

Aldo Rossi

The Architecture of the City

OPPOSITIONS BOOKS

Introduction by Peter Eisenman
Translation by Diane Ghirardo and
Joan Ockman

Revised for the American Edition
by Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman

Aldo Rossi

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The study of this debate over Rome as capital is of great interest for us even today; it engaged politicians and scholars of all persuasions, all of whom were concerned over which tradition the city should be the repository of, and toward which Italy it should direct its destiny as capital. Through this historical circumstance, the significance of certain interventions which tend to characterize Rome as a modern city and to establish a relationship between its past and the images of the other principal European capitals emerges more clearly. To see this debate over the capital merely as a manifestation of nationalist rhetoric—which was undoubtedly present—means to place this important process within limits too narrow to judge it; a similar process was typical for a number of other countries in various periods.

Instead, it is necessary to investigate how certain urban structures come to be identified with the model of a capital, and what relationships are possible between the physical reality of a city and this model. It is noteworthy that for Europe, but not only for Europe, this model was Paris. This is true to such a degree that it is not possible to understand the structure of many modern capitals—Berlin, Barcelona, Madrid, along with Rome and others—without recognizing this fact. With Paris the entire historical-political process in the architecture of the city takes a specific turn; but the meaning of this relationship can only be discerned by elaborating the specific ways in which it came about.

As always, a relationship is established between the urban artifacts structuring the city and the imposition of an ideal project or general scheme, and the pattern of this relationship is very complex. Certainly there are cities that realize their own inclinations and others that do not.

The Collective Memory

With these considerations we approach the deepest structure of urban artifacts and thus their form—the architecture of the city. “The soul of the city” becomes the city’s history, the sign on the walls of the municipium, the city’s distinctive and definitive character, its memory. As Halbwachs writes in *La Mémoire Collective*, “When a group is introduced into a part of space, it transforms it to its image, but at the same time, it yields and adapts itself to certain material things which resist it. It encloses itself in the framework that it has constructed. The image of the exterior environment and the stable relationships that it maintains with it pass into the realm of the idea that it has of itself.”⁴²

One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the *locus* of the collective memory. This relationship between the *locus* and the citizenry then becomes the city’s predominant image, both of architecture and of landscape, and as certain artifacts become part of its memory, new ones emerge. In this entirely positive sense great ideas flow through the history of the city and give shape to it.

Thus we consider *locus* the characteristic principle of urban artifacts; the concepts of *locus*, architecture, permanences, and history together help us to understand the complexity of urban artifacts. The collective memory participates in the actual transformation of space in the works of the collective, a transformation that is always conditioned by whatever material realities oppose it. Understood in this sense, memory becomes the guiding thread of the entire complex urban structure and in this respect the architecture of urban artifacts is distin-

guished from art, inasmuch as the latter is an element that exists for itself alone, while the greatest monuments of architecture are of necessity linked intimately to the city. “. . . The question arises: in what way does history speak through art? It does so primarily through architectural monuments, which are the willed expression of power, whether in the name of the State or of religion. A people can be satisfied with a Stonehenge only until they feel the need to express themselves in form. . . . Thus the character of whole nations, cultures, and epochs speaks through the totality of architecture, which is the outward shell of their being.”⁴³

Ultimately, the proof that the city has primarily itself as an end emerges in the artifacts themselves, in the slow unfolding of a certain idea of the city, intentionally. Within this idea exist the actions of individuals, and in this sense not everything in urban artifacts is collective; yet the collective and the individual nature of urban artifacts in the end constitutes the same urban structure. Memory, within this structure, is the consciousness of the city; it is a rational operation whose development demonstrates with maximum clarity, economy, and harmony that which has already come to be accepted.

With respect to the workings of memory, it is primarily the two modes of actualization and interpretation that interest us; we know that these depend on time, culture, and circumstances, and since these factors together determine the modes themselves, it is within them that we can discover the maximum of reality. There are many places, both large and small, whose different urban artifacts cannot otherwise be explained; their shapes and aspirations respond to an almost predestined individuality. I think, for example, of the cities of Tuscany, Andalusia, and elsewhere; how can common general factors account for the very distinct differences of these places?

The value of history seen as collective memory, as the relationship of the collective to its place, is that it helps us to grasp the significance of the urban structure, its individuality, and its architecture which is the form of this individuality. This individuality ultimately is connected to an original artifact—in the sense of Cattaneo’s principle; *it is an event and a form*. Thus the union between the past and the future exists in the very idea of the city that it flows through in the same way that memory flows through the life of a person; and always, in order to be realized, this idea must not only shape but be shaped by reality. This shaping is a permanent aspect of a city’s unique artifacts, monuments, and the idea we have of it. It also explains why in antiquity the founding of a city became part of the city’s mythology.

*The Attic historians, who tried to give their country a list of kings, made out that in Erichthonios, the second primaeval Athenian with the curious birth-legend, which we know from the stories concerning Athene, a Kekrops reappeared. . . . Allegedly also, he built the shrine of Athena Polias, already mentioned, set up the wooden image of the goddess in it, and was buried on the spot. . . . It seems rather that his significant name, which emphatically signifies a “chthonian,” a being from the underworld, originally meant not a ruler, not a king of this our world above, but the mysterious child who was worshipped in mysteries and mentioned in seldom-told tales. . . . The Athenians called themselves Kekropidai after a primaeval being, but Erechtheidai after this their king and hero.*⁴⁴

Athens