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Zum Bild, das Wort |

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Tempo del teatrino

The Untimeliness of Aldo Rossi

Kurt W. Forster

Among the first images Aldo Rossi invokes in his Scientific Autobiography – a remarkable reflection that extends beyond the impulse that may have prompted it – there is the church of Sant’Andrea in Mantua. Rossi is not simply acknowledging Leon-Battista Alberti’s achievement, which, in his view, consisted “nel ripetere le forme e gli spazi di Roma, come se non esistesse una storia contemporanea”, but he also connected



Top sculpture of 1979's *Il teatro del mondo* by Aldo Rossi (Archivio ASAC | Biennale di Venezia) at the entrance of “Aldo Rossi e la cornice veneziana”, exhibition at Iuav – Tolentini from October 24th to December 13rd (curators: Fernanda De Maio, Patrizia Montini Zimolo).

the space of the church with the fundamental experience of “tempo”. This experience was to reveal itself profoundly cleft, divided into clock time and weather, or, as he put it, in “tempo nel doppio significato atmosferico e cronologico” (*Autobiografia*, Milano 1999, p. 9).

Alberti’s architecture was certainly untimely too, but it set a cornerstone for the age of the Renaissance, precisely because, as Rossi said with regard to Sant’Andrea, “it [does not seem to relate to any] contemporary architecture” around it. The buildings by Alberti were notorious for the architect’s disregard of custom and practice, they stood out as lone reminders of another civilization, of antiquity, but not really. Alberti’s successors Bramante, Giulio Romano, Palladio and others in their wake sought to achieve a similar architecture fuori tempo. As Aretino put it with regard to Giulio Romano’s art in general, it was caught between two different times for being “anticamente moderno e modernamente antico” and, one should add, for being uniquely itself. During the Renaissance, antique architecture was very largely present in ruins, however grandiose, and the moment when the building of new St. Peter’s came to a temporary halt in the 1530s, the new looked entirely like the ancient, located as it was in a gap in time rather than firmly rooted in its own. Who, looking at Giuliano da Sangallo’s drawing of the Theatre of Marcellus (Codex Vat. Barb. 4424, f.4) would not think of Aldo Rossi’s Ora questo è perduto or some of his drawings of Cedimenti terrestri? An architecture so exposed to destruction was indeed lost to modern eyes.

One wonders what secured a special place for Aldo Rossi in postwar Italian architecture—first in Milan, then in Europe, and finally around the world. I think it was the untimeliness of his architecture that gave it a unique character. Untimely both with regard to when it appeared and how it looked in the midst of the 1960s. It was untimely in the sense of evading the terms in which problems were posed and solved, and in the sense of putting something forward that had no place in the townscape prevailing around it. The inaugural Monument at Segrate occupies an unidentifiable margin of time, located as it is, between resolute abstraction and a distant nature, shrouded by German oaks copied from a print by Carl Wilhelm Kolbe, and shorn of anything that is already in place. Since the 1960s, the social struggles and the challenge to authority set the tone of the debate and prejudiced architecture which, when put to the test, advanced paradoxical solutions. Rossi did find merit in Berlin’s Stalinallee and, for his Gallarate housing block, he invoked a monastery in Santiago de Compostela and German Wohnblöcke, neither very near to his task or time.

Designing a project, he averred, involved finding what has been lost, securing another lease of life or, at the very least, a memory of it for the future. This even holds true of that cavallo di battaglia, typology, for typology is precisely a means of breaking buildings out of their time and place and rendering them timelessly available. “To forget architecture” was one consequence of typological considerations. Another was that typology makes buildings of different purpose and location appear similar to one another, but more insidiously, to suggests a deep affinity between schematic drawings and calligraphy. This relationship prompted Rossi to say that “il segno è indifferente a disegno o scrittura” (*Autobiografia*, p. 60). Did he mean that all signs are indifferent to what they designate? And are buildings, once reduced to three-dimensional signs, equally indifferent to their place and time? One is tempted to think so, were it not that Rossi’s early projects belonged to sharply defined categories: memorials, housing, and schools.

Even more consequential was the fact that in typological terms buildings share only what is largely indifferent to their occupants. Among typological schemes, Rossi had his favorites, and they invariably float free of their epochs and categories like unmanned boats (or vaisseaux fantômes), whether they recall bronze-age structures raised on stilts, or, in the case of the Cabine dell’Elba, vernacular beach cabins or cupboards. Rossi invoked the gigantic stables in Khrenovoe when classifying his student housing project in Chieti and, indirectly, when he commented on the Cemetery of San Cataldo in Modena. In both cases he performed the same mental operation: typology is the door through which ideas can be transported from one time into another, from one category into another, as if seen in a mirror and yet out of reach. I would even go further and suggest that not only was Rossi’s architecture untimely but it was also placeless, like Pirandellian characters who keep looking for their role.

If there is something to what I’m saying, then the circumstances of Rossi’s debut seem inauspicious for a young architect. Undoubtedly they rendered his work difficult, his standing uncertain, his reputation controversial. After being relegated from the Politecnico, there followed a number of years in Zurich and soon a leap over the Atlantic, and, in the 1980s and 90s, many trips back and forth and on beyond the Western world. His is a story in stark contrast to most Italian architects of his own and of later generations who tended to graft themselves to local institutions and perpetuate old-fashioned ways of building. Perhaps only Renzo Piano enjoyed a comparably favorable reception outside of his country, if

for entirely different reasons, namely as a purveyor of trademark designs with a gratuitous technological appeal.

So much for historic time or chronology, but there is also the ‘weather’ — the other manifestation of time. As Rossi noted in 1980, a propos of Sant’Andrea, he saw “la nebbia entrare nella basilica”, and “osservarla nella galleria Milanese, come l’elemento imprevedibile che modifica e altera, come la luce e le ombra, come le pietre ridotte e lisciate dai piedi e dalle mani di generazioni di uomini”. The touch of atmospheric change may be ever so light, but it evokes the heavy hand of time. In 1984 Rossi let his thoughts ramble through Lombardy when he wrote that here “the cathedrals were probably never white, for reasons of fog and humidity [...] that cause settling and fractures in buildings like torsions of the spine signal arthritis or worse in human bodies” (*Architetture padane*, Modena 1984, p. 14).

Time distorts things, bends them out of shape and breaks them up, but the relics, ruins, and rural haunts Rossi loved also prompted him to seek out “questi [...] luoghi attivi e misteriosi” to which he dedicated the exhibition in the Casa di Mantegna in Mantua. Finding these mysterious places, mostly ruins of one kind or another, made up for having forgotten architecture and instead recovering “alcuni luoghi che costituiscono una patria ritrovata” (*Autobiografia*, p. 14). These allusions are almost too portentous: the patria holds few mysteries when it is the familiar setting of our affairs, but when we leave it behind, when we let it suffer the vagaries of time and age, we begin to perceive it at a distance with a sharper eye. Later on, the ritorno in patria changes everything. The “patria ritrovata” has “weathered” as many events as the traveler in foreign lands who also experienced any number of “deformations” of the familiar. As an analogy to his own peregrinations and as a reminder that however painful and humiliating it may have been to leave Milan, the architect returned to his homeland with his eyes sharpened and with a more vivid feeling for its character. In both atmosphere and material, something “unforeseen” had occurred. In a tumble of images Rossi enumerates Clara Calamai in the film *Ossessione*, her *minestra*, the gardens of Mantua and Ferrara, the vaunted race of Gonzaga horses, the stables of Count Orlov, and yet other places (*Autobiografia*, p. 14). Change can only occur in the dimension of time. Time, however, has a way of warping our experiences and our memory, and these experiences are all related to fleeting manifestations that yet left their trace in memory.

For Aldo, a site outside of all familiar places was the theater. Not any theater, and not even one he knew well, but his own teatrino. Again he belaboured the word no less than the idea when he wrote, recalling once again the experience of the Milanese galleria, of the

[...] conchiglia americana ritrovata per me nel [...] l'altro senso della conchiglia marina [di Alceo] che mi avevo spinto "figlia / della pietra e del mare biancheggiante / tu meravigli la mente dei fanciulli" (Autobiografia, p. 94).

Obviously, not only the minds of children, but also the child in all of us is excited by seashells: therefore the Jesuit scholar Philippo Bonano titled his treatise of 1684 "Recreatio Mentis et Oculi". As if to tease the reader, at least the foreign reader, Rossi did not name the poet (Salvatore Quasimodo), who wrote those words about seashells – "tu meravigli la mente dei fanciulli" – that closely echoes the title of Bonano's, but he harked back to what has distinguished seashells for centuries, their fascino, and their puzzling status as object that only an organism can create and that survive for potentially enormous time spans, long after these organisms may have become extinct. Paul Valéry had meditated on this conundrum in an essay of 1937, and his fascination with seashells has not been lost on architects.

In the teatrino, Rossi reduced reality to shells, complex relationships to a simple order of scale and growth, and made the objects of his desire into willing actors in his private world. The images of tempo and teatrino are tenuously tethered to words, whose meaning seems inconstant, so elusive that Rossi is casting about to pin it down in classical and modern texts before he finds the right place for it in his own work. It was the old issue of inside/outside that surfaces in many of Rossi's buildings, vexing one's sense of the distinction between exterior and interior, as did one of his earliest projects, the Monument to Partisans in Cuneo (1962), and as it defines some of his mature works such as the Hotel Palazzo in Fukuoka (later 1980s). There, visitors sit at a bar in front of the elevation of the building, which they just wandered into. In his thinking, "inside" and "outside" are the defining terms of the theater in a reversal of their customary relationship. The hollow of the cavea is also an exterior, and the plain view of the stage an interior shrinking optically and emotionally, not unlike a hotel that serves as a stage of life while strangely alien to it.

The seashell forms a link between animation and fixity, recording life while remaining inanimate, it has a long pedigree that was not lost on

Aldo. As elementary as the component parts of buildings are, and as ageless and inflected by the time of experience they appear to be, they transform the inert into vessels that sail through the straits of time. In a literal sense, the Galleria in Milan and Sant'Andrea in Mantua form the frames through which time wafts like the fog. Experiencing them, Rossi is able to muster a childlike immediacy and a sense of wonder: it is the large-eyed Aldo, who may have suffered many delusions but one, the desire to make, and make ever again, his beloved toys. Losing them, seeing them broken or thrown away causes him visible pain. Pain persists through changes of momentary *Stimmung* as the fundamental tonality of existence. Such a sense of loss is tangible in Rossi's works, even when they are accomplished and of a kind that promises permanence and renown. It is a sense of loss even more acute in the face of victory or near-victory. The Museum of German History in Berlin, derailed by the advance of history itself, represents such a Pyrrhic victory par excellence.

Rossi confessed that he had been a bad student at the Politecnico, lamenting the bland books and boring lectures of his professors, while remembering fondly the discussions with Heinrich Helfenstein at the ETH in Zurich (*Autobiografia*, p. 70). Helfenstein was Rossi's assistant and helpmate, a literary historian by training and a photographer by avocation, who shot some of Rossi's favorite images, such as the Sunday picture of a deserted and solemn courtyard at Zurich University. Throughout his *Autobiography* and quite casually in conversations, Rossi would prefer to talk of literature, philosophy, palaeontology and whatever may have been on his mind, rather than of architecture as such. This was no affectation, nor a false lead, but rather an admission that his imagination drew from many fields and explored moments of the past no less than speculation about the future. So he enjoyed imagining what Venice had been like before Sansovino and Palladio, a city as Carpaccio saw it, with a lot of wooden structures and desolate shores. On the other hand, his time in New York revealed to him a city made of stone and monuments in which the only things built in wood are the water tanks on the roofs. And it suddenly appeared, I observed long ago, as if Rossi had put them there, littering the town with disconcertingly primitive cylinders under conical tops.

It is appropriate to recall that one of the episodes specially singled out by Aldo in his *Autobiography* bears on the value of being a stranger, even a stranger to architecture: he describes how, riding on a vaporetto in Venice one morning, he overheard a stranger pointing out the corner of Ca' del Duca on the Grand Canal. As "a relic of time" —of another time

for another purpose— this fragment was destined to assume the singular role of a “symbol of architecture”, however overwhelmed, even swallowed, by its surroundings. Suddenly it struck him that this odd column was a “potente e prepotente” affirmation of architecture, this small fragment is, in fact, a whole and its pointless survival, a sheer stroke of luck. His personal luck, for he carried that column with him to various places and made it a placeholder for architecture tout court.

If one may be permitted to make such generalizations about another person’s life, I’d venture to say that Rossi was ‘lucky’ to be relegated from the Politecnico, that nothing better could have happened to him than to be invited to Zurich and lured to New York, and that the breakup of his Milan studio, although painful for everyone involved, propelled him further than he would have ever gone on his own. The direction he chose left many colleagues and friends in doubt. There can be little doubt, however, that Rossi’s last years —which were those of a waning century— found him wavering between affirmation and submission; submission to tendencies that led into the lowlands of facile imitation of historic forms and a consequent loss of the sense of time. The Schützenstrasse block in Berlin does indeed ask questions that find no answer on site, other than those offered by a city that had been virtually leveled during the War, a Prussia for which Frederick the Great imported Palladian facades by the yard and where a bit of Michelangelo might just be the thing the doctor ordered. That Rossi finds himself posthumously in the company of those Berliners, who have no compunction about surrounding one of the rare Schinkel buildings, the Werdersche Kirche, with the schlock of pseudo-classical buildings is perhaps undeserved, but quite poignant nonetheless.

Within the spectrum of architecture in Italy, ranging as it did from Paolo Portoghesi to Superstudio, Rossi had managed to secure a labile balance between designing memories and imagining their future. His iterations led to untimely confrontations, such as those of his “Window of the Poet in New York,” or to a contamination of moments that have little in common and no place where they appear. There was, however, one moment when Rossi was both ahead of himself and standing besides what he was making: the Teatro del mondo of 1979 floated on the lagoon as the perfect vessel for a time bandit. Forever remembered as an image, the Teatro recalled Venice before Sansovino and Palladio, its wooden hull a ghost, its silhouette a momentary companion of the city’s skyline, its inevitable disappearance as much a part of its existence as the changing cloudscape. Here, at dusk, time was one and the same with tempo. He said it in so

many words himself:

È sempre stata mia intenzione di scrivere i progetti, racconto, film, quadro, sempre più indipendentemente da ogni tecnica perché così questo si identifica maggiormente con la cosa essendo nel contempo una proiezione della realtà (*Autobiografia*, p. 55).

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Disregard for custom and practice in typology is the door through which ideas can be transported from one time into another, from one category into another, as if seen in a mirror and yet out of reach. Rossi's architecture was both untimely and placeless. Time, however, has a way of warping our experiences and our memory, and these experiences are all related to fleeting manifestations that have nonetheless left their trace in memory. Rossi's Teatro del mondo of 1979 recalled Venice before Sansovino and Palladio, its wooden hull a ghost, its silhouette a momentary companion of the city's skyline, its inevitable disappearance as much a part of its existence as the changing cloudscape. Here, at dusk, "time" was one and the same with "tempo", independent of custom and practice, and unheeding of techniques and conventions in order to give to architecture a sense of timelessness and spacelessness.



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