

1987 *Standing in the grand hall of the Banca di Verona was the best place to pause and look back. I had just walked the entire building with Arrigo Rudi, longtime collaborator of Carlo Scarpa, the architect who had been commissioned to design the bank. Over a five-year period, Scarpa and Rudi worked continuously on the project that was now finally complete. Five years of creativity and construction in a continuous feedback loop!*

*The project had begun in the usual way: the first sketch was pure intuition, then a more precise drawing and a model. From that point on, the process was atypical. They worked at scale through drawings and models, defining the scope and function as an aesthetic emerged. Over and over, the process would be generative, analytical and critical, then back again, eventually reaching a phase of refinement and detail. When the creative work was complete, construction began. From that point on, decisions, relatively minor compared to the earlier phases of work, were practical and technical. The architect was expected to make periodic visits to the site to observe and clarify. Why, then, had it taken five years?*

*Thom Mayne and I built experimental houses in Venice, California, working with young builders, some of whom had been our students at SCI-Arc. We were adventurous enough then to not have figured everything out in advance. We designed as we went along. Since there had been many iterations of models and drawings, by the time construction began, most of the design work was done. We still made changes as we went along, using the building as our full-size model.*

*As familiar as these projects of Scarpa's in Verona felt to me, there was something about them that was intriguingly elusive. Over the next few months, I was able to visit his other projects in the Veneto region and I began to develop a sense of what was different in his work, besides his obvious aesthetic predilections.*

*Scarpa's work had a body language bearing a clear trace of his conceptual fingerprints. For me, this was a completely unexpected way to think of a building. Didn't other buildings have body language? Perhaps, but these were distinct. These buildings were a visible record of all that they had gone through in coming into the world. They held the memory of the creative process, particularly that of their relationship with the architect.*

*I had been told that Scarpa would begin construction before the drawings were complete, while design continued on a parallel track. Each idea was tested full-size in real time, then became the impetus for the next set of ideas. The building, the architect, and the builders were all in a special dance with moves that mostly remained embodied in the building. This could be sensed. My body recognized it.*

*This way of working was freer than any other I knew. It was also risky. What if you did not like what you had done the day before? What if all the decisions did not add up and the whole became incoherent? It was like a chess game that needed basic rules to guide the process without restricting it. In concept, this was how we worked in the studio, but if we did not like what we had just done, we had erasers and more cardboard. Working full-size meant no second chance. I wanted to make a building using this process. I wanted to test myself.*

*After touring Italy for eight weeks, I spent the next eight weeks at SCI-Arc's villa in the Ticinese portion of the Southern Alps, overlooking Lake Lugano. I studied my sketchbooks, and thought about this type of praxis—completely free from conventional working methods and sequences. How could the work remain coherent as a system, aesthetically and linguistically? I'd read as a student that architecture, like other human expressions, was a language and must be conceived and executed with the intent of communicating to others in an articulate way. It needed a "grammar" and rules. However, if an open-ended, spontaneous approach were taken, rules would undermine the process. But maybe not. I recalled that we had had*

*the same concerns in the early days of SCI-Arc. Without knowing it, we had been embedded in a self-organizing system guided by rules that naturally emerged over time. If we paid attention and remained open to the possibility of changing our minds in light of new experiences, then we might be able to keep it both working and consistent. Now I know that everything has an internal logic that provides structure, as all the parts interact in apparently spontaneous ways. Pay attention and let it be.*

*Maybe a building had a DNA. I wondered, is it possible that freedom and structure are nested within each other? I've come to know this to be true.*

*Back from my four-month sabbatical, I settled in for a few weeks and then began to work in this way on my family house in Los Angeles, with a carpenter and his two assistants and with my ten-year-old son. We worked off-and-on over the next five years. There were no construction drawings, just sketches and a few drawings that set down the ordering and dimensional system for the surface and volumes.*

*The system was linear, circular, and sequential, all of which we embedded in the finished concrete slab for reference, if needed. The carpenter would build what was sketched. If it were unclear to him, he'd move on to some other part of the project and place lights on the areas that needed attention. When I returned home, usually after dark, long after they had left, I would turn on the lights and sit looking at the building, then sketch what was needed to keep them going the next day. If there were a "mistake," we would work on it until it became intentional. Basically, there were no mistakes and no erasers. I discovered the relationship between freedom and fear.*

*Throughout the entire process, I was interested in my son's ideas, which I knew would be fresh and radical, due to his inexperience. Not limited by prior knowledge, he would say things that I would not even have allowed myself to think. Working with a young, growing person showed me how we limit ourselves as we get more experienced. I began to remember things I had once known and ways I used to be. I rediscovered, in him, the deep intelligence of innocence. "Beginner's mind" believes that anything imaginable is possible. Shunryu Suzuki wrote in Zen Mind Beginner's Mind, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."*

*"Dad, can my bedroom be like a tree-house?"*

*Dad, can the entire front wall of the room be glass and slide out of the way so I am sleeping out of doors?*

*Dad, can we put a big opening in the roof and make a big telescope so I can see the stars at night when I am lying down, like the stars of my birthday constellation?*

*Dad, can we make the concrete walls look like your photographs of the desert from the airplane?"*

*My first thought was always "that's not possible," but I would keep it to myself and, with some patience and drawing, I discovered that it was possible to accomplish what he suggested. Next, I would have to confront my ego, realizing once again that these were his ideas and I wanted them to be mine. How absurd was my need to be first and original? Who had given me that imprint? What better teacher to have and what better time to let go? Things began to change for me. I learned a lot from him and still do. He made me a better teacher.*

*I eventually stopped working on the house, and left it incomplete when I moved to another house nearby, but my son asked if he could stay in the unfinished house. I gave him a list of items to be completed and told him that the house would be his if he finished it. He eventually completed the work and added a few new features of his own. The house is now his home.*