

## Coming to America ALDO ROSSI (1931-1997)

Aldo Rossi preferred tradition to individual talent in architecture, as did his teacher and mentor Ernesto Rogers. Yet there is scarcely a school of architecture in the world today where the mention of an Aldo Rossi building is not readily understood as shorthand for a melancholic remembrance of type, neoplatic in form and poetic in feeling. He was also, like Rogers, willing to challenge the architectural dogma of the modern movement and to, as Rogers himself insisted, affirm the propriety of a "building's life being connected with the past," such that it might "breathe the atmosphere of the place and even intensify it."<sup>1</sup>

If there was a single architectural intellect Rossi found most compelling, it was that of Adolf Loos, who admonished architects that "the best form is always already given and no one should be afraid to use it, even though it may have come almost entirely from someone else."<sup>2</sup> It was of the prompting of Rogers, as Rossi relates in his *Scientific Autobiography*, that he "read Loos for the first time around 1959 in the beautiful first edition published by Brenner Verlag and given to me by Rogers. . . . Without doubt I owe to this reading of Loos the profound contempt I have always felt for . . . the confounding of form and function. Through Loos I discovered . . . also the great architecture of ancient Rome and an America which I would come to understand only much later."<sup>3</sup> Up to then, Rossi's ideas of what America might be like had come mainly from watching movies; in fact, he chose to study architecture only after abandoning plans for a career as a filmmaker.

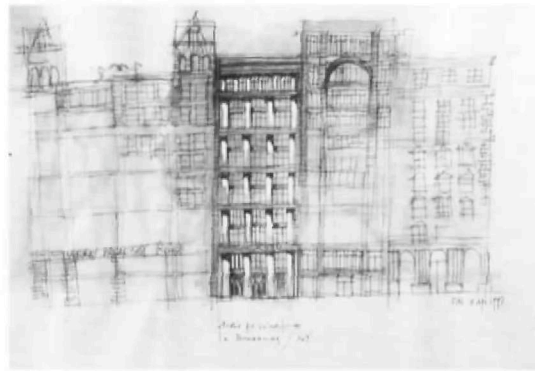
Rossi became, in due course, "the most watched and discussed [architectural] 'case' both in Italy and on the international scene," as Manfredo Tafuri was obliged to admit.<sup>4</sup> Even so (or perhaps for that very reason), Rossi experienced a far more hospitable critical reception in America than at home, as Kurt Forster noted when Rossi was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Tafuri, his colleague on the faculty at the University of Venice, found in Rossi's oeuvre only "surly indifference . . . resorting to . . . a geometric elementarism reminiscent of Durand's tables." But Vincent Scully at Yale discerned a laudable "passion for structural and spatial types, evolved from vernacular and classical traditions that make sense of the environment and hold it together."<sup>6</sup> Whereas Francesco Dal Co, Tafuri's occasional collaborator at the University of Venice, censured Rossi for "veer[ing] toward a mannerist practice, apparently replacing stubbornness with repetition," Peter Eisenman of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies took a contrary view, commending the built evidence of Rossi's search for "an alternative to functionalism [while] also looking for an alternative to a rationalism that, based on reason and logic, simply replicates the progressivism of the Modern Movement."<sup>7</sup>

Rossi took comfort in the relative permissiveness of the New World — "the fact that, in a large country such as America, all types of architecture exist without anyone complaining." What he found most debilitating in "the disease of modernism (or at least one of its diseases, resulting in the ruin of large areas of our cities) is its moralising, that is to say the intrusion of the question of morality into the architectural sphere. . . . When I say that I am not modern I am declaring my rejection of moralising in architecture, a moralising that rages like this in no other artistic discipline. . . . If one finds a Doric column beautiful or ugly, if one likes it or not, that is a decision that has nothing to do with morals. . . . Yet a supposedly democratic Europe regards an architectural style as democratic (and it is moreover hideous), simply because it made use of glass and . . . flat roofs. . . . I make use of what is good, wherever I can find it."<sup>8</sup>

Architectural tourists from Loos to Le Corbusier have managed to find something to marvel at in America, whether it be plumbing, grain elevators, or the Renaissance revivalism of lower Manhattan. Rossi was no exception. "In all my projects and drawings, I believe there may be a hint of . . . naturalism which transcends their oddities and defects," he wrote at the beginning of *A Scientific Autobiography*. "When I saw the complete work of Edward Hopper in New York [in a 1980 retrospective at the Whitney Museum organized by Gail Levin], I realized all this about my architecture: paintings like *Chair Car* or *Four Lane Road* took me back to the stasis of . . . timeless miracles, to tables set for eternity, drinks never consumed, things which are only themselves."<sup>9</sup> Still later in the *Autobiography*, he reflected on Loos's project for the *Chicago Tribune* competition as "his interpretation of America, and not, of course, as one might have thought, a Viennese *divertissement*: it was his synthesis of the distortions created in America by an extensive application of a style in a new context."<sup>10</sup>

Rossi's fascination with American places and themes is one of the persistent revelations in the *Autobiography*. "In this country," he wrote, "analogies, allusions, or call them observations, have produced in me a great creative desire and also, once again, a strong interest in architecture. For example, I found walking on Sunday mornings through the Wall Street

area to be as impressive as walking through a realized perspective by Serlio or some other Renaissance treatise-writer. I have had a similar experience in the villages of New England, where a single building seems to constitute the city or village, independent of its size."<sup>11</sup> He found the "industrial archaeology" of Manhattan especially alluring, sending his students to the no man's land "near the West Side Highway,



Building for Scholastic, Inc., New York (1994- ). Broadway elevation.

where . . . the old wood and iron piers enter the Hudson and are separated from the city by the old and often collapsed highways," to design projects in which "houses are built on the piers, and at times the old buildings are left standing, long warehouses of iron and brick with incredible Palladian heads."<sup>12</sup>

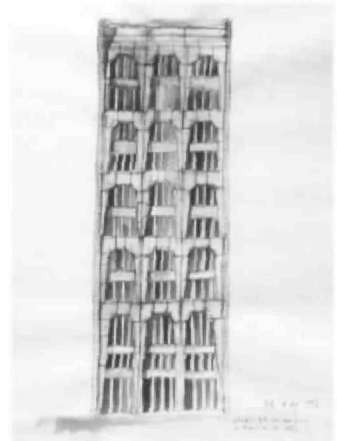
At the time of his death Rossi had already, with Morris Adjmi, his American collaborator and former student at IAUS, realized a large office complex for Celebration, the Walt Disney Company new town near Orlando, Florida (1991-95), and had completed plans for its expansion as well as the design of a large backlot building for the Disney studios in Burbank, California. The American work also includes a ceremonial arch for the Strand in Galveston (1987-90); vacation houses in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania (1988-89) and at Seaside, Florida (1996-97); and an unrealized addition to the School of Architecture for the University of Miami (1986-89), a diminutive acropolis-cum-tower with "colorful, geometric, Mediterranean forms" that Scully predicted would "go well with the more or less Spanish, limestone and stucco vernacular of the region."<sup>13</sup>

But arguably the most impressive reminder of Rossi's intermittent visits to America, independent of size, is destined to reside in the sliver of a building that will begin construction this summer at 557 Broadway, between Spring and Prince streets in the SoHo Cast-Iron Historic District, to augment the offices of the educational publishers Scholastic, Inc.<sup>14</sup> What Rossi and Adjmi devised is a ten-story duplexed *étagerie*, 50 by 200 feet, that will extend west through the block to Mercer Street — the very "synthesis of distortion created by the application of a style in a new context." On its pilaster-gridded Broadway front, the new Scholastic Building mediates between its next-door neighbors, the predominantly masonry Rouss Building (Alfred Zucker, 1888-90) and the terra-

cotta and ironwork "Little" Singer Building (Ernest Flagg, 1902-04). On Mercer, a street of warehouses, it manufactures its own "industrial archaeology" with an exo-skeleton of tapered, ribbed-steel, gantry-cranelike supports stacked one atop another.

Paul Goldberger, reviewing the plans for the new Scholastic Building in the *New York Times*, called it "a textbook example of how to design in a historic district: subtle, brilliantly inventive . . . a testament to the highest values of urbanism."<sup>15</sup> Scholastic is at once a quintessential New York and Rossi building — no Milanese *divertissement* but an affectionate intensification of place, made to measure by an architect who liked his cities "constructed out of preexisting elements that are then deformed by their own context"; by a traveler for whom "perhaps no urban construct in the world equals that of a city like New York . . . a city of monuments such as I did not believe could exist."<sup>16</sup> ■ Drexel Turner

- Ernesto Rogers, quoted in Oscar Newman ed., *New Frontiers in Architecture: CIAM '59 in Otterlo*, (New York: Universe Books, 1961), p. 93.
- Adolf Loos, "Heimatkunst," 1914, collected in Loos, *Trotzdem 1900-1930* (1931; reprint ed., Vienna: Prachner, 1982), p. 130.
- Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT/IAUS, 1981), p. 46.
- Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1986; Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989, Jessica Levine, transl.), p. 135.
- Kurt Forster, "Aldo Rossi's Architecture of Recollection: The Silence of Things Repeated or Stated for Eternity," in *The Pritzker Architecture Prize: 1990 Aldo Rossi*.
- Ibid., p. 138. See also Vincent Scully, "The End of the Century Finds a Poet," in Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, eds., *Aldo Rossi: Buildings and Projects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), p. 12.
- Francesco Dal Co, "1945-1985: Italian Architecture Between Innovation and Tradition," in *A+U Italian Architecture: 1945-1985* (March 1988 extra edition), p. 21; See also Peter Eisenman, "The House of the Dead as the City of Survival," in *Aldo Rossi in America: 1976 to 1979* (New York: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1979), pp. 8-9.
- Aldo Rossi, interviewed by Bernard Huet, 1992, in *Aldo Rossi Architect* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), pp. 26-27.
- Rossi, *Autobiography*, p. 5.
- Ibid., p. 76.
- Ibid.
- Ibid., p. 64.
- Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism*, (1969; New York: Holt, 1988, 2nd edition), p. 265.
- Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes: Charles Rouss and 555 Broadway — Broadway, His Middle Name," *New York Times* (August 11, 1996), 9:7. See also Paul Goldberger, "Architecture View: Primers in Urbanism — Written in Cast Iron," *New York Times* (September 22, 1996), 2:36. "Work to Start on New Rossi Building," *Architectural Record* (October 1996), p. 13.
- Goldberger, op. cit., 9:7.
- Rossi, "Introduction to the First American Edition (1978)," *The Architecture of the City*, (1966; Cambridge, MA: MIT/IAUS, 1982), p. 15.



Scholastic, Inc., Mercer Street elevation.