

Politics as Choice

Pier Vittorio Aureli

THE EVOLUTION OF URBAN ARTIFACTS Politics as Choice

“Politics as choice” is the last chapter of *The Architecture of the City*, and perhaps it can be read as the summary of the entire book. What does ‘politics as choice’ mean? *Who chooses what?*

In order to answer these questions it may be useful to understand the context in which Rossi wrote the book, originally published in 1966. *The Architecture of the City* was later translated and published in English in 1982, in the heyday of post-modernism. Rossi’s iconic projects such as the Teatro del Mondo, built as floating pavilion for the 1980 Venice architecture Biennale, provided the book with captivating images and references that contributed to make it a manifesto about the ‘autonomy of architecture’. Yet the book was written in a radically different context as a polemical text within a specific debate that was important in Italy between the 1950s and 1960s.

This debate was about the issue of town planning and its effectiveness in governing the development of urban territories at the time of a strong economic growth. In that period Italy experienced a sudden economic shift that in the span of few years changed the country society from being mainly based on agriculture to increasingly relying on industry. This change had a massive impact on the Italian territory and on all aspects of social life. Large masses of people moved from the rural

south to the industrial north. New infrastructures were built such as a dense network of highways linking all the main centers of the long peninsula from north to south and from east to west. Cities were radically transformed with little concern for their rich historical heritage. With large masses of workers to be moved from rural to industrial production, the Italian government – led by the Christian Democrats with the support of the Socialist Party – embraced the welfare state. What happened in the US in the 1930s happened in Italy in the 1960s: the re-organization of the economic system by linking mass production with mass consumption.

The advent of the welfare state meant the radical industrialization of the territory far beyond the space of production towards the reform of all the aspects of social life: from housing to education from leisure to culture. It is at this point that town planning became a major concern for both politicians and architects. Until then, the Christian Democrats had maintained a weak control over urban development in order to favor the growth of the building industry as a lucrative but backyard system. Yet at the beginning of the 1960s such weak control was increasingly at odds with the pressure of industrial development. The necessity of town planning became more and more pressing, conferences were organized, books were published, and in 1962 the mi-

nister of public works launched a major urban reform that was boycotted by the same party to whom the minister belonged. The underlying assumption within all these events was that the city was no longer an *artifact*, but was an ever-changing organism in symbiosis with its surrounding region. Concepts such as city-region or city-territory were established as the new fulcrum of urban geography. Terms such as flows, links, networks, special economic zones were introduced into urban discourse for the first time.

In 1963 the Fondazione Olivetti organized a workshop to train young practitioners in town planning, lead by three of the most important architects active in Italy: Ludovico Quaroni, Edoardo Detti and Gian Carlo de Carlo. Among the participants, acting as assistants, were Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri. While the latter was at that time busy with his collective AUA (architetti urbabisti associati) in studying the new urban phenomena such as the city-territory, Rossi launched a radical critique of town planning itself. It is possible to argue that it was precisely this occasion that inspired Rossi to write his book and I believe that the last chapter condenses precisely the polemic that Rossi put forward during this seminal event.

Rossi's argument was directed against the way in which planning completely subsumed the scale of architecture as a concrete artifact, which for him was the only valid point for a project of the city. This polemic was mainly a critique towards the vague interdisciplinarity of town planning, yet it is possible to detect an implicit critique of the governance implied in planning itself. With planning the city is reduced to the managerial logic of regulations and statistics. This approach is based on the assumption that political conflict and the possibility of decision (or choice, to use Rossi's term) is replaced by scientific parameters. Within the framework of town-planning the city becomes a natural product, the culmination of pure economic forces devoid of any political decision-making. Against this logic Rossi invoked

choice as the moment that disrupts the assumption of the city as a natural product of progress. By choice Rossi means the moment of decision, the moment in which a community or an institution, by building or demolishing something, inevitably express a judgment on the city itself: "Who ultimately chooses the image of the city if not the city itself – and always and only through its political institutions."

In this statement Rossi addresses institutions as the agent who makes choices, and in this way he addresses a collective subject that is capable of political judgment. This is why Rossi is in agreement with thinkers such as Friedrich Engels, for whom the problem of the modern city was not its architecture but the political forces that produced it. Here Rossi assumed a position vis-à-vis the relationship between politics and architecture that is interestingly paradoxical. He sees architecture itself, a form, as something that alone cannot be *political*, yet he sees politics as something that in order to be tangible needs architecture.

For Rossi architecture is a concrete means through which institutions can make tangible their politics. The city in all its concreteness and tangibility becomes the reification of these politics and allow those who confront those politics to accept or refuse them.

Pier Vittorio Aureli studied at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and later at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. Aureli currently teaches at the AA School of Architecture in London and is visiting professor at Yale University. He is the author of many essays and several books, including *The Project of Autonomy* (2008) and *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (2011).