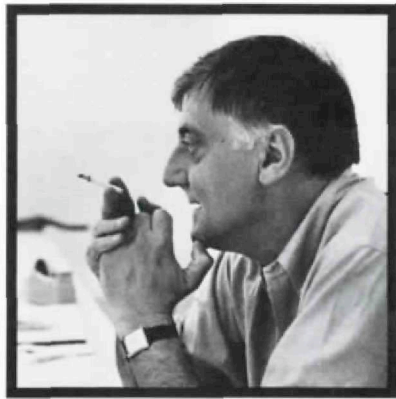


Mystic Signs

A Conversation With Aldo Rossi



Carlos Jimenez

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Over the last three decades, Aldo Rossi – theorist, builder, teacher, and this year's Pritzker Prize winner – has emerged as a preeminent figure in the intellectual and cultural development of European architecture. A simple and gentle man, he has a passion for architecture that bridges both art and profession with the rigor of reason and the melancholy of a poet. The new decade finds him building on a global circuit, crossing cultural boundaries and new thresholds of scale and complexity. The magnitude of this work has not deterred him from pursuing an architecture of constant inquiry, nor has it diminished his interest in designing small objects such as a watch, a chair, or a coffeepot. The last has become a recognizable emissary of its creator and a "miniature architecture" in itself. For Rossi, the creation of "monuments" is endemic to architecture, and their role within the city as narrators of human existence.

Since the publication in 1966 of *The Architecture of the City*, Rossi has continued to elaborate its thesis of collective memory through his architecture. As if pursued by the innumerable memories that he himself has rescued, he persistently reminds us of architecture's need to remember. Yet Rossi's remembrances remain well apart from the facile simulations that have populated recent architecture, deriving instead from a personal awareness of the significance of history and its logic. At the same time, his work reenacts the mysterious journey whereby architecture transforms absence into presence, emanating emotions and shadows.

Rossi's architecture aims to synthesize the catalogue of the city through a purist vision that dissolves into a world simultaneously traversed by reality and dreams. *Il Teatro del Mondo*, one of Rossi's most celebrated works, is a haunting example. Though an ephemeral protagonist in the life of Venice, this small floating theater evoked a mythical past along its course and so came to be fixed in the memory of the city. Another work, the Ossuary at the Modena cemetery, is both monument and meeting place, a repository of revolving memories. Its unrelenting, perforated cubical mass is internally transformed by mementoes of both the living and the dead. These two works affirm the eventuality of rituals and the power to astonish in architecture. Rossi's forms and spaces spring afresh from memory, "fearful with mystic signs, like actors in an ancient play."¹

CJ Your path in architecture has had "a degree of unforeseeability"; yet in retrospect it has followed an almost natural progression since the publication of *The Architecture of the City* in 1966.

AR There is certainly some truth in this. When I was a child, I remember, I had some kind of plan for the development of my studies. Then when my university career began I came to realize that the most important thing was culture, and the need to study the history of architecture in order to become an architect. And, of course, to write. I didn't care that for some years I was told I was a writer, that I wasn't an architect, that I wasn't this or that. I developed an interest in the academic culture and its possibilities for discussion with other people and for personal discovery. I guess I could have built or done something else; I did not. I wrote. This period in my life coincides with *The Architecture of the City*, which I wrote when I was about 28 and published four years later. This book is like the closure of a whole world of study on a single problem: the search for the city. After this period comes my experience at Casabella, my teaching at Milan and Zurich, the many trips to foreign cultures, and my American experience. When I was about 50 years old my *Scientific Autobiography* was published, as closure once again to another period of my life. Then, to be an architect. I think some of it is also "la forza del destino," which is very strong; but one can change it, give it a turn.

CJ A decade ago your work was primarily in Italy and consisted of but few buildings. Today you have projects in the United States, Japan, Germany, and France. How has this surge of activity affected your research and working relationships?

AR In between I was also working in large international competitions; these were very important to me. Now my work is divided into my Italian projects and international projects. I am currently working on two large projects in Milan: the Congress Palace (an exhibition complex) and the Sports Palace, which will accommodate 25,000 to 30,000 people – it's enormous. I have quite a lot of work in Japan, and as of a few days ago, some in England – Canary Wharf, I believe. I have never worked in England before.

In Germany I am working on a museum that came about as a competition for German architects primarily, and about

220 eventually participated. But five foreign architects were also invited: Stirling, Venturi I think, and two others. I won first prize, a very happy occasion for me, though a puzzle to German journalists, who thought that a museum of German history should be done by a German architect. This is not an art museum; it is a museum of German history. In Berlin I have built some housing for the I.B.A. [International Building Exposition]. I have a project in Spain – a market in Barcelona. It is very difficult, this work in many countries, and it leaves me physically exhausted at times.

It also changes the vision of things. I remember when I built my first project, the Galaratese quarter in Milan; I did it as if I had done a hundred of them. The engineers used to tell me, "One cannot work with young architects; they worry too much about this or that." The strength of architecture must be independent of its realization. At the same time, I think I have a stronger experience with architecture now, and a certain ease about it too. And, of course, I have a very good group of collaborators. I can work in Japan because I have a fantastic studio of young Japanese architects who support me all the time; in the United States, Morris Adjmi; in Italy, longtime colleagues.

CJ In writings and discussions of your work, you often make reference to personal and collective "fragments." How do you define "fragments," and how do they figure in your thinking?

AR I don't know if you have seen it, but I have done a drawing titled "Fragments" for an American art magazine [*Artforum*, May 1987]. In this drawing I tried to convey the fact that it is not possible to have a global vision since we only understand parts, pieces of culture, parts of cities. "Fragments" is like a midway point between a kind of theological vision and the urban realities of our cities. I believe that today we live in a world that cannot be repaired, a world of psychological and human fragments. This is something very modern and at the same time very ancient.

"Fragments" is also a reflection of my journeys, like questions one finds in a distant land. I am here talking with you, you are my friend, I feel fine, but three years have passed since I last saw you. These are also fragments. They have meaning because we are able to connect them. I always say that our true invention as architects is to determine how to con-



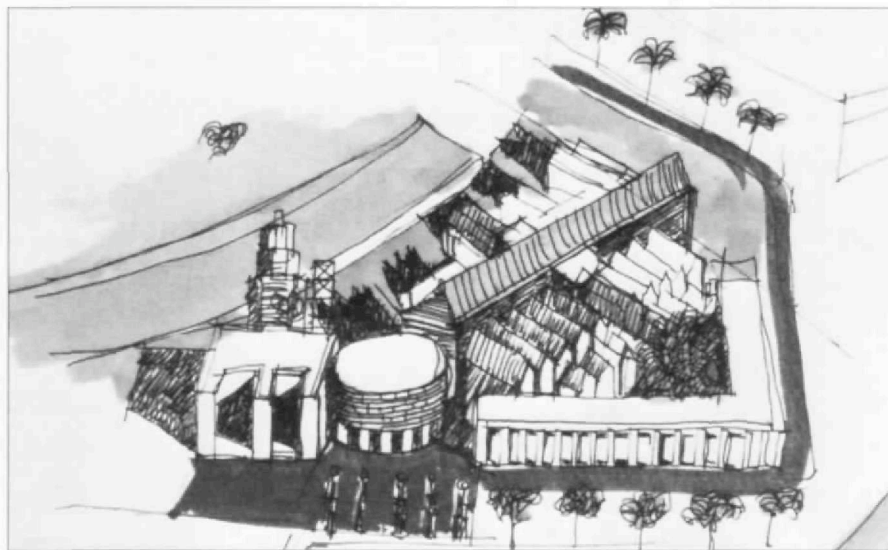
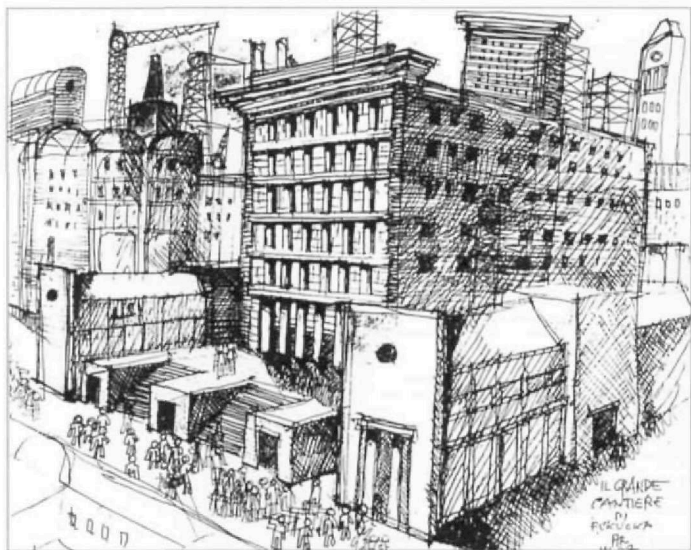
Antonio Martinelli

Interior of theater, Casa Aurora (GFT Headquarters), Turin, Italy, Aldo Rossi with Luigi Uva, Gianni Braghieri, Franco Marchesotti, and Max Scheurer, architects, 1984-87.



Antonio Martinelli

Funerary chapel, Giussano, Italy, Aldo Rossi with Chris Stead, architects, 1980-87.



Far left: Hotel Il Palazzo, Fukuoka, Japan, Aldo Rossi with Morris Adjmi, architects, 1987-90. Drawing by Aldo Rossi, 1987.

Left: German Historical Museum, Berlin (project), Aldo Rossi, architect, 1987-89. Drawing by Aldo Rossi, 1988.

nect all these fragments together. In my *Scientific Autobiography* I mention that I like museums of natural history, where you can see the reconstruction of extinct animals. Each bone, a fragment without significance, is reconstructed into the significance of form. There is no precise method of composing these fragments in any other way; it is futile to attempt otherwise.

Fragments are also like quotations. If one makes an Ionic capital it is just an Ionic capital, but if one makes a fragment of an Ionic capital one enunciates another reality. For instance, I recently completed a funerary chapel and tomb in Giussano. On its south elevation there is a cornice that has been broken into pieces to create a symbol of life interrupted by death, and of life itself as a fragment. Secondly, it is a fragment that also represents the impossibility of returning to a classical vision.

CJ The Casa Aurora office building in Turin, one of your latest buildings, is a very satisfying work. It merges both traditional and modern elements to create a significant "collective" presence in this industrial city, with a complexity and richness that set it apart from much of your previous work.

AR First, if one talks of, for instance, the Galaratese project or the school at Broni, one must know that in Italy – as is the case in most of Europe – when one builds for a municipal government or the state, there is no money but always a series of political difficulties. These facts become important determinants for such projects. But in the Casa Aurora I was able to do anything I wanted. My client, a financial group that manages labels such as Armani, Valentino, and others, gave me full freedom from the beginning. For example, the three towers that demarcate the building were totally closed in my initial sketches. But the engineers and administrators kept saying to me, "Of course, you can do anything you want – but windows, windows on the towers." Well, one day the president of the company, a very intelligent and religious man, visited my house, and there he saw both my early sketches and some new ones with windows on the towers. Then he said to me, "I like these towers without windows, the force of blank towers; please, no windows on them."

In terms of its construction, this building is perfectly crafted. There are not that many details but more my particular love of detail, and a mental complexity about them. For instance, there is a strange quotation, a cornice by Bramante inserted between the stone and the brick. It is so subtly executed that few seem to have noticed it. There are other quotations incorporated as well, like the grand arcades that are found in downtown Turin. This building is, foremost, *of* Turin; it coincides with the city's industrial and ancestral history.

CJ Lately you have been working on a waterfront hotel and restaurant complex in Fukuoka, Japan; here you seem to have made an effort to cross boundaries and establish a set of reciprocal relations between your own culture and the Japanese ethos.

AR The project has been full of intense

moments. Now that is finished and I have more work there, I am beginning, gradually, to understand the uniqueness of the Japanese. Anything that one can get to know in Japan is magnificent; I particularly like the old houses. My clients would say to me, "It is important that there are many hotels along the canal, but it is more important that we build the monument of all hotels; we must therefore have the best stone and marble." The main façade is composed of large steel lintels and red Persian travertine cladding. It shimmers amid the canal's landscape. The Japanese loved the idea of the monument (a very Italian notion in itself). For them a monument is both a spiritual and material refuge.

CJ Though they are different in location and scale, there seems to be a similarity as intimate monuments between your project in Venice, *Il Teatro del Mondo*, and the Galveston arch. How do you view the arch in relation to Galveston and its history?

AR In Galveston, I was concerned with the idea of Texas independent of Galveston: the Texas of films like *Giant*, and its seemingly endless landscape. As a city gate, the arch stands between the vastness of the ocean and the landscape beyond. Then there is also the idea of the main street and its linear theater of people passing and gathering; the arch was intended to incorporate viewing stands from which to watch this theater revolve. Galveston itself is like a theater to me. Once it was a rich city by the sea. The lighthouses are like obelisks, a memory of a former city, the memory of the sea.

CJ Your design for the School of Architecture at Miami University presents a very strong identity. It suggests a campus within a campus.

AR The project offers an opportunity to indirectly educate its inhabitants through architecture itself. I was influenced by Jefferson and his "academic village" as a symbol of how two cultures, in this case the European and American, encountered each other. With this in mind, I thought of this school as a place where three cultures could encounter each other: the European, the Anglo-Saxon, and the Latin, as most of the students are Latin or of Latin descent. I have been told that Miami views itself as the Venice of the Americas, an authentic fantasy perhaps. I looked for this Venice but I only saw the palm trees.

CJ Drawings play an important role in your architecture, presaging feelings that the architecture will eventually render within the city of your imagination. How do you distinguish between your drawings and your architecture?

AR I make a distinction between two kinds of drawings. There are drawings that are like the generative nucleus of architecture; they are also the most beautiful ones. They could be a sketch or no more than a line. Even when a drawing is just a line, it must have its formal autonomy. If the drawing is bad, it always will be bad. Then there are drawings I do as a means to study my new and former

buildings in relation to each other. There is a phrase by, I believe, Cervantes that goes, "If you want to find something new you must do the same things"; one must always do the same things in order to find the new. At times I love to draw for the pleasure of drawing. Unfortunately, I don't have much time to do this now. There is that precious moment when one draws, unique and different, like the experience of life itself.

CJ Often when your work is discussed or written about, certain painters like de Chirico and Morandi come to mind. The affinities are there – the dialogue of light and shadow, the pure rendition of volumes, the mysterious shadow of a moment in a particular space or time. Are there filmmakers with whom you share certain affinities as well?

AR I think that there is an equivocal relationship that most critics find between my work and de Chirico. Certainly there is a de Chirico-like element in my drawings, but I always find it strange that critics fixated on an immediate association with de Chirico. Because the truth is that my great influence and love is with Sironi and with Morandi. In fact, what Morandi does with his precise bottles and still lifes is part of what I aim to do in my architecture. I love the world of Sironi, his urban landscapes, the large black chimneys against white skies. His work is most important to me. Curiously, when some critics accuse me of fascism, this comes not because of de Chirico but from Sironi.

In terms of film and my work, the analogies are more between certain films and their specific landscapes; Visconti's *Obsession* is an example. I don't know if you know this, but my early interests were in film, and its influence on my perception is not a direct one but a very profound one. Filmmakers – I like them all. Now for certain aspects of surrealism, Buñuel is

to me the great master. For the translation of Italian life into cinema with a different type of surrealism, I would say Fellini. I like the Italy of Passolini and the way his films inhabit and depict the suburbs. There are so many new ones today, films and filmmakers. I believe the cinema at this moment does not have a particular felicity.

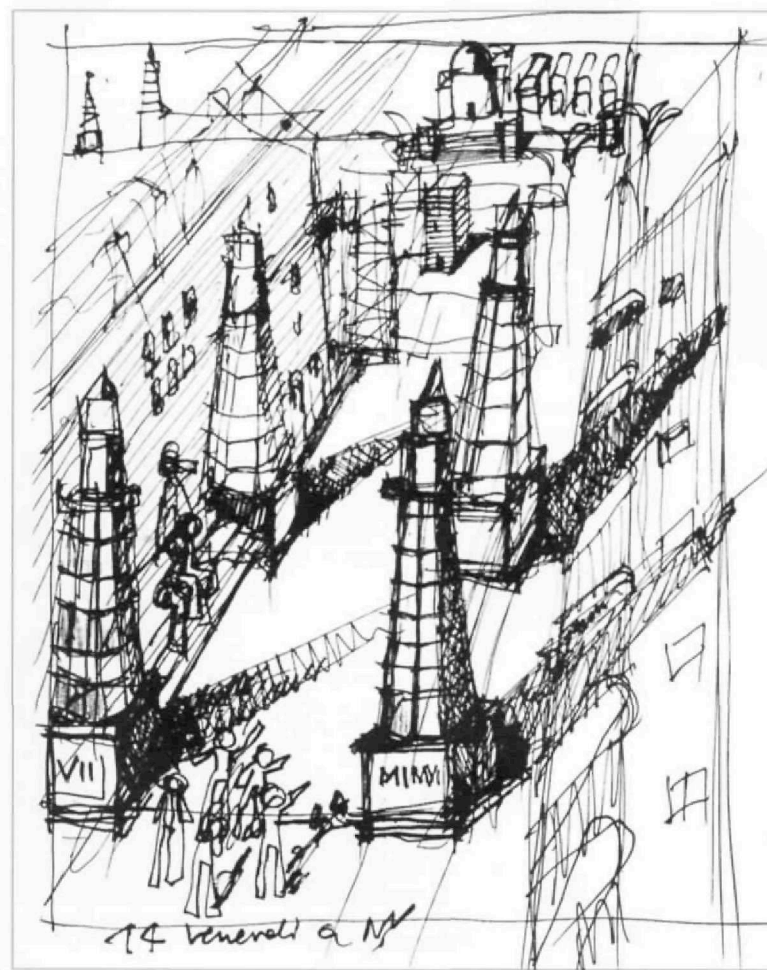
CJ As lecturer, teacher, and now practitioner, you have been in contact with the American architectural scene for some years. What are your thoughts regarding the current state of architecture in this country?

AR There is a strength in the United States that comes from its vastness, which in turn creates a much stronger force of contradictions than is found in Europe. So it is difficult to have a comprehensive opinion about the state of architecture in this country. I can tell more through the students. American students are much more open than European students. It is always interesting to teach here; in Europe students already know everything beforehand.

I am often asked what I think of the American city, and I have to ask myself, What is an American city? New York – a magnificent city that reaches toward Europe? Los Angeles – a whole new city? I believe that if there is an American city, its future is here, in cities such as Houston or those in southern California – a city articulated in a different manner, where the nonsensical polemics of modern and postmodern are not important. What is important in these cities is the creation of their "monuments," their points of reference – the force of destiny once again. ■

Notes

1 Arthur Rimbaud, "Le Bateau Ivre."



Maritime arch, Galveston (1987-90) with tower and acropolis for the School of Architecture, University of Miami (1986-), Aldo Rossi with Morris Adjmi, architects. Drawing by Aldo Rossi, 1987. The maritime arch, erected for Mardi Gras 1990, can be seen on the Strand at 25th Street in Galveston.