

Disclosing the Spirit of the Place: *Festina Lente* in Modern Design Practices

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Panel Abstract

Camillo Sitte concluded his book *Der Städtebau* (1899) with a plea for unrushed design that unfolds over time, symbolized as a winged snail. He drew inspiration from an earlier architectural book *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), whose narrator counsels architects “Festina Lente” — to ‘hurry slowly’ and take their time — not only to avoid mistakes, but more importantly to seize opportunities emerging within unfolding circumstances.

Like slow food, the sites of this panel are savored slowly, to allow an investigation of slowness in architectural practice.

This panel finds common ground in this consideration of slowness in architecture through three postwar projects whose architectures, rich in spiritual dimensions, emerged from their slow, on-site working practices: Bruce Goff’s Bavinger House, Carlo Scarpa’s Castelvecchio Museum, and Le Corbusier’s Chapel at Ronchamp

Whereas traditional practices following vernacular designs treaded paths that followed or diverged from the past, modern architects needed to shape their own ways to practice. Following WWII, the political undertones of Fascism’s top-down ordering systems persisted in Hitchcock and Johnson’s International Style, which ignored and denied designs outside of this rigid, stylistic modernism with its tabula rasa approach. Against generic, placeless, and iconoclastic formalism, attuned architects reacted passionately, and devised idiosyncratic working processes rooted in the site, analogically construing diverse elements as dynamically interconnected like organs in a living body, resulting in materially profound building expressions.

These radical practices were spiritually intertwined with Frank Lloyd Wright, whose ideas Scarpa’s friend, critic Bruno Zevi, popularized in Europe through his writings. In *Organic Architecture* and *The Modern Language of Architecture*, Zevi formulates design principles for an anti-classicist modernism, whose supreme pinnacle he names as “Falling Water, the *Divine Comedy* of the modern language of architecture.”

These three projects avoid the culture of object-buildings and autonomy of conventional design, and draw widely on the arts, culture, and genius loci to cultivate emotive qualities in the spaces. Long durations, working on site, enabled them serendipitously to engage ongoing natural, construction, or cultural processes. By amplifying the scale of their perception through poetics, they established multiple layers of meaning, created experiential depth and a profound sense of continuity, conveying to visitors a sense of the sacred through intense spectrums of experience, from concrete and tactile to ineffable and intelligible. Through these opportunistic architectural practices of open works, these resistant projects offer multi-dimensional examples of organic creative strategies.

Slow Building and Serendipitous Moments: Le Corbusier's East Wall of the Chapel at Ronchamp

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Abstract

Le Corbusier's Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp, an outlier within his oeuvre was the third church building on this site. A completely new design and construction, the building itself contained some remnants from the previous chapel. While numerous scholars have considered the design, construction, and symbolism of this chapel, there has been limited study of the unique design development of its east wall. This paper considers the east wall and its transformation through the notion of *Festina Lente*, an ancient notion and seemingly contradictory Latin term meaning "make haste slowly." *Festina Lente* is useful and essential to understanding Le Corbusier's design of the east wall of his Chapel in Ronchamp. The design, begun in 1950, was approved by the Besancon *Commission d'Art Sacré* in January 1951, with construction commencing in September, 1953, and completed in June, 1955. During this time, we will consider the design and construction of the east wall as it developed from its original approved design to the final design with a chance serendipitous encounter during construction that led to a unique re-conception and transformation of the original design. This serendipitous interaction was a quick and transformative moment that exemplifies Le Corbusier's ability to seize unscripted moments quickly even after his slow, careful, reiterative design practice: a materialization of *festina lente*.

This paper explores Le Corbusier's design process, described by Jose Oubrerie as an "open work" recalling Umberto Eco's description of works in modern art that change long after they are complete. It will also address Le Corbusier's intentional and careful slowness that allowed him time to engage in an iterative and reiterative process of "successive approximations" of the design, even during construction, and only ending once the building was finished. We consider changing symbolism and meanings of the wall once it was transformed from a blank wall holding a reused statue of the Virgin Mary, recovered from the earlier chapel that had been destroyed during WW2, into to a starry eastern night sky made up of small pinpricks of light – stars surrounding a now hovering Virgin Mary among the stars. The wall with its rotating statue (turning inward to face congregants within the chapel or outward to face congregants attending outdoor services) was now longer a wall rather it became a sky and a threshold to the beyond. Le Corbusier's slow, organic, and open design process, allowed him to re-imagine the site and unfinished building as a full scale "working" model. He quickly seized opportunities that presented themselves during construction with resulting 'as built' changes that embedded a unique sacred threshold between the inside and outside of the east wall of the chapel with Mary in a starry night sky. It also reveals a seemingly lost art of *festina lente*, with its associated slower building and design.

References

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A Poetic Architect: The Growth of Bruce Goff's Bavinger House

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Abstract

During the early decades of the twentieth century, Bruce Goff advanced a unique design approach that governed his entire career, "*Good architecture for everyone.*" Rejecting mainstream modernism, Goff sought a language that communicated one generated from unique site conditions and clients. He viewed his clients as individuals possessing a mind, a body, and a spirit living in a world together with others. Each person endowed with five or more senses always responds to Nature and the beauty within it. He extended the concepts inherent in organic architecture in order to express his client's physical presence and existential preferences, as well as spiritual existence.

Goff's prolific career spanned his entire life. Over the course of approximately 70 years, over 150 of his designs were realized. In 1987, Bruce Goff posthumously won the prestigious American Institute of Architect's 25-year award for the Bavinger House (1950-1955). This iconic Bavinger House, designed for artists and garden enthusiasts Gene and Nancy Bavinger, recognized around the world, represents the height of Goff's reception as an organic architect. During the five-year-long and slow process of building the spiral house composed of two hundred tons of locally quarried rock stood, stretching upward to well over fifty feet, it drew endless curiosity seekers, gawkers, and students of architecture from around the world.¹

The Bavinger House resulted from the efforts of two artisans, Gene Bavinger and Bruce Goff. Through their back-breaking physical labor, choosing and carefully placing each rock and glass cullet to achieve interesting effects,² the excavating and setting of the north side of the house into the earth, the creation of ponds for fish and other aquatic life inside the house, they created a sense mystery. Goff regarded Architecture as an Art,³ and felt that to retain its significance, it maintains a sense of Mystery, and is always found in Beauty.⁴ For the architect—the artist, this "craving for Beauty has existed in all mankind ... to seek Beauty the mystery of which he is ever endeavoring to discover ... has made his existence more worthwhile."⁵ Thus, undoubtedly Goff's design for the Bavinger House had to include a sense of the inexplicable evoking a sense of wonder as it was difficult to understand at once.

¹ "Bavinger House—OKC Mod."

² Chabot, *The Architecture of Bruce Goff*.

³ In Goff's writings, he often capitalized the words architecture, art, beauty, individual, mystery, and nature.

⁴ Goff, "Of Beauty and Architecture."

⁵ Goff.

Adaptive Reuse and Architectural Afterlife: Narrative and Transformation in Carlo Scarpa's Castelvecchio Museum

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Abstract

In his revitalization of the Castelvecchio Museum (1959-73) Carlo Scarpa's design process substantiates Bruno Zevi's call to enrich modern architectural language, inspired directly by Frank Lloyd Wright, whom they both met in 1951, whose *Fallingwater* Zevi called the *Divine Comedy* of architecture. While thinking on site in Verona, Scarpa worked through signs left by past events and ongoing activities. He opportunistically incorporated fortuitous discoveries, reintegrating long-buried gateways, critically detaching or demolishing, and skilfully re-situating found objects and *spolia*, in an open-ended, organically evolving neoplastic design. Scarpa introduced a spatial narrative, anchored in history, literature, and spirituality, to collocate architectural fragments and museum artifacts from different eras into a unified experience, building organic continuity to reveal new meanings and intensify encounters. The visitor's pilgrimage retraces historic patterns of movement and re-enacts cosmic dramas linked to local events; earlier moments foreshadow and frame encounters that follow. He re-imagined the museum program as an 'afterlife' of art and architecture, in which historical elements re-appeared transfigured, bearing new significance and life. Plumbing the expanded site's medieval life and spatial qualities, Scarpa introduced interpretive themes to shape the visitor's experience even as these slowed their pace to enhance perceptual depth. Amongst these can be found an architectural "Easter egg" — a spiritual narrative investured in an apparently secular building complex. At the museum's heart, you encounter the iconic statue of Cangrande della Scala, the warlord whose family built the castle. Cangrande hosted the exiled poet Dante in Verona, where he completed his *Divine Comedy*, dedicating *Paradise* to his friend. During Scarpa's own long sojourn, he and the museum director researched and produced the exhibition "Dante e Verona" on site. By the artistic strategy of reading the familiar as unfamiliar, in the entry sequence he materialized the threshold experience of Dante's spiritual journey, to configure a poetic discourse about the museum, modernity, architecture, history, memory and the world beyond.