Aldo Rossi in Berlin,
or Form Through the Presence (and Absence) of Memory

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Introduction

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 came swift political and governmental changes. Amid the massive transformation this monumental event brought, one seemingly minor ripple was the cancellation of Aldo Rossi's competition-winning design for the German History Museum (Deutsches Historisches Museum). Originally, the museum, which had been proposed in then-West Berlin, demanded certain questions be asked of its program and architecture. Following the reunification of Germany, these inquiries of the building's type and architect would prove too much for a sensitive, newly reunited German people. The result was that the Federal Chancellery would occupy the Museum's proposed site, near the Reichstag, and the German History Museum would instead be housed in the old armory of Berlin, expanded by an addition by I.M. Pei in 2003.\footnote{Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, n.d.}

As a building which would focus on history and memory in a country at odds with its past, the German History Museum seemed to confirm architectural form's inability to shed its political baggage. Aldo Rossi, however, certainly tried to make it do so.

Rossi was an architect whose work was particularly known for making physical the history of a place. The memory of a building's city was paramount to Rossi, typically making him an ideal candidate to design a museum. The difficulty in Berlin, however, was Rossi's perceived ambition to force recollection in a city which was trying to forget. The dilemma was twofold: the history and events of Berlin's recent past were ready to be hastily disposed of by the general populous, while the city was in need of reconstruction and reintegration of Berliners' urban fabric. Critics questioned whether architecture could
simultaneously present, and edit history along with its politics, eventually deciding it could not after Germany's reunification.

Rossi, however, in designing the museum had shown that architecture could indeed do just that. He did not consider architectural forms bound to their immediate meanings or histories, even their traditional typological associations. Rossi himself stated in regards to his design:

$$\text{Does our project seek to offer a picture of German history? No, that is certainly not possible even today. The ability to synthesize in our time is lost; we can at best offer fragments of life, fragments of history, building fragments.}$$

The fragment, the whole building read in discrete parts, was the direction Rossi was working toward during this point in his career. This was fitting to both the project and its context and will be addressed in detail in this essay. More importantly, the historical fragment, the ability to disassociate form and meaning while still creating memory, is what concerns us in Berlin. It is another project by Rossi which will prove this case: the Centro Torri in Parma, Italy, a supermarket/department store designed in 1985 and completed in 1988.

The German History Museum and Centro Torri in dialogue will be used to show both Rossi's relationship with Berlin and the greater architectural ambitions of his work. The following presents comparisons between these projects with regards to memory, formal meaning, and an architecture's possibility to remain complete while removed from its city. The hope is these analyses will direct a focus and

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2 (Rossi, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1989, p. 15)
establish a clear understanding as to how the constituent parts of Rossi's architecture operate, and possible readings of the projects as wholes.

The City and the Collective

One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the locus of the collective memory.

- Aldo Rossi

The construction of collective memory championed by Rossi challenges both the identity of the architectural subject and the scope of what is considered the locus. While seemingly reaffirming the collective subject of Modernism and directing focus to the genius loci of a particular place, we can understand from The Architecture of the City that he is in fact considering an expanded view of each. Rossi gives us this analogy:

Let us consider for a moment the space of the Catholic religion. Since the Church is indivisible this space covers the whole earth. In such a universe the concept of the individual location becomes secondary, as does that of the boundary or frontier.

By considering the immediate subject and physical context, as well as understanding a broader view of both in a globalized society, Rossi in his work builds up a concept of collective memory as an assemblage of parts. In the case of the German History Museum these selective fragments

\[3\] (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 130)
\[4\] (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 103)

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of history begin with an oak tree planted in the bounded garden, symbolizing the beginning of Germanic culture.\textsuperscript{5} Expanding from this point, Rossi invokes more symbols of German history through the use of traditional striped brick, white stone, and Miesian glass partitions, while referencing Schinkel’s Altes Museum with the colonnades along Paul Lobe Strasse and Moltkestrasse and the use of a rotunda. The cylinder and colonnaded volumes are two of three parts comprising the museum’s assembly of forms. The final fragment, a gabled glass atrium with adjoining wings would house all the exhibition space.

The more universal symbolism of these forms will be discussed in the next section, but for now, we look at Rossi’s local reactions to the metropolis. In his 1977 essay entitled The Third Typology, Anthony Vidler characterizes those championing what he sees as an emerging new typology as:

\textquote{...the professional servants of urban life, [who]
direct their design skills to solving the questions of avenue, arcade, street and square, park and house, institution and equipment in a continuous typology of elements that together coheres with past fabric and present intervention to make one comprehensible experience of the city.\textsuperscript{6}}

In the German History Museum, Rossi does just that. The cylinder establishes an interface with the city, the colonnades create a street presence along the avenues, and the grand atrium alludes to the repetition of a Medieval street wall with its many gabled volumes directed toward the city.\textsuperscript{7} In what may seem a convoluted assemblage of

\textsuperscript{5} (Rossi, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1989, p. 17)  
\textsuperscript{6} (Vidler, 1977, p. 4)  
\textsuperscript{7} (Rossi, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1989, p. 15)
disparate types we see Rossi's interest in "an increasing rarefaction of parts in favor of more complex compositional methods."

Although this method may seem piecemeal or episodic, Aldo Rossi's contemporaries aid in the reading of such groupings. In Complexity and Contradiction, published in the same year as The Architecture of the City, Robert Venturi advocates such intricacies as capable of acknowledging "expressive discontinuity." In what he calls the "difficult whole," Venturi praises the ability of architects throughout history who were able to fully understand the nature of each part in architectural form to create a cohesive composition. The complexity created by such a part-to-whole relationship, for Venturi resulted in a greater final product compared to a "simple" architecture.

Rossi's geometries do not emphasize dislocation, but rather a Venturian notion of "implied continuity." In the German History Museum, the cylinder serves as a node or hinge point from which all other spaces radiate, organizing both circulation and volume. The most complex component, the atrium, creates an axis upon which the other subordinate structures attach. This organization is also seen earlier in the Centro Torri, with solid volumes congregating around a central, linear atrium. The central atrium, which is extremely similar to the main space of the German History Museum, is flanked by towers bearing "Centro Torri" labels. Rossi explains these towers are in the tradition of Italian public buildings whose names appear on their end-walls.

8 (Rossi, An Analogical Architecture, 1996, p. 349)
9 (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1966, p. 98)
10 (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1966, p. 88)
11 (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1966, p. 98)
12 (Adjmi, 1991, p. 128)
The relationship between the parts is clear, hierarchical, and intentional, orchestrating the way one circulates through and understands both the museum and shopping center.

We begin to see in these projects both a dexterity with the fragment and the distancing of local politics from the architectural forms. Venturi repeatedly speaks highly of the "fragment" in terms of architectural shape, but this becomes problematic for Rossi due to historical associations. As Vidler notes in *The Third Typology*: "The fragmentation and re-composition of [architecture's] spatial and institutional forms...can never be separated from the political implications."\(^{13}\) The integrity of political references in the forms Rossi employs, however, is further interrogated by the Centro Torri. Rossi's repeated use of the same form in different locales erases any associated political meaning the architecture might carry with it.

The juxtaposition of parts in both the shopping center and the German History Museum, and the layered elevations they create, are immediately in dialogue with two conceptual projects, Rossi's *Analogical City* and O.M. Ungers' *Green Archipelago* drawing of Berlin. Rossi's ambition to locate architectural fragments adjacent to one another, however, creates neither a dispersal of architectural samples, as in the case of Ungers, nor a collage, but a unique reconfiguration. This produces a more amplified composition beyond the manner in which Pier Vittorio Aureli describes Ungers' archipelago in *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*: "...a condition where parts are separated yet united by the common ground of their juxtaposition."\(^{14}\)

Further than simply being juxtaposed, Rossi creates a synergy and interdependence between the various fragments.

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\(^{13}\) (Vidler, 1977, p. 3)
\(^{14}\) (Aureli, 2011, p. xi)
Form and Meaning

In Peter Eisenman's introduction to The Architecture of the City, he describes Rossi's work as embodying:

Both the idea of the end of history, when a form no longer embodies its original function, and the passing of type from the realm of history into that of memory [which leads] Rossi to his internalized, analogous design process.15

These defunct forms, remnants left over from their previous historical end, are the figures which Rossi sees as ripe for typological re-appropriation. When reinstating these types of conditions, however, Rossi does not use the original forms verbatim. He rather subjects the architecture to interrogation and transformation to achieve a new, albeit reminiscent, formal expression of the idea. To return once again to Vidler's text, in speaking of neo-Rational work such as Rossi's he characterizes these types of operations as producing, "entirely new entities that draw their communicative power and potential critical force from the understanding of this transformation."16

The question then becomes, what do Rossi's museum and shopping center communicate? Undoubtedly, memory cannot be induced from those interacting with the architecture if the collective is not adequately provoked. In the words of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in Learning from Las Vegas:

complex programs and settings require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service

15 (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 8)
16 (Vidler, 1977, p. 3)
of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.  

As their argument develops, the Venturi's propose that buildings themselves can become signs, or "ducks." As Rossi demonstrates, building fragments can be ducks as well. Rossi's ducks, set side by side, comprise the realization of his *Analogical City*, articulated both as dependant wholes and distinguishable layers to be read more closely. The readings and meanings of Rossi's fragments can generally be understood in two categories, those of local memory and expanded (or universal*) memory.

To begin with universal memory, these references in Rossi's work deal with forms that transcend any one culture so that they become relevant in multiple contexts. This also relates to an understanding of "type" versus "model" developed in *The Architecture of the City*. Type, Rossi argues, is mobile—it is emblematic of a way of life, but its form varies across societies. The model, on the other hand, is a specific iteration of a type. Rossi is interested in creating models because the interpretation or instantiation of the type allows for the departure from implicit meanings to new and universal communication of form:

[Quatremère de Quincy] rejects the possibility of type as something to be imitated or copied because in this case there would be...no "creation

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17 (Venturi, Scott Brown, & Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, 1977, p. 9)  
* "Universal" here is used only to distinguish from "local" memory. Rossi's projects of course still fall within a Western cultural context, and it is this greater sphere of social relevance that the word "universal" is standing in for.  
18 (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 40)  
19 (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 40)
of the model"—that is, there would be no making of architecture.\textsuperscript{20}

His refusal to use form as a direct copy is an important distinction with separates Rossi's work from, for example, Sterling Memorial Library at Yale, and also gives his architecture greater agility in terms of the readings and effects he is able to create.

We see this typological migration in the nearly identical extruded pitch-roof glass atriums of both the German History Museum and Centro Torri. These models are characterized by Rossi as cathedrals, and certainly evoke the memory of a nave without his explanation.\textsuperscript{21} However, the "end of history" which Eisenman alluded to signals the conclusion of the nave's primacy as a societal reading of the form, allowing it to be transferred to other uses free from the religious implications. Indeed, the museum is often referred to as the contemporary cathedral, but Rossi also rejects such a one-to-one reattribution of a form to a specific type by using the nave in the Centro Torri also.

The nave, however, is not used arbitrarily or without any meaning. As Vidler cautions, "The original sense of the form, the layers of accrued implication deposited by time and human experience cannot be lightly brushed away."\textsuperscript{22}

Rossi's nave maintains a certain sense of "sacred" social space, delineating the centrality and importance of the atriums in both the museum and market projects. The atriums are also symbolic of the commune, the space which brings together the city. In both buildings, although their time periods have "released architecture from the role of 'social book' into its specialized domain," Rossi is able

\textsuperscript{20} (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 40)
\textsuperscript{21} (Rossi, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1989, p. 15)
\textsuperscript{22} (Vidler, 1977, p. 3)
to maintain the essential operative elements of the type while creating two unique models, simultaneously retaining and disassociating form and meaning.\(^{23}\)

Complementing these formal elements which can be universally understood, Rossi also employs local memory in order to establish an identity with the city. This dichotomy, in fact, is necessary for Vidler's third typology to exist:

> We might characterize the fundamental attribute of this third typology as an espousal of the traditional city as the locus of its concern. The city, that is, provides the material for classification, and the forms of its artifacts provide the basis for re-composition.\(^{24}\)

In this regard, the towers in Centro Torri and the facades along the atrium in the German History Museum constitute the artifacts or local fragments for these projects. These formalizations are purely urban interventions. The Italian towers and Germanic street elevations are symbolic and iconic, establishing with the city and its inhabitants an identity and collective local memory. While site specific, they transcend a certain temporal moment, "emptied of specific social content from any particular time and allowed to speak simply of [their] own formal condition."\(^{25}\) The image of these forms intercedes with the urban environment in such a way that the architecture as an object directly fulfills Rossi's provocations in *The Architecture of the City*.

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\(^{23}\) (Vidler, 1977, p. 2)

\(^{24}\) (Vidler, 1977, p. 1)

\(^{25}\) (Vidler, 1977, p. 2)
In the course of history, certain architects have articulated the autonomy of form through a radical and systematic confrontation with the city in which they have operated.²⁶

Interestingly for an architect so strongly tied to urbanism and architecture's contribution to it, Rossi's work is simultaneously removed from the city. His use of form and typological reference at will, in multiple locations, and for multiple programs disassociates "building" and "place" to a certain degree. This encapsulates his architecture as something whole, apart from its city. It is precisely this characteristic of architecture that Pier Vittorio Aureli argues for in *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. In his book, Aureli sets forth four projects as examples of achieving the "absolute," that is, an architecture which when separated from its "other," i.e. the city, it remains in essence whole. He argues that architecture which does this reveals the essential nature of both itself and its city. I would suggest Rossi's work to also be "absolute."

Similar to Rossi, Aureli describes Mies van der Rohe's later work as having "absorbed the reifying forces of urbanization, but presented them not as ubiquitous but as finite, clearly separated parts."²⁷ He gives the example of the Seagram Building, so complete as an architecture that it is able to be removed from its New York City context and re-manifested, equally complete, in Toronto in the form of the Toronto-Dominion Centre. The same comparison, of course, could be made for the German History Museum and Centro Torri. Vidler asserts:

²⁶ (Aureli, 2011, p. ix)
²⁷ (Aureli, 2011, p. xi)
No longer is architecture a realm that has to relate to a hypothesized 'society' in order to be conceived and understood; no longer does 'architecture write history' in the sense of particularizing a specific social condition in a specific time or place. The need to speak of function, of social mores—of anything, that is, beyond the nature of architecture form itself—is removed.  

What makes this operation even more rich in terms of Rossi, however, is by his projects' nature of being so complete as to be "absolute," that they are able to shed the politics and typologies of their constituent fragments and forms. In *The Architecture of the City*, Eisenman again notes that, "For Rossi, architecture's history lies in its material; and it is this material which becomes the object of analysis—the city." If Rossi's architecture was not absolute, when his architectural forms were separated from their city, thus separated from their material and history, the fragments would not be able to be reconstituted in as powerful and complete a manner as is the case of the nave in Centro Torri and the German History Museum.

As stated previously, Aureli uses Ungers' Green Archipelago as an example of the absolute in Berlin:

Ungers saw Berlin in its most critical form—a divided city composed of irreducibly divergent parts and, because of the uncertainty of its reconstruction, in a state of permanent incompletion.  

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28 (Vidler, 1977, p. 2)
29 (Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 1984, p. 5)
30 (Aureli, 2011, p. 191)
With Aldo Rossi's work as a reference, however, we can see that these parts may indeed be irreducible, but not necessarily divergent. In fact, the great genius of Rossi is to not admit defeat to Venturi's "difficult whole." Instead, he questions and understands the fragments he employs sufficiently to be able to create an architecture which functions on the multiple and varied levels which have been acknowledged.

Aureli sees Unger's architecture as facing off with a difficult city, eventually asserting its legitimacy through its surviving the encounter:

"Berlin as a Green Archipelago postulates a city form that, in order to be defined, required confrontation with its opposite—urbanization—and with the city's most controversial aspects, such as division, conflict, and even destruction...in this sense, architecture is not only a physical object; architecture is also what survives the idea of the city."^31

Rossi's architecture, in a sense, endures an even more grueling test, surviving not only multiple cities on the exterior, but typological reconfiguration on the inside. In doing so, the German History Museum not only survives the idea of the city, but also creates the idea of the city within its own walls.

^31 (Aureli, 2011, pp. 226-227)
Conclusion

In the Fall 2010 issue of PLAT Journal, Matthew Austin somewhat cryptically presents three "sites" and two "actions" in an article entitled *Kudzu: The Plant that Ate Berlin*. Site one, which explains the introduction of the invasive Japanese Kudzu plant in the American South by way of the 1876 World’s Fair in Philadelphia, leads to two other sites in the present-day: a post office in Alabama and the former Iraqi embassy in Berlin. The embassy exists in a "diplomatic void," a no-man's-land reminiscent of that formed by the Berlin Wall, a site which both governments are equally unwilling to take responsibility for.\(^{32}\)

Two actions take place: in the first, a package containing kudzu is sent to Berlin; in the second, the plant is placed inside the embassy. The catalyst for urban intervention in this instance is an unexpected one, filling in for what architecture is unable to do. The case of Berlin is unique in that its inherent and latent tensions continuously invite radical ideas of intervention and of the city. Rossi’s combination, juxtaposition, and resolution of universal and local memory may be the most radical of all.

\(^{32}\) (Austin, 2010, p. 144)
Bibliography


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Images

14. Original image.