



ARQUITECTURA Y PAISAJE

transferencias históricas
retos contemporáneos

VOLUMEN I

A B A D A E D I T O R E S

**ARQUITECTURA
Y PAISAJE**
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retos contemporáneos

VOLUMEN I

LECTURAS

Serie **H.^a del Arte y de la Arquitectura**

DIRECTORES Juan Miguel HERNÁNDEZ LEÓN y Juan CALATRAVA

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Una ciudad de mármol. Lecturas urbanas a través de la lente de un material

A City of Marble. Urban Readings Through the Lens of a Material

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Abstract

“Encontré a Roma una ciudad de ladrillos y la dejé una ciudad de mármol”. Esta afirmación atribuida al emperador Augusto por el historiador romano Cassius Dio (56.30.3) es una de las frases más significativas y poderosas sobre la importancia de un solo material para la construcción de una ciudad.

El mármol es un hilo conductor importante en la tradición arquitectónica, con un fuerte impacto en la cultura de la construcción italiana. Más allá de las propiedades como material de construcción, el mármol posee ricos significados asociativos, fuertes expresiones de ideología y evocadoras cualidades estéticas. Simultáneamente el mármol es un material local cotidiano y una expresión extraordinariamente refinada que trasciende las fronteras entre la arquitectura y la escultura. El mármol es como venas que recorren el tejido de la ciudad. Tres lecturas basadas en textos de Plinio, el Viejo, Leon Battista Alberti y Luigi Walter Moretti investigan el rol y el impacto del mármol en la construcción y percepción de paisajes urbanos.

“I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble”. This statement attributed to Emperor Augustus by Roman historian Cassius Dio (56.30.3) is one of the most significant and powerful sentences about the importance of a single material for constructing a city.

Marble is a significant thread through architectural tradition, with a strong impact on Italian building culture. Beyond properties as a building material, marble carries rich associative meanings, strong expressions of ideology, and evocative aesthetic qualities. Marble is both everyday local material and extraordinary refined expression, transcending borders between architecture and sculpture. Marble is like veins running through the tissue of the city.

Three readings based on texts by Pliny, the Elder, Leon Battista Alberti, and Luigi Walter Moretti, investigate the role and impact of marble in constructing and perceiving cityscapes.

Keywords

Mármol, cultura de la construcción, materialidad, patrimonio

Marble, building culture, materiality, heritage

Introduction

“I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble”. This statement attributed to Emperor Augustus by Roman historian Cassius Dio (56.30.3) is one of the most significant and powerful sentences about the importance of a single material for constructing a city. With his statement, Augustus intended us to visualize the buildings of the city, the grandiose temples and monument. He referred not only to marble as a material but also marble as the symbol of power and glory.

Try to imagine Rome without marble. Almost impossible; we all notice the extent of marble in churches and monuments, palaces and houses, squares and streets (fig. 1). There is a simple reason: from Augustus’ era and on, the territorial conquests by the Romans brought enormous amounts of wealth and luxury to the centre of the Roman Empire. Marble ornaments from each of the provinces that the Romans had conquered were imported and exposed to show their power over that particular territory.



Figure 1: Rome – a city of marble (photo: Anne Pryds Schaldemose in Thomas Harder and Hans Scheving, *Glimt af Rom* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2009), 293).

When visiting Rome or another location in Italy we do not only find exotic marbles, also local ones. Italian cities and villages are often built with the use of local stone, which adds the predominant landscape color to the settlement. Marble is not only used for monuments, palaces, and churches but also for forming the physical frame of everyday life. Squares, pavements, stairs, benches, façades, window frames, ornaments, and sculptures are all made from this particular material, marble, with the effect of creating homogeneity in the urban spaces, and embedding the settlement in its surrounding landscape.

Marble has a strong impact on local building culture. Beyond properties as a building material, marble carries rich associative meanings, strong expressions of ideology, and evocative aesthetic qualities. Marble is both everyday local material and extraordinary refined expression¹. In this paper, marble as a culture-bearing and connecting phenomenon is investigated through three historical examples. Marble is seen as an agent for relating to, referencing, and commenting on the past.

Interactions across history. Pliny and Alberti

In the Roman Empire marble was at the heart of the political, social, and economic self-image. Marble was used for monuments and public buildings, tombs and palaces. The strength of marble as a material and a symbol of power is established during the Roman Empire. Exotic marbles arrived from many destinations, from the foreign areas that the Romans had conquered (fig. 2). After the fall of the Roman Empire, while other testimonies like coins, bronzes, white marble statues, or other artefacts were stolen, spread, destroyed or burnt, the coloured marbles arrived in Rome in great quantities².

The importance and power of marble was originally initiated by the Greeks who brought marble and religion into a direct relationship with one another. They utilized marble for the most prestigious commissions they undertook, which were the temples and images of their gods. This tradition was continued under the Romans who placed marble at the heart of their political, social, and economic self-image. They employed it not only for monuments, public buildings, and tombs but also for the palaces of their rulers³.

The Roman author, Gaius Plinius Secundus, called Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) wrote *Naturalis Historia* in 79 A.D. He was a naturalist and natural philosopher with a deep interest not only in nature but also in how humans approach to nature. With *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History) he described the whole world and everything that nature puts at its disposal to humans. In a political and patriotic context, his book became a narrative of the glorious Roman Empire and its endeavours in the world. Pliny became one of the most influential authors in antiquity, and in the light of his written masterpiece, the Romans were regarded as founded in nature⁴.

¹ J. Nicholas Napoli and William Tronzo, eds., *Radical Marble. Architectural Innovation from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.

² Henry William Pullen, *Manuale dei Marmi Romani Antichi*, trad. Francesco Crocenzi (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2015), 7.

³ Napoli and Tronzo, *Radical Marble...*, 2.

⁴ Jacob Isager, *En Antik Kunsthistorie. Plinius den Ældres bøger om græsk og romersk skulptur, malerkunst og arkitektur* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Forlæns, 2018), 5-7.

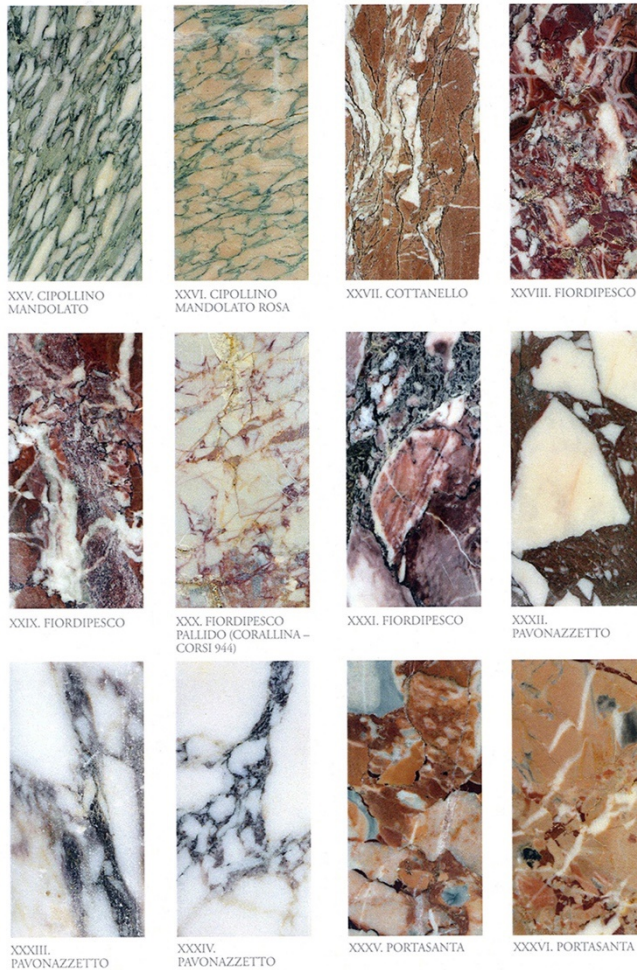


Figure 2: Examples of antique exotic marbles in the comprehensive catalogue (photo: Giancarlo Vona, source: Pullen, *Manuale dei...*, 76).

In Pliny's Natural History, Book XXXVI, he brings a critical view upon the extreme activity of marble extraction, and its influence on nature: "I. Mountains, however, were made by Nature for herself to serve as a kind of framework for holding firmly together the inner parts of the earth, and at the same time to enable her to subdue the violence of rivers, to break the force of heavy seas and so to curb her most restless elements with the hardest material of which she is made. We quarry these mountains and haul them away for a mere whim; and yet there was a time when it seemed remarkable even to have succeeded in crossing them. Our forefathers considered the scaling of the Alps by Hannibal and later by the Cimbri to be almost unnatural. Now, these selfsame Alps are quarried into marble of a thousand varieties.

Headlands are laid open to the sea, and nature is flattened. We remove the barriers created to serve as the boundaries of nations, and ships are built specially for marble. [...] when we hear of the prices paid for these vessels, when we see the masses of marble that are being conveyed or hauled, we should each of us reflect, and at the same time think how much more happily many people live without them. That men should do such things, or rather endure them, for no purpose or pleasure except to lie amid spotted marbles, just as if these delights were not taken from us by the darkness of night, which is half our life's span!"⁵.



Figure 3: Antiquity and Middle Ages meet and blend, view from Rome (photo: Anne Pryds Schaldemose in Harder and Scheving, *Glimt af...*, 21).

Spoliation in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, a practice arose of the reuse of marble from pre-existing structures (fig. 3). A material, architectural, and artistic form of antiquity was recycled through a

⁵ *Pliny Natural History. Volume X. Libri XXXVI-XXXVII*, ed. D. E. Eichholz (London: William Heinemann Ltd., Harvard University Press, 1962), 3-4.

culture that tried in many ways to distance itself from its predecessors. Antique marble building elements, columns, capitals, and marble plates with inscriptions were reused in the ancient Christian churches. The building elements were inserted and positioned with accuracy in the church spaces, side by side with contemporary architectural elements. The sourced pieces were placed in juxtapositions with other building components showing that they were not purposefully made for the Christian context.

Christian architects, sculptors, and stonemasons also had another approach cutting up ancient marbles into pieces and reassembling them into new, multi-colored wholes. Beautiful pavements in medieval churches were created not least under the Roman Cosmati family who has given the name to the many stunning Cosmati mosaic floors⁶. Here, Pliny’s expression about *opus sectile*, ‘painting in stone’ comes to mind.

Renaissance

Following on Pliny, the Renaissance architect and writer Leon Battisti Alberti addressed considerations about material properties and craftsmanship in his treatise *De re aedificatoria* (1443-1452). With marble as an integral part of the Renaissance’s engagement with antiquity, Alberti planted seeds of a building practice based upon knowledge of marble typologies, properties and narration. Marble was considered the very stone that expressed the classical language of architecture. It became common knowledge to the architectural treatise writers of the Renaissance that the architectural language of classicism was written in marble.

Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise, *De re aedificatoria* was the first book on architecture since antiquity, where Vitruvius wrote *De architectura*. It is worth noting that Vitruvius’ writings concerned the already existing buildings that one could experience in the Roman Empire, while Alberti addressed works described in ancient literary sources, or standing as ruins. So, while Vitruvius wrote about buildings he admired and which were already built, Alberti prescribed how future buildings were to be built⁷.

In the chapter about materials Alberti makes the following observations on marble: “White stone is easier to handle than dark, and translucent more workable than opaque, but the closer a stone resembles salt, the harder it is to work. If stone is coated with shining sand, it will be coarse; if sparkling with gold particles, stubborn; if it is, as it were, flecked with black, unmanageable. [...] At this point I feel I ought not to pass over several noteworthy observations that the ancients made on the various type of stone.

9. It is not at all irrelevant to our purpose to have an understanding of the varied and remarkable properties of the different types of stone, which will enable us to employ each in the most appropriate manner”⁸. (From Book Two: Materials. 8-9).

After these lines follow an outline of different types of marble from different regions in Italy, explaining colors, properties, and workability. Alberti points to ‘noteworthy observations’ by the ancients, and Pliny’s *Natural History* seems to be the model for

⁶ Napoli and Tronzo, *Radical Marble...*, 3

⁷ Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavenor, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (London: The MIT Press, 1988), X.

⁸ Rykwert, Leach, and Tavenor, *On the Art...*, 47-48.

questions about the geology and geography of marble. Marble was an integrated part of the Renaissance engagement with antiquity.

In Florence, a certain development of local marbles spread. 'Pietra dura' workshops in 16th century Florence were the key to spreading techniques of elaboration of marbles and stones. Sculptors travelled and migrated to a still bigger part of the world offering their skills of elaborating marbles and other precious stones. The multiple associations of marble related to social prestige, religious piety, and economical skill found resonance in a bigger world. The Florentine progress of stonemasonry expanded considerably, from Prague to India. At the same time, the geographical expansion of pietra dura raised questions about the logistics of marble extraction from the caves to the building sites.

Imprints of political power. Luigi Moretti

Marble was the material par excellence of the Roman Empire. As we will see, the use of marble during the fascist era of Italy was both a tribute to the Mussolini empire, and it was a clear reference to antiquity. The use of marble was one of the distinct features of the Italian rationalist architecture, Rationalism (Razionalismo), which was the Italian interpretation of Modernism. The international wave of modernism also hit Italy, and the fascist regime embraced the innovative and modernistic wave. The modern architecture of the early twentieth century had a preference for industrially-oriented materials like steel, glass and concrete, rather than natural materials like stone and wood. To modernism, the use of new materials was an important component in creating a new architectural language. The expression of structural and material honesty was a core in the modernist architectural discourse.

When the fascist regime under Mussolini to a large extent used marble as a material, it was because of the strong reference to antiquity and the Roman Empire, and, also to send a signal of nationalism (fig. 4). The use of local marbles expressed the obligation of the rationalist architects to support the self-sufficiency of the regime. Marble is a local material, an imprint of the surrounding landscapes, thus, a tribute to the nationalistic spirit. The use of marble with all its connotations to antiquity and the Roman empire, and the grand architectural monuments of the Renaissance, provided a certain monumentality to the modernistic buildings which would otherwise not be perceived as monumental. The aura of the material was transmitted to the buildings.

Nowhere else is the use of a single material as strongly connected to ideological importance as in Italy during the Fascist regime. A regime demonstrating power through monumental buildings with references to the grandeur of antiquity, combined with architects in search for innovative elaborations of traditional building materials, dedicated a protagonist role to marble in Italian fascist architecture.

The first two decades under the rules of fascism experienced an extensive use of marble in buildings and urban spaces. Marble surfaces, thin claddings, and monolithic masses added a certain aura of power to the national monumental projects of the regime and its colonies.

The traditional media and typologies where marble was used in the fascist era included mosaics, inscriptions, bas-reliefs, sculptural decoration, and monolithic monuments. The large extension of inscriptions carved into marble plates linked the fascist regime directly to its authoritative ancestors.



Figure 4: Stadio dei Marmi at Foro Italico, Rome. Each sculpture represents an Italian province (photo: Charlotte Bundgaard).

Foro Italico in Rome, a sports complex built under Mussolini in 1928-1938 is a prominent example of fascist planning. The Italian architect Luigi Moretti's *Accademia della Scherma* (1934-36) uses marble both as a strong historical and political reference to the Roman empire and as a manifestation of Rationalism. New construction methods concerning marble as façade cladding is developed in Moretti's project. Moreover, the whole layout with the plinth from which the building volumes, the stairs, the basin and the façades rise, present one continuous, white, refined marble surface. It is perceived as one monolithic marble block, pure stereotomic geometry (fig. 5). Moretti uses a white sculpture marble with veins, and he makes accurate projection drawings with dimensions of all marble plates and the many individual parts. He designs all special marble elements for the façades.



Figure 5: Luigi Moretti's Accademia della Scherma. A white refined marble building (photo: Charlotte Bundgaard).

Interpretations of local building practice. Carlo Scarpa

One of the most interesting interpretations of local Venetian building traditions is owed to the Venetian architect, Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978). Scarpa was born in Venice where he also lived most of his life, and almost all of his architectural works are situated in Italy, mostly in the region of Veneto, especially Venice. He saw himself as a real Venetian and part of the cultural environment. He had a profound knowledge of local traditional building methods, craftsmanship, and the use of materials. He understood the nature of Venice; its history and character are reflected in his work (fig. 6).

Venice is a particular city, built on sandbanks, organically grown and stitched together. It is particular for Venice that buildings decay faster and from more angles than in other cities. Whereas buildings normally decay from the top down, in Venice, they also decay from the bottom up, because the whole city literally sits on the water level, weightlessly floating and thereby exposed to frequent flooding. The comprehensive process of decay means that the Venetians constantly re-stucco their buildings leaving a veneer of thin layers of stucco on the façades. When looking into the works by Scarpa one recognizes this method in his layering thin layers of new materials on the existing building structures. He also revives the artisanal technique of stucco lustro which originates from antiquity, and its second name 'Stucco Veneziano' points to its Venetian roots. In stucco lustro plaster is mixed with

marble dust, and together with craftsmen Scarpa experiments with colors and luminosity, utilizing the artisanal techniques.



Figure 6: Carlo Scarpa's Quirini Stampalia in Venice – rich interpretations of Venetian building culture (photo: Charlotte Bundgaard).

“The key elements of Scarpa's architecture – metal, wood, stone, glass and water – originate in Venice as demonstrations of ancient denotation, persistently open to modern connotation. Decay, stucco falling off brick, headless and/or weather-beaten statues, wind-swept stone, crumbling marble strapped together with bits of iron, bridges of stone, of stone and metal, of metal, of wood and metal and the defining play of light and water everywhere are his lexicon of material presence, cultivated in the fertile soil of associations that nourished his detail imaginaries. Material fragments embedded in ancient walls

throughout Venice bridge time, structuring encounters with various pasts that a multitude of presents negotiate, suggestive of open futures”⁹.

In Castelvechio, Verona (1957-1964) Carlo Scarpa interprets the history and architecture of the castle by revealing, subtracting and adding spatial and material layers to the existing building complex¹⁰. His architecture reveals a Venetian character talking about the impact of water, water levels, renewal and decay, erosion, and time. Working on-site he develops suggestive details in close collaboration with local craftsmen, strongly embedded in Venetian building traditions. Not only Venice is recognizable, but also the specific character of Verona with its medieval structure and walls, local forms, and local stones and marble¹¹. The particular marble, Pietra di Prun which is excavated in the nearby mountains visible from the city of Verona, is used and elaborated according to local craftsmanship.



Figure 7: Il Sacello, a refined marble cube clad with the local Verona marble, Pietra di Prun (photo: Anne-Catrin Schultz, source: Schulz, *Carlo Scarpa...*, 94).

⁹ Nathaniel Coleman, *Materials and Meaning in Architecture. Essays on the Bodily Experience of Buildings* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 66.

¹⁰ Charlotte Bundgaard, *Montage Revisited* (Aarhus: Arkitektkolens Forlag, 2013), 102-115.

¹¹ Coleman, *Materials and...*, 81.

This light red Pietra di Prun marble has an indefinite variation of color tones and properties, depending on the specific layer of the mountain, and the processing of the surface, e.g., splitting, cutting, grinding, rolling, polishing, etc. In *il Sacello* which is a small stone tiled cube protruding from the entrance area façade into the garden, the tiles of Pietra di Prun elaborated in various ways show the playfulness of this particular local marble (fig. 7). The Sacello refers to the motif of the floor mosaic in another of Carlo Scarpa’s projects, the Fondazione Querini Stampalia (1961-63), in Sacello with changes chromatics, referencing the polychromy of traditional church floors¹².

White Istrian marble is another important material from the Venetian vocabulary, especially employed to reinforce edges of claddings. Typical Venetian brick buildings have white marble frames around windows and doorways, whilst cladged façades bear these stabilizing marble edges on corners and transitions. It is noted that the use of specifically white Istrian marble emphasizes an effect of depth, as the exposed surfaces that are protected from the weather turn black, while surfaces exposed directly to the weather turn white¹³.

“The more intensively one studies the architectonic phenomena of the city and their details, the more apparent the sphere from which Scarpa drew his inspiration becomes. Scarpa was able to absorb all that he saw and integrate it into his creative process. [...] The city’s architectonic motifs and its specific atmospheric situations leave their mark on Scarpa’s work, as does the skilled way he treats materials”¹⁴.

Concluding remarks

Three historical examples from periods with pronounced and important use of marble have led across ways of perceiving the city through the lens of a material; marble as a culture-bearing phenomenon, and as an agent for relating to, referencing, and commenting on the past.

Marble shapes landscapes and cities, both as material and meaning. Like no other material, marble holds the potential of bringing nature and culture closer together. Seen in a historical perspective marble is one of the most emblematic materials carrying both metaphorical properties and material presence. When reading a city through the lens of marble, powerful meaning and beautiful matter occur. Spanning from everyday spaces to glorious monuments, from small building details to primary loadbearing structures, from rough naked surfaces to polished perfection, marble has a significant impact on urban building culture.

¹² Anne-Catrin Schulz, *Carlo Scarpa. Layers* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2010), 71.

¹³ Schulz, *Carlo Scarpa...*, 77.

¹⁴ Schulz, *Carlo Scarpa...*, 77.

El paisaje es hoy un tema crucial en el debate arquitectónico, urbanístico, artístico, territorial, político, ecológico y antropológico. En la pregunta sobre qué es un paisaje se entrecruzan muchas de las grandes cuestiones que tienen que ver con la construcción y con la percepción de nuestro entorno, en un momento determinado por una crisis global que convierte a la mirada sobre nuestro hábitat en un asunto marcado por la urgencia. La centralidad del paisaje en la cultura contemporánea es un fenómeno tan reconocido que ha dado lugar a elaboraciones teóricas específicas tendentes a dar cuenta del mismo. Está claro que hoy las cuestiones relacionadas con el paisaje, en su sentido más amplio, constituyen uno de los núcleos conceptuales en los que en mayor medida se entrecruzan naturaleza, cultura, historia y contemporaneidad.

La complejidad y variedad de temas que el paisaje convoca solo puede abordarse desde una mirada transversal y desde la complementariedad de diferentes saberes y disciplinas. Tal fue el objetivo que se propuso el Congreso Internacional *Arquitectura y paisaje: transferencias históricas, retos contemporáneos*, celebrado en Granada del 26 al 28 de enero de 2022, cuyas aportaciones se recogen en el presente volumen.



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