

Urban Ecology and Psychology

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THE INDIVIDUALITY OF URBAN ARTIFACTS,
ARCHITECTURE
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1 Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), p.130.

2 Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, p.114.

Arriving at San Cataldo, from America, from an American childhood and architectural education, tests the boundaries of associative thinking. The echoes are embarrassingly close to home. Driving from northwest of Modena, the cemetery appears over the gentle rise of a highway ramp. The pastel mass of its pitched metal roof aligns with overhead power lines. There is a bus stop and a parking lot. It is surprising how big the buildings are, how wide and how tall. How the windows, so stark black in Rossi's famous watercolors, are framed in the pale blue-green of the roof, and divided into four parts by conspicuous mullions.

A few people get off the bus holding flowers. The effect of the place before you falls short of the uncanny purity of Rossi's painted forms. The disconnect between expectation and experience makes space for a strange flash of association – you could mistake it for America, for a vast complex of stucco buildings surrounded by highways, a pilgrimage site of sorts out in the suburbs. It almost looks like a shopping mall. The association feels crass – a disservice to Rossi's impeccable sense of monument, context, history, and program, and to the solemnity of the place – and it fades as you walk around. But the core of it sticks with you: a crossing of wires brought on by an unexpected, buried body of personal experience. A mundane, essentially American me-

memory of the city layering itself, unbidden, onto an Italian icon.

Memory, and the ways that memory locates itself within or grafts itself onto physical artifacts, are essential concepts in *The Architecture of the City*. “The soul of the city' becomes the city's history,” he writes, “...One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people.”¹ Collective memory is the stuff from which the city is built, the force that defines the artifacts that structure the urban. But Rossi is less interested in the psychology and memory of the individual citizen, or the noncitizen visitor. Underneath the book's 20th sub-heading, “Urban Ecology and Psychology”, he dissociates architectural thinking from psychological feeling: “When Bernini speaks disdainfully of Paris because he finds its Gothic landscape barbarous, we are hardly interested in Bernini's psychology; instead we are interested in the judgment of an architect who on the basis of the total and specific culture of one city judges the structure of another city.”²

But when you get there, to San Cataldo, sitting on a bench between the blank yellow stucco walls and the famous, hollow-eyed cube, it is easier to put yourself into Bernini's shoes. It is not possible to shake the suburban scale of the place, or the rush of the highway so nearby. You are in Modena, on the edge of an ancient city,

but you are also home, in Upstate New York, or driving across Indiana. You are standing at the edge of a housing subdivision, looking over a corrugated metal gate into the adjoining hayfield. There is the rumbling discomfort of wide open spaces.

The power of collective memories and spaces is that they gather individual stories, that they provide an image and a canvas that is constantly, productively refracted through the assembled histories of those that pass through. They provoke comparison, discussion, and framing that allow disparate forces to come together without the pressure of consensus. Rather than drawing on “the total and specific culture of one city”, at San Cataldo, you are invited to examine your own fragmentary, reconstituted recollections. By its peculiar unwelcome, awkward scale, and raw unfinishedness, you are reminded that artifacts, collectives, need not be whole or seamless, and that “the judgment of an architect” is always rooted in personal and interpersonal narrative.

San Cataldo is a product of Modena, of the study of its history, its people, of the history of the European city, of the Italian landscape. Every day it is a venue for people to remember the dead, to stand in silence at their engraved names, and to return home on the bus. But part of the uncanny power of the place comes from the ease with which it sheds that specificity - how it welcomes and dissolves into images brought from other countries, traditions, and times. At points in *The Architecture of the City*, Rossi’s attempt at scientific rigor feels forced. His watercolors are the inverse, raw emotion distorting and smearing his clean forms, shadows deepening to harsh black. Eisenman argues that the drawings are the true locus of Rossi’s architecture, preserving space for fantasy amidst cities over-determined by history and layered form. But for an American visitor at San Cataldo, the building itself – half-built, too big, stranded on the edge of the city – allows for an ambiguity and space for thought that is not achieved by either the book or the drawings.

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