

# The Landmark Trust

## VILLA SARACENO

### History Album

#### Vol II- The Repair of the Buildings



Charlotte Haslam, 1994

Re-presented 2007, 2015

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## **Basic Details**

**Project and Director of Works, from 1988 till mid-1993:** Francesco Doglioni  
**Site Architect and Director of Works from mid-1993:** Ilaria Cavaggioni  
**Superintending Architect, the Landmark Trust:** John Bucknall  
**Historical Consultant:** Richard Haslam

**Main Contractor:** Taita snc. of Feltre  
(Foreman, Simone De Cet).  
**Fresco Conservation:** Vanni Tiozzo  
**Floors:** Terracotta: Polirone spa  
*Battuto:* Ambrogio Trevisan  
**Joinery:** Repairs: Claudio Montesin,  
Specialist Contractors from England

**Repairs to Villa Saraceno**

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## 1. The Roofs

The roofs of the whole complex were probably last repaired properly in the late nineteenth century. The roof structures of the buildings on the east of the *corte* are from that period, including the two older houses at its north-east corner. The *barchessa* had a sound mid-nineteenth-century roof, but no gutters. At the villa house, the centre and the west wing still have Palladio's admirable trusses which elegantly span the large spaces of the granaries; apart from distortions and their corrections which are observable in the main granary, they are still efficient. Poorly reconstructed without tie-beams, the replacement east granary roof had sunk. The main east cornice had moved out and was close to collapse, since its deep moulded brick components could no longer function as cantilevers.

Careful dismantling of the coverings of the eaves revealed the shafts of the two original lateral chimneys, rising from the long-disused fireplaces in the large north-facing rooms. In one, a brick moulding from the vanished chimney was found.

All the roof structures and coverings were repaired in 1990. The east granary defect was corrected by swinging up new tie-beams of pine brought from the Alps, and linking them to the existing trusses by new stone imposts in the angles and raking braces so as to reduce the thrust at the wall head. The villa house roof coverings were repaired first, and the opportunity was taken to remove the two later dormer windows in the south pediment hips and a chimney on the south-east corner. Secret gutters were installed like those at Palazzo delle Trombe, which discharged rainwater through copper spouts so as to avoid external gutters and down pipes. New chimneys were built like those at Villa Marcello Curti, which echo the rhythm of the facades below. The other roofs followed in sequence, with the *tezza* roof (which, being low, is the most visible) coming last. The existing system, using the existing components was repeated throughout; *pianelle* (flat tiles) planted on battens and visible from below, then timber bracing and insulation as necessary, then *coppi* (curved tiles, secured with clips).





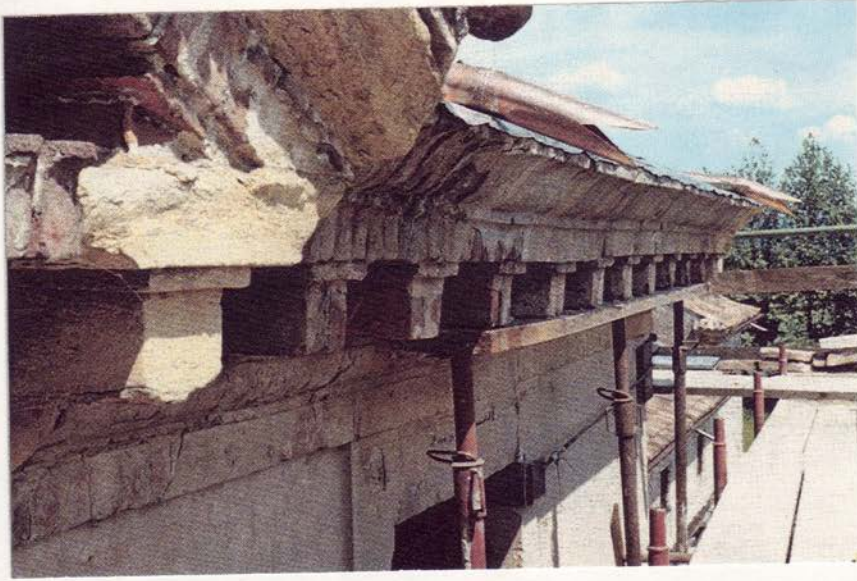
*North pediment: cornice and valley.*





**Making the secret gutters and rain-water spouts.**





*Re mani cornice of Palladio's house.*

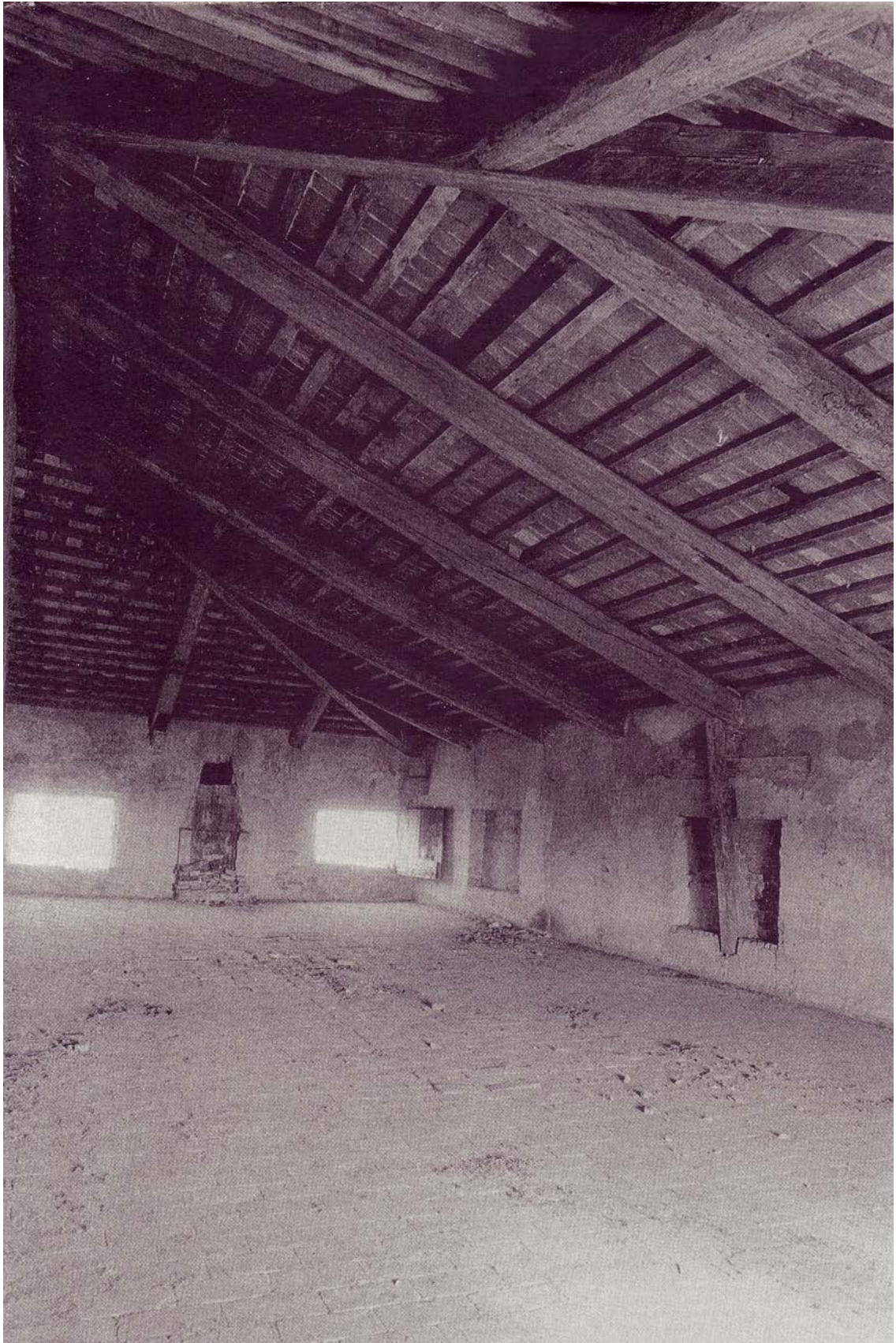


*Re Carchessa roof seen from above.*



△  
The east wing main cornice had  
moved outwards, because the roof put △  
on after the fire of 1798 had no tie beams.





## 2. The external walls of the Villa house

The external walls of the Villa Saraceno were affected by problems of many kinds, and required a commensurate number of skills to bring them back to a sound condition. The dampness of the alluvial fens of the Pianura Padana is compounded here by layers of clay which prevent drainage in the winter. The cornices shed water on the wall-heads; the *intonaci* (fine lime plasters) were cracked, and in many places, missing altogether. The house was also largely unventilated. In the Veneto, the combination of rain and lack of sun often led to the darkening which is endemic on the north walls, due to the growth of lichens, moulds and mosses. The north façade had also suffered architectural degradation; the north axial window in the west wing had been blocked; the east wing had its Palladio granary window blocked, and a projecting pantry had been added in place of the axial north window in the original design. The fenestration consisted of six smaller windows arranged in two vertical axes.

Understanding this tormented wall (the subject of a brick-by-brick survey in 1991) showed that the construction of these windows accompanied the insertion of the mezzanine in 1659, and that they were rebuilt when the mezzanine was raised to its present level in the eighteenth century. Below ground, the main walls were found to stand on deep foundations of impermeable stone. The cracks in the walls are the same as those described in a survey in 1692. Evidence of the form of the seventeenth-century north steps was found. The south steps also proved to be a seventeenth-century addition, with ramped steps also having been laid on the brick arch. Prolonged examination established that the *intonaco* on the west, south and east walls, and on part of the north wall, is the original of about 1550.

Works on these walls lasted from about 1990 to 1994. A cement render applied to the plinth in 1974 was chipped off. A ring-drain was dug. The north *intonaco* was washed, and patches and cracks filled with lime putty. Stains on the south front, where verdigris remained from spraying vines, were removed with lime poultices. Areas where Palladio's architectural concept had been represented in the *intonaco* surface by drawing on impressed joints to imitate stonework were re-integrated. Palladio's north-east window was reformed in brick, and the later windows were all blocked. The nineteenth century shutters were removed all round. The south steps had their walls raised and capped with S. Germano stone, but replacement of the grey stone steps themselves, mistakenly added in 1974, is still to be done.





△ The north front before repairs; and a glimpse of its problems ▽





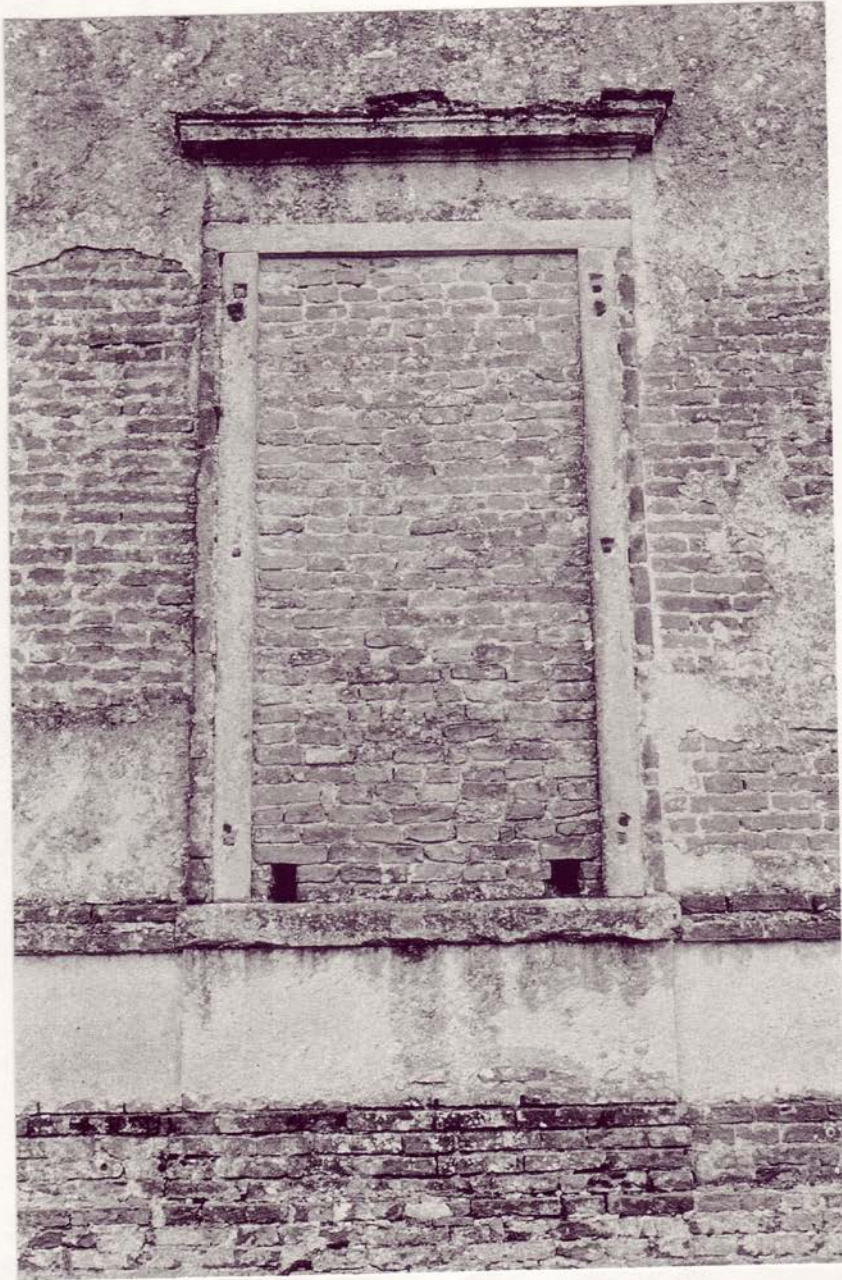


East window of north front after  
removal of pantry.



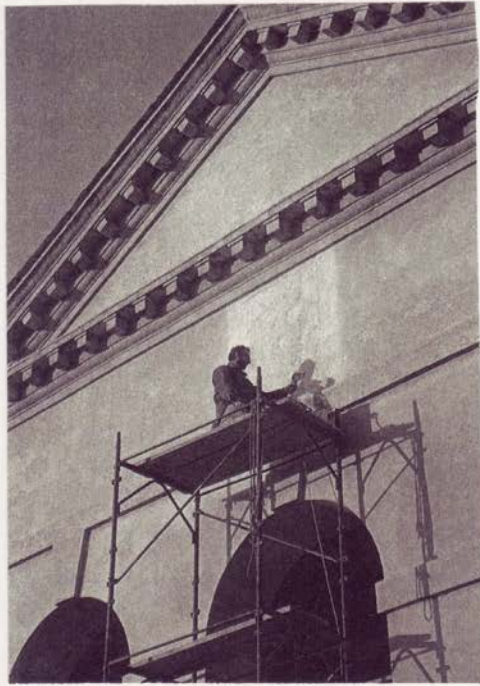


best window of south front,  
with 19<sup>th</sup> century shutters.



best window of north front, before  
unblocking to light the stanze maggiori.





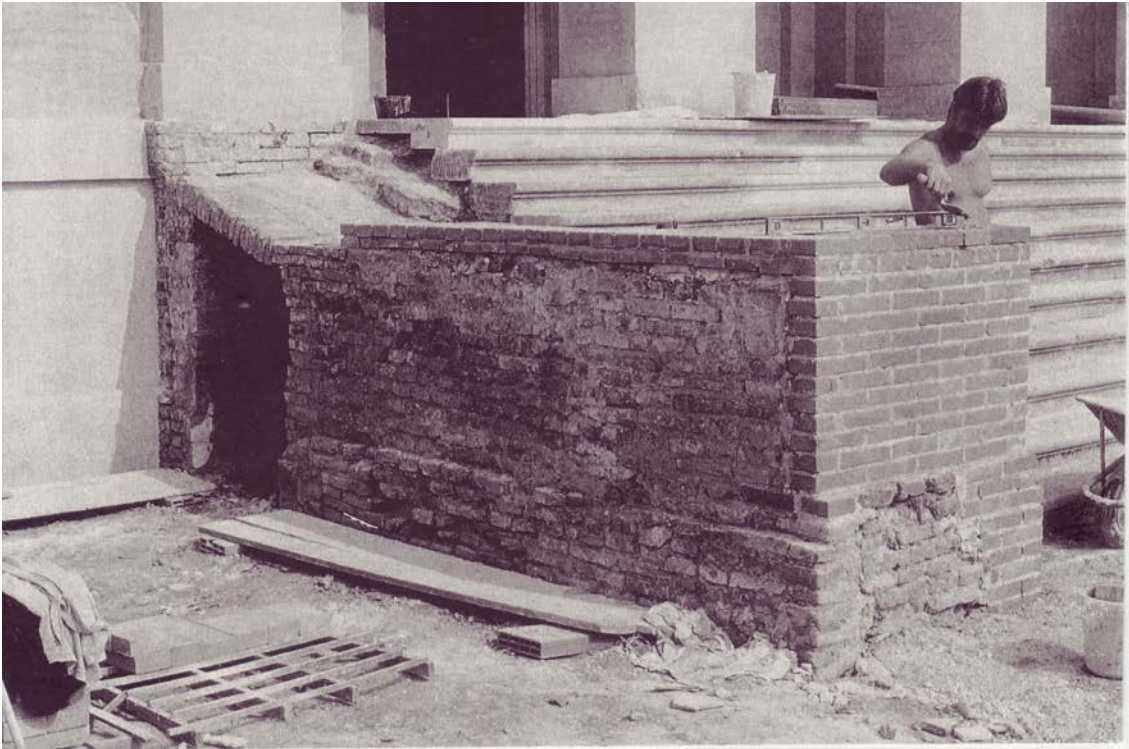
Suinore, the site foreman, uncovering the damaged cornice slab on the south front.



The original brick drain leading south from the cellar, with its replacement beside it.

The south front had been damaged by the plinths being rendered in cement, and by copper stairs from spraying vines. The south steps prove to be an early-17<sup>th</sup> century project; the side walls were refaced in March 1994; and the stone-hogged stepped ramp is still to be installed.





(overleaf) Looking through the 19<sup>th</sup> century window  
in the cucina grande towards the wooden doorway  
into the casa vecchia. ▷

### 3. The *Sala*, or central hall.

The *sala* (unlike the exterior of the villa house) was scarcely recognisable, as one of Palladio's most memorable achievements before work began. The brick floor was decaying and littered with rubble and broken glass, lit only by the great south and north doors (the windows were shuttered) which vandals had left open to the elements. The wall surfaces were overpainted with ochres and the frescoes were increasingly obscured by dust, mould and salts since its abandonment in 1974. It was a sorry place indeed.

The entrance had been constricted to a narrow passage by the enlargement of the little rooms on either side, thus obscuring the T-plan of the *Sala* which was still visible at frieze level. The east third of the ceiling had been burned in 1798, and replaced in plain wood, and the tempera decoration of the remaining two thirds was flaking off. The wooden cornices of the frieze had been taken down.

The floor stratum slowly yielded its story as work progressed. The sand fill beneath the pavings had sunk over time below the original level, together with the imprint of the original tiles left in their lime mortar bed; survivors of these tiles could therefore be identified. Excavating the floors of the *stanzine* revealed the footings of Palladio's walls and the correct position of the stone doorcases in these partitions. Scraping the later coloured limewashes off the walls uncovered an ivory-white *intonaco* (presumably the original plaster, left unpainted) save where rising damp destroyed it long ago. All this contributed to the rediscovery of the space and light of this remarkable room.



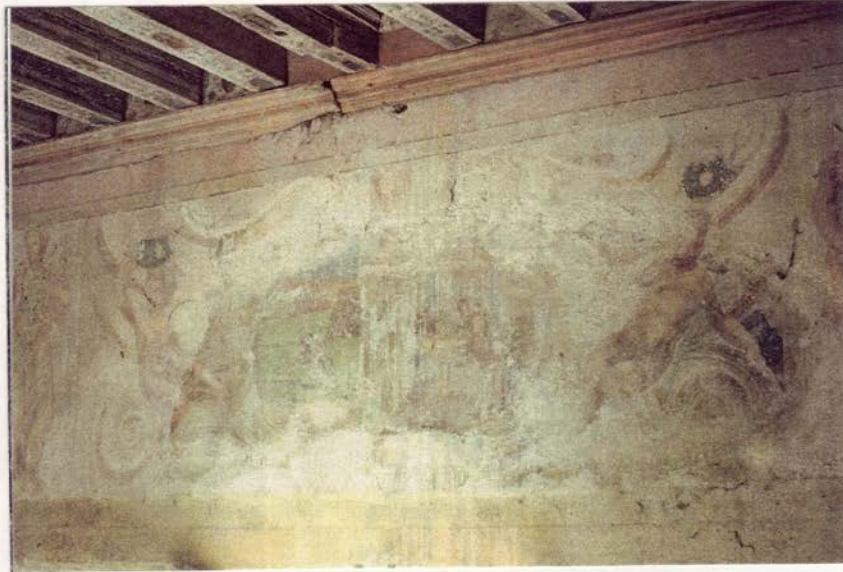
Considerable skill was needed from our mason to reinstate the long walls of the two *stanzine* to their former positions, since the sections of fresco frieze above had not been cut away when the remodelling took place in the 1890s. The weight of the brickwork behind was carried on wooden beams, which new brickwork had to replace – as it successfully did.

The stone doorframes were successfully resited, and the doorway cut through to the middle west room was blocked up again. The floor was laid with new two-clay tiles specially made at Polirone to match the old. The walls had their fine lime plaster made up where defective and were then lime sprayed to match the old tint.

The ceiling decoration was fixed and new stone grills were cut for the lower parts of the *stanzine* to match the originals in the upper. The frescoes were cleaned, fixed, and generally intergrated in watercolour; new upper and lower wooden cornices were made to match surviving fragments of each. The doors were overhauled, new shutters were made, the window recesses were opened up and given new seats and windows – copied from survivors in the *stanza maggiore*.



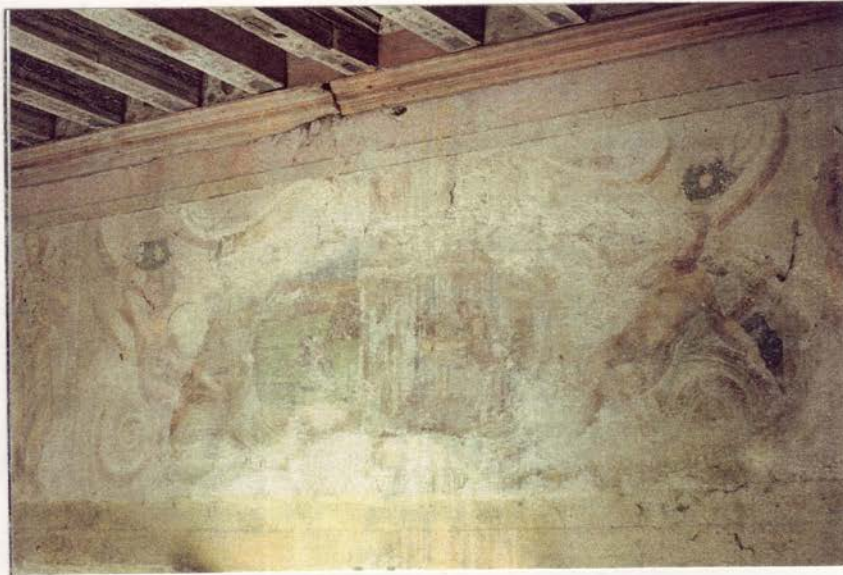




The sala frescoes before cleaning.



Imprint of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century tiled floor.



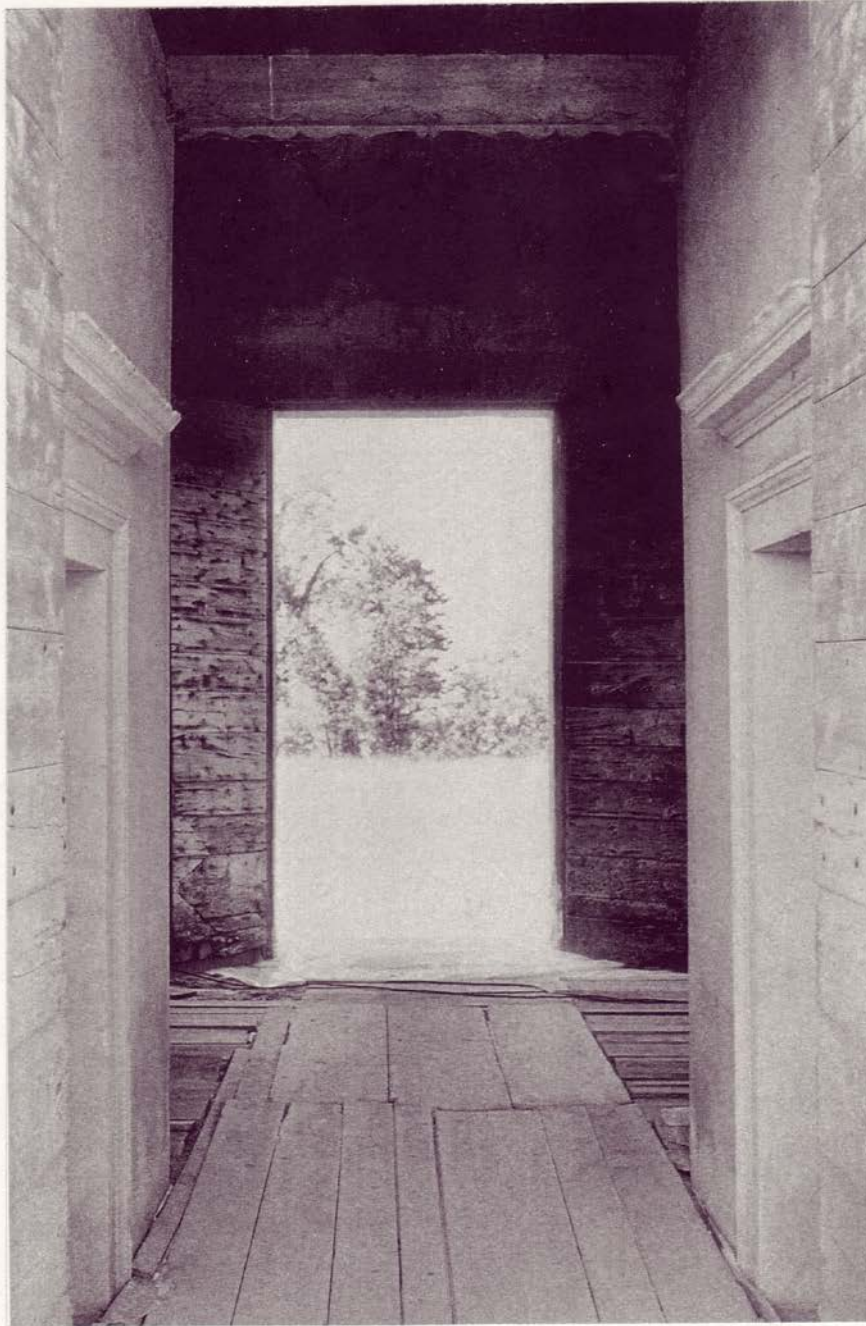
The sala frescoes before cleaning.



Imprint of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century tiled floor.

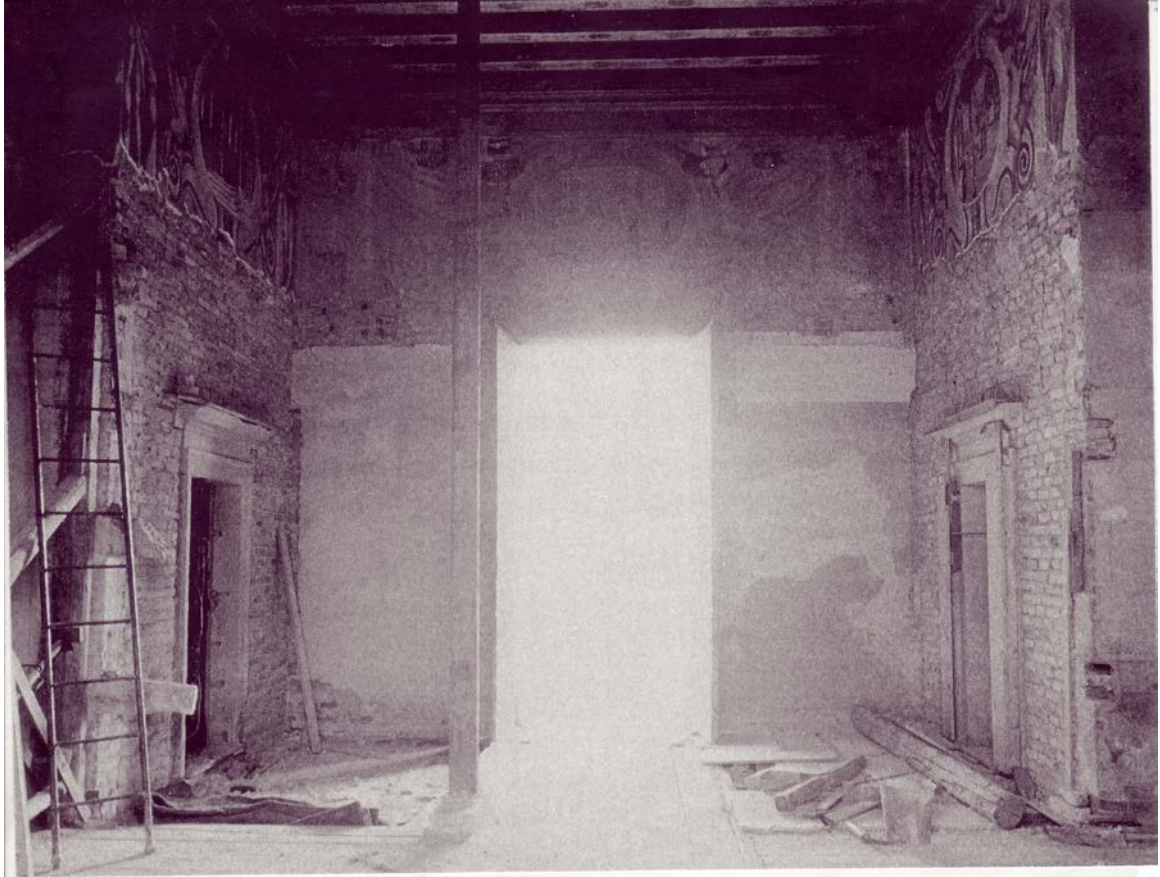




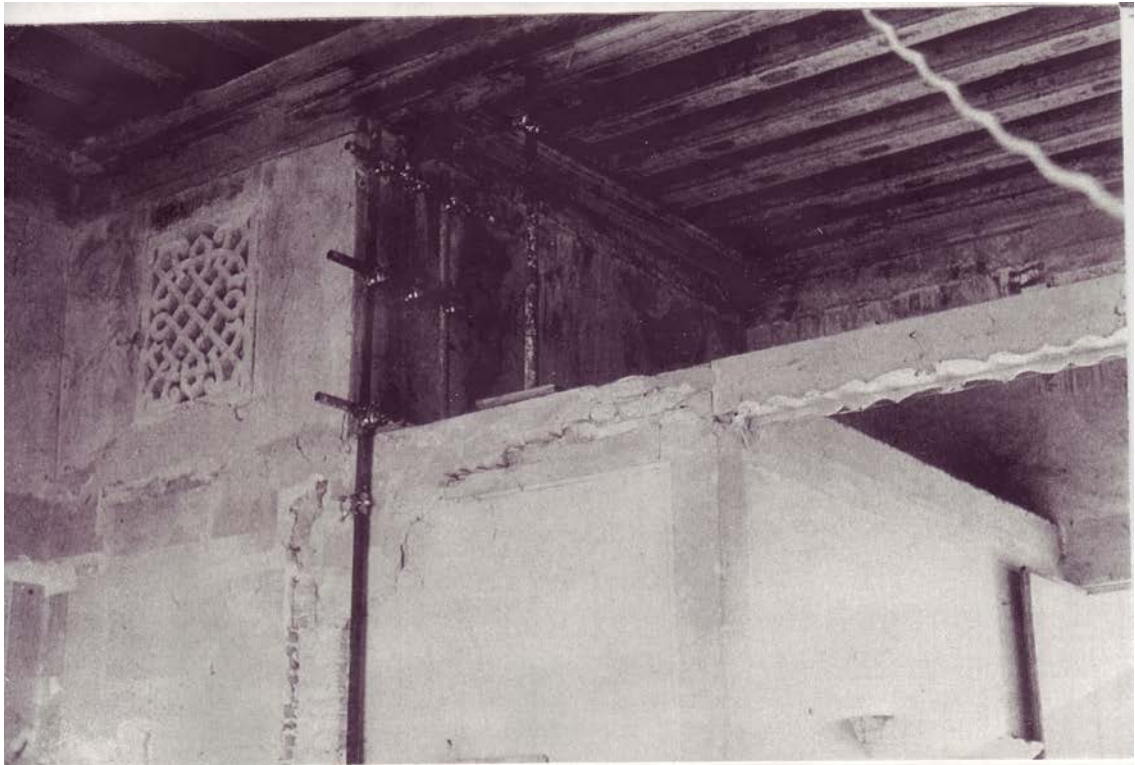


The sala entrance, looking north,  
Left reduction of the stanzine.





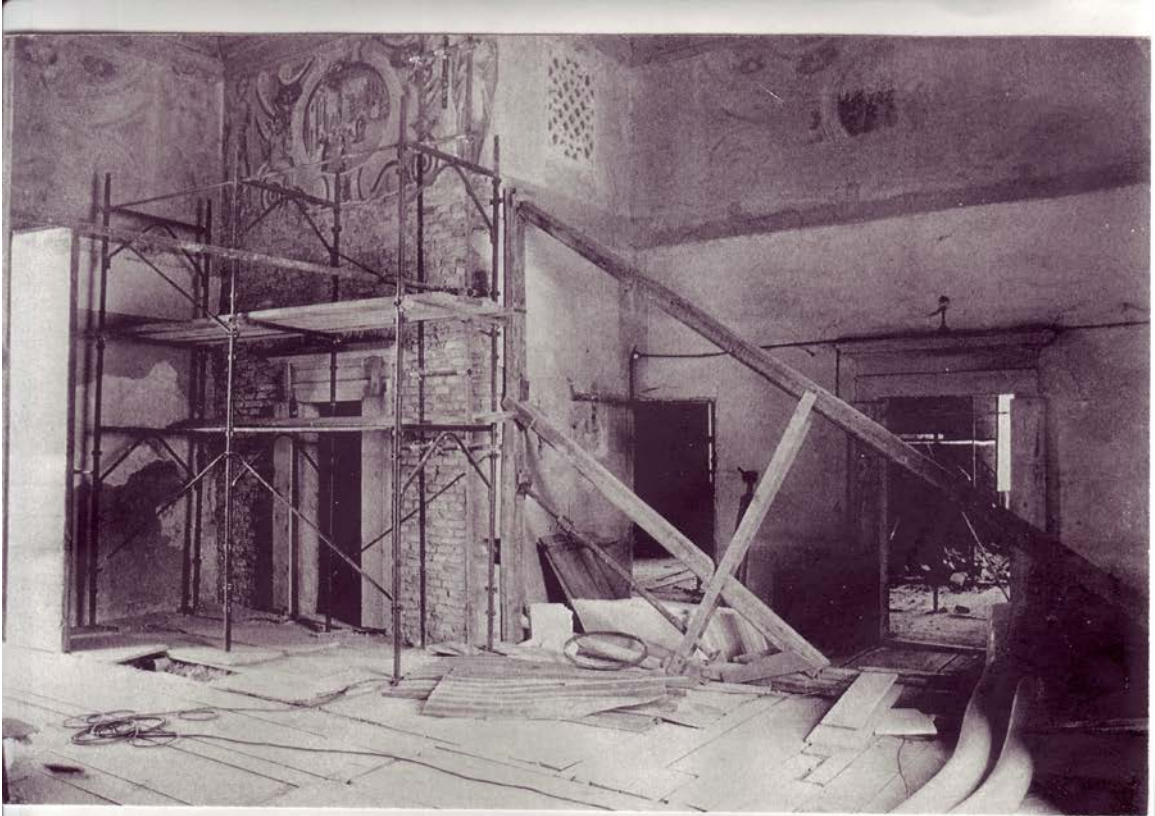
The sala entrance, looking south, after the reduction of the stanzine in 1991. The frescoes above the void were first cleaned and fixed as a precaution.



△  
The east stanzina as  
enlarged about 1890.  
The west stanzina,  
(above) just after the  
Levi statement; and  
(below) with old patches  
of intonaco and trials  
for new.

△ The east stanzina  
as reduced.





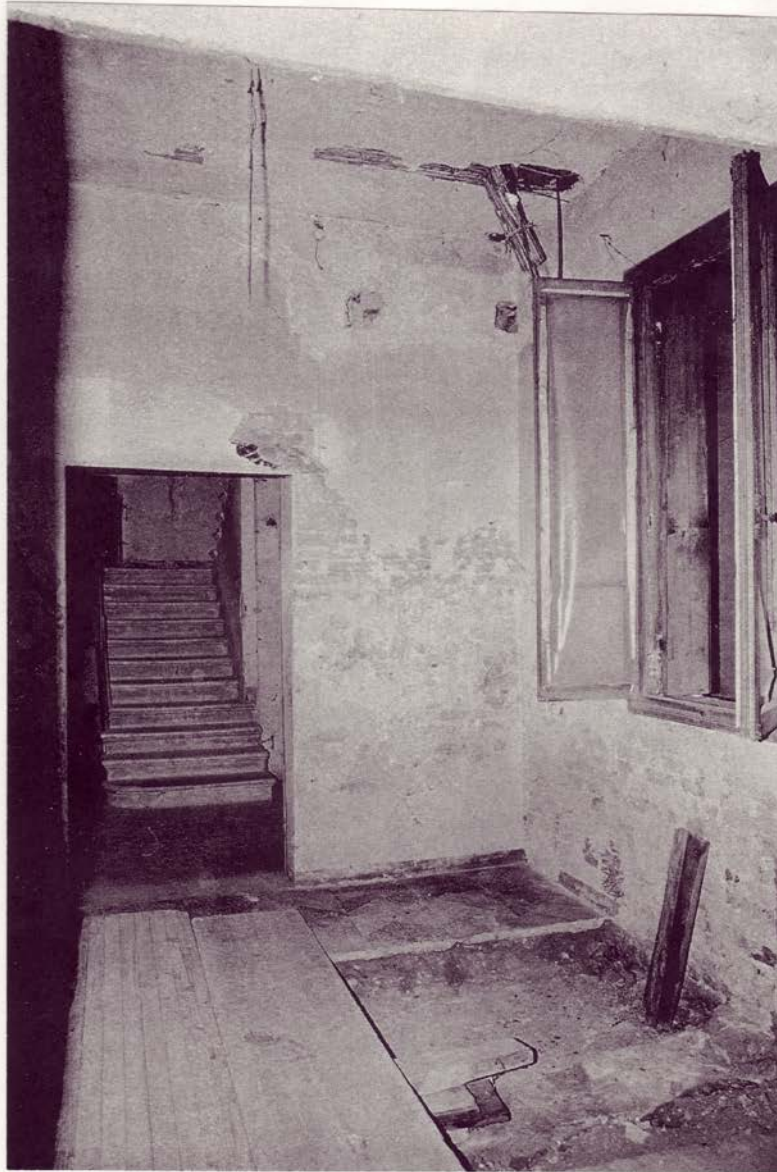
#### 4. The *Stanzine* (the small corner rooms in the *sala*)

The *stanzine* occupy a pivotal place in the plan of the house, in its rediscovery and in the repair. They and the loggia have been altered considerably for functional reasons. The loggia's *battuto* floor, of brick fragments pounded into lime mortar had been partly broken up and been patched with stones and cement. Its walls had been punctured by a door to the east *camerino*, which had served as a kitchen in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries and by two windows to the *stanzine* cut symmetrically into the blank bays beside the main door. These only lit the *stanzine* in their enlarged form. Both had lost their grille-windows to the *sala*. But the distortion of the east *camerino* was more complex and serious; not just because a way through had been cut in its east wall to give access to the stair inserted into the east wing also in the late nineteenth century, but because this little tower had contained Palladio's stairs giving access to the granary.

Investigation showed that this stair had indeed been built, but then it had been removed and its flights rebuilt in the contrary direction so as to open northwards into the *sala*. This was done when the house was divided by Lucietta Thiene Caldogno in 1659 in the interests of her two sons. In the eighteenth century the steps were returned to their starting position, where they remained until about 1890. Though two windows to the loggia are marked on the plan in the *Quattro Libri*, they cannot have existed in the house as built, since the outer walls of the *stanzine* – as their footings confirm – come across these late-nineteenth-century Palladianising openings.

The two *stanzine* were returned to their original form in 1991 and the windows and the east door were closed up. The stairs and lower grilles were reproduced in stone and installed in 1993. The west *stanzina* retains its paving of reused neoclassical Veneto mosaic. While these little rooms became dark and narrow again, the contiguous spaces gained immeasurably, especially the loggia which has reacquired its intended lofty and noble simplicity.



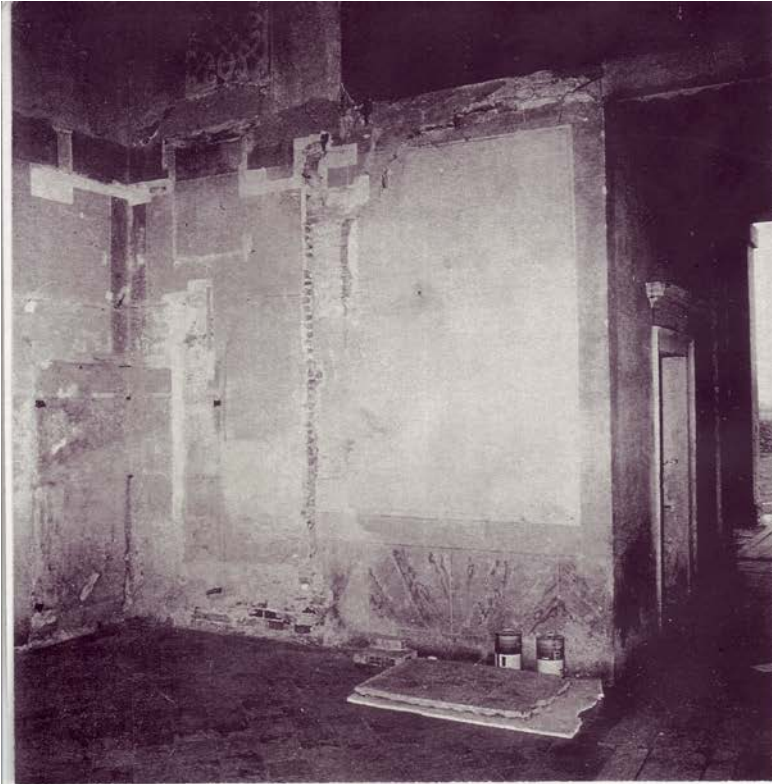


The east stanzina, with the mirdar  
to the loggia opened about 1890, and  
the door through to the stairs of 1890.  
Examination of the east wall revealed  
that three staircases came and went  
in this space.

The next stanza, showing (right) the reopening of the perforation for a lower tier of stone grilles, and (below) the finding of this feature from within.



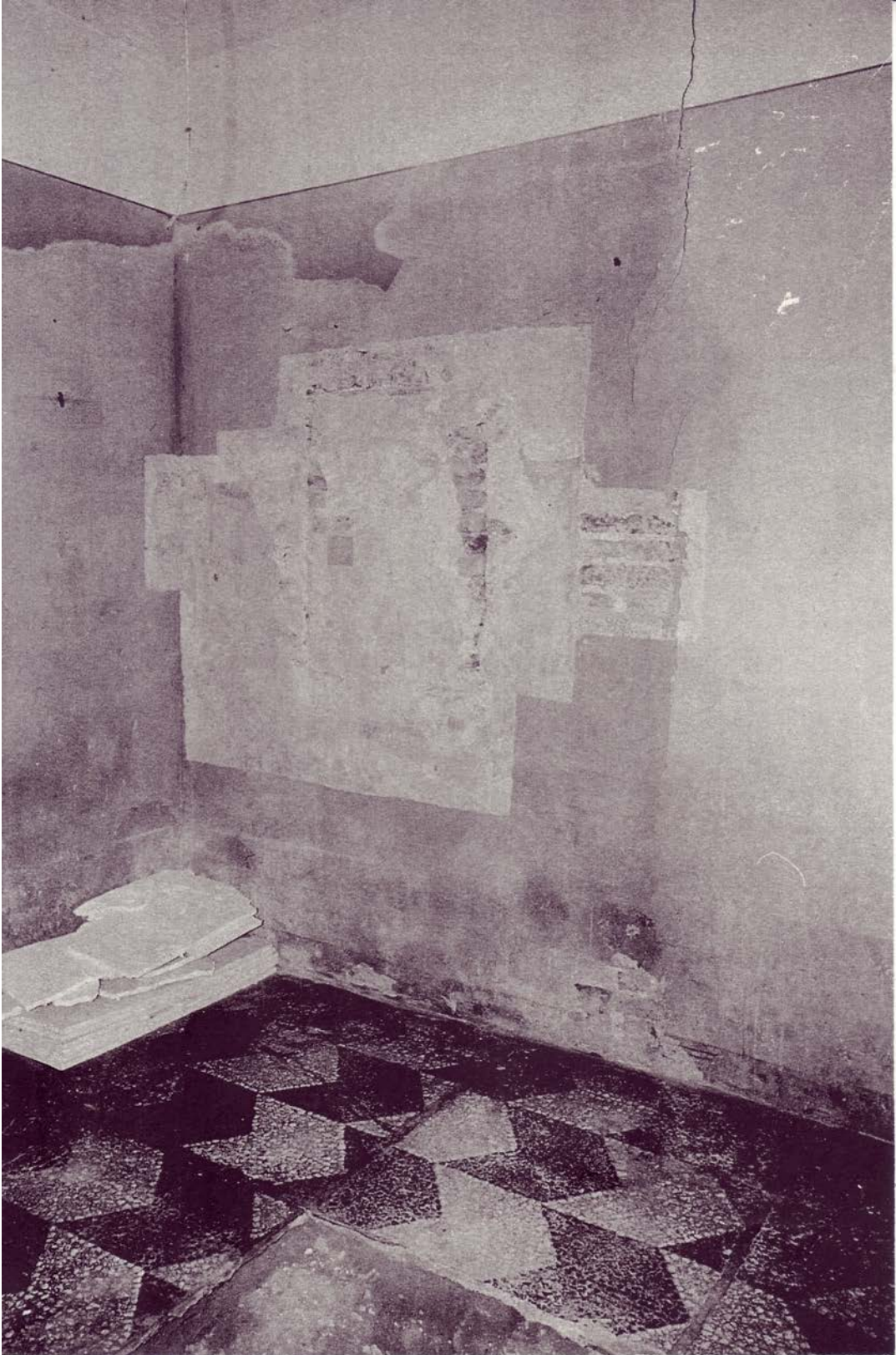




The east  
staircase,  
showing  
◁ (left) the  
blocked 17<sup>th</sup>  
century  
doorway  
to the sala

(below) the  
imprints of  
the 16<sup>th</sup> century  
tiled floor  
left in lime  
mortar.







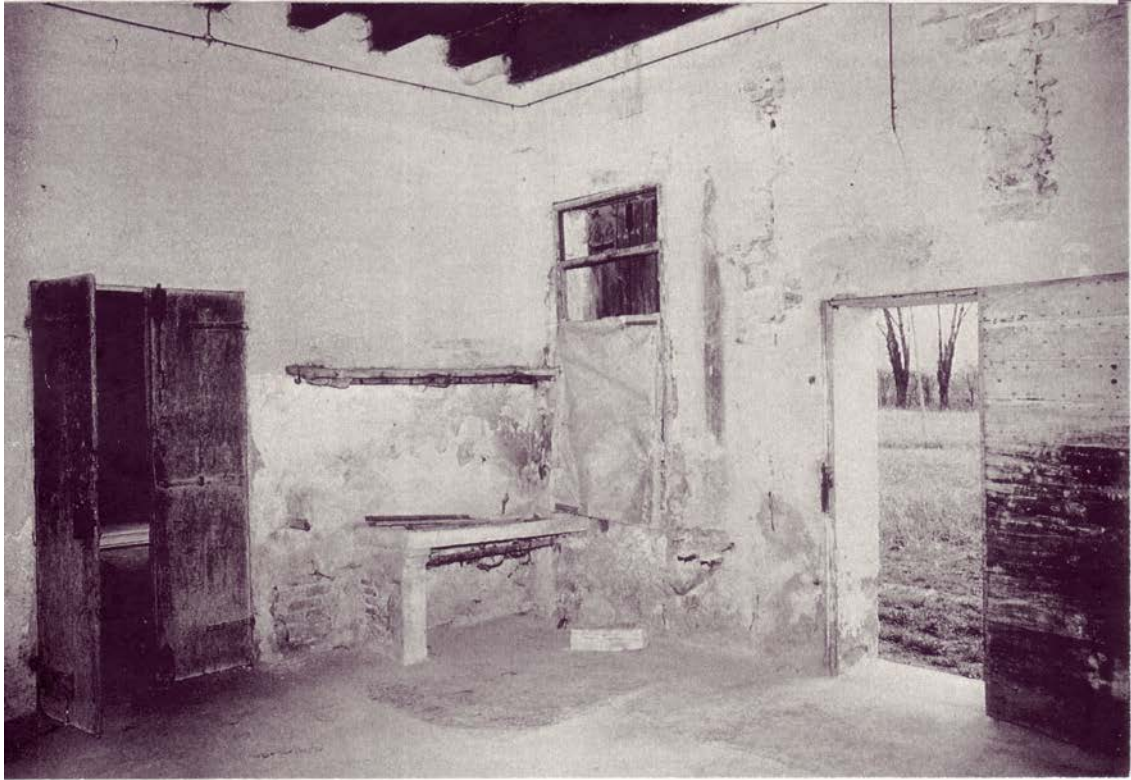
## 5. The East Wing

The east wing of the villa house had undergone great alteration internally, as the space used by Palladio's two rooms on one main floor, the *stanza* and *camerino* (or chamber and closet, the first with a beamed ceiling and the other with a brick vault) had been rearranged in 1659 and given a mezzanine to make four equal rooms. This involved the demolition of the vault over the south east *camerino*, the moving of its inner wall to the centre of the space, and the insertion of the mezzanine floor in the first (and lower) position. Subsequently this mezzanine was raised to its second level, like the floor of the granary above it. Further alterations in the nineteenth century returned the inner wall of the *camerino* to stand on Palladio's footings but at the same time a partition wall was built to divide the *stanza* (or *cucina grande*, with seems to have begun as the main kitchen) in two, thus blocking the fire place. Furthermore, new concrete stairs were erected in the central room.

This history emerged when the surfaces were unpicked. The fireplace, which it seems was never finished, emerged in the east wall. When when the nineteenth-century brick floors were lifted, the early *battuto* floors were recovered – damaged, but repairable since, being supported by the cellar vault, they had not sunk like those in the west wing.

Removing the *cucina grande* partition returned that space to the floor dimensions of Palladio's plan. A fireplace based on the kitchen one at Villa Pisani, Bagnolo was introduced. The big fireplace in the east *camerino* was allowed to stay, although it is not usable, having no chimney. The *battuto* floors were patched, then oiled and waxed. Upstairs the mezzanine floor plan is nineteenth-century (the eighteenth-century partition's position is visible in the centre between two closely set joists on both floors); and advantage was taken of its existence to install two bathrooms.

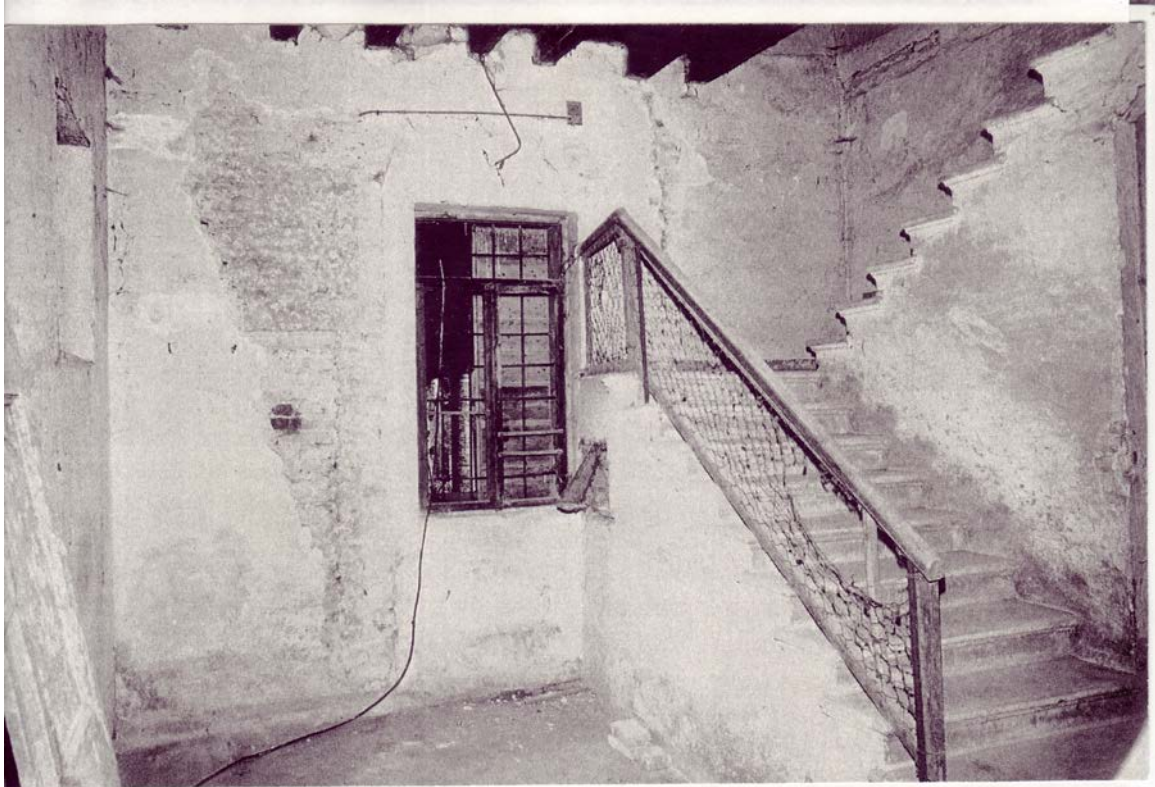




The north half of the cocina grande, after removal of the pantry which obstructed the site of Paredo's window.

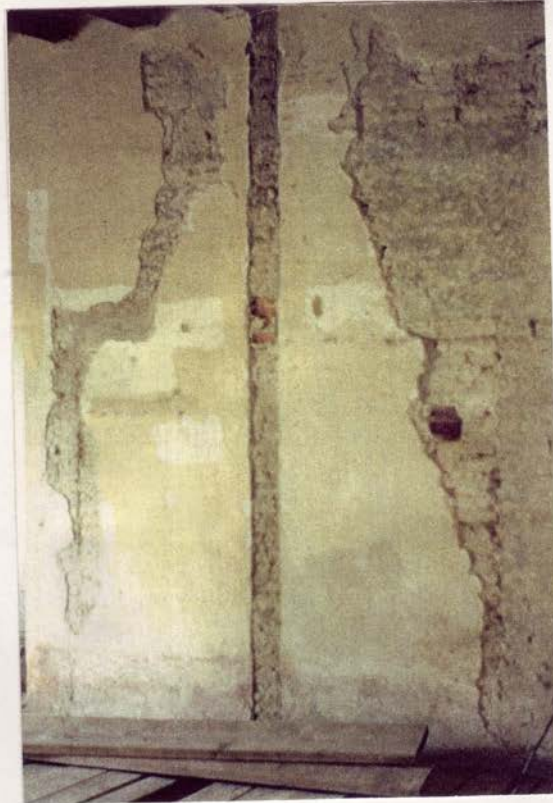
△ The east-west axis from the blocked Paredo doorway, now hidden under thick plaster.





The south half of the cucina grande, before  
removal of the partition wall which divided  
Paredi's very tall fireplace in two.





The cucina grande fireplace, as outlined in  
blue in file after removal of the partition.

The south-east camerino, has an 18<sup>th</sup> century  
ceiling, and a fireplace dating from its use  
as a kitchen. ▷





## 6. The West Wing

The west wing had followed a similar path of degradation to the east wing, apart from not having had a mezzanine installed. The west *camerino* lost its vault in the seventeenth century, when a wooden beamed ceiling replaced it. In the late-nineteenth century disaster struck this room, when the frescoes were hacked off the walls apart from the fragments surviving in the crowns of the arches above where the false ceiling was inserted at that time. The walls were thickly plastered, the window embrasures filled in.

These fresco fragments and the under painting for a Judgement of Paris in the west lunette were important discoveries. Round them the shadows of the brick vault were found. Perhaps no room in the villa has taken such a pronounced turn for the better. The vault which had been missing for centuries was reconstructed in wood and lath an *intonaco*. A *battuto* floor was laid on 20th November 1993, made of the materials found within a metre of the house's walls.

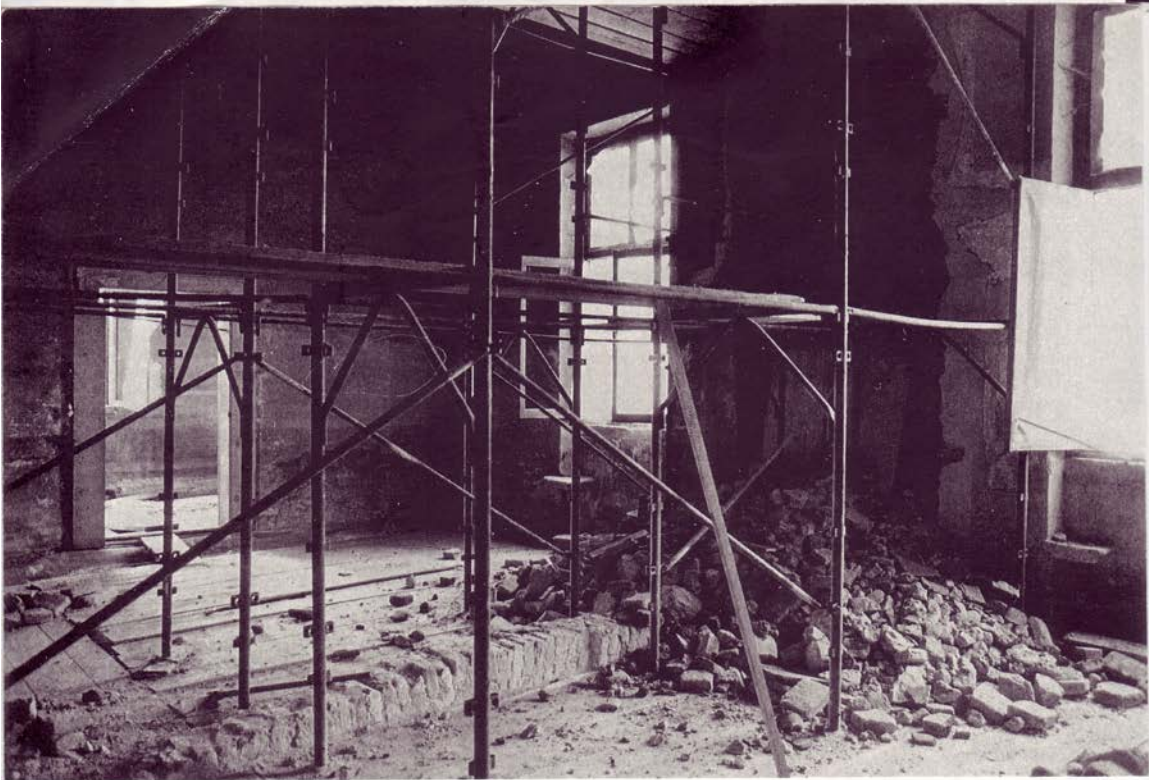
The *stanza maggiore* had suffered, like its counterpart in the east wing, from subdivision by a wall which cut the fireplace in two. When this wall was demolished, the fireplace proved seventeenth-century in the profile of its hood and its fireback. The two west windows here retained some seventeenth-century woodwork in their casements. The walls were covered in a terracotta limewash, which concealed another old *intonaco*, this time grayish and translucent. The fresco frieze appears to have been damaged in the nineteenth century, perhaps in an unsuccessful attempt at *strappo* (the removal of the painted layer of plaster, a technique then invented by a Venetian). The decorated ceiling was much blackened. The *battuto* floor had sunk so far that it leaves room for underfloor heating in the space between it and the bricks.

In addition to the regeneration of this excellent space, all the surfaces have recovered their quality and all their main component parts – which were found to exist here and were repeated for the other rooms. The ceiling beams were cleaned till the chestnut tint and the remains of their painted decoration emerged. The frescoes were integrated in watercolour and the walls beneath them were completed with new *intonaco*. A new fireplace surround was made in the same material, the mouldings again being one long day's work.



Mythological scenes in the stanza mezzana  
(great chamber) where had to compete with  
the drying of agricultural produce.





De stanza maggiore after demotion of the partition wall.

▽ De sunken battuto floor beneath the brick of the stanza.



This view of  
the stanzza  
maggiora after  
renovation of  
the two halves,  
and before the  
red clay / marmorino  
has scraped off  
the early plaster  
(arintoneco).





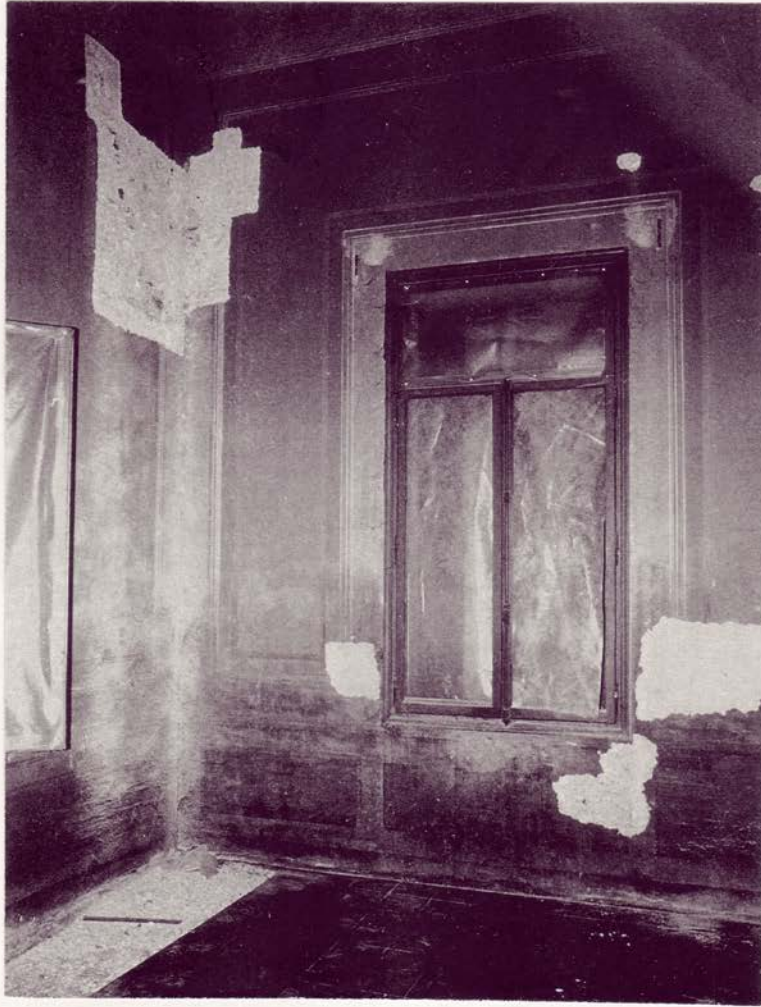


One of the two 17<sup>th</sup>-century window frames  
in the stanza maggiore, which provided  
the model for the rest of the house.



The 17<sup>th</sup> century chimney piece in the stanza maggiore, emerging (left), and half way to reconstruction (above).





Looking for the west camerino vault,  
pulled down about 1660, and for the  
mudar seats.



## 7. The *Barchessa*

The *barchessa* was a practical farm building and had been used hard. In its loggia, the floors had been replaced to a higher level with concrete, and a cement render had been applied to the height of 5ft to the columns and all the internal spaces – and in the latter this had been covered with pitch. The east bay of its loggia had been converted to make a two story forge and was much blackened. A section of the loft floor had collapsed in the 1960s when being loaded with hay.

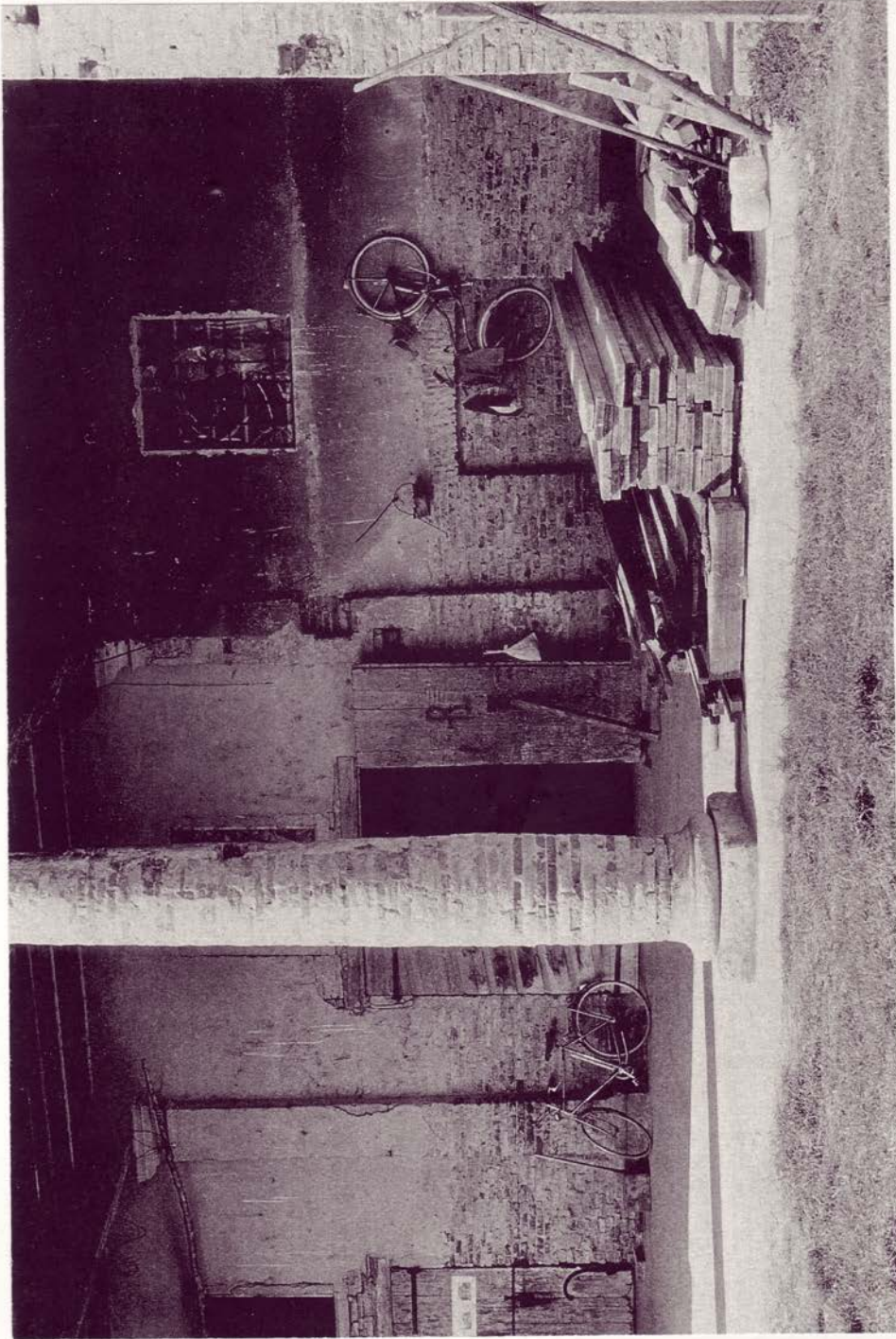
Examination of the south and north sides of the north wall had already shown that this was substantially the remains of the *barchessa* built in 1658; excavation in its southern part revealed the bases of its columns and other features, but nothing of the *barchessa* previously erected in this position in 1607.

On the long north wall overlooking the *brolo* the two large windows and the arched doorway to the *brolo* were reopened. The poor nineteenth-century outer coat of plaster, part of which remains on top of the seventeenth-century *intonaco*, was left, and the old thin coat was repaired and integrated. A new floor of the grey igneous trachite of the Colli Euganei was laid in the loggia at the right level for the columns. The doorway from this space to the *casa vecchia* was reopened, and the old wooden doors were repaired throughout. Little beyond replacing floors and missing shutters was done in the granary. The ground and mezzanine levels provided opportunities for installing services such as a new kitchen, the boilers, a back stair, and a big space paved with stone from S. Germano in the Monte Berico, all without making any new openings in old fabric.

Among the discoveries during the work were the foundations of the columns of the *barchessa* of 1658, from which it has been possible to establish the plan of this unusual building. The north wall, though partially covered in a thick nineteenth-century plaster, had two blocked windows and a blocked arched doorway to the *brolo* as well as parts of the seventeenth-century improvements.

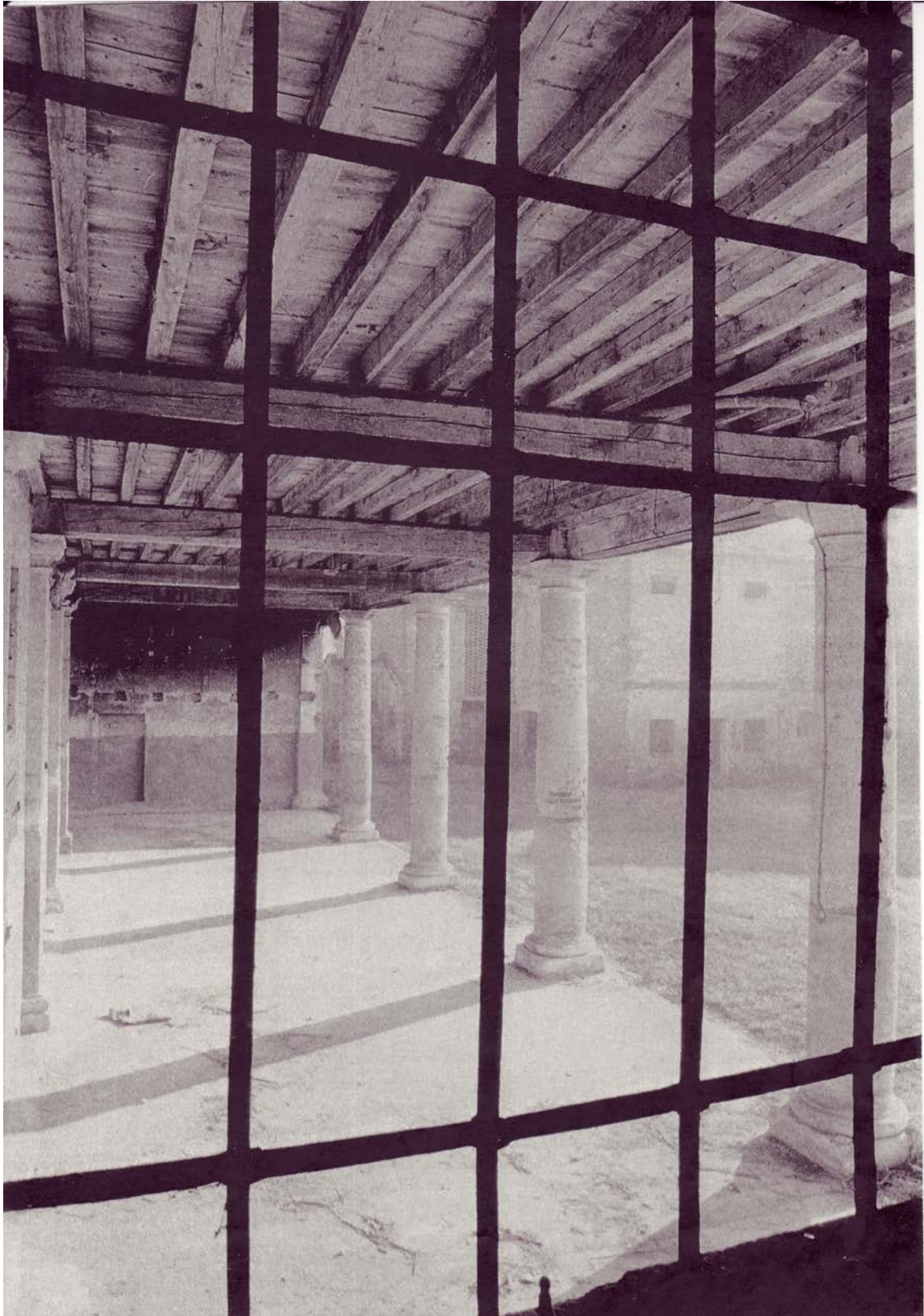


The profile of Palmedio's brick vault, after removal of the 19<sup>th</sup> century false ceiling revealed the fragments of fresco decoration beneath the crowns of the arches.



The iris-shaped columns are made with bricks of various diameters from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Carrussa's predecessors.



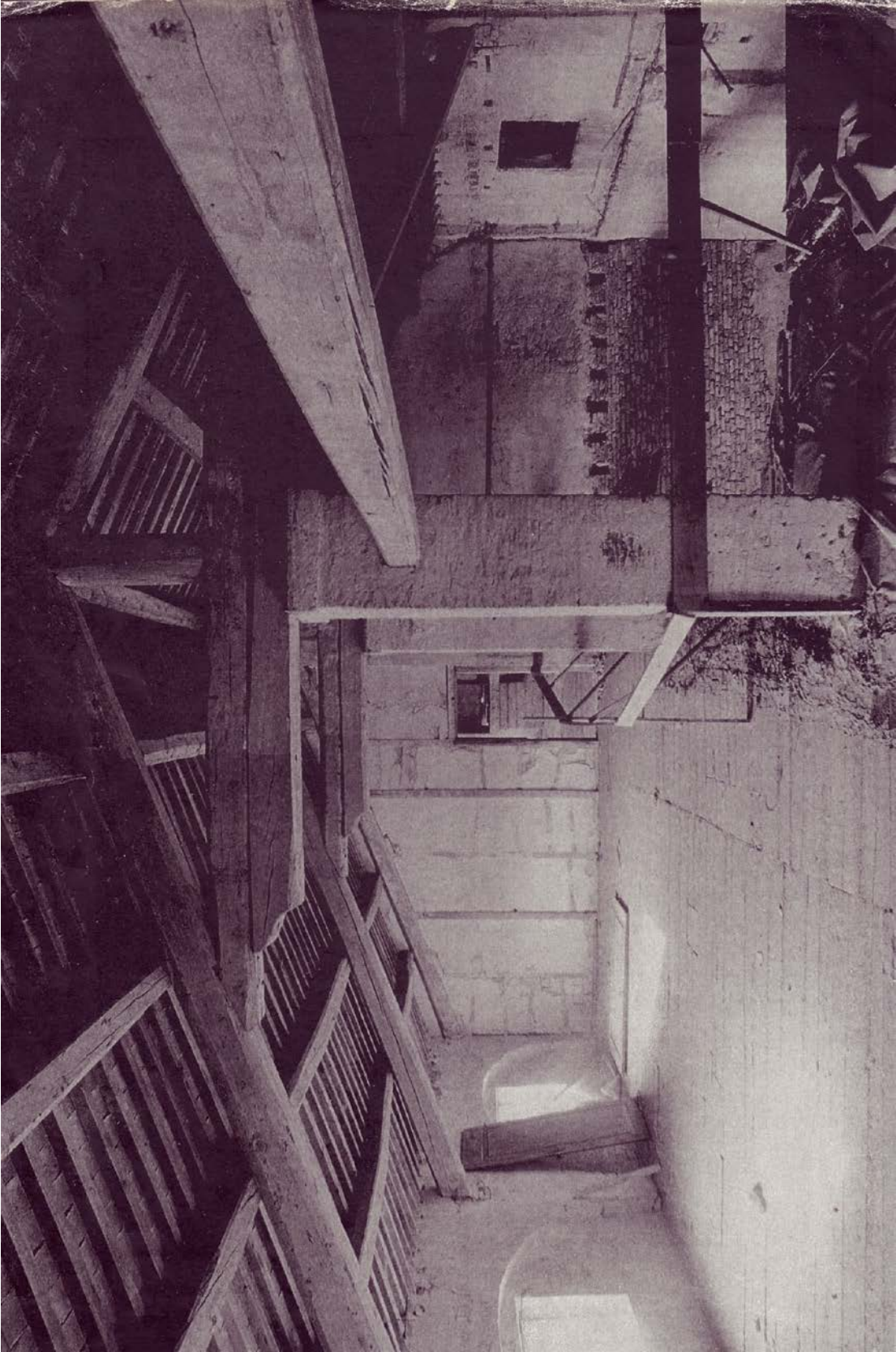




Among the discoveries during the work were the foundations of the columns of the barchessa of 1658, from which it has been possible to establish the plan of this unusual building.

The north wall, though partly covered in a thick 19<sup>th</sup>-century plaster, had two hooked windows and a hooked arched doorway to the crolo, also parts of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century improvements. D









Blocked 17<sup>th</sup>-century doorway to the *brolo* in the north wall.

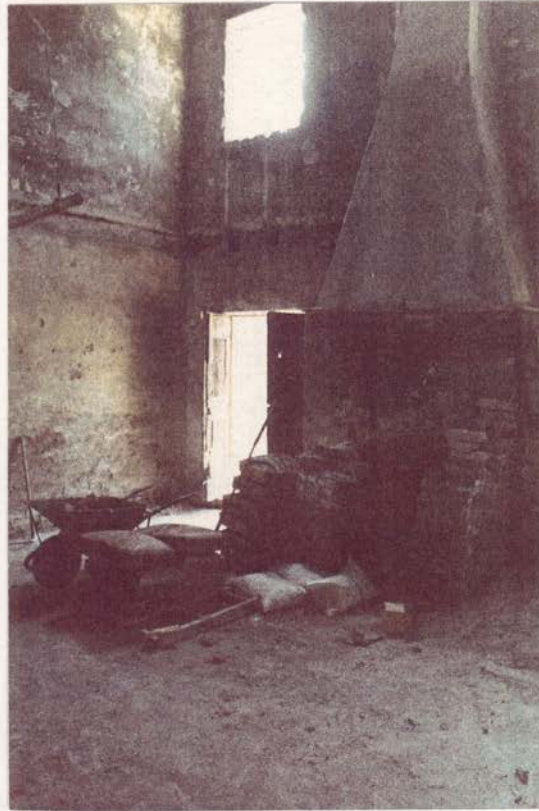
## 8. The Casa Vecchia

The *casa vecchia* or old house (so called because it was used - with the earlier *colombara* – by the Saraceno family and then by their steward) was perhaps the most seriously damaged part of the complex. Its windows are all late nineteenth-century, as are its south cornice and (rebuilt) chimney. Its doorways are either made of borrowed stones or not in situ. No floors remained: the interior had been blackened by smoke from enigmatic sixteenth-century ovens whose floors were found below ground. The fine sixteenth-century first floor beams survived, but had been raised a metre and some have been inverted.

While much of this house is a mystery, the fresco frieze which originally decorated the ground floor room called the *camino* (chimney or hearth), while of small intrinsic quality, proves that this was the living room of a noble family. The beams originally fitted just above it.

The interior had previously been divided into three storeys; the mezzanine was reinstated and the upper floor relaid. This provided a reduced *camino* on the ground floor (its beams come from the site – in fact from the custodian's house), served by a small kitchen and a new stair connecting internally with the *colombara*. Two bedrooms were made at the level of the frieze, and the big farm space under the roof was left as a dormitory. The frieze responded well to cleaning in 1993, considering its state beforehand.



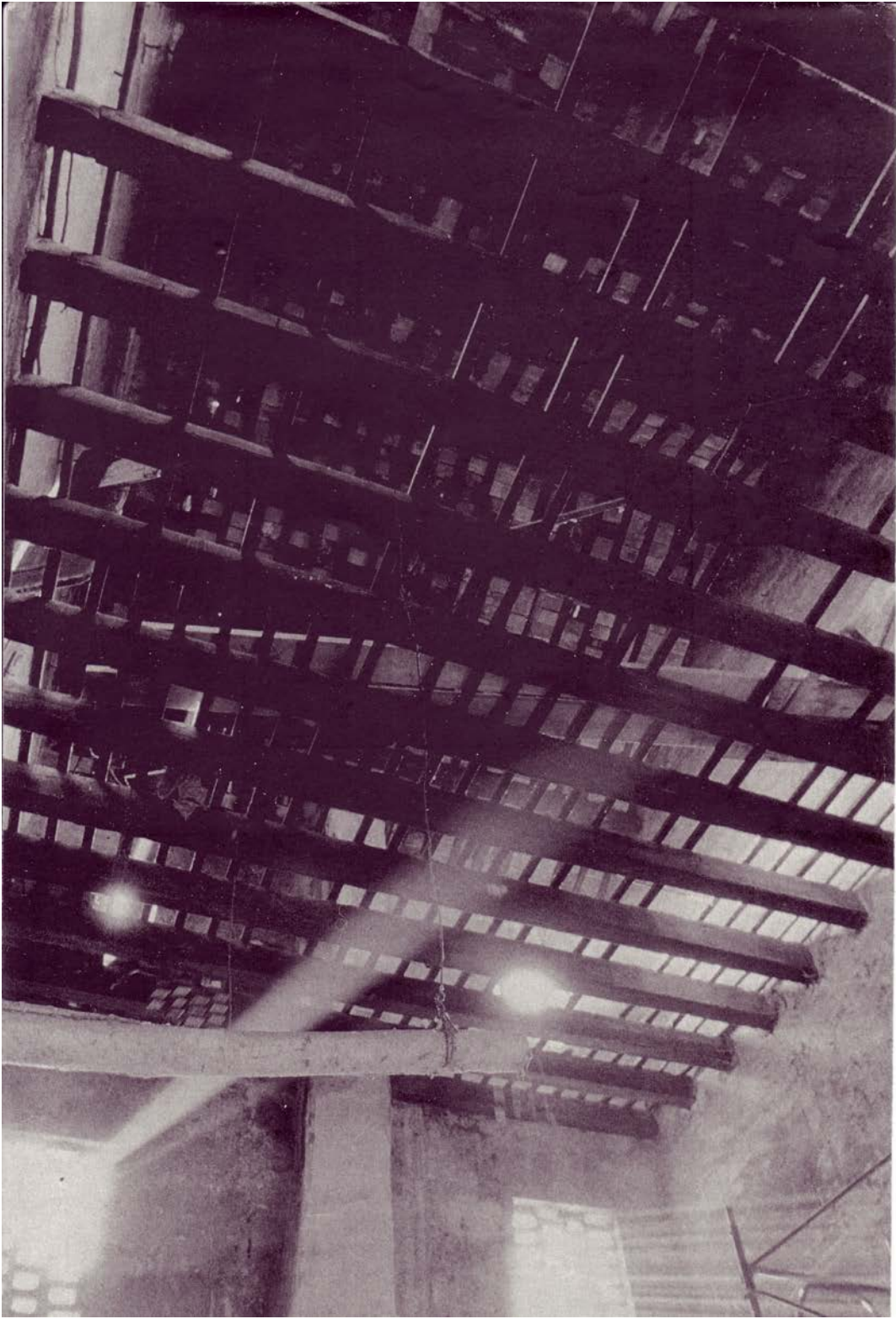


Looking  
up through  
the casa  
recelino

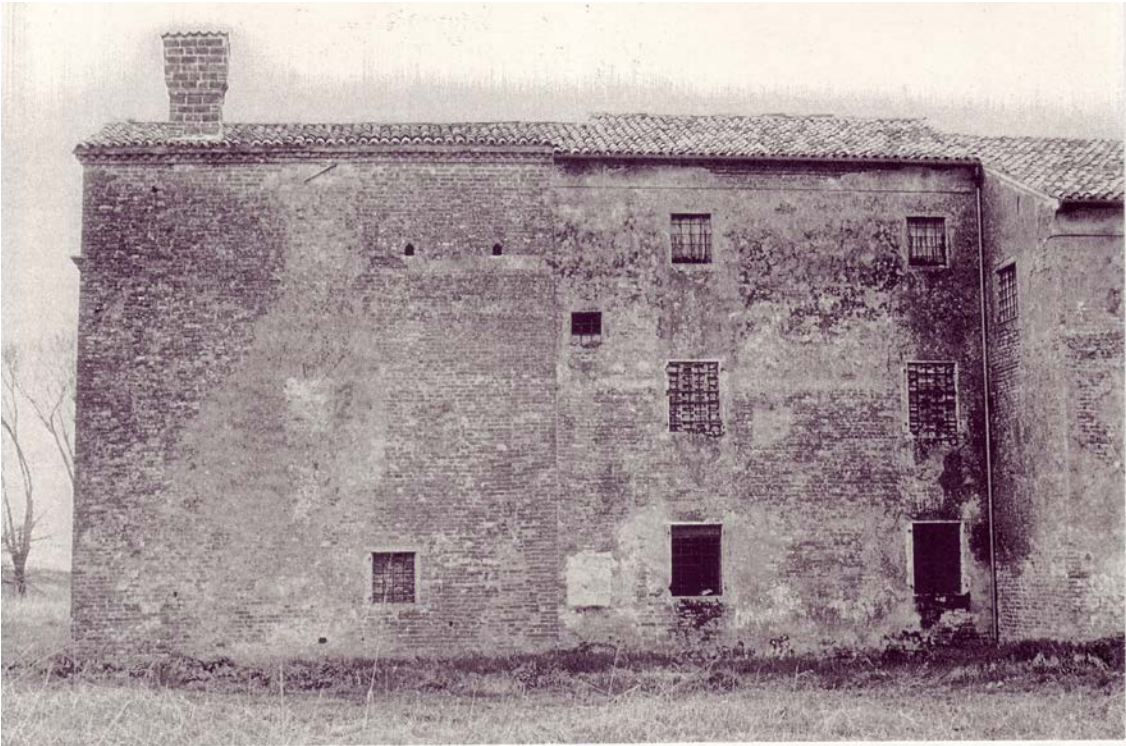
Re camino in farm use



new staircase wall, and (rested) Renaissance doorway (right)







Colombasa

casa vecchia

barchi  
essa

from the hotel

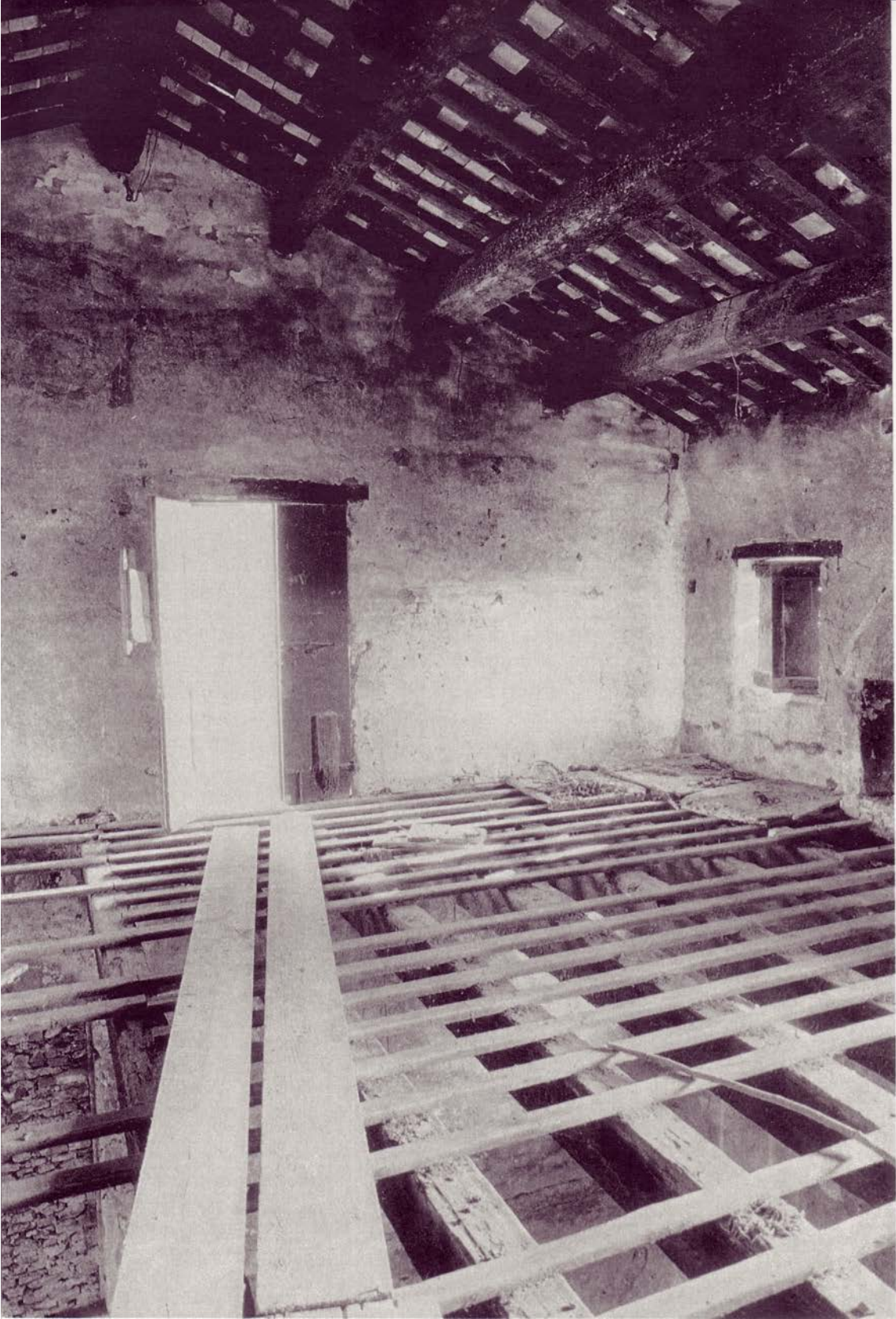




Looking for the fresco frieze, visible  
now in the bedrooms.

At granary level

D





## 9. The *Colombara*, or Dovecote

The *colombara* was once a freestanding little tower, but its architectural quality has been progressively reduced over five centuries. It had an alighting shelf for pigeons round three sides which exists only on the east now, and many little holes into the interior of the dovecot of which only three are traceable, since its upper part had been rebuilt in breeze-block. Other lost detail includes the main *piano nobile* window to the south, under the exposed arch; and the original chimney, although it is possible that the present one was built of reused material. 500 years of Veneto weather had seriously eroded the bricks; and vandals lighting fires in the late 1980s damaged the floor beams and floorboards of the upper room.

The significance of this little structure emerged as repairs proceeded. While the ground floor is featureless, the first floor preserves the outline of its big late medieval fireplace (hidden now by a false wall on the north of the east bedroom). Sizeable areas of orche-grey translucent early *intonaco* were found; part is still exposed in the ante room. In addition, the north wall (though apparently thinned) retains on the first floor the medieval stone entry arch of a garderobe shaft; and below ground level the brick exit arch out to the original cess-pit.

Despite substantial repairs, the *colombara* still has the look of having been worn by time. The roof truss had to be renewed, but to the same engineering principle as originally. Some floors were replaced and new outside steps were made to the old design. In addition, the upper stair openings were closed in with windows. Three more bedrooms were fitted in, and the two oldest houses on the *corte* now have three bathrooms between them.



The opening in the  
first-floor brickwork  
for a medieval window,  
looking south.



Architects looking  
at the medieval  
cess-pit.

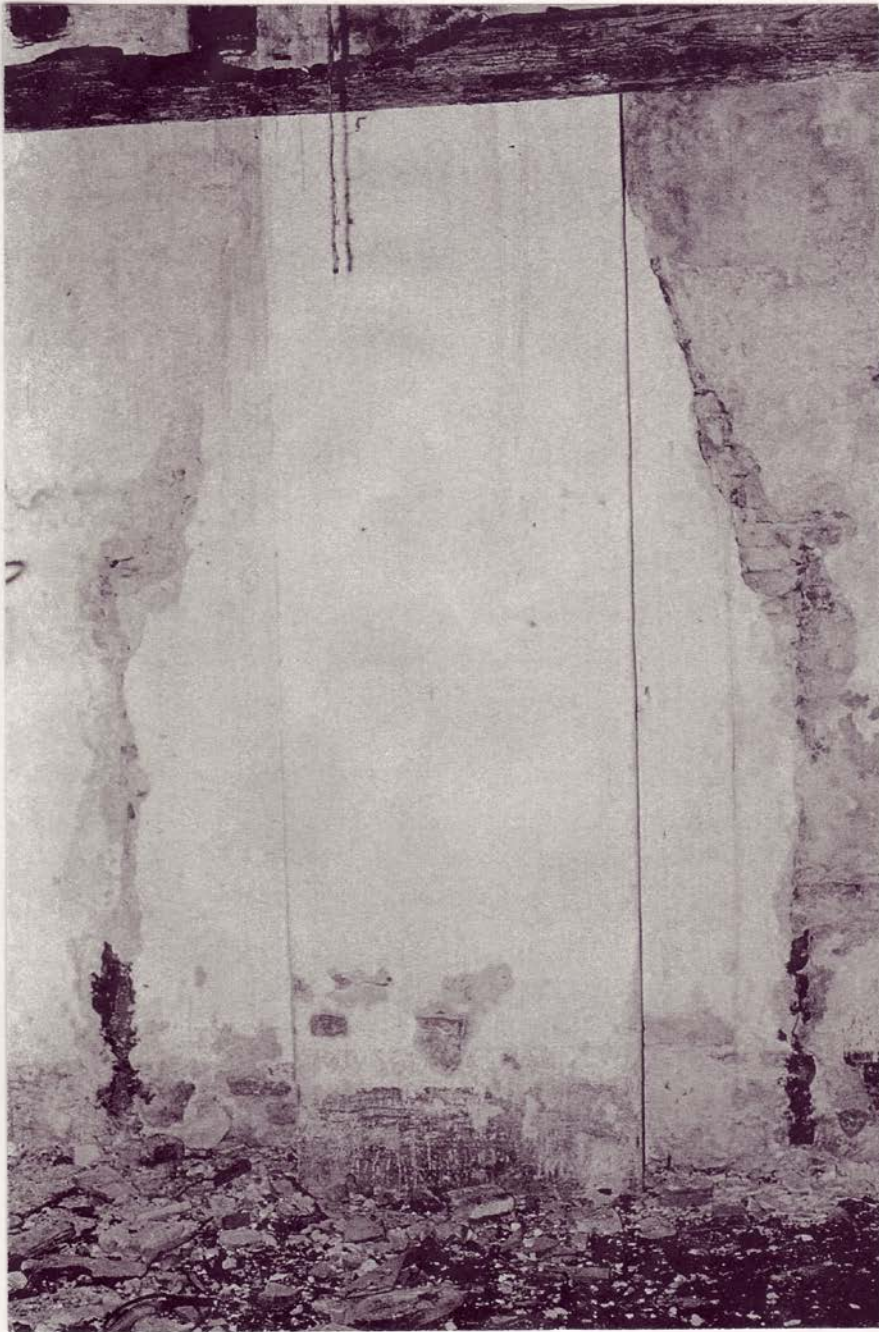




*De Colombara from the east*



*Casa  
vecchia Colombara Custodran's house*



no first-floor fireplace, now hidden  
behind a false north wall.

at direct level







Steps from the cave to the first floor.  
an archaeological record.

## 10. The Tezza, or Barn

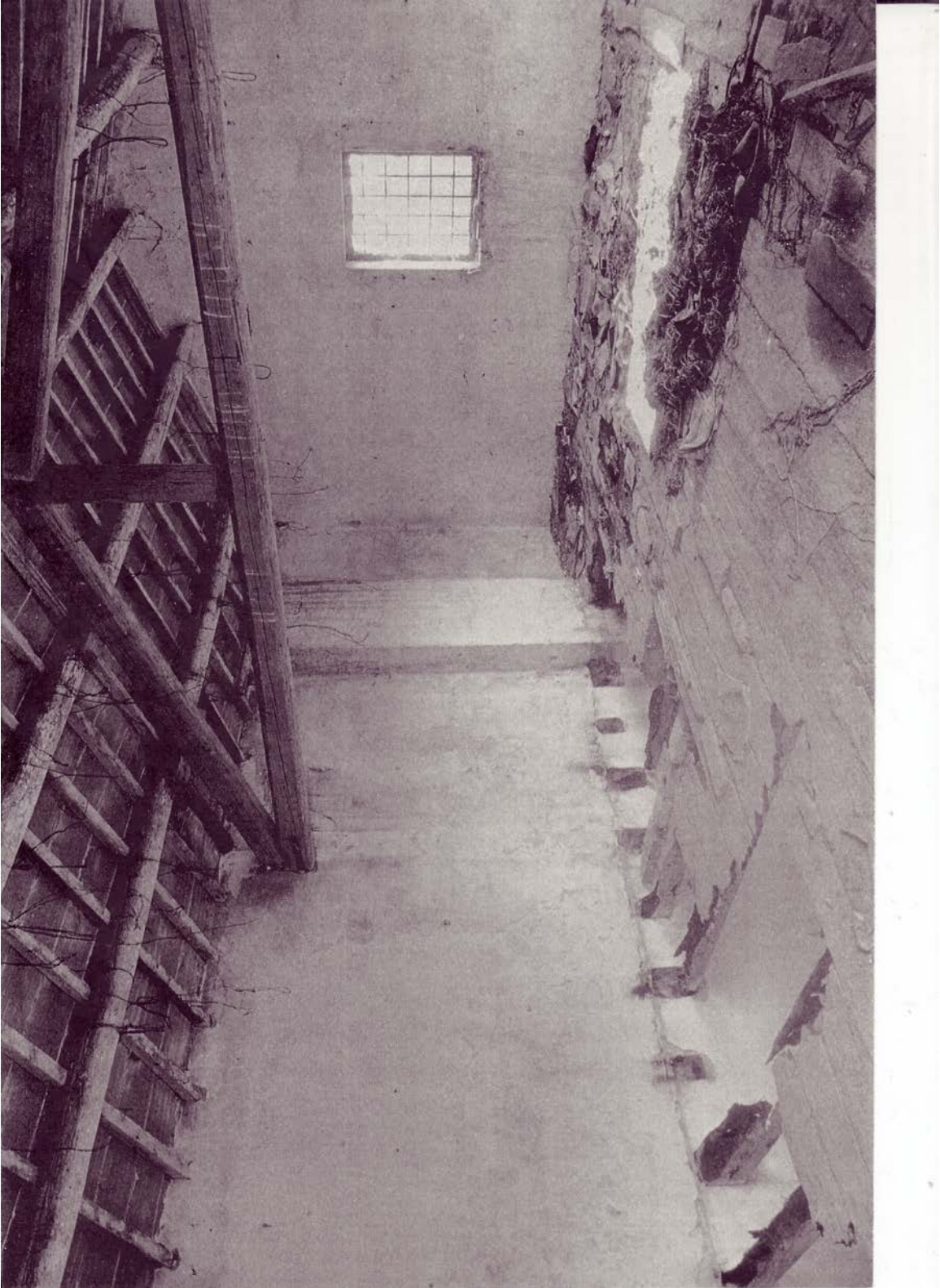
The *tezza* was close to collapse when the builders first came on site in 1989. The first thing they did was to shore and chock it all round. The medieval rear wall was winding, as brick structures without foundations always have been on this sandy soil. Two of the brick piers on the *corte* side were unsound; the roof timbers were therefore unstable and parts of the roof covering were falling in.

There is inconclusive evidence (now made good) that these piers were founded on their rather smaller medieval predecessors. The arcade they form was originally entered through the gateway whose medieval remains are built into and next to the silo tower on the road.

The *tezza* was made secure, but has not been altered apart from having a rolled stone surface for cars laid in its loggia-like space.

Most of the nineteenth-century agricultural buildings were treated likewise. The next going north was left unfloored; the second and third made into a custodian's house (with new windows on the first floor to east and west) and laundry. The little pigsty was repaired, but the intrusive, if picturesque, hen houses to the west of the villa house were removed.





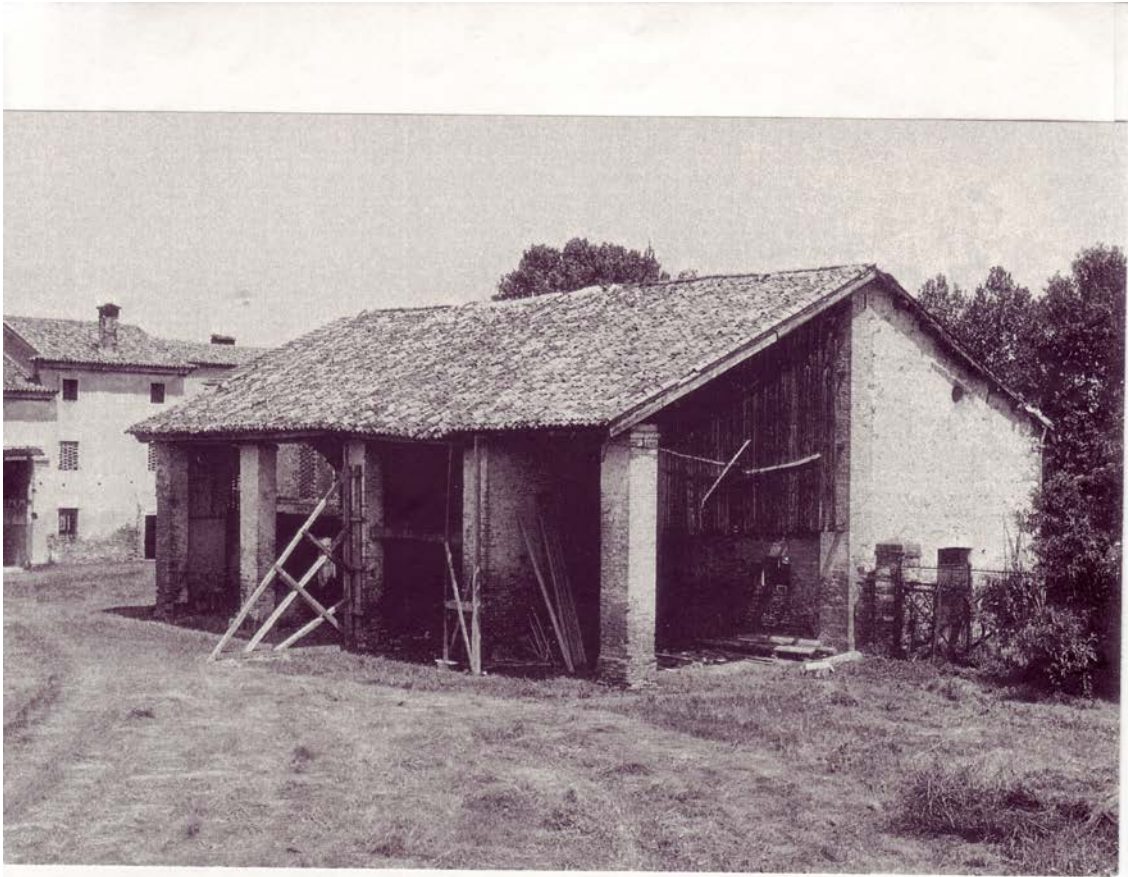


holes in the terra roof.



chicken houses in the north-west corner of the estate, demolished 1992.





*The teza was shored up in 1989 and jacked straight in 1990*



A page of  
graffiti.

◁ top bedroom,  
colombara  
(slogan of  
Mussolini).

pre-war  
good manners

◁



middle floor,  
colombara

▷

in Palledio's  
next grammar,  
c. 1980 ▽

