

The City as History, History as Life.

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THE INDIVIDUALITY OF URBAN ARTIFACTS,
ARCHITECTURE
The City as History

“Since the mid-eighties, Rossi’s professional activity becomes hectic. The blue notebooks record faithfully the intellectual and physical commitment required by the amount of work Rossi undergoes. In particular, those written between 1989 and 1991 contain several intimate notes (...). Their tone is not surprising, while the literary style and writing reveal haste, impatience, moments of instability and neglect. (...). These pages represent the end of an intellectual and existential cycle dating back to the beginning of Rossi’s career. In 1973 Rossi writes: ‘The last time we had dinner together in Milan one sentence struck me: the advantage to start drinking in the morning is to be subtly drunk without ever being really drunk. When I was young I thought it was important to be really out of control, a total collapse. Now I listen and stay: through a growing deafness abstraction is tinged by a sense of presence. It may be the disappointment of a brilliant man, but perhaps only the condition of an old man.’”¹

¹ Aldo Rossi to Carlo Aymonino, October 5th, 1973, Archivio Carlo Aymonino. In F. Dal Co, *Il Teatro della Vita*, pg. XVII, XVIII. In Aldo Rossi, F. Dal Co (a cura di) *I quaderni azzurri*, Mondadori Electa, Milano, 1999. Translation by the author.

² F. Dal Co, *Il Teatro della Vita*, pg. XIX. Aldo Rossi, F. Dal Co (a cura di), *I quaderni azzurri*, Mondadori Electa, Milano, 1999. Translation by the author.

Rossi won the Pritzker prize in 1990. The ceremony was held in Venice on June 16th, at Palazzo Grassi. In July, Rossi moved his milanesian office from Via Maddalena to Via S. Maria della Porta. The building, at n.9, sets directly on the baroque facade of the church of Santa Maria alla Porta designed by Francesco Maria Richini. The international notoriety grows together

with the number of contracts. The office needs a bigger and more central space. There are many things happening in Rossi’s life in those years, maybe even too many. *“The time that slips through your fingers becomes more and more rapidly the focus of the blue notebooks. (...) A melancholy that imprinted also Rossi’s physical traits, similar to those Theodor W. Adorno observed in Chaplin, ‘He entered the scene as if continuing a long walk.’”*² A drastic mutation characterizes the texts Rossi wrote during that period: there is a shift that gradually transforms Rossi’s prose through a renewed poetic trigger together with an increasing interest in death, memory, fragments, analogy as key elements of his narrative. A reverse relationship flips Rossi’s career: on one hand the interest in writing as a form of memory - being books, essays or project’s reports - keeps growing, while on the other hand there is a declining interest in architecture as an analytical and rational operation, as if Rossi increasingly permeates the *logic construction of architecture* through autobiographical or extrinsic traits. The city is no longer a juxtaposition of multiple layers sedimented through collective efforts but it becomes a set of highly personal memories, far from the structure - though chaotic - provided by the theory of urban facts contained in *The Architecture of the City*. In the introduction to the last volume that Ferlenga dedicated to his works

3 A. Rossi, *Un'oscura innocenza*. In A. Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi, architetture 1993-1996*, Opera completa vol.II, Mondadori Electa, Milano, 1996, p.9. Translation by the author.

4 A. Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, MIT Press, 1981.

5 Manfredo Tafuri a Aldo Rossi, 12 ottobre 1971, *Rossi Papers*. Translation by the author.

Rossi writes: “I omitted the great treatises for more than one reason: mainly for a certain idealism that separates them from restlessness; for a sort of self-confidence the treatises inexorably force architecture into a demiurgical process that intersects with politics: from the height of Alberti to the aggressive urbanism of Le Corbusier; they above all claim to offer an order to life.”³ Rossi reads the city through a different take in respect to his juvenile one: through *A Scientific Autobiography*⁴ he is just registering things, he is taking notes of them, basically without any propulsion, perhaps even as a farewell. A much more intimate and disenchanted position than the one proposed in the early works: ideology – or maybe idealism – leaves space to a repository of memories: private diaries programmatically written – and scripted – for the use and consumption of the reader.

A Scientific Autobiography does not present specific tools for understanding the contemporary city: nonetheless it allows to grasp some elements of the *private archive* from which Rossi constituted his late architectures. Those architectures demonstrate the interference of a private sphere on a collective dimension and the substitution of an objective and shared complexity with an autobiographical and private set of images. Rossi certainly, after his first successful book, no longer provided *instructions*. Neither for the city nor for architecture. Instead, he starts to transfer upon himself the complexity of the city by moving between the rational and the subjective, transforming urban complexity into an autobiographical narrative. The book, as well as the diaries, are instrument of memory through which it is possible to understand the relationship between the architect and his standpoints recurring throughout his careers and, above all, his life. They testify a certain irrelevance of architecture if compared to life as well as Rossi’s rightful obsession with life, which, in the end, *means much more than architecture*. The architectures produced are thus apparently empty, surely indifferent to program and function. Architectures that are reticent, desolate

and obscure. “... Your projects without objectuality, alluding to meanings which are suddenly deprived, which refuse the world, they are precisely acts of ‘private poetry’, the less mystifying the more they stay locked in their hermetic silence.”⁵ These architectures make space but do not change the space. They represent the life of the author, that is their only history.

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