Aldo Rossi: Architect and Artist

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Over the last two decades, architects have increasingly been seen as artists as well as architects. In the United States, architects such as Richard Meier have made an impact through their collages and drawings. But the architect whose drawings have made the greatest impact is Aldo Rossi (1932-1997). He considered himself both an artist and an architect, and his drawings and paintings dating back to the 1940s consistently informed how he worked as an architect.

Drawings can be understood as "texts," texts which for me are transformative in that they capture and engage that elusive contact between life and the environments in which it is lived. For Rossi, this notion came together with his sense of architecture as linked to the theater, perhaps best seen in a drawing for Uskudor Square, Istanbul (1986), in which the representation hovers between inside/outside, hidden/exposed, imploded/extruded. And Rossi's work constantly acknowledges the dialogue between theater or stage and life, such as in his drawings for the reconstruction of La Fenice Theater in Venice (1997).

Rossi's architecture consists of elemental masses and forms, sleek and crisp, and yet the drawings are free and expansive renderings that combine elements of his buildings with others drawn from everyday life. It is intriguing to consider how his work spanned these two poles, and what lay behind his highly personal drawings and his contextual and historicizing buildings. Rossi believed that memory is "an all-encompassing filter for perception."[1] He remarked that "my observation of things has remained my most important formal education."[2] He recreated the things he saw both fancifully and critically in his drawings, often as a way of commenting on a city's condition and often with human figures used as iconographic expressions. When he sketched the little cabins on the beaches of Italy and summoned references to carefree times at the sea, he interspersed personal memory with the built environment. The same strategy is evident in many other drawings, often untitled, of coffee pots set in urban landscapes. Objects are out of scale in their relationships with one another, but the every day objects such as cigarette packs and bottles act as space definers for the city and as bridges between daily life and the built environment.

Along with everyday items (usually from the kitchen) Rossi also drew animals, such as horses, in ways that made their skeletons equivalent to structural elements such as piers or beams. Into the scenes he inserted furniture he designed, specific buildings in Milan (especially the Duomo), and often references to religious figures, such as St. Carlo Borromeo or the infant Jesus. Along with the strong forms and powerful iconic references, Rossi also used strong, high-impact colors such as red. This kind of visual syncopation of form, image, historical and personal reference and color first attracted my attention to his work; the viewer is pulled in to the rhythm and cadence of these many elements so artfully held together.

In the drawings for his projects, Rossi left a clear record of how he envisioned them. For the Architecture School at the University of Miami, for example, Rossi intended to give a new, monumental core to a campus that he saw as scattered. An avenue of palm trees would connect existing buildings with the lake, and his tower would serve as part of a new acropolis for the campus. The early schemes for this project included a wood castle, but the tower of stacked cubes also recalled an earlier project, the Teatro del Mondo for the 1980 Venice Biennale. Previous work cropped up in mutated form in Rossi's projects as well as his drawings.

Rossi's connections were not only to his own earlier work, but to historical precedents: this is particularly true of Boullee, whose library design from two centuries ago is a shadow presence in Rossi's 1990 design for the library at Seregno. Likewise, he accepted elements from other cultures for his international projects: the Restaurant and Beer Hall (Sapporo Japan, 1989) has a white marble clock tower that is profoundly Italian, but the side windows overlook a small, Japanese shrine. An installation for an exhibition in Japan in 1989 led him to design his own Yatai (a traditional Japanese stall that is portable). Rossi was always fascinated with moveable architecture (evident not only from the Teatro del Mondo but from his drawings and his little scientific theater), so he brought that together with another of his favorite figures, that of Pinocchio. Pinocchio's Yatai allowed Rossi to design for a boy/man who exists in both worlds: the fun-loving boy and the somewhat neurotic, never fully grown up man. As Rossi wrote, "Pinocchio accepts all of his responsibilities and in order to defend himself against harm drives a tractor to confront all the adversaries of the journey...Pinocchio has faith in technology and a better world."[3]

Perhaps the epitome of Rossi's "mobile architecture" was his Monumental Arch for Galveston, Texas (1987). Originally designed for the Mardi Gras of 1988, it was not actually erected until 1990—the first theme was Venice while the theme for 1990 was Brazil. This three-dimensional collage of Rossi's impression of his favorite sites in the United States (Galveston's light house, Cape Cod architecture) was designed to be site specific, but when it was constructed, it was not placed on the original waterfront site.

Rossi's designs for Disney World's new city, Celebration, freely mingled historic references such as the square at Pisa, the Camp Santo (or cemetery) and their various heraldic elements. Part of a much larger master plan for huge tracts of land outside of Orlando, Florida, Celebration allowed Rossi to be fanciful without constraints of existing buildings. In Fukuoka, Japan, by contrast, the problem was to help generate development in an ignored part of the city's waterfront. The main facade, with its gigantic red travertine columns conveyed a monumentality and an order that he believed would stimulate further development. But he placed no windows in the main facade: in the E. M. Forster novel, *Room with a View*, the room of the pensione was empty, so Rossi argued "What is even

better than an empty room with a view is a life-filled room without a view."[4]

For Rossi, architecture should not be remembered for itself, but rather the events and people who populate it and bring it to life should be remembered. In this way architecture becomes a stage for life, reinforcing the ancient bond between city and theater. In a 1975 drawing entitled "Interior," Rossi clearly demarcated the interior from the exterior, while the shadow figure gazes out the window to the urban landscape, reinforcing its power and significance. But in another interior of 1988, Rossi blurred the boundaries between interior and exterior: the Duomo is out of scale, almost entering into the room, while the chair is also out of scale, dominating the interior, while the window that separates the two areas provides a permeable frame for these illusions.

In Rossi's work I see that often-labeled "primitive" quality, similar to descriptions offered of my own drawings. For me, the transformational power of the visual in his work creates a kinship with which I have come to identify. The cadence and movement in his drawings creates a visual syncopation that expresses what he saw as the specifics of the site linked with the cultural spirit of the city and the country, as Morris Adjmi so aptly phrased it. Rossi himself said, "Our memory is our culture."[5]

NOTES

[1] See Sara Richardson, *Aldo Rossi: Surrealist Vision* (Vance Bibliographies, No. A, 1925).

[2] Vincent Scully, "The Scientific Autobiography," (MIT Press, 1981), p. 111.

[3] Also Rossi, *Drawings and Paintings*, Ed. Adjmi Morris and Giovanni Bertolotto, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).

[4] Aldo Rossi, *Architecture 1981-1991*, Ed. Adjmi Morris, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), p. 101.

[5] Aldo Rossi, Mangin David, "L' aide memoire," *Architecture d' Aujourd' hui*, no. 242 (December, 1985), p. vi.