

## Rossi the Ambiguous

Nicholas Lobo Brennan

THE INDIVIDUALITY OF URBAN ARTIFACTS,  
ARCHITECTURE  
How Urban Elements Become Defined

Thirty underground parking spaces. How to best arrange thirty underground parking spaces? What about the width of the corridor so that two people can pass, and the distance to the lift shaft? How many square meters are the offices, what is the size of the canteen, how big is the lobby, what proportion is the facade to the floor area? How big is the plaza, what is the width of the pavement beyond the plaza, what is the footprint of the building in the master plan, how many trees are in the streets (are there trees), what is the distance to the bus stop, the city centre, the airport, the suburb?

So pick up your Neufert, your guidebook to the actual. The logic that informs it is the foundation to our regulations, our planning, our designs. The world it describes presents neutrality as a style, an ideal device for fixing in place the invisible bureaucratic forces that form the city. Its generalised solutions set out each and every point of life as a discrete problem, from the completely public to the deeply private. It has come to describe how to live rather than how we might be minimally comfortable. It describes that things need not be any more than this, nor any less than that. Efficiency as the primary generator of space. This is the condition within which we live.

And if efficiency was not the starting point? There have been and could be other priorities, impulses and ideas.

The point at which bureaucratic technocracy becomes not just a useful assistant in making our cities, but the very spirit, style and character of our environment is the point when we must wonder if this is what we want. By focusing on discrete guidelines and solutions, Neufert and its close family members, regulation and standardisation, have led to a technique of hyper specificity that results in vague places. Rossi in his *Architecture of the City* attempts the opposite: ambiguous discourse asking for specific qualities to be designed into places. It resists being what it is, a book of guidelines for designers, resisting for the sake of not becoming a deadening closed system.

I have no argument with standard building processes and materials. I make no argument that Rossi rally against them. I love these things, my practice revolves around them, and I would argue that Rossi's did too. In *Architecture of the City* Rossi is asking us to see what other ingredients make a city that go beyond data.

*Architecture of the City* is written from a designer's point of view. Its chapters describe the designer's concerns, it is for the architect tackling something that will be made physical in the world. Who are these decisions for, whose duty is it to care, how can a design be precise and concrete, yet adaptable in use and non-oppressive? The book can be seen as the result of a productive anxi-

ety over the responsibility of these decisions. Rossi does not hide from the monumental scale of collective experience that the city requires.

The desire to write and theorize about what propels *Architecture of the City* comes as one epoch is ending and another starting. It was the forbearer of other seminal books that hoped to respond to the supposed death of modernism: first *Learning from Las Vegas*, then *Delirious New York*. Each of these books set out to learn from existing cities and build a foundation from which to design in relation to the qualities of ‘city’, as they saw it, rather than to design discrete objects (potentially culturally and socially irrelevant). The later books are written with America as the subject, and aim to resolve a then tense desire for relevance by theorizing an American vernacular city form as a new paradigm (these theories later become their design work). The authors aimed to supersede the seminal books that preceded their own as manifestos. Rossi’s book is written with Europe as its subject, and aims to resolve the perceived diminishing force of modernism by pointing to the vernacular qualities of European historical cities as a petri dish of examples. Rossi does not aim to supersede, but rather wants to find a way to work with both architecture as a continuous and independent body of knowledge developed over thousands of years and the political left’s project to spread equality (which of course must view historical social forms as bondage).

Rossi’s book is looking to resolve this seeming contradiction as a basis for his design work. He finds a way to satisfy himself by settling on a kind of continuation of the work of the first generation of ‘true’ modern architects. This was a generation, perhaps the final one that had a truly classical education. The relevance of this is that their work was a hybrid between the historical forms they had learnt and the raw abstraction they were looking for. In this sense Rossi was not post-modern like his contemporaries who worked with the fine plastic details and games of falsity from high classical

architectural systems. His work is primarily based on unadorned primary forms and elements, with a more archaic, more proletarian, more infrastructural quality. It recalls Piranesi’s *Antichità Romane* more than Palladianism. The results of his attempt at a resolution between architectural history and leftist politics has been adopted both consciously and unconsciously by parts of each subsequent generation: in some cases wanting to replicate the qualities of traditional city as opposed to continue the spatial experiments of post war modernism, and in some cases wishing to recall the rawness of archaic temples and ancient infrastructural wonders. Purposefully dense, architecturally direct, intellectual ambitious, the ideas Rossi set forward in *Architecture of the City* hold great power today. And yet in his book he wriggles as much as possible out of allowing one to follow his texts as a set of commandments. This is perhaps the most powerful quality of the work.

Nicholas Lobo Brennan is a founding director of APPARATA, a Zurich and London based architecture practice established in 2016. He is the joint editor of the architecture magazine Models Ruins Power. He studied architecture at the Royal College of Art and The CASS in London. He has given talks at the Venice Biennale, Delft Berlage, and EPFL amongst other places. He taught at ETH Zurich, at HEAD Geneva and the Gerrit Rietveld Academie Sandburg Institute Amsterdam.