

Gregorio Froio  
**Narrative and autobiography in architecture.**  
**The Scarzuola by Tomaso Buzzi**

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**Abstract**

The relationship between architecture and narration is a widely debated theme in the contemporary world. At the base of possible convergent themes with apparently so distant disciplines there are a series of knots not yet completely resolved. In particular the spectacular dimension has swept away all areas of knowledge, with the problem of a continuous rethinking and adaptation of artistic (and therefore architectural) work. Especially in relation to the theme of communication, we can verify a paradox: between narrative languages and immediacy of media, the conceptual (and temporal) short circuit generates interpretative ambiguities. One of the most effective form of communication, the image, plays an increasingly persuasive role as well as pervasive.

What forms of narration support this unprecedented acceleration of communication? What is the role of writing today? Can the architecture measure itself with the narrative and imaginative dimension of the storytelling?

**Keywords**

auto-narrative — sedimentation — fairy-tale

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**Introduction**

The connection among narration, writing (literary, artistic, architectural writing) and architecture was studied by several authors.

A particular link between novel and history was investigated by Roland Barthes. A common bond, for both, implies «la construction d'un univers autarcique, fabriquant lui-même ses dimensions et ses limites, et y disposant son Temps, son Espace, sa population, sa collection d'objets et ses mythes»<sup>1</sup>. This research implies the definition of a literary world based on the identification of a language or (on a deeper and more personal level) of a writing.

What is the meaning of writing that underlies every form of telling story? Beyond style and language, as objects (the things of literary doing), writing, as a function, is defined as «le rapport entre la création et la société, elle est le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale, elle est la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l'Histoire» (Barthes 1953). In this social purpose there is an intrinsic nature of compromise: between choice (freedom) and tradition (memory). Writing as a narrative process includes in itself a component of temporality that unfolds through times, sequences, rhythms, pauses.

Tale, time, memory: among these terms there is an indissoluble and circular function according to Paul Ricoeur. In *Temps et Récit* (1983) he describes three phases: in a pre-figurative phase the story requires an action and a world (symbolic and temporal) within which it takes place; in a second configurative phase the content of stratified norms interlaces with innovation; in a final stage of 'refiguration' the story becomes an instrument for decoding and understanding the world (Rocca, 2008).



**Fig. 1**  
The Great Mother (Photography  
by Matteo Benedetti, 2012).

In *Architecture et narrativité* Ricoeur progressively reduces the distance between telling (as language of spoken and written signs) and architecture (as language of building materials and structural forms) making out recounted time and built space. Connecting the spatiality of the story with the temporality of the architectural design, narrative praxis implies the creation of a new fact, an unpublished work. In this sense «every narrative composition starts a story that we can define fictitious in a broad sense, including also historical narrative insofar as there is a verbal composition separated from real events, a *story* distinct from a real *history*»<sup>2</sup>. The category of the *plot* involves a reflexive operation in which the time turns up twice, as time of story and time of telling. In analogy, in the configuration of architectural space the act of building includes a temporal dimension. The new building becomes petrified memory: time is incorporated in a space. The inscribed signs, as inscription, bring within the space the act of the story assuring its duration: in the same way the hardness of the material confers durability to the built.

The textual character concerning the matter of a single building is transferred in relation to the city in terms of sedimentation of the literary space: «In the same way that the narrative has its equivalent in the structure, the phenomenon of *intertextuality* has its own in the network of already-there buildings that contextualize the new building. (...). It is a matter of the historicity of the very act of inscribing a new building in an already built space, which coincides broadly with the phenomenon of the town» (Ricoeur 1996)<sup>3</sup>.

### **Narrative and autobiographical architecture**

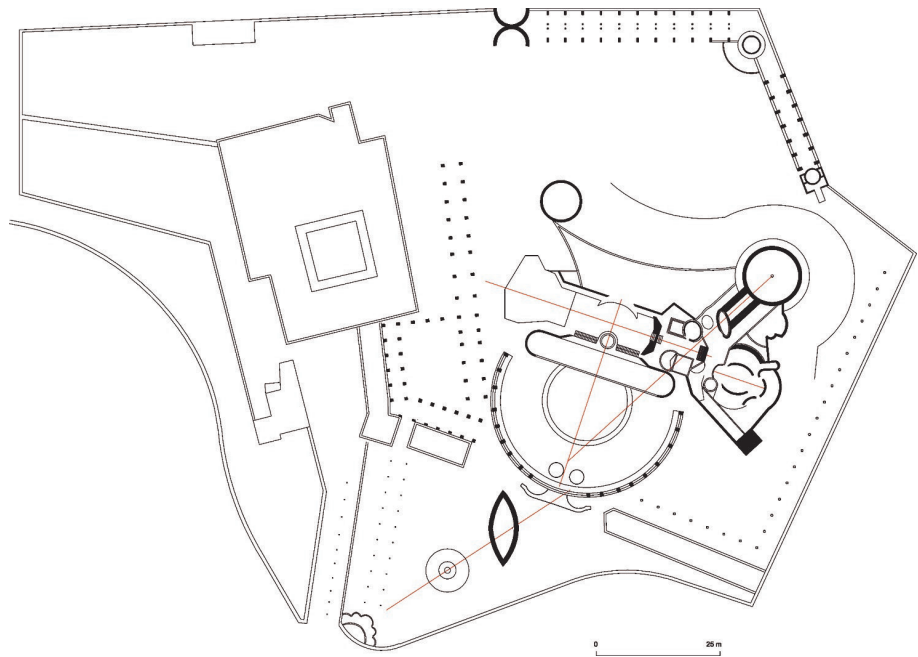
The concept of narrative architecture describes a set of theoretical reflections widely debated over the past decades, in a dense thematic reference between literature, art, cinema, architecture, urban planning. So we can make the difference between analyzes and narrations. While analysis have a scientific character, using models based on the description of data and quantitative testing, etc., architectural and urban narratives have an imaginative character that brings them back to the sphere of the story. In this way they imply a collective operation that aims indirectly to create a real *epos* (Purini 2007)<sup>4</sup>.

If this is true above all about the city we can transfer this theory to individual architectures whose peculiar character transfers the narrative dimension into a self-reflective and personal sphere.

In another paper we have spoken about Villa Adriana as a narration of memories (Semerani 1991) as well as a collection of memories by Hadrian (Ungers 1979). The composition of plan, from the open and unfinished layout (Malfona 2012), the pavilions system of the individual buildings with a *paratactic* (MacDonald and Pinto 1997) or *hypotactic* disposition (Caliari 2013), defines the narrative traits of a historical exemplum whose evocative power increases interpretive links and references to other modern architectures.

An example of narrative architecture is provided by the personal residence of Tomaso Buzzi, the Scarzuola. Buzzi built it from the late fifties until his death (in 1981), incorporating the historical pre-existences into a single project<sup>5</sup>.

There are only a few schematic plans of the whole structure, which are closely related to the personal way of working by Buzzi. From these and others reconstructions it is possible to identify a plot of architectural liter-



**Fig. 2**  
General plan of the Scarzuola  
(Froio, 2012).

ary connected to symbolic and religious themes. The setting in a natural context intentionally refers to typology of ancient Roman suburban villas (above all Villa Adriana in Tivoli), with many references: the eccentric architectural plants in the English gardens or the Italian gardens, like Villa D'Este and *Bomarzio*; the quotations of the eighteenth-century fantastic projects by Ledoux; the esoteric gardens built in Europe between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries<sup>6</sup>.

We can read literary descriptions of ancient villas by Pliny the Younger Buzzi knew well.

But what is actually the narrative character of this work?

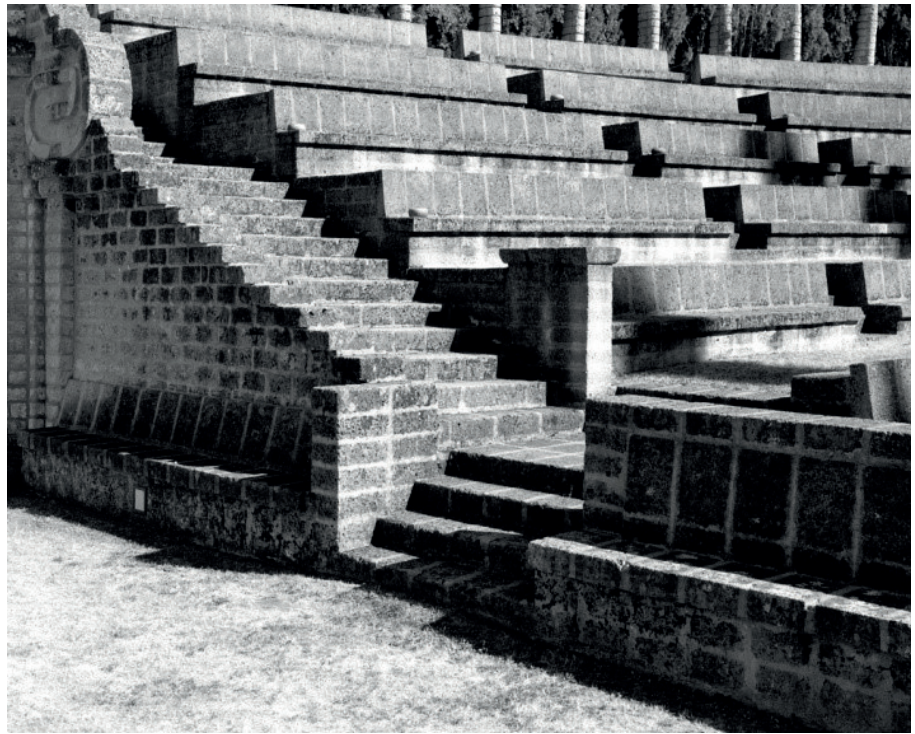
Tale. The Scarzuola tells a story, about its author, his personal impression and a vision of the world: it is a collection of memories, echoes and suggestions.

But it is also *a story in the story* of his writings, a diary of memories. There is a continuous reference between construction and description and back. An autobiographical memorial, in the shape of a museum in *plein air*:

Ho raccontato sere fa, in società, delle mie costruzioni nel giardino alla Scarzuola, paragonandomi, per celia, all'emigrante che, ritornato in patria, si costruisce, secondo dei paesi stranieri in cui ha soggiornato e i gusti dei tempi, lo chalet svizzero, l'isba russa, la pagoda cinese o il padiglione arabo o il giardinetto giapponese; o all'estremo opposto, al modo con cui l'imperatore Adriano, nella villa di Tivoli, ha riunito, in un solo luogo la valle di Tempe, il canopeo, ecc. ecc., in costruzioni che gli ricordavano i paesi dove aveva soggiornato e che gli erano cari: a metà distanza potrei porre quegli ambasciatori che hanno riunito nelle loro case porcellane e icone russe, bronzi e lacchè cinesi, stampe giapponesi, sculture maya e messicane o peruviane, totem africani<sup>7</sup>.

Theatre. The Scarzuola can really be read as a textual work: there is a clear and literary reference to the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by Francesco Colonna, an obscure and mysterious text of the humanist age. Buzzi carefully studied it drawing the complex symbology of illustrations and the mysterious and initiatory plot. But it is, above all, a theatrical work, staging the visions, the dreams and the obsessions of its author-narrator<sup>8</sup>. A petrified fantasy, as it has been defined, in which the mater and consequently the materials become an expression of the flowing time. Time. Temporal dimension is another key of reading, as quotations of other





**Fig. 3**

The detail of steps from Teatrum Mundi (Photography by Matteo Benedetti, 2012).

architectures (by miniaturized archeological sites): from the idea of poetical fragments, but also, and in a more properly compositional way, as sequence of linked spaces: a sequence of doors, metaphysical passages in a meridian light; the detail of steps rising next to the *Teatrum mundi*; the evocative value of the column in the atrium of the Tower of Babel or the ruined architectures as refined quotes from the Garden of the Desert de Retz; the compressed and Hadrian space of the *Nymphaeum*; the sensuality of the female figure as a portal; the small pavilions silent apparitions as guardians of the garden. And again: the *Teatrum Mundi* with the Theater of Arnia, the Camera of the Eye and the Acropolis; the *Nymphaeum* of Diana and Atteone (in the part below the central scene); the Aquatic Theater or the *Naumachie*; the Temple of Apollo with the sacred cypress; the Theater of the Infinite, of the Unfinished and of the Human Body. In this stratification of themes and Names, a narrative plot is constructed with its rhythms, pauses, paths, stops and arrival points<sup>9</sup>. Fairytale dimension. Outside of Time and history (in an anti-historical dimension), the fairy tale ties together, as an enchanted garden, the themes described above. The container-content reveals the hidden plot: the run of Narrator from Poliphilo/Buzzi to Polia/Wisdom becomes research of an architectural self-communication's (or self-narration) form with an incessant springing up of interpretations<sup>10</sup>.

The eyes of the Architect (and his vision of the world) finally become a narration form, a serial sequence that wisely takes up the forms and its materials. Lastly, the protagonist of this investigation becomes the idea of an absorbed and meditative Time that the architecture incorporates as a secret element, full of mystery.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barthes R. (1953), *Le degré zéro de l'écriture suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques*, Éditions du Seuil, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur (1996), *Architettura et narratività*, in «Urbanisme», nov.-dic. 1998 n.303, pp.44-51.

<sup>3</sup> A second thesis, in antithesis with Ricoeur, was investigated by Jean-François Lyotard: the fracture and the crisis of the story in modernity is reflected in a “weakening” of post-modern narrativity and an eschatological rethinking of the architectural project (Riva 2017).

<sup>4</sup> The narrative sphere has a strong link with an imaginative representation of the city and the story through images. The city as a text or hyper-text has powerfully inspired the twentieth century narrative: urban descriptions in *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos, *On the road* by Jack Kerouac, *Cosmopolis* by Don de Lillo.

<sup>5</sup> The Scarzuola is located in Umbria, in Montegabbione (in the province of Terni) in the place where, according to tradition, Francesco d'Assisi founded a small convent and a church. The name seems to derive from the word ‘scarza’ a local aquatic plant with which the saint built a small hut in the garden of the convent.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Cazzato, V., Fagiolo M. e Giusti M.A., (2002). *Atlante delle grotte e dei ninfei in Italia, Italia Settentrionale, Umbria e Marche*, Electa, Milano.

<sup>7</sup> Tomaso Buzzi, *Lettere pensieri appunti 1937-1979*, a cura di Enrico Fenzi, Silvana Editoriale, Milano 2000, p.60-61 (12/1/1967).

<sup>8</sup> «Perché ho scelto l'architettura teatrale, moltiplicando i teatri (esterni e interni)? Per una mia vocazione teatrale che non è stata mai sviluppata per la nequizia dei tempi (...). E poi perché era il vero modo, l'unico legittimo in architettura, per ispirarsi, riprendere, riecheggiare forme del passato, modi di espressione, uso di materiali, manierismi ecc., senza cadere nel pericolo delle ricostruzioni: per dar libertà alla fantasia (anche surrealistica: ma non quella nella pittura e nella scultura), ma solidificandola, pietrificandola». Ivi, p.63.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Cassani A. (2004), “L'autobiografia in pietra di Tomaso Buzzi”. Casabella, 723 (maggio-giugno), pp.62-87 and: Mantovani S. (2004), “La Scarzuola, ovvero opera Classica, medievale, manieristica, e anche, perché no, decadente”. Quaderni della Rivista Ricerche per la progettazione del paesaggio. n 1, vol.3 (settembre-dicembre), pp.61-71.

<sup>10</sup> The Scarzuola was defined by many authors: a neo-manneristic and kitsch *capriccio* (Bisi 1983), an eschatologic allegory (Alighieri e Moncagatta 1997, p.156), an esoteric (Fenzi 2000) and piranesian work (Purini 2008).

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