

# Aldo Rossi: An Artist Challenges Typology

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Aldo Rossi's work is often dismissed today in the United States as typological, a term which generally has a negative connotation. Whether he is an orthodox typologist or a heterodox typologist or not a typologist at all will be determined in the course of this essay.

First, it goes without saying that Aldo Rossi has been the most representative Italian figure on the international architectural stage since 1970. After his premature death Italian architecture found itself extremely vulnerable and provincial. Those who want to reconstruct his view of architecture have to face a fragmentary way of thinking that avoids a perfect and closed philosophical construct, as in Saverio Muratori for instance.

In fact, although Rossi often states that he wants to construct a theory, his approach is never systematic. Both his masterpieces, *The Architecture of the City* and *Autobiography* are a collection of notes that recall the famous *Zibaldone* by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. What is more, the fragments are not in order and are often contradictory. In this essay I have put them together like a puzzle, even if there could be several solutions, testimonies of a very articulated personality.

Aldo Rossi's interest in typological studies appears for the first time in the writings for the courses in *Caratteri distributivi degli edifici* (The functional characteristics of buildings) for which he was assistant to Prof. Carlo Aymonino, at the School of Architecture in Venice during 1964-1965<sup>1</sup>, where he took a personal position, and later on in the first chapter of *The Architecture of the City*.

In this period he takes position in favor of the central role of type: "I think of the concept of type as permanent and complex, a logic expression that anticipates form and constitutes it" and "Type is a constant, it is a structure. No one type can be identified with a form, but every form can be reconnected to a type." There are even later memories of this in his *Autobiography* where he adds: "It is impossible to create something imaginative without a rigorous foundation, incontrovertible and in fact repetitive."

In a 1985 interview in Casabella in a special issue on typology<sup>2</sup>, he states: "From the beginning I did not renounce the clarity of the typological choice," and so on and so forth. After this first approach his relationship with typology changes in time, parallel with his involvement in the realization of his projects.

Rossi's road is deeply woven with the Italian historiography of typology, and the reply to the basic question: what is typology, or better, what is Aldo Rossi's typology? Let us step back a moment to set some boundaries: a reasonable definition of type that we can refer to is the following: "Type is the organic sum of the characters of the buildings in a limited area and in a given time." The second part of the sentence is very important, because it suggests either that the type can be identified within a limited cultural area or that it changes following the custom of the people. It is a dynamic factor that varies in space and time. Moreover, type, like Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, has

a double personality. It exists a priori but it can be recognized in the built landscape only a posteriori.

We will try to measure the intellectual route of Aldo Rossi from 1964 onward in relation to the frame of the above definition. The main legacy in the sixties is the work of Saverio Muratori<sup>3</sup>, who envisioned a type historically grounded and a priori. This concept had two important consequences:

1. If the type exists in people's minds before they build, it is the most effective expression of the collective memory. In fact Muratori exalted this participation, this ethical and core value of the building versus major architecture.

2. The corollary was that if the type is the expression of the life of people, it changes in time and space, therefore that idea of process, which is the most progressive contribution of Muratori. Unfortunately, Muratori's intellectual construct was universally rejected for political reasons in the 1960's and his school condemned to a *damnatio memoriae*.

The Muratorian idea of typological process also envisioned a method of design in which analysis and design were conceived too much in continuity, and therefore "dangerous" for the freedom of an artist. Rossi, differently from his pupil Monestiroli, did not have a great passion for the urban fabric, and did not share the latter's vision of collective memory, although here and there he keeps the door open with the idea of a priori type, when he describes the courtyard houses of Seville or when he identifies type as a primary formal scheme. In the *Autobiography* he says poetically: "I try to stop the event before it happens," but he refers to the archaeological plan of Ostia, from which with a lot of imagination we can reconstruct the third dimension. His rejection of the idea of process leads him to contradictory statements, like: "I think that dwelling types have not changed from antiquity to the present, while obviously the way of living has changed" and more: "Suburbs were foreseen and designed at the moment of the foundation of the city, they are not a product of a successive increment."

Opposite to the idea of a priori type is the a posteriori type, given such sharp definition by Giulio Carlo Argan in the entry "typology" of the *Enciclopedia dell'Arte*, later on translated into English by Joseph Ryckwert.<sup>4</sup> For Argan, type is a formal scheme, a mold for further reproduction that can be recognized in history. This concept that we can define formal typology is summed up well in the famous example of central plan churches. Rossi is at the center of this line of thinking and in *Architettura della città*, he speaks the same terms of the Palazzo della Ragione at Padua. His project for housing at Monza San Rocco is a coherent interesting exercise in formal typology in which he measures himself with the memory of the Roman limitatio.

The a posteriori idea of type contains two conceptual traps:

1. It favors classification and leads to taxonomy, which is

essential in some disciplines like botany, but hardly useful in design. Moreover it privileges functional classification, a risk Rossi was aware of, since he devotes almost an entire chapter of *Architettura della città* to confuting this deviation.

2. It leads on the other hand to an incorrect and superficial use of morphological memory: the quotations from history, the manipulation and decontextualization of forms, vulgar contamination.

The American public is too aware of the appropriation of historic forms by corporations, supermarkets with pediments — because “classic” gives a sense of solidity — to insist on this point. But a posteriori type also means analysis of the city. Rossi takes all the advantages of this interpretation, establishing a binary law typology of the buildings/morphology of the city. Discovering the city as the context of architecture, he creates a school. More poetically he states: “I saw the elements of urban morphology distributed in the city with the purity of mineralogy,” or, “I walked the cities in order to understand their plan and classify them according to types.” This part of his thinking has been popularized and refined mostly in France by the School of Versailles and it is well known enough so that it needs no discussion here.<sup>5</sup>

Often in *Architettura della città* he compares the study of the city to linguistics, a basic intuition that leads to important consequences like the identification of city and structure, but more important, structure and history. He never proceeded up to this point, feeling that a type identified with structure and history would have limited his freedom of movement in history. He took the other route within the tracks of formal typology. On the one hand, he preferred to identify type as the formal primary scheme with the idea of permanence of the plan (a concept deduced from M. Poete) or the generator plan (deduced from P. Lavedan), while on the other hand he stretched the concept of type beyond its limit.

We have now reached the nodal question of if and how the stretching of the concept could lead to the disruption of the type. In fact the manipulation of this concept comes for every architect from the necessity of “what to do in the process of design with the type,” what is its use. Rossi’s faith in type is not so strong (probably because his thought was formulated at the School of Milan with Ernesto N. Rogers, who never had the typological question in his agenda). The identification of type with a static form of history is his limit. Not accepting the idea of typological process, he points out for instance with surprise many contradictions between type and evolution: “How can I measure a building if an amphitheatre could become a city and a theatre a house?”

Conscious of the risks of formal typology starting at the end of the 1970’s to avoid falling into the vulgar manipulation of historic forms of the popular postmodern, he had to raise the range: he exalts the primary elements of the cities versus the residential fabric, he talks of monuments. He charges the forms of history with deep meanings, archetypal references, and progressively takes them not straight from history, but rather filtered through his memory and consciousness. Historic forms mediated by oneiric experience and the nostalgia of childhood; buildings like toys, chimneys, pieces of abandoned factories, the Albergo Serena and the bridge over the Mincio River. This activity of stretching, filling and contaminating the type is based on an inventive process that is comprised of different procedures:

1. Fragmentation of the image of the city. The cult of the fragment has been present in his poetics since the beginning: “I love broken things, reassembled again,” and talking about Padua: “The city arrives to us from the Roman world more as fragments of a lost web than pieces of a system.”

2. The increase of the symbolic significance of the form. He tends to identify type with the architectural theme, its emotional nucleus of reference. This was the approach of the French Revolutionary architects, most of all Boullée. In the introduction to the Italian version of his treatise “Saggio sull’Arte,” Rossi notes that in the famous project for the National Library Boullée took inspiration

from Raphael’s School of Athens and the Greek bouleuterion because of their emotional and educative values.

3. Monumentalization of the fabric. Rossi proposes references that are universally defined, like the amphitheatre of Lucca or the siedlungen of the Modern Movement versus the medieval fabric. In his projects he coagulates the residential type: the Gallaratese block becomes representative of all residential types, a metonym for housing.

4. Exaltation of the role of the site. Quoting Cattaneo about Milan<sup>6</sup> he says that the city had an innate preeminence even before the Roman Empire. Prediction as a sort of typological character of an order that is not verifiable. In the same period his Modena Cemetery is more a superb exercise in topophilia than typology.

All these procedures go under the famous phrase of the analogous city, “la città analoga,” an idea formulated in the mid 1960’s, but clarified in *La città di Padova*. He makes ample use of analogous thinking in the four procedures as a form of enriching the analysis to provoke architectural invention. The very example of Argan of central plan churches (compared in spite of their belonging to different periods and cultural areas) is deeply indebted to analogous thinking as well. In fact, in science we have analogical types when we compare from different scales; on the contrary, I believe that although all the scales of the built environment are connected by consequential links, typological thinking is essentially homological.

On several occasions Rossi states that in order to understand the city we have to mediate between the real and the analogous city. But after 1980 the turning point is the project for the Teatro del Mondo at the Venice Biennale — the second term surpasses the former: in wandering the cities he discovers suburban houses, roofs, gas storage drums, industrial buildings that he filters through the irrational of a nostalgic memory. The discourse on the analogous city becomes the simulacra of the existing city for its reinvention, using the tendentious reference of its image. It is a prophecy.

This and the analogous thinking in Rossi have been compared to the Jung and Freud diatribe about representation of the deep images of the conscience and their usefulness for knowledge. In a few words, can we learn from the irrational images that come out distorted from our consciousness? Can this irrational knowledge be called typology? Or do we have to recover principles only from reality? I believe that typology is a positive science that can retrieve principles for design from the built landscape around us, i.e. reality, although design could find its references outside the typological discipline. The more architectural invention tries to imitate artistic procedures — this seems a predominant characteristic of Modern architecture — the more typology becomes an obstacle to the so-called expression of an artist.

It is a fact that Rossi’s separation from (rational) typology towards a (dreamed) typology coincides with his international involvement. In the middle of the 1980’s he already seems disillusioned with typology: in the Casabella interview he says: “To have a good classical education does not mean that you have to be a professor of Greek literature.” In his Autobiography he says: “I searched for it in history and I translated it into my own history.” A true epitaph. In the same book he describes his passage towards a typology without history, an attempt to build a timeless type. But typology without history lands in the rootless world of the individualistic expression of an artist.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See for instance: A. Rossi, “Tipologia, manualistica e architettura,” in *Rapporti tra la morfologia urbana e la tipologia edilizia* (Cluva, Venice, 1966), pp. 67-83 and A. Rossi, “La città come fondamento dello studio dei caratteri degli edifici,” in *ibidem*, pp. 83-97.

<sup>2</sup> Casabella, 509-510, (Jan-Feb. 1985), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Saverio Muratori (1910-1973) is a leading figure of the Roman school. His ideas on typology are in the following writings: *Studi*

*per una operante storia urbana di Venezia*, Poligrafico dello Stato (Roma, 1960); *Studi per una operante storia urbanistica di Roma* (Roma, 1963); *Architettura e civiltà in crisi*, (Roma, 1963); and *Civiltà e territorio* (Roma, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> “On the Typology of Architecture,” in *Architectural Design*

(Dec. 1963), pp. 564-565.

<sup>5</sup> Ph. Panerai, J-Ch. Depaule, M. Demorgon, M. Veyrenche. *Elements d'analyse urbaine* (A.A.M., Bruxelles, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> The ideas of Carlo Cattaneo on the city are in C. Cattaneo. *La città* (Milano, 1949).