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Outline of an archaeology of the sepulchral space

Abstract
This contribution aims to develop a structuralist "critical measurement", in order to individuate "formal principles" underlying the architectonical design of the Brion cemetery. Based on the theories elaborated by Vittorio Ugo concerning the issue of archetypes in architecture, an "archaeology" of the sepulchral space is here proposed, in order to perform a "classification" of the internal forms of the monument. The archetypes found are classified in two macro-families: "archaeology of nature" and "archaeology of architecture".

Parole Chiave
Archetype — Eidos — Architectural measurement — Carlo Scarpa — Brion Cemetery

The theory of Structuralism, the critical-artistic movement originating in the '60s of the 19th century, is based on the principle of "classification". According to structuralists, everything can be and must be classified; what is not classified does not exist.
Following Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, who represent the main references for the construction of a contemporary analytic criticism, several scholars have attempted to define a new "general system of artistic knowledge".
In the field of architecture, where the development of Structuralism started later, Vittorio Ugo[1] built a theory aimed to individuate the consistency and the statute of architecture as a discipline, through a taxonomical argumentation. Within this "classification" – intended as principia individuationis – Ugo elaborates a theory on archetypes: «a system of systems that aims to reunite and relate the foundational principles of architecture in a unitary and articulate theoretic field».
This article does not contain a deep investigation on the complex relationship that has developed between architectural analysis and structuralist thinking[2] – in order to save space for the other focuses of the text –, whereas it presents an experimental critical reading on the fundamental archetypes of the Brion cemetery, based on Vittorio Ugo's theories. The objective is to define an "archaeo-logy" (literally, a discourse on archetypes) of Scarpa's masterpiece: an analysis of the monument that allows going beyond the superficial description of the physical, metric, chronological and symbolic information within the complex of San Vito d'Altivole (moreover, already discussed in a consistent part of literature), in favor of an objective (but also subjective) interpretation of its deepest figurative structures. In Ugo's words, the purpose is a "dimensioning" aimed to clarify the measure units

Fig. 1
Carlo Scarpa, Tomba Brion, San Vito di Altivole.
The Meditation Pavilion.
Photo by Lorenzo Pennati.

of the materialized elements, within the field of archetypes.

By adopting the Sicilian professor's double classification of "archaeology of nature" and "archaeology and architecture"[3], it is possible to recognize, in the èidos of the Brion cemetery, three macro-families of "primal forms" that allow "measuring" space. The first macro-family, the "archaeology of nature" includes the archetype of "forest", "clearing" and "garden". The second and the third family, "archaeology of architecture", comprise the archetypal variants of the static space – "fence", "hut" and "theatre" – and of the dynamic space – "labyrinth", "bridge" and "stairs". These are nine elementary[4] and trans-typological polarities, composed in an allusive sense by Scarpa as a clarification of the maximum degree of structural consistency of the sepulchral space.

Without altering their position within archaeo-families, and without keeping in a close consideration their physical distribution (that is, their compositional syntax), the nine individuated archetypes are reported in the following as in a "list"; they are described according to the physical elements that can be recognized in the phenomenological field of the monument.

The Forest

At a conference held in Madrid[5] in 1978, Carlo Scarpa declared that he wanted to propose the plantation of "one thousand cypresses" in the first design idea. This is an interesting statement that shows the "forest" to be the first archetype sought for the figurative orchestration of this extraordinary masterpiece. «I could have done it – Scarpa says – […] but as it always happens at the end of a work, I thought: "My God, I did it all wrong" » (Scarpa 1978). The exclusion of the plantation of one thousand trees in favor of the design of an intercluded space did not forbid the master from leaving traces of this first archetype. They can be found, for example, in the eleven cypresses planted in the rectangular space on the West of the cemetery, beyond the boundary wall, next to the main access, or in the cedrus atlantica glauca pendula placed in front of the "propylaea" at the internal access to the cemetery.

The "forest" – or rather its traces – represents in the Brion cemetery the memory of the "primal state" of the natural space, before the modifications brought by man and by history.

Using Vittorio Ugo's words, the forest portrays « "the anti-house" par excellence, the unhabitable-by-man» (Ugo 1991); a context where habiting – and burying – cannot help constituting a modifying activity that changes the "wood" into a "garden".

The Clearing

It is the archetype that affirms the «dominant quality of a "place"» (Ugo 1991), the settling and topological principle based on deforestation and tillage works: the opening of the "forest", the geometrical venue of the "enclosure", representing the primigenial furrow that houses walls and sacralizes the intercluded area. In the clearing is the dense and consistent "void" that Scarpa prefers to the dense and primal "solid" of the "forest". An "enclosed" space within which the other "representational" archetypes can be collocated, following a precise composition.

The Garden

It is the archetype of the tamed natural space: the cultural Apollonian that substitutes the Dionysian "wood". It is the analogical model of the kosmos that intertwines with chaos. Eden, «a place of dia-logue and conciliation par excellence» (Ugo 1991). In the Brion complex, the "garden" can be found in the whole geometric, formal and structural organization, in its totally controlled and controllable nature, in the definition of the image of a "pacifying" and "sacred" place.

The Fence

It is universally acknowledged that the act of fencing marks the official sacralizing action of a space. The fence separates the inside from the outside, the self from the other, order from disorder. The construction of the fence creates a sacred world that analogically mirrors kosmos. The "fence" archetype is built by the religious man who seeks a contact with the divine. It is temenos: a "separate" sacred space where the entrance is only possible through the "threshold". In San Vito d'Altivole, the fence turns into a wall that is sloped on the external side, yet plain on the internal side: an optical mechanism that allows «those who are inside to look outside [and forbids those] who are outside from looking inside» (Scarpa 1978)[6].

Fig. 3
Carlo Scarpa, Tomba Brion, San Vito di Altivole.
The cave-temple.
Photo by Lorenzo Pennati.

The Hut

As a fundamental archetype of the idea of "dwelling", the hut is at the origin of the éidos of architecture. In its "schematical" evolution, it is initially a stone-cut "cave" – that communicates the principle of "shelter" – and then a built hut, expressing the comprehension and the cultural re-elaboration of the same law. In the Brion cemetery, there is the metaphor of both versions. The first representation is that of the "temple-cave" that conceals the altar; a space illuminated by holes and by a gash in the pyramidal configuration. The archetype of the "cave" is referred to by the aedicula for the burial of the family members, characterized as well by a light from above, cast by an emptying cut on the sloped roof.

On the other hand, the "meditation pavilion" can be reconducted to the constructed structure of the "hut", demonstrated by a wooden roof sustained by slender metal pilasters; as it emerges from many drawings, Scarpa imagines this space as "inhabited" by young women's bodies.

The Theatre

The Brion grave is the place of the "staging" of the binomial couple of death and life. It is a thèatron, a term that derives from the archaic thèasthai, literally meaning: a place where to "look with astonishment and wonder". In this design, Scarpa writes the "script" for an "open", strongly cathartic place. «I wanted to demonstrate – says the artist in a statement reported by Philippe Duboy – how to act in the social, local, urban context to make people understand what the sense of death, eternity and transience could be»[7]. The grave is the «public place of civitas […] prepared for the "wait"» (Dal Co 1984); the space where «everyone goes with a strong affection, [where] kids play and dogs run» (Scarpa 1978).

The Brion grave "theatrically" represents death as a "complement of life" and not as a "mystery". It is a monument and a cultural symbol raised in front of the dead; «primigenial cradle of meanings» (Dal Co 1984). Within the global conception of this space as a "theatre", the semicircular seats placed in the cavity beneath the arcosolium are physically allusive to the koilon: a place for prayer and for the ecstatic contemplation of death.

Fig. 4
Carlo Scarpa, Tomba Brion, San Vito di Altivole.
The arcosolium and the koilon.
Photo by Lorenzo Pennati.

The Labyrinth

In complementarity with the static space of the hut, the labyrinth is a dynamic space. When analyzing this archetype, Vittorio Ugo affirms that the labyrinth is a physical and conceptual structure «that exalts the notion of place as a geometric quality, intrinsic in a space, and as the result of the coexistence of components» (Ugo 1991); in this sense, the Brion cemetery is a "labyrinth-shaped narration".

The processional succession of routes that connects the archetypes, imposing «a particular approach to each architectonical event» (Dal Co 1984), is indeed labyrinthic. The ambiguity of the access to the grave, reachable both through the forest/threshold from the cemetery, and through the gate/threshold on the street (private access), is indeed labyrinthic. The allegoric path of water «that fuses together images of beginning and end, producing the coincidence of the "first and last" » (Dal Co 1984), finally, is indeed labyrinthic; it is a liquid element of figurative link (and symbolic mediation) between all the other archetypes[8].

The Bridge

It is the "joining" archetype, the topological "axial" dimension of continuity/discontinuity. The bridge represents the metaphor of the rite of passage, of connection. This archetype can be seen in the arcosolium of the grave, past the two spouses' graves. «I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth» (Genesis, IX, 13), as stated in the passage of the Bible that could have suggested this figurative program to Scarpa. In the arcosolium of the Brion cemetery, the bridge is actually a "rainbow", as suggested by the color of the mosaic on its internal side. It is a dynamic place entrusted to Iris, Gods' messenger and intermediary between the Earth and the Sky.

The paths on the surface of water in the labyrinth-path that allow reaching the "forest" of cypresses and the "meditation pavilion" are bridges, as well.

The Stairs

It is the archetype of ascension: a "vertical bridge" for the initiation to the rite. In the Brion cemetery, the stairs are used to mark the slight difference between the original height of the existing cemetery and the artificial one, created by Scarpa's design. Here five steps, slightly offset, allow a detachment from the existing cemetery. Additional allusions to the archetype of stairs can also be found in the theme of the "stepped frame", diffusely used as a decorative element. In this case, the frame/stairs serves as an «optical guide [that] runs across the volumes […], showing its most evident form where the need for a formal definition is more urgent, and where a sign of order is more necessary in the axial pattern of the composition» (Dal Co 1984).

These are, in a nutshell, the nine archetypes found: primal foundational principles that allow "backwarding" to the global intuition that drives the genesis of the design; to its deepest "structure". In a structuralist key, the exegesis performed here – through a methodology that can be experimented on any architecture – allows developing a concrete knowledge activity of the "conceptual form" of the architectural work. In this sense, the analyzed formal structure is not physically intrinsic to the construction[9], but the expression of a work of interpretation and measurement: a product, as Vittorio Ugo would say, of "critical dimensioning" aimed to the representation of the "archaeological field" of the sepulchral space.

Notes

[1] Vittorio Ugo (Palermo, 1938-2005), Full Professor of Theory and History of Representation Forms at the Polytechnical Institute of Milan, he taught in Bari, Grenoble, Tokyo. Among his books, it is worth mentioning: Vittorio Ugo, Forma Progetto Architettura, Didactic documents 05, Institute of Architecture Fundamentals, Faculty of Architecture of Palermo, Dante Library, Palermo, 1976; I.D., Dimensioni dell'architettura, Cogras, Palermo, 1982; I.D., Lauger e la dimensione teorica dell'architettura, Dedalo, Bari, 1990; I.D., I luoghi di Dedalo. Elementi teorici dell'architettura, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari, 1991.

[2] For detailed studies on the relationship between architecture and Structuralism, see: Cesare Brandi, Struttura e Architettura, Einaudi, 1967; and the recent essay by Josè Ballesteros: MANUAL ESTRUCTURALISTA para arquitectos, Madrid, November 2010 (accessible at the website of the PhD in Architecture and Design at the University of Geneva through this link: http://www.addgenova.org/DSA/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/manual-estructuralista_-Italiano.pdf)

[3] A classification that Ugo himself draws from "The Archaeology of Knowledge" by M. Foucault.

[4] In his classification, Vittorio Ugo only mentions the "forest", the "garden" and the "clearing" within the family of "archaeology of nature"; the "labyrinth", the "hut" and the "bridge" within the family of "archaeology of architecture". This essay adds three archetypes to the classification proposed by the Sicilian professor: the "fence", the "stairs" and the "theatre".

[5] See Carlo Scarpa, Mille cipressi. Conference held in Madrid in the summer of 1978, in DAL CO F., MAZZARIOL G. (1984). Carlo Scarpa 1906-1978. Electa, Milan, pp. 286-287.

[6] The area of the Brion cemetery is at +71,5 cm above ground level, while the boundary wall is 160 cm tall. Hence, the internal sepulchral area is at +231,5 cm above ground level, guaranteeing the possibility of spotting the horizon from the internal area.

[7] See Philippe Duboy, Scarpa/Matisse: cruciverba, in DAL CO F., MAZZARIOL G.

(1984). Carlo Scarpa…cit., pp.170-171.

[8] According to Guido Pietropoli, Scarpa's assistant and collaborator, during the design process the master does not seek a labyrinthic effect in the acceptation of a space where to get lost. «Here, we must not feel lost», Scarpa says as reported by Petropoli, «as we have already arrived». See Guido Pietropoli, Carlo Scarpa 1968-78. Quasi un racconto, n.p.

[9] Concerning the concept of "structure" as a subjective interpretation of a form, it seems interesting to report some words by Gilles G. Granger, written by Cesare Brandi. «A structure is an abstraction through which a concrete knowledge activity defines, at a stage determined by practice, a form of objectivity: the structure is not, in this sense, within things; it is not even in the mind as a model of being or a process; it results from the applied work of a subject on an experience, and that is how it contributes to section with accuracy the thing within this experience, giving it the status of object» (italics in the original Italian text AN). See Cesare Brandi, op. cit. pp.22-23.

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