

Aldo Rossi 1990 Laureate Essay

Aldo Rossi's Architecture of Recollection: The Silence of Things Repeated or Stated for Eternity

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One can wear a Rossi wristwatch, sit in a Rossi chair sipping espresso from a Rossi coffee pot, don clothes from a Rossi armoire, promenade through a Rossi mega-shopping center near Parma, see an opera in his Genoese theatre, and even reserve a plot in the giant Rossi cemetery at Modena. Soon sports fans in Milan and architecture students at the University of Miami will use new quarters designed by an architect whose hotel in Japan, schools and town halls in Italy, and housing estates in Milan and Berlin have begun to rise, like the proverbial tip of the iceberg, from the immense reservoir of his imagination. Rossi has also laid down his ideas—many among them first expounded in the line of his editorial and teaching duties—in books, and over the years he has created an impressive body of drawings, paintings, exhibitions, and product design. Only knowing this can we begin to grasp how completely he manifests his profession, a profession that is nothing without mastery of the crafts but never masterly without the arts.

It is startling that an architect of such capacity should have embarked on his practice with a villa of strictly Loosian design, giving an early hint of the lasting importance the Viennese architect and the sources of northern classicism and poetry would command in his thinking. Even more startling is the fact that he should advance ideas on the colossal scale of some of his most recent projects while retaining a deep affinity for a world of toylike size and silence. Rossi, whose early writings identified the city as the true theatre of architecture, took the long road home and, along its lonely path, remained identified for years with a single enigmatic monument at Segrate. Cast in rough cement and composed of the parts of an ancient coffin, its roof-shaped lid having slid off and come to rest on a stump of a column, this monument to the resistance inscribes death into the time of passing shadows and the flow of water into the solitude of its square. Rossi articulated with precocious assuredness both the monument's pristine volumes—cube, cylinder, and prism—and a public arena for their elemental identities as tower, column, and fountain. If Cezanne's dictum on the pictorial reduction of nature to the sphere, the cube, and the cylinder was intended to distill synthetic and lasting images, Rossi's affirmation of basic stereometry springs from a resistant, even an archaic will. Against the ravages of history and the corrosive consequences of functionalism, Rossi poses his pure and simple shapes in an aura of wholeness which, exposed to the razzle-dazzle of the contemporary city, tinges the surroundings with their surreal presence, casting a spell of silence over them.

Rossi's buildings affirm themselves in the power of forgotten events. Time has escaped, but the objects remain like childhood memories, at once tiny and gigantic, or rather measured by an unchanging scale of their own. Like toys and childhood memories, they survive traumatic experiences wholly intact and resist change or resolution in adult thoughts. Instead of being shattered or dissolved, they bob like corks on the water, tossed about but impervious to disaster. No other work of Rossi's revealed the power of his imagination so much as the *Teatro del mondo* of 1980, whose wood clad tubular scaffold forming a tower had to be towed into Venice on a barge for the Biennale. The fate of Rossi's objects may be fulfilled in their future role as cenotaphs of our time, but in the present, they stand as beacons for the city. Rossi's coffee pots shaped like domed towers, and his *Teatro del mondo* tugged through the Venetian lagoon are only two of the phantom vessels he has launched on the ocean of architectural imagination. They make their appearance again and again, like mountebanks turning up at every fair, but for the architect they are "the silence of things repeated or stated for eternity."

In his search for norms, Rossi confronts the typological schemes of modern architecture with their ancient and vernacular counterparts; in his formulation of an architecture for present conditions, he plumbs the first truly normative concepts that undergird neoclassicism. He has no use for period ornament, no interest in cut-rate imitation; what he intimates, instead, is the possibility of an order of things that allows us to experience the present as a suspended moment in the passage from the past into the future.

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It is no accident that school buildings have been the testing ground for some of Rossi's ideas about architecture's capacity to address the question of time and the passage of generations with peculiar poignancy. For it is here that the architect can allow his personal memory to mingle with collective traditions, "under the huge clock, which indicates both a particular time and also the time of childhood, the time of group portraits, with all the merriment that such photographs usually cause. The building thus seems pure theatre, but is the theatre of life." Photography and theatre constitute the global media for Rossi's stage, upon which he captures the literary and pictorial reflections of his native Lombardy in the figurations of a Pavese or a Sironi. This rarest of architectural capacities, the power to be radically of a place and to impart a meaning to objects far beyond their origin, makes of Rossi an architect whose reflections, lectures, and buildings capture our attention. He has escaped the sacrifice typically exacted for such ubiquity—uncritical servitude to economic interests and schematic reduction of ideas to mere patterns and fads—and continues to expand the sheer magnitude and depth of his projects across countries and continents.

Rossi's international recognition is in no small way connected to the interest with which he was first received by American architects and schools. Foremost among them was Peter Eisenman's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, which, by means of exhibitions and the publication of Rossi's writings, laid the groundwork for a steadily widening audience and helped position Rossi's thought in the area of architectural controversy during the 1970s. When Eisenman contrasted Rossi's use of history "with the plunder of history prevalent in America today," he propelled the Italian architect's work headlong into a debate from which few have emerged with the confidence of Pritzker Prize winners Richard Meier and Frank Gehry, who are now joined by Aldo Rossi. "While American has always expressed a nostalgia for a history that never was," Eisenman continued, "Rossi's merging of analogue and history in Segrate guarantees a history that will never be.... Rossi's modernism denies the possibility of choice from history, the idea that styles may be selected.... His drawings offer 'nothing new' precisely because anything new which can be offered is, in the present condition, nothing."

Rossi's apartment and studio, located in nineteenth-century enclaves of the city of Milan, appear, at first sight, unlikely laboratories for his far-flung projects; but their somewhat haunted familiarity, studded as they are with neatly framed drawings, models and objects of the architects invention, evokes a visit to the residence of a latter-day John Soane. The latest projects somehow assume the appearance of relics from another time, while early work seems to place Rossi's buildings outside of the familiar cadence of periods and styles. As his uncanny shifts of scale suddenly magnify a corner column or a schoolhouse clock, so the unexpected appearance of his urban insertions falls into a historic zone that belongs as much to recollection as it does to reality. He contemplates the monuments of industry with the awed eyes of a child, but treats the traditions of his art with the weary wisdom of a master. When you descend the granite stairs from his apartment and return to the din and hurry of modern Milan, the realm of Rossi's imagination yields to the memory of a truant afternoon spent in the attic among the objects whose magic is as complete as their power and origin are incomprehensible.

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