



Zentner house in Zurich:

A villa by Carlo Scarpa abroad and its furniture

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Abstract

Zentner house (1964–1968) is the only work ever built abroad by Italian architect and designer Carlo Scarpa. For nearly 50 years the house was neither accessible nor publicly documented. The house is currently being studied by a group of Swiss researchers as an example of “trans-national” design, with the complete documentation (photography, drawing, three-dimensional models) of a surprisingly high number of details, materials, and designs for a building in Switzerland, also influenced by the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, who had a close relationship with the clients. The furniture of the house has a pivotal role in the further development of the work of Scarpa as a product designer. The whole house hosts a profusion of made-to-measure furniture and fixture designed by Scarpa. As well as the undocumented designs the current study highlights the impact of an Italian project on Swiss and international scenes.

Keywords

Made in Italy, Swiss design, Carlo Scarpa, Dino Gavina, Zentner house

Introduction and methodology

This paper reports on the research project “Casa Zentner in Zurich: an Italian Villa in Switzerland”, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and developed by an interdisciplinary team, integrating the methods and views of the architectural historian, the conservation architect and the industrial design scholar. The team is composed of prof. Giacinta Jean, dr. Roberta Martinis and dr. Davide Fornari.

The project considers the architectural design history of the house with a holistic approach encompassing the transformation of the pre-existing house, the design of outer and inner space including the furniture and fixtures production (Jean, Martinis, Fornari 2014). The methodology includes retrieval and analysis of all the documentation of the building: drawings, bills, letters, prototypes, photographs are currently scattered among private and public archives in Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and the United States.

Oral history is a main concern as most of the people involved with the building have passed away, such as the main architect Carlo Scarpa, the commission givers, and some of the professionals involved. Theo Senn, the local architect in Zurich, is still alive and a source of fundamental insights. On the Italian side, Dino Gavina – who produced some of the furniture of Zentner house in his catalogue – died in 2007, while Sandro Bagnoli and Raffaello Repposi, who worked for Gavina, offered many details about the transformation of a unique piece into a successful serial product. Many of the scheduled interviews remain to be conducted, especially with the assistants of Carlo Scarpa.

Finally, the analysis of the house and of everything it contains is a main source of understanding of its value to architecture and design history.

Research framework and history of the house

Zentner house by Carlo Scarpa was built in Zurich between 1964 and 1968. It is the only work built abroad by the Venetian architect. The house was designed to the very last detail, including furniture, and it has always been inhabited by the original clients, who have never made any significant changes.

Set on the Doldertal’s slope, in a panoramic position, Zentner house is characterized by monumental and shifting spaces: large interconnected rooms, with double height or very long perspectives, where the

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views continuously change. The precious materials and their design contribute to this “domestic” monumentality, and so do the translucent *marmorino* plasters and the floors of different-colored wood. All is purpose-made for special clients, who lived in it with their art collection.

The house represents a cultural and material testimony of the highest value. Due to its location in Switzerland, the privacy of the owners and the inaccessibility of the Scarpa archives until few years ago, the house has never been the subject of a monographic study.

The state of research concerning Zentner house is minimal: the house is depicted in a number of magazines with the same few drawings and photographs, along with short texts with basic information (Vercelloni 1973; Joly 1974; Yokoyama 1976; Scarpa 1977; Scarpa 1985; Scarpa 1988). The same happens when the house is included in general publications on Carlo Scarpa, such as monographs or exhibition catalogues (Fenaroli 1984; Marcianò 1984; Fonatti 1984; Guller 1986; Albertini-Bagnoli 1988; Los 1995; Furuya 1997; Noever 2003; Beltramini-Zannier 2004 and 2006; Bruschi-Scaramuzza 2005). In both cases, magazines or monographs on Scarpa, the presentation of the work exploits only a minimal percentage of the existing graphic documentation. Due to the inaccessibility of the documentation, Italian researchers have partially avoided this subject: Zentner house is nearly absent from the endless bibliography produced in Italy on Scarpa, although foreign publications have featured it, especially within international reviews on the issue of villas devoted to masterpieces of the 20th century, such as *GA Houses* (Yokoyama 1976).

In 1964 Savina Masieri Zentner commissioned Carlo Scarpa to restore a villa built in 1914 on Aurorastrasse in Zurich. The result of the design process, whose main feature is the incorporation of the existing building (to the point that it completely disappeared) in a brand new volume, is a suburban, magnificent, refined house. In the words of Savina's son: a “villa [...] gorgeous yet anachronistic for its time and place” (Edoardo Zentner, in discussion with Roberta Martinis). Savina Masieri was the widow of the architect Angelo Masieri, a disciple, then assistant of Scarpa, who in 1951 commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to renovate his palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice (Moneo 2004), which encountered a series of obstacles and changes that led to the establishment of the Masieri Foundation in the same building, refurbished by Carlo Scarpa and entrusted to University Iuav of Venice (Martinis 2008).

In Zentner house, Scarpa's intellectual wanderings seem to happily collide: Viennese architecture, as seen by Hoffmann, Otto Wagner and Loos (in the façade on the street), Wright (in the façade on the garden) (fig. 1); remembrances of Klee (e.g. in the motif of the wooden floor), as well as his then recent interest in Mark Rothko (Tafari 1984, pp. 86-89). Once mounted together, autobiographical and architectural elements, as well as suggestions, build a sort of gigantic fragment, which, as Tafari noted “if taken on its own, tells about an irreparably lost whole” (Tafari 1984, p. 77). Furthermore, Kurt Forster suggested that the city of Zurich in the 1960s was for Scarpa a “real cultural vent”: through Savina Zentner he got to meet a variety of personalities from the Zurich cultural scene, and in particular Max Bill, a member of the *Zürcher Konkrete Kunst* group (Forster 2004, pp. 15-16), previously involved in the experience of De Stijl. An evidence of such an encounter of similar personalities despite their different cultural remits is the large sculpture by Max Bill in the garden of Zentner house, entitled *Homage to Carlo Scarpa* (Edoardo Zentner, in discussion with Roberta Martinis, Zurich, March 12, 2014). At Zentner house Scarpa met other artists whose works were collected by the Zentner couple: Hans Arp and especially Gottfried Honegger, author of *tableaux relief* with geometric shapes set according to stochastic sequences (Forster 1972; Forster 2004a, pp. 21-22). Scarpa was constantly reasoning on such topics.

The project for Zentner house included also most of the furniture. It was here that Scarpa started his experience in the field of industrial design: the table “Doge”, produced in 1968 by Dino Gavina, is the first of a series of further variations (tables “Sarpi” and “Florian”, produced by Simon in 1975).

The same lack of in-depth historical and critical literature concerns the furniture of the house. Authors have highlighted the exceptional genesis of the table “Doge” (Pollifrone 1984, p. 186; Bagnoli 2000; Sonogo 2009, p. 8; Bagnoli, Di Lieto 2014), yet they have not thoroughly investigated the ensemble of furniture designed for these clients in the framework of a general project of living.

The artist Lucio Fontana introduced Dino Gavina (1922–2007) to industrial design. In 1953 Gavina opened a shop in Bologna selling furniture and fittings, then in 1960 he founded the company Gavina SpA. He was the chief executive officer, while Carlo Scarpa, whom Lucio Fontana introduced to Gavina at the Milan Triennale in 1953, was appointed president. The first designers working with the company were Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Vico Magistretti, Kazuhide Takahama and Tobia Scarpa, Carlo's son. Gavina was the first company to produce reissues of historical pieces of design, such as the tubular steel furniture designed by Marcel Breuer in the

1920s, including several tables. Breuer gave Gavina as a present a table with two plinths for his house in Bologna: after observing its structure, Carlo Scarpa proposed a new modified version, which was marketed as the “Delfi” table.

Following this reissue, Carlo Scarpa became more interested and actively involved in the production of industrial design projects (Sonego 2009). The first piece produced by Simon – the new company founded by Dino Gavina and Maria Simoncini – was made in 1968: a new version of the table designed by Carlo Scarpa for Zentner house, marketed as “Doge”, with some significant variations. The original top was in wood (ebony) with a marquetry of marbles, while the “Doge” table has a transparent crystal top, in order to reveal the supporting structure, as Gavina suggested.

This table is not only the first piece of furniture produced serially following a design by Carlo Scarpa, but also the first in a series entitled “Ultrarazionale”, a project which aimed to overcome the issues of Modern architecture, in search of a “poetical richness”, that Carlo Scarpa perfectly represented in Italy. The whole series, including tables, sofas and containers by Carlo Scarpa and Hirozi Fukuoh, was developed between 1968 and 1983, but only partially reissued by the company Estel who acquired the rights of Simon-Gavina.

The “Doge” table represents the first experience of Carlo Scarpa in the production of serial furniture – a field in which his son Tobia was already successful, designing furniture for Gavina SpA and lamps for Flos, another company founded by Gavina. The comparison with the original table designed for Zentner house is important, both for evaluating the criteria for the translation from “unique piece” to serial production, and for documenting its real manufacturing and the relationships with other authors, as well as for assessing its state of conservation.



Fig. 1: Zentner house, view of the façade on the garden, ph. by Thomas Güller, from *Carlo Scarpa Architektur*, Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1986, p. 84.



Fig. 2: Zentner house, view of the dining room, ph. by Thomas Güller, from *Carlo Scarpa Architektur*, Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1986, p. 89.

Intermediate results and conclusions

The research project is in its second year of three. The analysis of documentation is completed and the on site survey for a complete two- and three-dimensional analysis of furniture and fixture is scheduled. A comparative analysis of furniture and architectural details is to be completed, yet it has already highlighted a strong connection between Venice and Zurich: most if not all the raw materials, elements, details, fixtures and furniture were imported from the Veneto region.

A morphological genealogy of details can be established between Zentner house and other Scarpa projects in Italy. As an example, the Olivetti showroom (Venice, 1956–1957) and Zentner house show unexpected connections, such as the same corner treatment cut at 45 degrees employed for the window frames. The dining table designed for the house features a steel base and a top made of ebony with marble inlay (fig. 2). Through archival research, a prototype of the top was tracked down in the collection of the Vienna MAK Museum, who acquired it from the Anfodillo family, Scarpa’s carpenters, together with several drawings and sketches.

While the Italian design entrepreneur Dino Gavina had the chance to admire it and decided to produce it as part of the catalogue of Simon Gavina, under the name of “Doge”, significant modifications in size and materials were made. Through an interview with the designer Raffaello Repposi (in discussion with Davide Fornari, Mantua, January 10, 2016) who was working with Dino Gavina in the late 1960s, it was finally possible to define the story of the table’s production. Scarpa provided Gavina with a technical drawing with measurements on a paper napkin. Repposi and other Gavina assistants produced a first prototype in the wood and metal workshop in San Lazzaro di Savena, near Bologna, under the supervision of Japanese designer Kazuhide Takahama. The finished

prototype astonished the staff at Gavina for it did not require many adjustments in terms of size. Gavina decided to complete it with a crystal top in order to let the metal structure show. Few modifications were requested by Scarpa, such as a joint in form of an intersection of gilded cylinders (Scarpa's signature shape in many projects) between structure and top, were agreed in words and partially rejected in production. Since 2013, the table is in the catalogue of the Italian company Cassina, specialized in authorized re-editions by masters of design.

The analysis of the architectural object led to the definition of a catalogue of a number of unpublished fixtures, mainly lamps integrated into the architectural elements (ceiling lamps, wall lamps). A three-dimensional description of all these discoveries will form part of the final results of this research project, as they will neither be available for direct view nor be shown in museums or produced for mass market in the future.

A direct visual survey of the house in its complexity led to the discovery of an unpublished archigraphy by Carlo Scarpa, who often embedded typography into architecture ("archigrafia" is the Italian word for describing such practice), generating a series of typefaces specific to construction or craft techniques, e.g. for concrete façades, ivory tiles and the likes. The typefaces designed by Carlo Scarpa have been the subject of two different surveys, one by a then graphic design MA student (Palladini 2007) and one by an architecture historian (Abbondandolo 2011). Neither had access to Zentner house, yet even scholars of Carlo Scarpa found unlikely the idea of an archigraphy by Scarpa at Zentner house. Surprisingly enough, hidden by plants in the garden next to the access to the living room, a low relief acronym set in concrete was found. According to Edoardo Zentner, Carlo Scarpa designed it in order to brand the prefabricated concrete tiles that covered the terraces and external floors of the house, which were also produced in Italy and imported to Zurich by a company belonging to the extended family of Savina Zentner. Archigraphies are perhaps the missing link between the work of Carlo Scarpa and Max Bill: if we compare Scarpa's recurrent figure of the intersecting circles to the typeface designed by Max Bill for the furniture shop Wohnbedarf in 1930s (redesigned by Cornel Windlin and Gilles Gavillet as Supermax typeface for Lineto foundry in 1999) we notice unexpected similarities between such different personalities and scenes as Scarpa and Bill, Venice and Zurich.

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