

Aldo Rossi In the United States: A Meditation on Artifacts over Time

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<quote>...the city...presents itself through certain clearly defined elements such as house, school, church, factory, monument. But this biography of the city and of its buildings, apparently so clearly defined, has in itself sufficient imagination and interest--deriving precisely from their reality--ultimately to envelop it in a fabric of artifacts and feelings that is stronger than either architecture or form, and goes beyond any utopian or formalistic vision of the city.

— Aldo Rossi, "Introduction to the First American Edition," *The Architecture of the City*¹

Aldo Rossi received recognition in America first for his drawings and then for two major projects, well before his theories about architecture were widely disseminated. News of his winning entry to the competition for the S. Cataldo Cemetery in Modena, Italy (1971), preceded the translation of his book, *The Architecture of the City*, by a decade.² With its stark forms, luminous, deep hues, and the rendering of a city of the dead as a foil to a city of the living, the widely published cemetery design captured the imagination of students, professors and practitioners. The subsequent publication of Rossi's 1975 drawing, "L'architecture assassinée," on the cover of the English edition of Manfredo Tafuri's book, *Architecture and Utopia*, followed by Jorge Silvetti's 1977 article in *Oppositions*, illustrated with drawings and photographs of the Gallaretese low-cost housing project near Milan among others, and finally an exhibition of his work and a catalog in New York in 1979, lifted him into a position of primary importance.³ Prominence and influence have not meant that the influence has been profound, however, or that United States architects have been willing to follow the rigor of his ideas rather than the seduction of the forms.

The quick rise to prominence was predicated on the strength of his designs, with their powerful stereometries and haunting representations in drawings thick with shadows. Those who had not visited one of his buildings nonetheless found the images compelling. Something about the limpid spheres, squares, cones and cylinders registered as at once archaic, distilling a timeless essence, and of today, recalling the grandeur of the drawings of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Etienne-Louis Boullée at the end of the Enlightenment. Although similar to modern movement designs in being straightforward and unadorned, Rossi's early projects also broke away from them with the assembly of diverse forms, the cylinders and triangles disrupting any possibility of monotony.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, studio projects in United States architecture schools echoed the crisp, elemental forms, the square, four-light windows or the rows of fenestration composed of punched out squares raked with shadow, the brilliant blue roof of the Broni Middle School library (1969), the rhythm of slender piers set against a shallow portico. *The Architecture of the City* explained

the principles behind his projects, in particular challenging the modern movement especially through an architecture that was rooted to its *locus*, that was not abstract and internationalizing, but local and particular. But despite the clarity with which he expressed his ideas, in the United States architects tended to seize on the images, reproducing without grasping the ordering philosophy that animated them, and instead fastening on formal aspects which seemed susceptible to mindless emulation. To be sure, there is a long history of precisely this response to the strongest and most interesting work from Europe: When Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson published *The International Style*, they eviscerated modern European design of all but stylistic issues; the pernicious consequences of this still echo today.⁴

By the late 1970s, even before *The Architecture of the City* appeared in English, others adopted the notion of locus as "contextualism" in the most formalistic, simplistic fashion. Indeed, a recently erected supermarket in Santa Monica appears to be a fifth generation copy of Rossi's Centro Torri shopping center near Parma (1985), but like a fifth generation photocopy, it is blurred and illegible almost beyond recognition. And yet, in its own way, the supermarket confirms the ideas Rossi articulated in *The Architecture of the City*, particularly with respect to his ideas about the city as biography.

REACTION AGAINST MODERNISM

It is perhaps something of a historical irony that the two harbingers of the revolt against modernism in the United States, Aldo Rossi and Robert Venturi, drew much of their inspiration from the cities and buildings of Italy, but in tellingly different ways: Rossi grew up and absorbed high architecture as well as vernacular buildings, while Venturi learned about Italian architecture during two years as a Rome Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Where Rossi always sought to grasp the principles that animated all building, Venturi remained fascinated with the images. When architects, cities and corporations embraced the modern movement in the United States during the 1950s, they selected out of the complex and diverse manifestations of its European manifestations only a few features: the spare, unadorned surfaces, the dizzying heights and glazed surfaces of urban skyscrapers first proposed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1919, the *existenzminimum* principle for housing estates for low-income populations, and disdain for the built environment of the past coupled with enormous zeal to destroy old buildings to make way for new ones. Robert Venturi's response to the United States version in his 1966 book (published the same year that *The Architecture of the City* appeared in Italian), *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, was to refer to what he characterized as the masterpieces of historic architecture — buildings by Francesco Borromini,

Gianlorenzo Bernini, Michelangiolo Buonarroti, among others — as a means of proposing a return to the design strategies that incorporated complexity and contradiction and made buildings by those architects interesting even several hundred years later.⁵ Like a true carpetbagger, Venturi looked at the individual buildings as dehistoricized, autonomous artifacts whose richness could be encapsulated in a series of design strategies independent of the cities in which they were erected or the machinations of power that enabled them to be built.⁶

Powerfully simple and conveniently easy to reduce to recipes, Venturi's ideas initially polarized the architectural community, particularly during the 1970s; nonetheless over time they steadily gained support. But as is often the case, his radical critique concealed a far more conservative impulse. His exhortation to architects to celebrate that which already existed rather than continuously to propose fantastic utopias entailed nothing other than a call for a return to the many variations of Greek and Roman classicism that for centuries constituted the enduring building blocks of Western European and North American architecture. Likewise, his statements in the book's introduction about the failure of architects to consider social and economic issues, never followed up in the rest of the book, represented nothing more than pious lip service. More fundamentally, despite its apparent novelty in the late 1960s, Venturi's position masked a highly traditional undergirding: celebration of the power of the architect as genius, as solitary creator; the uniqueness and significance of the individual building as a work of that genius; and history as a repository of forms to be deployed according to the will and genius of the architect.

Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* adopted a dramatically different perspective on architecture and cities. In his introduction to the American edition in 1980, Rossi culled out and clarified some of the key points, particularly what he described as the analogous city.⁷ He argued that cities grow and change and are defined by their artifacts, which in turn are rich with potential, interruptions, transformations and diversity. Cities are inevitably works in progress, which he explained by reference to the Italian word *fabbrica*, meaning the construction of a building or a city over time. This also means, he continued, that cities are *collective* artifacts, chapters in an infinite biography of the lives and destinies of the individuals who have lived and passed through them. The analogous city, then, is expressed architecturally through a process wherein the elements employed are "preexisting and formally defined, but their true meaning is unforeseen at the beginning and unfolds only at the end of the process. Thus the meaning of the process is identified with the meaning of the city."⁸

By the time he published *A Scientific Autobiography*, his ideas had deepened and matured, but the core remained constant. In this book he explored the poetics of his design, but he never failed to link them to the larger issues already developed in *The Architecture of the City*. "[...] architecture," he wrote, becomes the vehicle for an event we desire..." but then he continued, "[...]the dimensions of a table or a house are very important — not, as the functionalists thought, because they carry out a determined function, but because they permit other functions... [...]...because they permit everything that is unforeseeable in life."⁹

With these ideas, Rossi challenged, point by point, some of the very principles that Venturi celebrated, even while both challenged the hegemony and monotony of the modern movement. For Venturi modernist architecture produced dull and boring buildings (his response to the motto of Mies van der Rohe, "Less is more," was "Less is bore"), while for Rossi it destroyed the very fabric and soul of the city, violating a city's imagination and interest, which are greater than individual forms, works of architecture, or "utopian or formalistic vision[s] of the city."¹⁰ To counter Venturi, historians of modern architecture and architects who could only see buildings as abstract formal exercises, Rossi offered a strikingly different approach. Using the example of America, he rejected the dominant

attitude whereby America was "composed of disparate examples of good architecture, to be sought out with guides," suggesting instead to see a city with the eyes of the archaeologist who would find, in the "nameless architecture of large cities, streets and residential blocks, of houses scattered in the countryside, of the urban cemetery in a city such as St. Louis," "...the people, living and dead, who have continued to build the city," analogous to the oldest heroes of our culture detectable to the archaeologists in the ruins and fragments of Mycenae.¹¹

In short, Rossi argued that the individual building's meaning rested in the dynamic tension between the solitary artifact and the way it is structured as an urban artifact, and further, that no architectural intervention could be neutral: every project adopts a stance, for better or worse, even if the architect refuses to acknowledge it. No recipes, then, and no formalistic design games based upon clever variations on Bernini or Bramante, but a committed and profound study of the city, its history, traditions and buildings, into which a structure was to be inserted. As Rossi astutely recognized, the Italian architects so admired by Venturi (and the legions of architects who followed him and trundled through Italy photographing the individual buildings and ignoring everything else) realized their accomplishments through the very same kind of rich and complex understanding not merely of buildings, but of their culture, and their past.

A second book, *A Scientific Autobiography*, written nearly fifteen years after *The Architecture of the City* but first published in English a year earlier, in 1981, spelled out Rossi's ideas in a more personal way, linking the earlier theories with his own autobiography and with his architectural production, perhaps most tellingly with reference to theaters.¹² Endlessly fascinated with the relationship between the theater and buildings, Rossi both designed theaters and wrote about them, repeatedly envisioning architecture as the stage upon which the events of human life took place. In this of course, he deliberately stepped into a tradition dating back at least to classical antiquity, where stageset and civic ideology were linked in Greece and Rome, and articulated again in the Renaissance by Palladio, Serlio and others.¹³ Projects such as the Carlo Felice Theater in Genoa (1983), the Casa Aurora in Turin (1984), Hotel Il Palazzo, Fukuoka, Japan (1987), and the design for the reconstruction of La Fenice Opera House in Venice (1997), all deliberately juxtaposed the building with the city, and both city and theater were, as he described them, "useful space[s] where definitive action could occur."¹⁴

For each design, he studied the building in specific reference to the city, its history and its traditions (including architectural ones), alongside of which Rossi brought into play an inventory of elemental architectural forms, his own personal understanding of them and their complex relations to those histories, those cultures, those sites. Each design explicitly linked city to theater, theater to city. Let me illustrate only two of many examples. For the Carlo Felice Theater, Rossi recreated the typical elevations of Genoese houses, complete with marble revetments, balconies and windows, to line the interior walls. An early model from the competition in 1983 even depicted the theater set within the context of Genoa, much as Karl Friedrich Schinkel had done for the Schauspielhaus in Berlin (1818). At the Casa Aurora, Rossi actually repeated the corner elevation of the building as the proscenium for a small interior theater.

Nesting the theater within the city/the city within the theater in each of the projects, in a potentially endless repetition, fused this understanding with Rossi's own deep comprehension of the history of buildings and building elements. Again and again he returned to the most elemental components — cylinder, cube, rectangular slabs, equilateral triangles — which haunted his compositions and his drawings. They were not a kit of parts, however, but rather the "overlapping of the individual and the collective memory, together with the invention that takes place within the *time* of the city."¹⁵ To the memories of a place, then, the architect added memories from a personal history, which, when combined with that of the collective,

constituted invention. Rossi thereby clearly differentiated his position from those of Venturi and other American architects of the time.

The work of architecture, the building, belonged not to the individual whims and fantasy of the architect, but to the city, its people, history, traditions, cultures, their fluid mix over time, from which it sprang and into which it was to be returned. Not for Rossi, then, the totalizing vision of a Frank Lloyd Wright or a Le Corbusier, who sought the terrifying power to design every object placed within their buildings, as if they wished to redesign the very lives and beliefs of the residents. Rossi's diametrically opposed attitude is best illustrated in an anecdote he told me many years ago, when only the first few wings of the San Cataldo cemetery had been built, but the first group of buildings had already been filled with tombs. A group of German architects came to Milan after visiting the cemetery, horrified at the way individual families had placed photographs, plastic flowers, inscriptions, lights and other objects on the marble tombstones according to no standardized system; the architects instead celebrated those sections that had not yet been used for burials, the long vistas down the corridors that evidenced only the architecture, punctuated by the raking light that marked each successive building. To Rossi, the Germans had missed the whole point: the cemetery became architecture *only* when it was transformed by the families who honored their dead in their own unprogrammed, autonomous and highly personal fashion, without design controls that stipulate every element.¹⁶ For Rossi, instead, a building survives precisely to the extent that it is used, transformed to meet new needs, adapted and *lived* over time; at this point it becomes architecture.

In several important ways, then, in both his theory and his buildings Rossi took issue with the most basic assumptions that underlay architectural thinking and practice in the United States. In certain respects, some of his ideas were indeed diffused through architectural culture; *The Architecture of the City* has been a regular best-seller since its publication, adopted as a textbook in many schools of architecture and a fundamental text in libraries. But it has been precisely on the level of basic assumptions about the role of architecture and as a consequence, the role of the architect, that architects in the United States have not followed Rossi beyond a surface response. During the 1970s, when Rossi was first visiting the United States and teaching at Yale University, among other places, his work was exhibited and published by the now-defunct Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies; eventually both of his books appeared in part under the auspices of that body. Peter Eisenman, then director of the Institute, wrote the introduction to *The Architecture of the City*, in which he initiated this history of misunderstanding by refashioning Rossi's design ideas as a projection of his own.

Eisenman began with the cover illustration on the fourth Italian edition, a section of the Mausoleum of Hadrian in Rome: interpreting it first as a spiral, then as a labyrinth, he identified it as a symbol of Rossi confronting the "collapse of historical time" and being adrift in the "uncertain present."¹⁷ In characterizing Rossi as proposing a neutral architect who acted as an autonomous researcher into the city, Eisenman viewed both Rossi's buildings and his theory as an attempt to certify the independence and autonomy of the subject (the architect) from the object (the building, the city), and the analogous city as an attempt to subvert the real city. Eisenman even went so far as to claim that the European city had become, for Rossi, a "house of the dead," at the end of its history and its function.¹⁸ Nothing of these ideas came from Rossi's writing or indeed, from his work. Ultimately, Eisenman projected his own cynicism and pessimism onto Rossi, who was himself neither a cynic nor a pessimist.

Subsequent writers continued to misread Rossi, often in the most facile way. William J. R. Curtis, for example, set Rossi within a movement to "relate buildings to their context," and saw his buildings as a "looping back, a re-examination of anterior forms."¹⁹ Like Eisenman, Curtis mistook Rossi's discussion of type and analogy as a recipe for design, a "quick-fix" that would allow an architect to

produce a design with formal links to its formal context, rather than a process whose results could not be entirely anticipated, and that certainly were separated from such facile formalism by a yawning gap. By the time the Portuguese edition was published in 1977, Rossi had already responded to these misapprehensions.²⁰ After first noting that his sources for *The Architecture of the City* had been primarily historians and geographers, Rossi continued:

It might seem strange that someone concerned with defining the boundaries of the "corpus" of architectural studies should make use of theses from disciplines outside of architecture, but in fact I have never spoken of an absolute autonomy of architecture or of an architecture an *sich... the history of architecture is the material of architecture*. In the process of constructing a large and unique project over time, working on certain elements which alter very slowly, one steadily arrives at an invention... Only within the context of the logical succession of urban artifacts can one evaluate with some precision the *formal* character of specific proposals...²¹

Type could never be a formula for Rossi; the Gothic house, for example, was inextricably linked to the lot sizes and shapes of the specific city. As Rossi remarked, the form of the city refers to real experiences, and the architecture summarizes the city's form: type then can only be a result of the particular history of specific places, and can never be a model, or an image to be copied. For the architect, a thorough and rich understanding of topography, geography, history and culture necessarily precede any attempt to design. Such is the case for his office building project for an entire city block on Landsberger Allee in Berlin (1992), as one element in a complex plan to knit together a city torn asunder for nearly one half of a century. Having both erected other buildings in Berlin and studied the city in depth for over thirty years, Rossi proposed an intervention that utilized traditional materials (red brick, ceramic tiles), the scheme of constructed perimeter and interior garden, and yet he imaginatively varied the street elevations by assembling and re-assembling the different elements. Unlike a typical monotonous modernist facade, rigidly uniform and repetitive, Rossi's respected the diversity of Berlin's blocks without succumbing to banal imitation, which is precisely where he imaginatively transformed the existing elements in individual and provocative fashion. The same principles had animated his design for the Gallarate low-cost housing project of 1969, where the typical Milanese residential typology of open air corridors punctuated by staircases is both present and transformed, strikingly so given the extreme budgetary limitations such projects faced.

It is precisely this fundamental aspect of Rossi's thought which has been ignored in favor of a facile formalism. What has been impossible to eradicate in the United States is the concept of architecture that consists of willful self-expression. In this view, the architect enjoys complete freedom to impose a vision based on nothing other than personal whim, and is intolerant of any constraints on that freedom. United States architecture schools inculcate this attitude in students from their first year, and solidify it over the succeeding years. While the economic recession of the early 1990s began to erode this attitude among young designers, the newly robust economy, coupled with the success of architects such as Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas, both of whom trade on an architecture of imagery and the architect as genius, has strengthened it again in recent years.

A recent design for a fire station in Santa Monica by Thom Mayne illustrates the problem. The firemen objected functionally to the project because of the placement of glazing, among other things, but they also objected to the deconstructivist imagery. In interviews, Mayne both belittled their objections and rejected any limitations on his "artistic" license. Mayne thereby presented himself as a hero, resisting the philistine client and following in the tradition of heroic architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. He also affirmed the animosity that many people have toward architects,

believing them unnecessary additions to projects because they are committed to their interests, not those of the client. As another Southern California architect remarked to me at the time, Mayne's behavior set the rest of the profession back another decade.

For Rossi, such behavior was unthinkable; and yet he managed to design and build original and inventive projects without turning clients into enemies. Rossi's view was far more humble, and far more honestly responsive to the cities and buildings he saw, to the places he lived; as he remarked in 1979, "The project should be only a pretext, an occasion for a greater involvement with things."²² In fact, it was his commitment to an *architecture of the city* understood as a collective enterprise and as the product of personal and collective invention, that made the projects appropriate for their clients and sites, but still designs that were very much his own. This represents a far more difficult way of doing architecture, which perhaps accounts for the reluctance of practitioners to pursue it, and yet it is the one which offers the most sure results.

NOTES

- ¹ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1982), p. 18
- ² Rossi's book was first published as *L'Architettura della città* (Padua: Marsilio Editori 1966). By the time the English edition appeared, the book had already been translated into Spanish (1971), German (1973) and Portuguese (1977).
- ³ Jorge Silvetti, "The Beauty of Shadows," *Oppositions* 9 (1977), pp. 43-61; Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1976); Aldo Rossi, *Aldo Rossi in America: 1976 to 1979* (New York: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies 1979).
- ⁴ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style. Architecture Since 1922* (New York: Norton 1966, reprint of 1932 edition).
- ⁵ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art 1966).
- ⁶ Carpetbagger was the term used in the U.S. south to denote northerners who came to the south following the Civil War, their belongings carried in bags made of carpet remnants. The connotations are negative, those of a foreigner coming into a new place and operating with brash assurance but without any understanding of the culture.
- ⁷ Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, pp. 13-19.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ⁹ Rossi, *Aldo Rossi in America*, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 18-19.
- ¹² Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, translated by Lawrence Venturi (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1981). The Italian edition of this book was only published in 1991, nearly ten years later.
- ¹³ Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, edited by Licisco Magagnato and Paolo Marini (Milan: Il Polifilo 1980), see in particular the prologue to book four; Sebastiano Serlio, *Tutte le opere d'architettura*, reprint of English edition of 1611 (New York: Dover Publications 1982), in particular book two; for Scamozzi, see Kurt W. Forster, "Stagecraft and Statecraft: The Architectural Integration of Public Life and Theatrical Spectacle in Scamozzi's Theater at Sabbioneta," *Oppositions* 9 (1978), pp. 63-87.
- ¹⁴ Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, p. 33. In this passage although Rossi explicitly referred to the Little Scientific Theater (*Teatrino Scientifico*) he had built in his studio as a device for studying architecture, he also referred to his understanding of architecture more generally.
- ¹⁵ Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ He could not understand the attitude of Frank Gehry, for example, who was furious when a client with whom he had fallen out hired Mark Mack to redesign his house, specifically so that it would meet his needs and those of his family. Even though Mack first discussed it with him, and Gehry wished him luck with a client with whom he had had problems, he nonetheless remained furious at the transformation of his design and for years refused to speak to Mack. The house in question was the Whitney house in Santa Monica Canyon (1989). See Ghirardo, *Architecture After Modernism* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson 1996), pp. 141-2, and Ghirardo, *Mark Mack* (Tubingen: Wasmuth 1994).
- ¹⁷ Peter Eisenman, "Editor's Introduction. The Houses of Memory: The Texts of Analogy," in *The Architecture of the City*, pp. 3-11; the quote is taken from p. 3.
- ¹⁸ Eisenman, *ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁹ William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 3rd. ed. (London: Phaidon 1996), pp. 553-4, 590, 592-4. Like many others, Curtis simplistically connected Rossi's designs to the paintings of Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico from the early twentieth century, instead of recognizing that both Rossi and de Chirico drew inspiration from the urban and vernacular landscapes of Italy; in the case of Rossi, from northern Italy in particular. If any painter influenced Rossi, it was the Milanese Mario Sironi.
- ²⁰ Rossi, "Introduction to the Portuguese Edition," *The Architecture of the City*, pp. 169-177.
- ²¹ The quotations come from pages 169-170 of the "Introduction to the Portuguese Edition;" the emphases are his.
- ²² Rossi, *Aldo Rossi in America*, p. 17.