

CUT-UPS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY AS A COLLAGE¹

What is the relevance of *The Architecture of the City*, today? Granted, the first book of Aldo Rossi has secured a place in the pantheon of architectural history and theory. Yet, since the original publication in 1966, both work and author underwent significant makeovers that inevitably affect critical reception. Furthermore, current social and cultural conditions for the practice of architecture became so extreme it is necessary to reconsider this legacy once again. Thus, a discussion on the subject should transcend a strict etiological survey in order to embrace also teleological implications. It should stem from the original causes of a seminal text, only to be confronted with the repercussion of subsequent readings. This paper argues that the relevance of *The Architecture of the City* derives from its doctrinal stance, but also from its perplexing arbitrariness. While today is hardly possible to ignore the arbitrary as a zeitgeist, Aldo Rossi seems to have anticipated this prospect with his modus operandi. Namely, collage.

Collage was instrumental to Aldo Rossi, both on visual and textual level. The juxtaposition and amalgamation of different sources constitutes a trademark of his body of work. *The Architecture of the City* can be seen as an early experiment of this procedure. It comprised a wide range of references from disparate fields. Notions such as type and urban artifact were intertwined with mentions to Francesco Milizia and Marcel Poète, to name but a few. The eclecticism of the book – a mélange of genres disguised as a treatise – prefigured the fragmentary nature of the output of Aldo Rossi. Right from the start, this diversity is somewhat indelibly imprinted. At the introduction of *The Architecture of the City*, the description of contents is interrupted by a remembrance of things past:

Anyone who remembers European cities after the bombings of the last war retains an image of disemboweled houses where, amid the rubble, fragments of familiar places remained standing, with their colors of faded wall, laundry hanging suspended in the air, barking dogs – the untidy intimacy of places. And always we could see the house of our childhood, strangely aged, present in the flux of the city.²

This tension, between scientific tone and poetic outbursts, is crucial to the discussion of the work of Aldo Rossi. Quite predictably, the formulaic premises from the former have

1. Diogo Seixas Lopes, presented at the International Conference “L’architettura della città,” IUAV Venice, October 2011.

2. Aldo Rossi, *L’architettura della città* (Padua: Marsilio Editori, 1966) / *The Architecture of th City*, Oppositions Books, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p.22.

prompted devoted following. Nevertheless, the vivid phrasing from the latter also contains fundamental facts. It places the foundations of this theoretical endeavor amid the rubble of postwar Europe. Urban centers such as Milan, the birthplace of Rossi, endured severe bombings and gave rise to a disrupted cityscape. Old parts were stripped and exposed, while new quarters sprawled into the outskirts. *The Architecture of the City* is an attempt to reconstruct, from a disciplinary standpoint, the cohesion of this fabric. Given the scope of destruction, full restoration of historic continuity was out of the question. Instead, a calculated nostalgia for the remains was counterpoised to the emergence of suburbia. Named and framed, these fragments were therefore potentially exempted from obsolescence. Yet, the city had changed irretrievably. Its image, or gestalt, was now closer to the jumble of layers of the so-called *décollages* by the artist Mimmo Rotella.

Parallels such as these probably amount to *enjeux épistémiques*, an expression used by Carlo Olmo in his preface to the study conducted by Elisabetta Vasumi Roveri about *The Architecture of the City*.³ This extensive research effectively examines the history of the book and its text, chapter by chapter. Other scholarly contributions have long added a variety of perspectives. For the case, this particular interpretation begins with archival sources held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. They bring forth revealing information about *The Architecture of the City*, disclosing a composite work wherein several documents were collated into one. Among them, it is noteworthy to inspect two large notebooks dated between 1964 and 1965.⁴ Like a backstage, the notebooks foreshadow the final version of the book. There is a mixture of manuscripts and typescripts, glued onto their sheets. These intertwined texts testify to an editorial process of cut, copy, and paste. It allowed to incorporate the results of previous studies, namely conducted at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia.⁵ It also accounts for the ambition of Aldo Rossi and his encyclopedic project. He recalled the initiative with martial undertones:

I read books on urban geography, topography, and history, like a general who wishes to know every possible battlefield – the high grounds, the passages, the

3. Carlo Olmo, preface to *Aldo Rossi e L'architettura della città. Genesi e fortuna di un testo*, by Elisabetta Vasumi Roveri (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2010), p. 7.

4. Aldo Rossi, *I fatti urbani (20 settembre 1964 – 29 agosto 1965)*, Aldo Rossi Papers (henceforth ARP), Getty Research Institute (henceforth GRI), Los Angeles, Box 6, Folder 68 [1]; *Architettura dei fatti urbani 30 agosto 1965 – 15 dicembre 1965*, ARP, GRI, Box 6, Folder 68 [2].

5. Aldo Rossi et al., *Aspetti e problemi della tipologia edilizia* (Venice: 1964); *La formazione del concetto di tipologia edilizia* (Venice: IUAV, 1965); *Rapporti tra morfologia urbana e tipologia edilizia* (Venice: IUAV, 1966). Proceedings of the course "Caratteri distributivi degli edifici," taught at Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia.

woods. I walked the cities of Europe to understand their plans and classify them according to types. Like a lover sustained by my egotism, I often ignored the secret feelings I had for those cities; it was enough to know the system that governed them.⁶

To accomplish his mission, Aldo Rossi resorted to multiple citations from different fields. While reclaiming scientific autonomy, *The Architecture of the City* took over academic discourse based on miscellaneous bibliography. This interdisciplinary approach produced a hybrid “state of the art.” It delved into the social sciences of the nineteenth century, quoting Maurice Halbwachs or Karl Marx, but was also committed to new paradigms as well. For example, the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss came to the fore. These sources were seamlessly weaved into the text, like a patchwork. The assortment of contents gained prominence thereafter, turning into a leitmotif. Drafts, annotations, and souvenirs constellated into small blue notebooks, the famous *quaderni azzurri*.⁷ Driven by a compulsion to collect fragments and figments, these logs supplied material for the writings of Aldo Rossi. In his second book, *A Scientific Autobiography*, they would surface as memoirs. Once more, this work is the offspring of manuscripts and typescripts along with clippings and photographs. Overall, the assemblage unveiled a stream of consciousness.

This subjective tone is certainly one of the most problematic legacies of Aldo Rossi. Specifically, it contests the alleged objectivity of *The Architecture of the City* and the tenets professed by the book. They would be replaced by an intricate, often labyrinthine, nebula of memories and meditations. The style of later publications relates to that whimsical pattern, similar to the literary exploits of William Burroughs and his cut-up technique.⁸ Along with cohort Brion Gysin, the American writer implemented this radical system of redaction during the postwar years. Instead of the typewriter, it used the razor blade as a means to obtain prescience. In the words of Burroughs, “when you cut into the present, the future leaks out.”⁹ Much like Rossi, texts become saturated with visual references haphazardly associated onto each other. Yet, there was a method to this apparent randomness. It favored the intuition of personal choices, rather than the strict compliance of predetermined rules.

6. Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 16.

7. Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, edited by Francesco Dal Co (Milan: Electa, 1999).

8. For a survey of the cut-up technique see Hendel Teicher, ed., *Cut-Outs and Cut-Ups: Hans Christian Andersen and William Seward Burroughs* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2008).

9. William S. Burroughs, “Origin and Theory of the Tape Cut-Ups,” in *Break Through the Grey Room*, Sub Rosa, CD, 2001.

Not by chance, the revision of *The Architecture of the City* is linked to collage. In 1969, Aldo Rossi penned a preface to the second Italian edition published a year later. While the original contents of the book did not change, this introduction announced a new mode of interpretation of urban reality. It set forth the role of analogy over analysis, heralded by the depiction of a city where fact and fiction converge. As Rossi explained,

To illustrate this concept I gave the example of Canaletto's fantasy view of Venice, a *capriccio* in which Palladio's projects for Ponte di Rialto, the Basilica of Vicenza, and the Palazzo Chiericati are set next to each other and described as if the painter were rendering an urban scene he had actually observed. These three Palladian monuments, none of which are actually in Venice (one is a project; the other two are in Vicenza), nevertheless constitute an *analogous* Venice formed of specific elements associated with the history of both architecture and the city.¹⁰

Within the canvas, buildings were manipulated like *objets trouvés* to create a scene where time and space had no fixed boundaries. Aldo Rossi developed his idea of the analogous city under this insignia. Throughout the 1970s, he gave further explanations about the subject in a series of articles that culminated with the presentation of a collage in 1976.¹¹ Made for the Venice Biennale along with Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin, and Fabio Reinhart, it displayed a profusion of images. These ranged from Campo Marzio by Piranesi to Notre Dame du Haut by Corbusier. There were also several projects by Rossi himself, indicating an increasingly self-referential discourse. This visual maelstrom merged into a panel that seemed to revoke the prescriptions of *The Architecture of the City*. Rather than the strict indexation of urban forms, it relied on serendipity to reinvent them. Thus, it instituted the arbitrary as a mental operation to engage with reality. This decision brought upon critique, as if an holy grail had been renounced. "Ceci n'est pas une ville," such was the notorious verdict by Manfredo Tafuri.¹²

Despite the indictments, still *de rigueur*, this theoretical update effectively operated like a Trojan horse during the afterlife of *The Architecture of the City*. In the introduction to the Portuguese edition, originally written in 1971, Aldo Rossi stated: "The analogous city meant a system of relating the city to established elements from which other artifacts could be derived. At the same time, the suppression of precise boundaries in time and space allowed the design the same kind of tension that we find in memory."¹³ Published in

10. Aldo Rossi, "Preface to the Second Italian Edition," in *The Architecture of the City*, p. 166.

11. Aldo Rossi, "La città analoga: tavola." *Lotus*, no. 13 (December 1976): pp. 5-8.

12. Manfredo Tafuri, "Ceci n'est pas une ville." *Lotus*, no. 13: pp. 10-13.

13. Aldo Rossi, "Introduction to the Portuguese Edition," in *The Architecture of the City*, p. 176.

1977, the translation was graced by a picturesque cover with landmarks from Portugal and former colonies. Drawn by José Charters Monteiro, a former student at Politecnico di Milano, it enveloped the book with a fantasy of national identity. Such makeovers of the original content culminate with the American edition, revised by Peter Eisenman and published in 1982. Significantly, *A Scientific Autobiography* came out a year earlier also under the label of Opposition Books. Underscoring ambivalence rather than clarity, the outcome of this reversal is a palimpsest – *Rossi d'après Eisenman* – where the follow-up supersedes the debut. Thus, *The Architecture of the City* became itself an artifact prone to multiple interpretations and agendas.

With the advent of postmodernism, *enjeux épistémiques* such as these flourished. To use the parlance in vogue then, their metanarratives converted diversity and disparity into an ethos of urban design. Thus, collage became a cultural strategy to combine instances that were often contradictory within a framework of multiple meanings. Significantly, one of its major proclamations was titled *Collage City*.¹⁴ Published in 1978, the book by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter advocated an alternate cityscape peopled with *objets trouvés*. According to the authors, the associative interplay of historical references preempted technocratic planning and made room for civic space. That is, “utopia as metaphor *and* Collage City as prescription: these opposites, involving the guarantees of both law and freedom, should surely constitute the dialectic of the future rather than any total surrender either to scientific ‘certainties’ or the simple vagaries of the *ad hoc*.”¹⁵ Not by chance, this commentary was illustrated with the painting of Canaletto mentioned by Aldo Rossi. Although there were no references to the writings of the Italian architect, *Collage City* shared a similar iconography. Later editions of *The Architecture of the City*, such as the one edited by Daniele Vitale in 1978, made clear this visual turnabout. Pictures became a prime medium for the dissemination of the ideas of the book.

The consecutive revisions of this corpus, firstly promoted by its instigator, reflect a drastic change of context since the initial date of publication of *The Architecture of the City*. They are, in the words of Fredric Jameson, “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.”¹⁶ Likewise, the endorsement of collage as a *modus operandi* differed greatly from preceding experiments with the same procedure. During modernism, it served the rhetoric of the new

14. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

16. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. ix.

against the old using sharp contrasts. Notable examples, like the collages produced by Mies van der Rohe, underlined the crispness of these inserts. Instead, the collages of Aldo Rossi revived an individual and collective experience of history using the vague contours of a mosaic. This sort of fuzziness was also consecrated by the atmospheric allure of watercolors, for instance, transforming a theoretical project into artistic bravado. Typecast as a virtuoso, the architect could only aspire to engender *objets à réaction poétique*. The image of the Theatre of the World sailing across the shores of Venice conveys the solipsism, or alienation, of this status quo.

In retrospect, the lack of focus of this *ars combinatoria* can be judged as a gateway to the politics of laissez-faire. Mental correspondences were only allowed as a distraction to large-scale transactions of capital and estate. In turn, the early premises of *The Architecture of the City* called for an understanding of urban facts that implied disciplinary empowerment. Today, the problem of the legacy of this book is not the betrayal of its moral credo but rather the social and cultural conditions of its current reception. Beyond the restricted confines of academia, it is likely to be read in a state of distraction. Yet, due to a process of collage, certain passages can be rekindled. With its strange mixture of theorems and fragments, *The Architecture of the City* seems less dated than some of its counterparts. Despite the flaws, perhaps also due to them, the text retained universal value. It can still help to cut into the present, hoping the future leaks out.