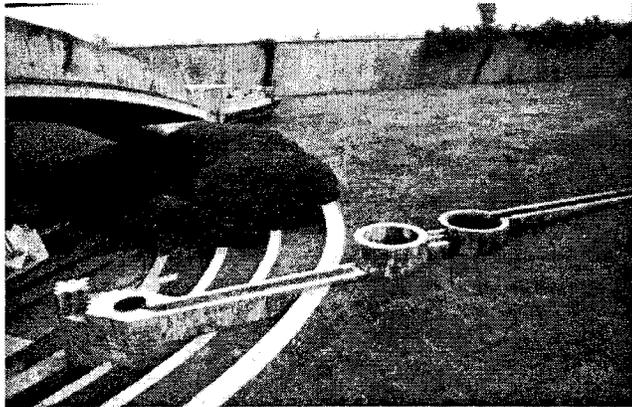


Fig. 6. Water course and tomb precinct.

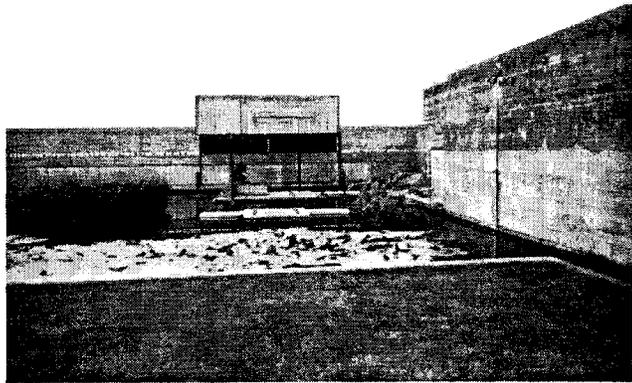


Fig. 7. Island pavilion.

Thresholds mark passage through distinct moments of architectural transformation. Formal episodes are thus created which constitute chapters in a possible architectural narrative. These edges, however, generally block physical rather than visual movement. One can view easily between or among the episodes, which remain noticeably different due to their physical qualities. Thus the thresholds make explicit what is already spatially present.

## VISUAL PASSAGE

Visual passage within the cemetery is both intentional and enticing, presenting spaces and objects for observation rather than physical attainment. This is a potent reminder of the possibility of

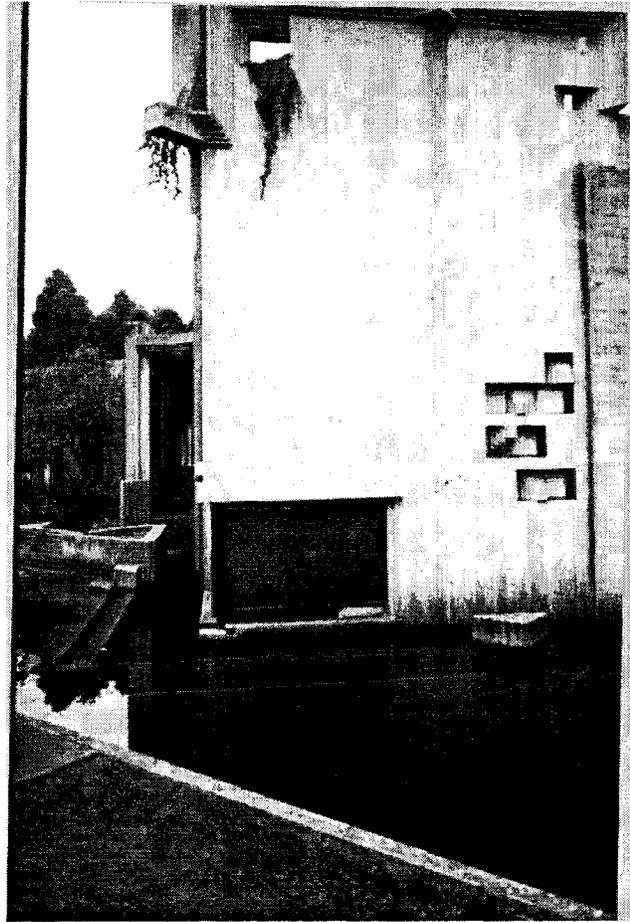


Fig. 8. Chapel.

different symbolic states within the co-existent physical space of the cemetery. More significantly, this posits different existential states not accessible to literal or physical human activity. Through this partial visual access one is aware of what is unreachable or only partly so, and as a result the continuity of physical space is broken. An even space of experience is replaced by places which are qualitatively, and even symbolically distinct. At the entry physical passage to the right is blocked. Visually, however, the corridor extends past the glass door to the bridge beyond. Present but inaccessible, this path provokes curiosity. Once in the cemetery proper, the view back to the island is accentuated. The thin wire barrier prevents physical travel, at least symbolically, but it serves an inverse function visually, enticing attention. Like the pool beyond, the wire identifies a region of the ensemble for visual contemplation. We can't reach the island, but are seduced into reflecting upon it.

The water observed within the linear channel observed upon entry leads one along the path to the tombs. Its subsequent disappearance, like the wire mentioned above, acts to entice. The linear channel and active water guide visual passage, but to where? The destination is hidden. It is possible that the water is simply absorbed into the physical earth, losing its form in the process. Yet the water's disappearance may also remind one of an inhabited yet inaccessible underworld beneath the earth. If the pond around the pavilion island protects through preventing horizontal passage, like a moat, the water here is more sectional, showing us a partly glimpsed region or destination lurking beneath the visual field.

The chapel at the opposite end of the complex also provokes visual travel, though in a different way. Like the floating pavilion it is an island within a larger pool, but it is easily accessed by the entry bridge. In contrast to this horizontal journey, however, one is

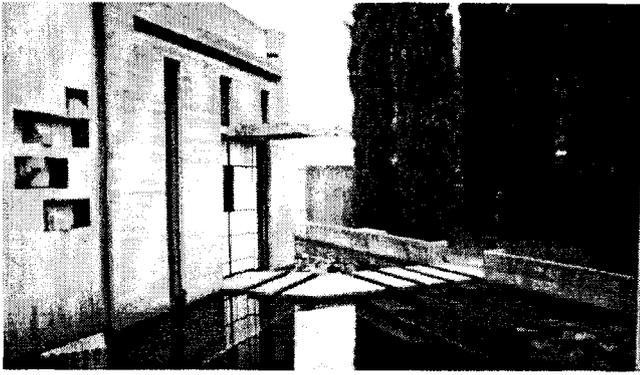


Fig. 9. Chapel/ hidden garden

directed by the building's form to look down, into the water itself. The walls and foundations of the building there transform. In and around the water, the building's facets create an ambiguous reflective barrier with its surface. Walls sculpted underwater extend visual passage. Architectural detail is tantalisingly obscured; carefully made but not fully apprehended by us. These deep and mysterious foundations provoke speculation on the grounding of the chapel and, by extension, the stability or value of the ground plane itself. Unlike the floating pavilion, the chapel establishes a vertical orientation, with mysterious ends.

The ceiling of the chapel leads in the opposite direction. One's view is drawn upwards by its form and material transformation. A set of steps or layers seen in geometric progression creates a perspectival path, culminating in a ceiling of gold and light. Destination is noted by brightness and material value. This path implies a possible departure from the room, past the guided ascent and beyond to the sky above. Material lightness animates the altar and alabaster windows, creating ritual parallels to the vertical path. Thus the chapel floats between the two mysterious realms of water and sky. It calls attention to a visual journey extending away from our inhabited plane. While all buildings notionally exist within this narrow band, the chapel calls attention to its limited physical state. In both directions there is a clear material expression of visual passage, marked by the faceting of the form. Each leads the eye away from our horizontal landscape, and physical potential, to mysterious and inaccessible possibilities beyond.

The journey between our realm of physical inhabitation and its bounding conditions is marked through difference and duration. Thresholds are identified and thickened. Yet this visual clarification of difference also demonstrates the potential for a visual passage towards the invisible. More clearly this shift in direction implies the coexistence of imaginary destinations within the precinct of the cemetery. One may also pass from the interior of the chapel through the doorway to the private garden beyond.

### THE NARRATIVE OF IMAGINARY TIME

Evoked by these visual clues is a passage of the imagination, which is ultimately mythical, or even theological. This mental voyage provides the cemetery's essential narrative structure. For it is proposed here that the devices mentioned above serve to articulate different existential or mythical states, imagined or implied within the specific episodes of the cemetery. In this case the narrative follows an ideal version of a Catholic eschatology. The journey of humanity, from its ideal but lost past through our physical and mortal presence to a sense of a possible future is outlined, the significance of each episode evoked.<sup>2</sup>

The island pavilion is partly visible upon entry, yet inaccessible to physical passage. To see it completely one must enter the cemetery, travel to its centre, and look back. The wire barrier and the water's edge create visual markers, but also identify spatial and even

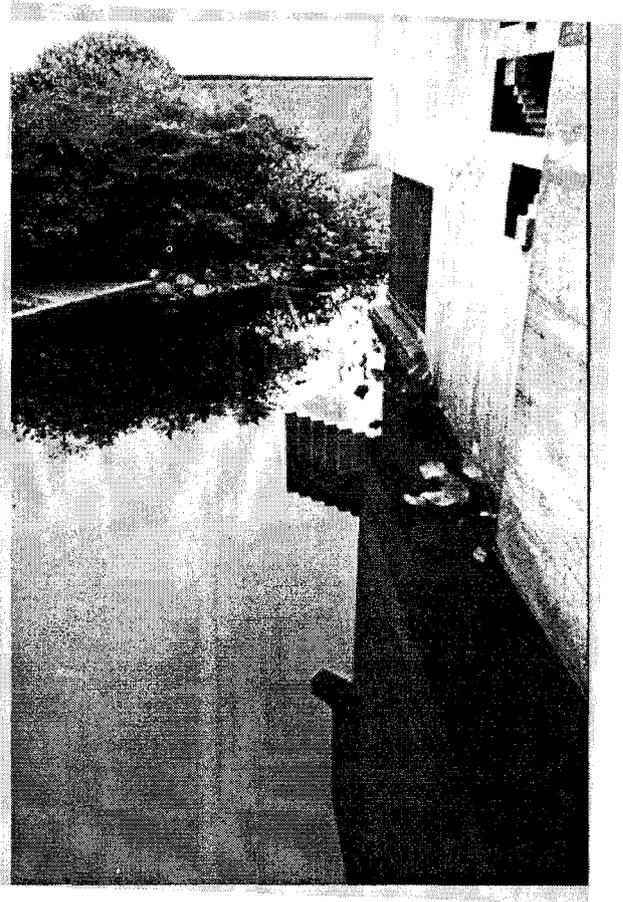


Fig. 10. The Chapel and its grounding.

temporal boundaries. One inhabits the central landscape of the cemetery (spatially its simplest part), yet looks back to a different world of greater purity, or even perfection. Indeed, it constructs a form of idealised memory, the pavilion in its setting provoking a dramatic sense of longing. This confrontation with a distant ideal, is Edenic. A desired past is remembered, yet impossible to regain.<sup>3</sup> This reminiscence is further reinforced by the island motif, a recurring utopic symbol.

The central zone of the cemetery is most clearly the space of worldly physical passage. Flanked by the island on one side and the chapel on the other, both set within their still pools, it is compositionally circumscribed by more mysterious ends. Water here moves then disappears, the image of life passing away to a new home beneath the earth. This disappearance locates the earthly remains of the interred bodies, the absence of water echoing an absence of earthly life.

The tombs are set into the earth, under a low heavy roof as if underground. They are physically and geographically fixed. Interesting formally as objects, the tombs remain rather opaque. They inspire respect rather than encouraging optimistic speculation. While the tombs contain the remains of the patrons, and are thus a destination worthy of concern, the area is more like a space of passage; one less developed architecturally than the two ends. Simpler and more horizontal, the cave-like home of the bodies is discovered within one's earthly travels across the landscape.

The chapel at the end of the passage proposes a destination. Poised between the mysterious underworld and the sky, it presents a foretaste of a possible heaven; a purpose for this earthly journey and its summation. One is presented with salvation through faith, in contrast to the weighty, sombre and decaying state of physical mortality. Whether abstractly, via the journey to a heavenly sky within the chapel, or more physically, through to the private paradise

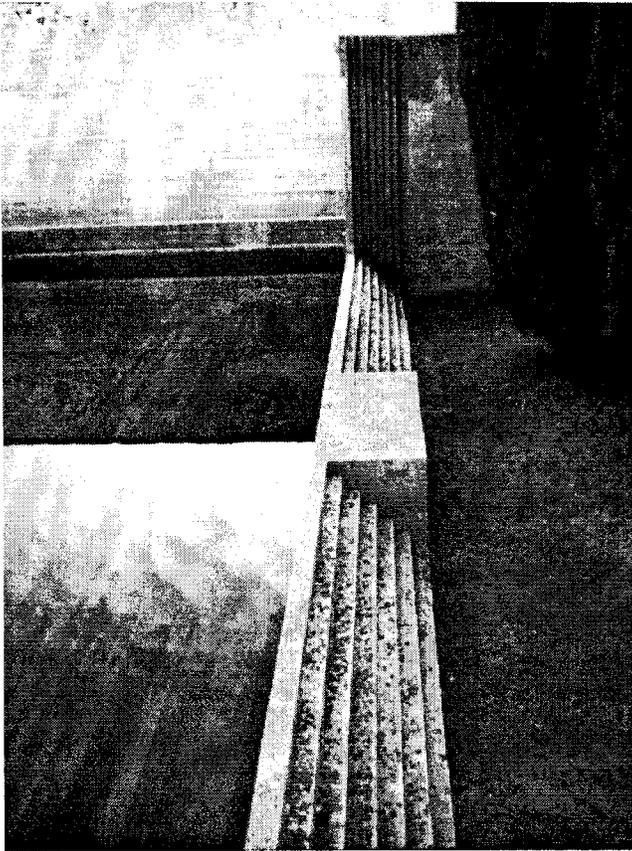


Fig. 11. The Chapel base.

garden, passage here extends beyond the completion of a physical life. The hidden garden is a place of repose, a place with no exit. Thus it is atemporal, where one reflects upon the journey undertaken. The destination implied through the visual journey up and past the chapel's ceiling we can only imagine.

We are in the Middle Ages, stated St. Augustine, trapped between original sin (and the expulsion from Paradise), and Last Judgment (with the subsequent destinations of heaven or hell). Our earthly life is a pilgrimage towards this future destiny, knowledge of which only exists through prophecy, imagination or, perhaps more accurately, fear, dream and desire. Yet assisting in this undertaking is a reminder of what we have lost, the memory of a past ideal. We can't return to an edenic state, but may reflect upon it as a guide for the journey forward.

Between memory and dream there is earthly existence, a mortal passage linking different existential states. Connecting these mythical ends is a long journey, through the physical demands of toil and death. This is the journey narrated architecturally by the Brion Cemetery. It is understood through its articulated episodes and their associational qualities rather than by any specific referential code. Yet this narrative is not an alien or private one applied to the project. In its parts and essential concerns the story relates directly to the programme of the cemetery itself, where the questions of life, physical death, and an alternative future are clearly central.

The programme of a cemetery (like the city) does not demand a narrative necessarily, but in this case the narrative structure places the programme and its site within a larger cultural and religious context. This presents a possibility of considering the cemetery and its function so that, through the architectural experience, one views the purpose of death rather than its simple material result.

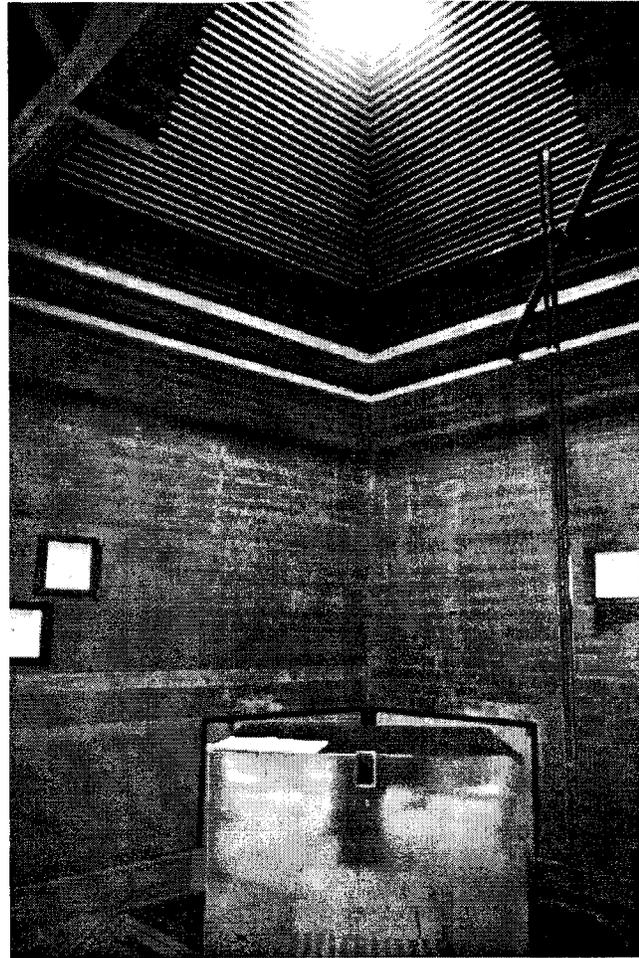


Fig. 12. The Chapel Ceiling.

Death is a mysterious state, yet it maintains a function within our perceptions and preoccupations. The revelation of its cultural purpose through an architectural experience is the ultimate intent of the Brion Cemetery. It also demonstrates the narrative aspect of Scarpa's work. The cemetery does not construct a narrative in the sense of telling a literal story, but rather it points to narration as the principal means of placing an activity or event within the context of a social or existential purpose, revealing its own story for our benefit. By extension, this narrative possibility provides ways of considering the larger city as well, through its arrangement of episodes and events within an intentional and significant whole.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The island is open to the owners of the cemetery, and is tended by a local nun, but it is closed to the general public.
- <sup>2</sup> It is also possible here that the narrative is a cultural hybrid. Scarpa's drawings of the island pavilion, for example, appear to refer more to a classical golden age rather than any explicitly Biblical image. The merging of an Ovidian past with a Biblical future is perhaps a specifically Italian possibility.
- <sup>3</sup> It is interesting seeing visitors step over the wire barrier, oblivious to its presence, in order to get closer to the edge of the pool and the island. While this doesn't demonstrate a great deal of architectural sensitivity, it does point to the drawing power of the island image.