



1 View of Ca' Marioni-Mainella on the Grand Canal. Casa Balboni is in the right-hand side of the building, on the ground and first floors.



2 Loredana Balboni, 1945.
3 Francesco Pasinetti and Loredana Balboni, 1947.
4 Carlo Scarpa, 1972.

Roberta Martinis

Carlo Scarpa, the House for Loredana Balboni

The house Carlo Scarpa worked on in 1964 to a commission from Loredana Balboni is set in one of the buildings owned by the Balboni family, Ca' Marioni-Mainella. The neo-Renaissance palazzo designed by Ludovico Cadorin in the nineteenth century stands on the Grand Canal at the corner of the Rio di San Trovaso (fig. 1).¹

Loredana Balboni (1920–2013) was active in cultural circles in Italy in the sixties. Though little has been written about her, she is clearly present in the memory of those who knew her.² She was the widow of the Venetian critic, filmmaker and screenwriter Francesco Pasinetti (1911–1949), director of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome (figs. 2, 3).³ and the sister-in-law of Pier Maria Pasinetti (1913–2006), to whom she and her sister Letizia were both very close.⁴ To Pier Maria Pasinetti, a professor of Comparative Literature at the UCLA in California, both were points of reference within the family, and much more, because they personally undertook to keep up contacts with Italian literary circles.⁵ In 1954 Loredana Balboni had made her second marriage to Antonio Pellizzari of Arzignano (1923–1958), an industrialist in the spirit of Olivetti and a musician,⁶ while Loredana's sister Letizia had married the film director Michelangelo Antonioni in 1942.⁷

The Balboni family was involved in various capacities in the antiques trade. This was true of both their father Carlo (1877–1958)⁸ and their brother Giorgio, a collector and art dealer in Bologna and a friend of Giorgio Morandi.⁹

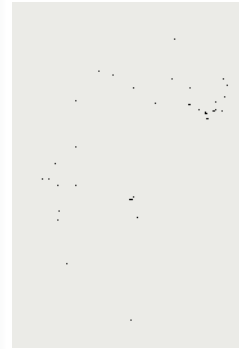
"She wasn't cultured, but she had instinct,"¹⁰ remember those who knew her. Loredana also bought and sold art, turning for advice about the most important works of modern art to the Bolognese art historian Carlo Volpe. When times were more difficult, she would sell her most valuable pieces of contemporary art (including a Magritte) to the Galleria Contini in Venice. Our image of Loredana Balboni's life is therefore Venetian and cosmopolitan.¹¹ Apart from Venice, she had a house in Piazza di Spagna in Rome and one in Via Verri in Milan. She was a friend of artists like De Kooning; in Rome she mixed with filmmakers, pupils and friends of Francesco Pasinetti, her brother-in-law Antonioni, Cito Maselli and his sister, the painter Titina (a close friend). In Milan she frequented Vando Aldrovandi, the founder and director of the Libreria Internazionale, who was related to the publisher Giulio Einaudi.¹²

For her Venetian home in the family's palazzo, an apartment on two levels with an independent entrance on the ground floor, Loredana Balboni initially chose the Venetian architect Paolo De Marzi. In 1962 he drafted a first project, obtaining the necessary building permits for the work, which envisioned a large spiral staircase connecting the ground and first floors (figs. 6, 7).

In 1964, the agreement with De Marzi evidently fell through and Loredana Balboni turned to the most illustrious Venetian architect and the one most qualified to take over the commission: Carlo Scarpa.¹³ Balboni wanted a home that would represent her appropriately in the social circles she moved in, and



5 Casa Balboni, elevation on the Grand Canal.
6-7 Paolo De Marzi, project for the renovation of Casa Balboni, 1962. Plans of the ground and first floors (drawings attached to the application for a retrospective building permit presented on 26 September 1986, with authorization from the Superintendency for Architectural Heritage and Landscape of Venice, prot. 81192, 29 December 1986).



showcase her collection of artworks. Scarpa was at the peak of his career. In June 1963 he had completed his work on the Fondazione Querini Stampalia; in July 1964 the Castelvecchio Museum opened and he was at work on the project for the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the design of Villa Zentner in Zurich (1963-69) for Savina Rizzi, widow of the architect Angelo Masieri, in which architecture and life appear closely entwined, required his particular attention.¹⁵

At the time of his acquaintance with Francesco Pasinetti, Scarpa had known Loredana Balboni only as a shadowy, occasional presence,¹⁶ but now her apartment provided an opportunity, as often happens to the architect in designing a private home, to create a luxurious portrait of her. As has been observed elsewhere, wishing to keep faith with the words with which Scarpa introduced himself in his lecture in Vienna as an *allestitore* (a designer of exhibitions), it is also possible to interpret his projects of houses as the designs of the settings for aristocratic lives and the preservation of private memories, which he carefully selected and catalogued through his contacts with his clients.

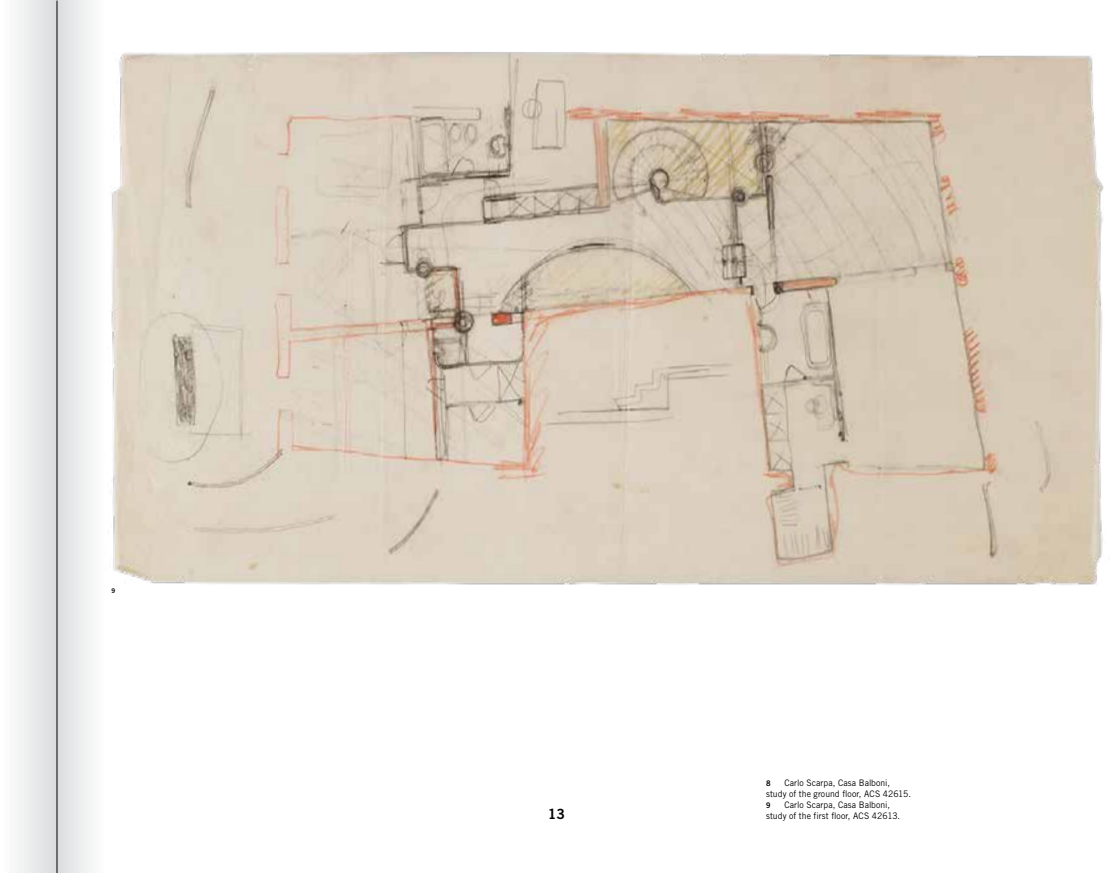
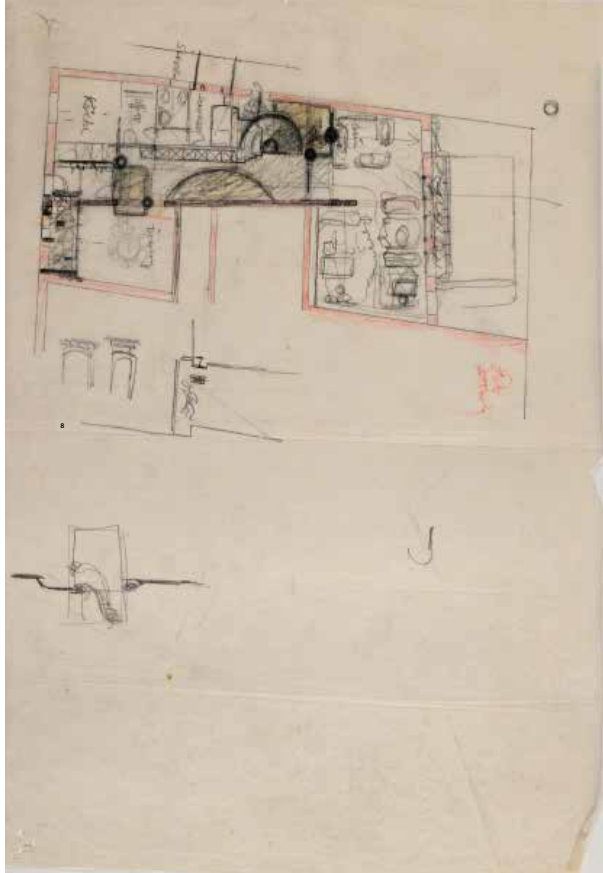
In this case, he saw it as a matter of working on the result of the subdivision of a building that did not conform to the type of the traditional Venetian palazzo, to which Cadarin's original project can only be vaguely compared in its vocabulary and internal layout: a C-shaped area traversing the building, measuring some 9.5 meters wide with a depth of more than 18 meters, extending between a private garden giving access to the house, and the view to the east over the Grand Canal, while taking advantage of the pre-existing structures and the provisions of De Marzi's first project. In this context the fortuitous accidents became a personal stimulus for the *virtuoso* architect.

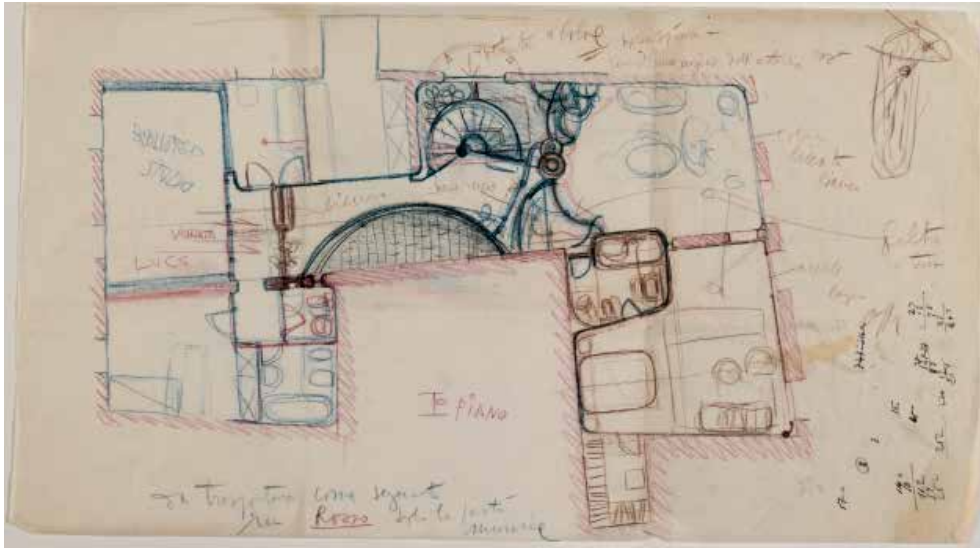
From the first drawings (figs. 8, 9) Scarpa focused on the principal axis connecting the two extremities of the house, the garden and the Grand

Canal. He conceived it as a freely and plastically configured spatial sequence, isolating the lateral episodes as independent events. It was immediately clear that he intended to create a perspective vista pointing towards the water, anticipating for the visitor the shimmering glow that fills the living room.

In Venice, as a rule, the ground floors are not inhabited. During the years when Scarpa was designing the Balboni apartment, the *acqua grande*, the floodwaters that rose 194 cm high and devastated the city in 1966, still lay in the future. And the possibility of being able to live at water level and enjoy all its most surprising effects must have seemed a rare opportunity to be explored and grasped, after he had created similar effects in his makeover of the ground floor of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia. In any case, with the aim of protecting the house, the new height of the ground floor was set at 1.50 meters, with the heights of the interiors consequently being reduced to 2.70 meters on the ground floor and 2.50 meters on the first floor.¹⁷

On the ground floor, Scarpa studied an access sequence through a *bussola*, a vestibule squeezed in between the wing of the service rooms and the dining room and leading to a richly designed longitudinal passage. After the compressed space of the *bussola*, Scarpa inserted, as a counterpoint, a short interval at double height to mark the start of a *promenade architecturale*, which models the movements, forming the prelude to the experience of the upper floor. Midway in the longitudinal passage, the curved form of the helical staircase – whose dimensions appear smaller than in the project already approved by the council – reverberates in a large arc of a circle that cuts out the upper floor, introducing a spatial comment transversal to the direction indicated. In the plan, the spaces that run through the house at full height appear marked in yellow: the atrium, the area around the staircase towards the perimeter wall, the large internal lightwell with the function of instilling





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spatial qualities into the upper floor, and a small winter garden laid out in the dining room. The theme is making broad what is cramped, and Scarpa's approach to the design of Casa Balboni focuses on this need in a movement of systole and diastole that is then resolved in the large living room and above all the terrace facing the Grand Canal, where the water flows almost on the same level as the stone paving.

Five massive circular pillars are distributed like links to regulate the dynamics of the weights and forces in relation to the shifting of the loads and supports in the new project, whose static configuration remains, however, difficult to interpret. The center of gravity of these elements, which delimit the passage and rise the whole height of the building, is again the central pivot of the fan-shaped staircase, and it remained unchanged all through the development of the design. We will see how, in his opening moves, Scarpa proceeded by concentrating on the most problematic aspect of the house, the spatial and visual connection between the entrance and the living room, verifying the scope for resorting to tried and tested methods, such as marking the space through pillars with their diameters dilated to a suitable rhythm.

During this first draft of the project, the association between cylindrical structural elements and broad curves was eliminated in the light of a study for the first floor (fig. 10), where the exploration of the possibility of using curved perimeters in continuous reciprocal resonance prevails in the layout. The communication between the two upper areas – the bedroom with the sitting room facing the Grand Canal, and the library-study with the guest room overlooking the garden – is interpreted as a walkway no longer traversed by structural elements (the cylindrical pillars) but by a space that presses on the house, breaking into it at some points.

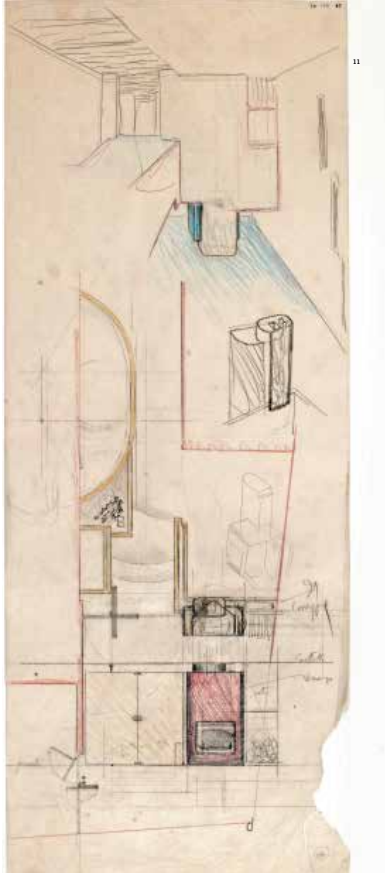
In this way, the height of the low corridor below this interval, with a surprise move, was extended to

5.20 meters, so making it possible to channel quantities of natural light into the most shadowy part of the house. And there is more to it than this because, while the gaze from the entrance is drawn towards the Grand Canal, the device introduces a counterpoint to the dynamics of vision.

The walkway appears as a slender cutout element, its outline replicating the form of the lobed canopy in the Sculpture Garden of the Biennale (1952), though here the play of gravity is made emphatic and gradually more mobile by the large spiral staircase.¹⁸ Scarpa meant to make the walkway a place where lights would be conveyed from different sources and of variable quality. The light shed from the study windows, the Grand Canal, and a "stained glass window very brightly colored illuminated from outside," inserted behind the staircase, would play over the glimmering floor laid with white marble.¹⁹

The need to shape the enlargement of the internal lightwell in a more appropriate way, by repositioning the space in relation to the available height, generated the definitive motif, substantially changing the nature of the overhead walkway (figs. 11–18). In this sequence we can observe the results of "thinking by doing," the key to Scarpa's working method. Initially he explored the possibility of dividing the long arch in two, within a single continuous perimeter, until each of the two "voids" was endowed with its own form, in the quest for the "right lines," for a three-dimensional device, in a veritable *Raumplan*, one capable of accompanying the compressions and dilations of the gaze and movements towards the two extremities of the route.²⁰ This was in January 1965, as recorded on a heliographic copy of the drawing ACS 39908, hand-dated 22/1/65, with a note on the reverse that states: "drawing for parapets not exact" (ACS 42621R).

At this point Scarpa's reflection on a continuous space guided by soft curves, meandering lines, which was expressed in a "caressing movement,"



extended to the most private rooms of the house by sinuously configuring the wall between the master bedroom and the bathroom, both overlooking the Grand Canal (the client did not accept this arrangement) (fig. 21).

The theme changed from exploring the relevance of some schemes that Scarpa was developing all through the course of his research – the giant pillars that vertically traverse superimposed spaces and act as sculpted elements that order the space,²¹ in their turn placed in tension with light and airy horizontal planes – to using the space as a solid body, hence one that could be modeled, with its sculptural compendium in the use of refined polished surfaces through the use of *marmorino* and smoothed plaster.²² These were not necessarily alternative lines of thought, but it was nevertheless a crucial step with respect to proceeding by articulating the space with juxtaposed planes that Scarpa had accustomed his contemporaries to by the mid-sixties.²³

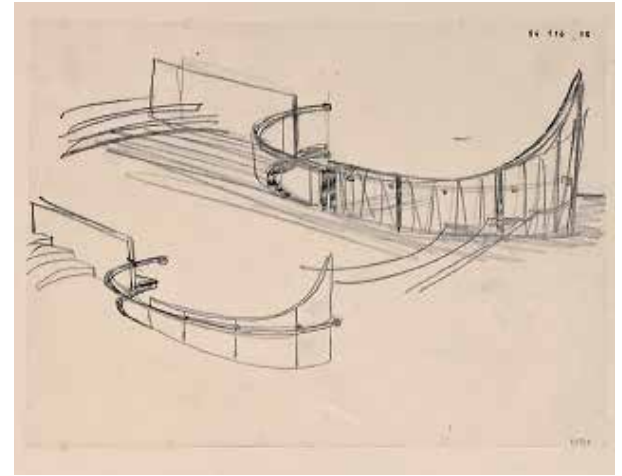
In his lecture *Arredare*, which inaugurated the academic year 1964-65 at the IUAV, Scarpa openly raised the question of the relationship between mass and space. "The sense of space is not conveyed by a pictorial order but always by physical phenomena, meaning by matter, by the sense of heaviness, by the weight of the wall. For this reason I affirm that it is openings, gaps and transitions that create the spatial relations."²⁴

Ten years later the reasoning remained equally taut. "Within a physical space one enters a spatial world, one that is tactile, harmonic. To begin with, one could imagine that that space is a solid parallelepiped and we are going to hollow out its inner parts to take advantage of its mass."²⁵ A action of hollowing and modeling dominated his reasoning in these years, as is also shown by the way in which he configured the two internal lightwells that traverse the corridor on the first floor of Casa Balboni, giving them not a continuous elliptical curve but a broken

course, probably suggested by the configuration of the supporting structure.

If we dwell on a *form* dear to Scarpa, the shape of the arc of a circle, in turn taken from Oriental culture (the Moon Gate), we can observe its multiplications and transfigurations in its rotation and upturning, eventually taking on completely different features: from a flat, cropped membrane (in all its interpretations in the canopy of the Sculpture Garden at the Biennale, but one that twists under slight pressure in the design of the Lucio Fontana exhibition at the 1966 Biennale)²⁶ to a curved and hollow space.²⁷

That this exploration of the form arises from a single line of reasoning is shown, for instance, by the simultaneous development in Villa Zentner, between May and November 1965, in the advanced phase of its design and on the building site, of the helical staircase (as a thin, continuous ribbon, wrapped freely in space to define a transparent three-dimensional entity), and of Savina Zentner's private bathroom, where the same space becomes solid and hollow, in a reciprocal resonance of void and solid. So much so that Manfredo Tafuri observed in the Veritti, Cassina, Balboni and Zentner houses, an approach in accordance with "interpenetrations by antithesis of forms."²⁸ We could continue by noting how this antithesis is not limited to forms, but concerns the way he shaped space. Scarpa takes us into a plastic space, the product of research into modeling; the result, as described by Pavel Aleksandrovic Florenskij (an author Scarpa read in the seventies): "touching a soft material with the hand or with small instruments that are an extension of the hand itself, presents us with a system of dots, points, small spaces, which we assess separately as minimum tensions. They pass softly into each other because each of these points, separately, has only a definite position in space, but does not have a direction [...]."²⁹ Following Florenskij, the plastic works activate a "tactile" vision, in which "sight is expanded and touch refined. An object is felt



11 Carlo Scarpa, Casa Balboni, studies of the zone of passage to the living room with the fireplace on the first floor, ACS 42864.

12 Carlo Scarpa, Casa Balboni, study of the parapets on the first floor, ACS 51502.

13 Carlo Scarpa, Casa Balboni, study of the space through the house on the first floor, ACS 42696.