

Monuments and the Theory of Permanences

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THE STRUCTURE OF URBAN ARTIFACTS
Monuments and the Theory of Permanences

“There is nothing new in all of this. Yet in attempting to formulate a theory of urban artifacts that is consistent with reality, I have benefited from highly diverse sources.”

Monuments and the Theory of Permanences concludes the first chapter of *The Architecture of The City*. Among the four chapters of the book, this is the only one in which Rossi succeeds in restraining the centrifugal tendencies of its discourse. By virtue of a great effort of synthesis, here, Rossi achieves important results.

With *Monuments and the Theory of Permanences* a particular idea of the city’s place in relation to the ordinance of time reaches its ultimate formulation. This idea sets-up the (unfulfilled) premise for a theory of the city where new and old parts – suburbs and town centers, mediocrity and monumentality – become part of a progressive and unitary plan embracing “all” the contemporary city.

With *Monuments and the Theory of Permanences*, Rossi takes distance from the simplifications of both modern utopias and postmodern nostalgias in order to explore the complexity of the contemporary city; its technical advancements as well as the memory deposited in it throughout history.

With *Monuments and the Theory of Permanences* – in accordance to what Rossi calls: “consistency with reality” – both past and future per-se are rejected as moments detached from the concrete experience of life. Yet, for the sake of a deeper understanding of the present, past may prove of particular interest.

“One must remember that the difference between past and future [...] in large measure reflects the fact that the past is partly being experienced now, and this may be the meaning to give permanences: they are a past that we are still experiencing.”

At the very same time, to the extent that it exerts passive resistance towards new forms of appropriation, the past (i.e. the monumental structure of the city) is felt by Rossi as the equivalent of a pathological condition; an obstacle to the pursuit of one’s duties and pleasures.

“In this respect, permanences present two aspects: on the one hand, they can be considered as propelling elements; on the other, as pathological elements.”

Rossi's position regarding the time of the city is problematic:

“The form of the city is always the form of a particular time of the city; but there are many times in the formulation of the city, and a city may change its face even in the course of one's man life, its original references ceasing to exist.”

However, a comparison with traditional ones can enlighten Rossi's stance. “Earlier urban thinking had placed the modern city in phased history: between a benighted past and a rosy future (the Enlightenment view) or as a betrayal of a golden past (the Romantic view).” According to Rossi “[...] by contrast, the city [has] no structured temporal locus between past and future, but rather a temporal quality. The modern city offer[s] an eternal hic et nunc, whose content [is] transience, but whose transience [is] permanent. The city present[s] a succession of variegated, fleeting moments, each to be savoured in its passage from nonexistence to oblivion.”¹ According to Rossi, the present is not simply the point of transition between past and future, but rather the point of convergence of multiple pasts and possible futures. Therefore, it cannot be judged in terms of “progress” or “decadence”. In this context monuments play a particular role, as the formal infrastructure allowing for the permanence, as well as the sudden reappearance of a collective sacred memory within the otherwise profane character of modern civilization. Suspended in a state of eternal present, according to Rossi, monuments mediate between permanence and change, past and future, playing both a conservative and a propelling role.

“I mainly want to establish [...] that the dynamic process of the city tends more to evolution than preservation, and that in evolution monuments are not only preserved but continuously presented as propelling elements of development.”

Rossi's theory of permanences brings together two conflicting concepts of the city's evolution. A positive idea of the city as progress inherited from authors like Voltaire, Fichte and Mumford – the city as the culture-forming agent par excellence; the site as well as the symbol of civilization – is blended with the fatalism of a concept of the city as *destiny* – the city as “[...] a collective fatality which could know only personal solutions, not social ones.”² – influenced by the *kulturpessimismus* of Burckhardt, Spengler and Beaudelaire.

As distant as it is affected by both utopia and nostalgia, the ambiguous stance toward one's own time outlined by *Monuments and the Theory of Permanences* is a difficult whole seeking a tricky reconciliation of opposites. Nevertheless, Rossi's idea of “consistency with reality” is not only the main achievement of *The Architecture of the City*. Also, it is still a realistic work hypothesis.

Ganko produces architecture. Ganko was established in 2011 by Guido Tesio (1984) and Nicola Munaretto (1984) following previous experiences with Baukuh (Milan) and OFFICE kgdvs (Brussels). After three years spent between Milan and Beijing, in 2014 Ganko has relocated to Basel and Lausanne, Switzerland. In 2013 Ganko was invited to contribute to the book “Pure Hardcore Icons: A Manifesto for Pure Form in Architecture” edited by WAI Think Tank for Artifice Books, London. Since 2014 Ganko has been guest editor for the catalogues of Beijing-based art gallery Intelligentsia. Recent works by Ganko have been featured in Domusweb, StudioMagazine and SanRocco.

¹ Schorske, E. Carl, “The Idea of the City in European Thought: Voltaire to Spengler”, in Burchard, John E., Handlin, Oscar, eds., *The Historian and the City*, Cambridge, Mass., 1963, p. 109. In the original text Schorske is referring to Charles Beaudelaire. The French poet is a fundamental reference for Rossi's theory and is explicitly quoted at the end of the paragraph.

² Schorske, E. Carl, p.111. In this case Schorske is referring to the conception of the city of the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke.