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## THE EXALTED RATIONALISM OF ALDO ROSSI

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### EGZALTOWANY RACJONALIZM ALDO ROSSIEGO

#### Abstract

Aldo Rossi always thought, wrote and worked inside two antithetical terms: rationality and exaltation. Two terms that seem to refer to two incompatible ways of knowing reality. Instead, A. R. conducted his research by comprising, in a single thought, rationality and exaltation.

*Keywords: Aldo Rossi, Exalted Rationalism*

#### Streszczenie

Aldo Rossi zawsze myślał, pisał i pracował w obrębie dwóch przeciwstawnych kategorii: racjonalności i egzaltacji. Te dwa pojęcia zdają się odnosić do dwóch niekompatybilnych sposobów poznawania rzeczywistości. Jednak Aldo Rossi prowadził swoje badania, skupiając racjonalność i egzaltację w jednej myśli.

*Słowa kluczowe: Aldo Rossi, ekstatyczny racjonalizm*

*Logical thought is expressed in words and aimed outward as discourse. Analogical thought, imagined and mute, is not discourse but instead a mediation regarding a material of the past...*

A. R. *La Architettura Analoga* in: *2C Construcción de la Ciudad* no. 2, April 1975

Aldo Rossi always thought, wrote and worked inside two antithetical terms: rationality and exaltation. Two terms that seem to refer to two incompatible ways of knowing reality. Instead, A. R. conducted his research by comprising, in a single thought, rationality and exaltation.

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In his two fundamental works, *The Architecture of the City* and *A Scientific Autobiography*, published fifteen years apart (1966–1981), we can recognize a procedure that starts with systematic knowledge of the city, of its composition in parts and elements, and then grafts onto this knowledge a thought composed of memories, associations and analogies, in keeping with an artistic method.

A procedure that is the sum of two halves: the first belonging to logical thought that sets the objective of certain knowledge and the second, opposite, entirely bent on proposing hypotheses that can only be tested a posteriori, hypotheses entrusted to the work and recognizable only after the work is finished.

On the one hand a solid rational base, then, a reality that has taken form in history, with its connections with anthropology and geography, which involves knowledge of the city as the work of man par excellence. On the other, a fertile thought that seeks the essential aspects of this reality, at a depth that cannot be reached except through an act of exaltation of meanings on the part of the person operating.

A. R.'s city is simultaneously the city of all citizens and the city of an artist who from the first, which he knows very well in all its aspects, takes what fascinates him, what serves him most to represent its values.

I have always associated this thought with the thought of Herman Melville, an author very dear to me and one often quoted by Aldo Rossi, on the difference between the whales pursued and killed in the hunt, systematically described and classified in an extraordinary catalogue of cetology, and the white whale, always pursued but never killed, always before the eyes of Captain Ahab as a delirious need to make it his, to kill it in order to know it.

Two worlds held together though they are so different, that intertwine to form the work of this extraordinary writer. To live only in one or only in the other of these worlds would have been impossible for Melville, as it was for Rossi.

Architecture for A. R. is the thing always sought, always there before his eyes like a beloved whose true identity is never known, but only what it represents for us. For Rossi it is the tendency toward architecture, the will or the desire for architecture, that leads to the exaltation of what lies at the base of architecture. A thing we know how to describe but whose true nature we can never know.

These two worlds, then, the rationally known real world and the ideal world imagined through the exaltation of its meanings, markedly intertwine in the work of A. R. and can be studied through those two books that A. R. himself encourages us to read in succession, or even by summing their pages, as he puts it, transforming them into a single work that, at least in part, explains his architecture.

Research utterly misunderstood by those who, stopping with the first work, have perceived only the rule of history there. Research that is instead so skewed toward the imaginary, so surprisingly new, though working with the materials of antiquity. So impossible to imitate.

Research that makes us think of Andrea Palladio, of his systematic analysis of the buildings of antiquity and his obsessive manipulation of the temple, used in all the forms of contamination: on high bases or overlaid on another temple, penetrating it to reinforce its form. As if to say that there are no other possible forms.

That “great master”, Rossi says, who is able to hold together “the meaning of nature, the meaning of the construction and a restlessness that leans toward the ancient and the future”.

*There was a precipice of ten metres in the highest point in the room.*

This phrase, which A. R. heard by chance in a *trattoria* in Milan, contains a paradox worthy of Kafka. A contradiction between a precise, measurable world and a sensation of fear prompted by a highly improbable situation. Beyond the paradox, this is the condition of every artist who entrusts his emotions with a reality that can be described and measured throughout its expanse, a reality that through its measures restores all those emotions to us.

It is the condition of architecture according to Loos, realized in the relationship between the burial mound, described and measured, three by six feet, and the emotion these measurements provoke in us. A concrete datum like a dimensional ratio produces in us a feeling that would otherwise be impossible. That onset of dusk before the burial mound of Loos is connected with its proportions.

The precipice was seen by A. R. in his youth, and he remained fascinated by it. The buildings destroyed by war displayed, outside, what remained of their insides, hung on the walls in an utterly improbable way.

It is the abandoned, even ruined house, in which everything is still, suspended in space and time. It is what remains of the house.

Like theatre without the performance, like the arrangement of objects on a table after a meal, that table of which Le Corbusier speaks, which Rossi drew many times.

This condition of knowing the house, the theatre, etc., through what remains of the house, of the theatre, of the table after use, is the condition that exalts the meaning of things.

What remains, after use, is the form. A form that is paradoxically full of life, in spite of life's absence. Only the traces remain. That life which during its unfolding even seems to deplete, or at least attenuate, value from the forms in which it dwells, only to exalt it, making it recognizable, in the moment in which life is removed.

But how can we reconcile these thoughts with the idea of construction?

Is it possible to reconcile the passion for blasted houses, in which life or at least its traces remain in the few relics still hanging on the walls, with the knowledge of the house through all the houses classified in a rigorous typological analysis? How can we reconcile the passion for ruins with the passion shared with the architects of the Enlightenment who designed the places of the new bourgeois city seeking forms that would respond to an idea of civilization?

A. R. approaches this theme by crossing the work of his masters. They include Boullée and Schinkel, Loos and Mies, Rogers and Gardella, who each in his time traced an indelible furrow with the culture of utility. All six, though in different eras, had to come to grips with this culture. A culture that was dominant in the years in which Rossi conducted his research.

Just consider Boullée's definition of architecture, the reversal of that of Vitruvius, *who takes the effect for the cause*, Boullée says, and then continues: *our fathers built their cabins after having created their image*.

Boullée had to come to terms with Laugier and the theory of the primitive hut, while Schinkel had to cope with the neoclassical academy, re-establishing the act of construction, decreeing the end of the classical orders but without losing the evocative quality of construction. Likewise Loos, perhaps his most important master, the one who set Rossi on the path he



Ill. 1. Aldo Rossi, Gianni Braghieri San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena, 1971–1978 (Photograph Stefano Topuntoli)

was never to abandon, asserts that architecture is monuments alone, which are not important for their utility but for the evocative quality of their forms. Finally, Rogers and Gardella, who once again have to take architecture outside the Italian rationalist slogans on the form-function relationship.

For these six giants Rossi loved to spend time with, the functions of our life are not the object of the pursuit of responding forms; the functions are only a contingent, particular aspect of the deeper meaning of human experience.

It is the difference established between purposefulness and purpose in the definition of beauty of Kant, perhaps the greatest of the philosophers of reason: *Beauty is the form of the purposefulness of an object, so far as this is perceived without any representation of a purpose*". The purposefulness has a general value, the purpose is a particular thing. The purpose takes part in the definition of the purposefulness, but it does not coincide with it. The latter is always wider, more general.

The purposefulness of the library of Boullée encompasses the value of the books and what they represent for us; the purpose is more simply linked to their use. Like Loos's mound, whose value does is not based on its practical function (its purpose), but only on its evocative purposefulness.

We can also find this difference (between purposefulness and purpose) in the great buildings of history, discovering that architecture is accomplished and passed down only when it is capable of evoking its purposefulness, that general value that even when the function changes

still remains over time. The construction of architecture is the enactment of this general value that is harboured in the stones, to be passed down in time.

Ignazio Gardella, in the few lines written to accompany the interview he granted me a number of years ago, clarifies this point, saying that he thanks me for having given him the opportunity to narrate the motivations behind his buildings that would otherwise have remained concealed, as he puts it, in the stones of his constructions.

So inside the stones of the construction lies the motivation of the construction itself, and if the stones do not reveal it, it remains hidden inside them. But when the construction sets itself the objective of revealing that motivation, of revealing its meaning, it appears and makes itself recognizable.

One extraordinary example is the project for the theatre of Vicenza by Gardella, a very beautiful project that is always cited by A. R., a project on a par with the great 20th-century masterpieces, constructed not only for the functioning of the theatre, which painters and carpenters can set up case by case, according to varying needs, but around an idea of the theatre entrusted to the form of the enclosure, which is always capable of evoking the theatrical nature of the place, even when the theatrical action is absent and the stage is not furnished as a set.

A. R. wrote one of the most beautiful pages on Ignazio Gardella, in which he positions his older friend in a wider context of masters who have been able to take modern architecture beyond functionalism without betraying the essential component of architecture, which is the precision of the craft with respect to the objectives it sets out to accomplish. First of all, that of the pursuit of the *right form, above and beyond any manifesto or program*.

The project for the theatre of Vicenza is the design of a large hall in which the ritual of reflex can be enacted in the widest range of different ways. It reminds us of other very beautiful halls, those of Mies, places that evoke an idea of community, in which different functions unfold in time.

Ernesto Rogers, who was the first true mentor of A. R., is the main representative of this idea of craft that goes beyond its technical tools. The craft of the architect is based on the expertise of a builder who channels his technical knowledge into a higher purposefulness, towards the construction of a viewpoint on our life and the world. It will suffice to read *Experience of Architecture* by Ernesto Rogers to understand the vastness of our discipline and the necessary precision of its tools.

I say this yet again because this viewpoint on our profession is getting lost or has perhaps already been lost, pushed aside by the production of forms that are utterly extraneous to what they construct, or extreme exercises of technological virtuosity.

All of Rogers's teaching, all his writings and projects, contain this message: architecture is the translation, in the stones of the construction, of our experience of the world. Only in this way can it be of interest to us, only in this case can it deserve the passion necessary for construction.

So the term construction widens. From construction as a technical factor it becomes construction of the world that relies on technical precision to be transformed into real construction, lasting and capable of making its reason for being explicit through its forms.

Those who interpret A. R. outside a strong rational framework cannot understand the didactic scope of his thought, which instead is very strong.

In his writings A. R. always returns to the term rationality, in the two senses mentioned above – the rationality of descriptive systems and the rationality of inductive reasoning – recognizing the importance of subjective experience that leads to the extreme or, we might say, exalts the question of the meaning each of us recognizes in things.

Together with Carlo Aymonino, Guido Canella, Gianugo Polesello and Luciano Semerani, A. R. belongs to the generation after that of Rogers, and his contribution consists in considering the city as a context of architecture and urban studies as a necessary premise for studies on architecture. This close link between architecture and city (previously examined by Saverio Muratori and Giuseppe Samonà) positions architecture in its context and allows us to see it in a new light that expands its meaning, both with respect to the space in which it is positioned and the relationships it establishes with that space, and with respect to the time measured by the phases of construction of the city and its parts. From this moment on, architectural studies are no longer just studies of individual buildings, prevalently reduced to questions of language, but studies that focus on the relationships between architecture and what Rossi repeatedly calls “urban facts”.

In the introduction to his text *The Architecture of the City* Rossi clarifies this point with two fundamental observations. The first has to do with the question of form. What interests A. R. about the city is the form, to the extent that it is the “form of the society that produces it, that is deeply ingrained in it”.

The second observation, which pervades not only the whole book but also all the work of A. R., is that the form of the city is seen as *the fixed setting of the experiences of man, charged with emotions of entire generations, public events, private tragedies, new and ancient facts*.

This close link between the form of the city and the experiences of human beings that live in it is what sets this extraordinary text apart from other urban studies of that period.

The city takes on the culture that produces it in time and reflects it through its form.

We can understand that doing an architectural project with this awareness is profoundly different from doing it only on the basis of factors of technique or of language, which have to do with each individual building.

Aldo Rossi thus ushers in, first in Milan and Venice, and then immediately in other schools of architecture in the world, the period of urban studies, of urban analysis, as it was termed at the time, as a necessary premise of the architectural project. A positive thought inherited from the natural sciences, which lay the groundwork of any hypothesis using a careful, systematic analysis of phenomena. The city as the work of man, in the end, can be considered a work of nature, and this is the perspective in which it should be analysed.

*The exercise of any imagination requires a rigid surface*, Aldo Rossi says, clarifying the meaning of the necessity of analytical studies.

Reading *The Architecture of the City*, one of the most beautiful and instructive passages is undoubtedly the one on Athens, at the end of the third chapter. The intense pages on Athens take us outside the world of classifications.

Athens is a city constructed on the myth of nature. It is a city without walls, different from the ancient cities of the Orient and the Roman cities, because it is not built inside a fortification but constructed from the inside outward.

Its constituent principle is that of transfer of the myth of nature into the stones of its monuments. In this way, the myth is fixed and can last in time.

It is said that the ancients transferred, in columns of wood or stone, the spirit of the trees, precisely to make it last in time, to go beyond the life of the trees. This legend confirms the description of Vitruvius of the origin of the column.

The Acropolis of Athens, when it was built, dominated the nature around it, that extraordinary set of forests and highlands, with the sea on the horizon. Its Temple set the focal point of a system of relations open to the natural landscape. The walls of Athens were built later, not at the beginning. At its origin there was no practical principle of defence, but the myth of nature.

The timeliness of this thinking is evident: the alternative between the closed city and the open city is already there in antiquity, in the two models of the walled city and the city constructed on the relationships between its monumental centres, residential areas and nature.

But there is more. The pages on Athens also clarify the constituent principle of architecture, which for A. R. cannot be a principle of necessity that can be satisfied in a thousand different forms, but must be a value, a collective value, recognizable in the forms of the architecture, that make it stable and lasting.

It is that passage from the function to the value I have talked about when speaking of Mies, that passage that has produced the profound difference between the temple and the hut.

So in our time, the myth of the ancients is replaced by a value, a cultural value shared by a community.

As I was saying, this discussion reaches its apex in the Enlightenment, the historical moment most thoroughly studied by A. R., a period in which very different viewpoints faced off: that of Laugier, that of Milizia, that of Boullée.

Through Boullée A. R. confirms, even more deeply, his idea of architecture and its relationship with myth. As if a “spirit in things” existed, that should be recognized and transferred, or translated, as Rogers would say, into the forms of architecture.

For Boullée it is the myth of nature and the emotions nature stimulates in those who are sensitive to its forms. For Boullée the relationship between architectural forms and the emotions they call forth is similar to the relationship established between emotions and natural forms.

Through architecture this relationship is renewed, every time it takes constructed form, and in this way the myth is renewed as well.

Boullée thinks that a deep value is hidden in every building, a constituent value that is the reason the building was constructed, a value that has to be transferred into its forms.

Rossi sees a new rationalism in this procedure, which he calls exalted rationalism, as opposed to a conventional rationalism that, instead, belongs to the natural sciences.

Exalted rationalism allows us to recognize the *emotional nucleus of the work* and to make it evident as a value that belongs to our culture.

Exaltation not as an anomalous state of reason, then, but as an aptitude of reason to recognize what lies at the basis of architecture, that nucleus that provokes an emotion in us only when it is recognized.

A. R. writes the *Introduction to Boullée* immediately after writing *The Architecture of the City* and the beautiful pages on Athens, immediately after having described the context of architecture, its scope that includes much of knowledge, and before, just before, making

his most important projects. During his work Rossi keeps a diary, the very beautiful *Blue Notebooks*, where writings and drawings alternate and combine, bearing witness to ongoing thought about architecture and his projects, often reworkings of previous projects or of buildings seen in other times and other places.

Through his interminable monologue, Rossi shows us the importance of his experience, of the memories and sensations provoked by things seen and people met, in pursuit of the meaning of the buildings of history or those he is designing, which often blend into a single form.

His masters are always present in the diary. All his masters address the problem of the emotional nucleus of the work. They all know that the problem lies in knowing how to recognize that nucleus as a value belonging to our life, and how to find the responding forms capable of safeguarding that nucleus and displaying it at the same time.

Architecture is simply this, *the house of life or the house of death*, which for A. R. are the same thing. The architecture of the house makes what remains of the house after its use shine through. It makes its purposefulness shine only after its purpose has been fulfilled.

A. R. seems to be obsessed with the transiency of things, of all things, of buildings as of life. Perhaps it is precisely this obsession that leads him to focus on what remains after they are consumed.

The project for the “Casa dello studente” in Chieti is a true urban allegory.

On a slope of the hills of Chieti, the house of the single student and the house of the community of students are distinguished above all for their size. A small house constructed with the elements belonging to its definition. A small volume with a double-pitched roof that forms a tympanum below which there are a door and a window. A building very similar to the cabins seen at Elba by Rossi in his youth, and obsessively drawn in time. An archetypal form of the cabin-house, repeated around a large luminous house, still with a double-pitched roof, this time in iron and glass, precisely like the one by Berlage in the Bourse of Amsterdam so often mentioned by A. R., lighting up a large community space. It is clear that these two types, in the forms and dimensions of the drawings, are not very practical. They are without a function or an immediate purpose, as we said, yet the purposefulness of the forms is very evident. It is clear that the vocation of those forms is to represent the house and the city. This, in my view, is one of the most emblematic projects of the work of A. R., precisely due to its explicit intention to stage the identity of buildings, beyond their particular function.

But the theme that recurs in Rossi’s discussions and drawings is that of the theatre. Theatre in the widest sense of the term: *the fixed stage of human events (...) because without experience there is no theatre, there is no architecture.*

The point is knowledge of human experience, which allows us to construct what represents it, what puts it on stage.

It is at this point that architects are divided: those who invent the experience, making it the expression of a personal episode that is imposed, at times with violence, on the community; and those who reduce it to its mechanical aspect, to the function of something they do not want or are not capable of knowing (it is possible to know how something works without knowing what that something is). Finally, there are those architects – very few in number, actually – who choose the most difficult path, that of realism, of the pursuit of

the meaning of human events in their extension in time and in the pursuit of forms of their representation.

A. R. built a number of theatres, like the Carlo Felice in Genoa, together with Gardella, and the Teatro del Mondo in Venice, and then the Teatro La Fenice, also in Venice (as well as the many little scientific theatres with which he surrounded himself in his home and studio).

But how can we fail to also consider the Cemetery of Modena as a theatrical form, that “house of the dead” reduced to its bare essence? Or the block on Schützenstrasse in Berlin, where the fronts of the buildings look like the many theatrical wings of many houses facing the urban street?

Or the hotel in Fukuoka, with its large stagefront facing the city? A metaphor of construction, Shelling would say, where the idea of construction is defined in the relationship between the overlaid orders. Six stacked rows of cylindrical columns support metal architraves composed of pieces of bent sheet metal, bolted together. An ancient construction mode revisited in the great American architecture of the last century.

A ritual renewed in time with different forms and materials, always harking back to a wider idea of the act of building, which is not only the construction of a single edifice but the pursuit of a general form of construction per se.

Of the many projects and very many drawings these, perhaps, are the most beautiful, or at least those I consider as such; those that more than others declare that exalted rationalism discovered in the projects of Boullée.

What is exalted is an event that already exists, that is contained in the theme of the project, discovered by those who seek it. A pursuit done by means of reason, but ready to recognize what lies beyond its schemes, what belongs to the realm of our desires.

“Our only possibility,” A. R. says, *is the addition between logic and biography*, between the world we are able to know with the tools of comparison and our personal experience, our capacity for observation, the memory accumulated in time and the desire for a better life. This is why A. R. combines logic with analogical thought.

Without analogy not one of his projects would be possible, nor would inductive thinking be possible, which pertains to the project and protects us from any form of tautology. Rossi says: *Perhaps the observation of things has been my most important formal education, and then the observation shifted into the memory of those things...* Reading the *Scientific Autobiography* we can understand how many of the things seen became part of his work. Not all of them, as in a list or a catalogue, but certainly those that contain a response to what the project is seeking. The analogy with things seen, with the things most loved, drawn and drawn again over time, becomes his way of doing, of bringing to light things that seemed to be forgotten.

What brings new life to the things of memory is desire, the desire to revive the things that have impressed us when we first encountered them.

Thus the workers’ houses in 19th-century Milan, the courtyard houses with balcony accessways, are transformed in the long building at Gallarate; the lighthouses seen in New England find their way into the Teatro del Mondo in Venice, and so on. Analogy brings about a metamorphosis of the things observed, which are transformed into things desired, transporting their identity into them. In the end, this is still a rational procedure, that gives up invention, based on knowledge of the world in which we live, on the exaltation of everything

we love or we think can make us happy. This is the most extraordinary trait of the projects of A. R.: one by one, they are happy.

I have used this term to talk about the expressionism of Guido Canella, a friend of Aldo Rossi, together with Carlo Aymonino and Gianugo Polesello. Happy expressionism, Guido Canella said, to distinguish it from the expressionism of protest of German artists in the period between the two world wars.

The happy expressionism of Canella is not far from the exalted rationalism of Aldo Rossi: in both cases, the idea is to represent a viewpoint on reality. Not reality as it presents itself, but that desired reality, found by separating it from everything that is episodic or accidental. That reality rooted in the culture of citizens, in their historical memory, in their hopes for a better life.

What distinguishes this research from the thinking of Pietro Verri, who connects happiness and knowledge, stating that one is not possible without the other?

What distinguishes the projects of Aldo Rossi from those of the exalted representatives of the Enlightenment – as I like to call them – those illuminists, so-called romantics, who countered the academic culture of neoclassicism with the exaltation of the values of the new bourgeois city?

In the end, as Valery says, speaking of Hölderlin, the classical world – no longer repeated, imitated and eavesdropped – was understood and dialectically re-experienced in romanticism.

I am thinking of the project of Foro Bonaparte by Antolini in Milan, the new Piazza del Duomo of Pistocchi, so profoundly different from the academic culture of Milizia and Piermarini, utterly concentrated on the neoclassical language. The difference is similar to that between conventional rationalism and exalted rationalism, which I outlined at the start of this text. Antolini surrounds the new castle for the citizens of Milan with a large circle of buildings set aside for civil life, a large collective space, a large circular plaza constructed at the end of a road access pointed in the direction of Paris. Pistocchi designs a new Piazza del Duomo, where in front of the cathedral a new urban forum is organized, for the administrative life of the new greater Milan.

Some have tried to interpret the work of A. R. as the liquidation of the Modern Movement, reduced to its functionalist matrix and therefore to be condemned. This is not the case. As I have said, his masters understood modernity in a progressive way, as the staging in work of the “spirit of the age”, precisely as Mies said. Meaning, certainly, not the ephemeral things every era produces, but its deepest values, constructed across the span of history, starting from the childhood of humanity of which Marx speaks, recognizing it in ancient Greece, from that state of obscure innocence Rossi never wanted to abandon, and of which his most intelligent interpreters have spoken.

This state of obscure innocence allowed Rossi to be modern, and thus to grasp, in the experience of his own time, all of its most radical enchantment.