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ARCHITECTURE AND CITY – HISTORY AND PROJECT

ARCHITEKTURA I MIASTO – HISTORIA I PROJEKT

Abstract

The essay concerns the topic of the relationship History – Project in the theoretical thought of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Giuseppe Samonà and Ludovico Quaroni, proposing the theory of *The Architecture of the City* by Aldo Rossi as a synthesis ideas elaborated in the Schools of Milan, Venice and Rome in the second half of the twentieth century. The thesis aims to affirm that the elaborated theory could/should indicate, still today, relevant directions for guiding architects in constructing the contemporary city while respecting the continuity of a millennial tradition. Thus, the “other pair” Architecture–City is proposed as a specific legacy derived from the architectural debate of the Italian culture to be used to interpret the relationship between History and Project in the practice of architecture today.

Keywords: architecture of the city, Aldo Rossi, Ernesto N. Rogers, Giuseppe Samonà, Ludovico Quaroni

Streszczenie

Esej podejmuje temat relacji między historią a projektem w refleksji teoretycznej Ernesta Nathana Rogera, Giuseppe Samonà i Ludovica Quaroniego, proponując teorię Architektury miasta Alda Rossiego jako syntezę dorobku szkół mediolańskiej, weneckiej i rzymskiej drugiej połowy XX w. Autor stawia tezę, że opracowana wówczas teoria może/powinna wskazywać również współcześnie istotne kierunki dla architektów, prowadzące do kształtowania miasta nowoczesnego z poszanowaniem ciągłości wielowiekowej tradycji. Tym samym „druga para” – Architektura i Miasto – zostaje przedstawiona jako szczególne dziedzictwo włoskiej kultury architektonicznej, które pozwala na nowo interpretować relację między historią a projektem we współczesnej praktyce architektonicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura miasta, Aldo Rossi, Ernesto N. Rogers, Giuseppe Samonà, Ludovico Quaroni

1. PREMISE

The reading in “mirrored pairs” – *Architecture and City, History and Project* – proposed in the title of this essay, is supported by the idea that a significant connection exists between history and the architectural project in the definition of urban project, understood as that feature of architectural design capable of forging links between the city, history, and modernity. This definition is rooted in Aldo Rossi’s theory and, in addition, constitutes a singular characteristic of Italy’s cultural heritage.

In his essay *«Tendenza»: Neorazionalismo e Figurazione*¹, Ignasi de Solà-Morales identifies Rossi and the 15th Milan Triennale of 1973 as the moment of synthesis in which

¹ I. de Solà-Morales, *«Tendenza»: Neorazionalismo e Figurazione* [in:] idem, *Decifrare l’architettura. «inscripciones» del XX secolo*, Umberto Allemandi & Co., Torino 2001, pp. 107–130.

the theoretical development of the so-called “neo-rationalists” reached a significant point of stability and definition. Solà-Morales speaks of a convergence, in Rossi’s theory and thinking, of what had been developed in the previous decades in three places – Milan, Venice, and Rome – around the figures of Ernesto Nathan Rogers and his magazine *Casabella-Continuità*, Giuseppe Samonà and the IUAV teaching staff that he directed, and, in the more “complex” Roman cultural environment, around the figure of Ludovico Quaroni.

Among the “theoretical points” of this approach are: a process of disciplinary re-foundation that places great emphasis on the history of architecture and the city, and a structuralist analysis of architecture based on the physical and material characteristics of the city. Hence, the “mirrored pair”: History and Project, Architecture and City.

Therefore, the essay will try to unravel the intertwined threads that hold Rossi’s thought together with that of the three masters. Beyond this, the aim is also to reconnect these same threads to the present day, to demonstrate how the theory of architecture and the city is still alive and potentially operative today and, above all, useful considering what we can observe regarding the current state of architecture.

In addition to the aforementioned essay by Solà-Morales, another extremely important reference text is the essay *Avanguardia e Nuova Architettura (Avant-garde and New Architecture)* by Massimo Scolari in the book *Architettura Razionale*, essentially the catalogue of the XV Triennale di Milano – International Section of Architecture curated by Aldo Rossi.

The essay begins with this proposition:

In order to define contemporary Italian architecture, no judgment could be more precise than that expressed by Camillo Boito regarding the eccentricity and confusion of architecture at the end of the 19th century. Now [Boito said] there are buildings and architects, not architecture. Now, except in rare cases, architecture is a plaything of the imagination, an ingenious combination of forms, a whimsical display of pencils, compasses, rulers, and set squares.²

Scolari continues by stating that “[...] in 1973, almost a century later, the considerations that can be made on the poverty of recent, designed and built, architecture are, with rare exceptions, the same.”³

More than fifty years later, today, we face the same problems. Recently, authoritative voices – I think of Vittorio Gregotti and Giorgio Pigafetta⁴, respectively for the defining contemporary architecture as a *proliferation of enlarged design objects* and as characterised by a *persistent and vulgar media iconicity* – have repeated the same warning and convinced us that Boito’s words – *now there are buildings and architects, not architecture* – are, unfortunately, adequate to describe many things that are built in our cities. On the contrary, architecture exists when there is the capability to identify civic values (collective and shared) and represent them through architecture; otherwise, there are certainly many architects, perhaps some good buildings, but no architecture.

It is exactly in this distinction that the topic of the relationship history-project becomes relevant. There are two different attitudes: that of the avant-garde, on the one hand, which

² M. Scolari, *Avanguardia e Nuova Architettura* [in:] *Architettura razionale. XV Triennale di Milano. Sezione Internazionale di Architettura*, Angeli, Milano 1973, p. 153.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Among other texts of the two authors, see: G. Pigafetta, *Architettura dell’imitazione. Teoria dell’arte e architettura fra XV e XX secolo*, Alinea editrice, Firenze 2005 and V. Gregotti, *Ma l’architettura non è un’arte ornamentale*, “la Repubblica”, 15.09.2008.

excludes history and understands progress in terms of diversity/rejection, and, on the other hand, that of the disciplinary foundation, which includes history and thinks of progress as clarification. The second is the “rational option” of architecture, for which architectural form is rational not in the sense that it favours the right angle but in the sense that it is intelligible, self-explanatory, and, as such, can be shared, according to the concept of *architecture as a civil art*, following, among others, the definition by the philosopher György Lukács⁵.

Let us return to the hypothesised genesis of this theory in the thought of the Italian masters.

2. ROGERS, SAMONÀ, QUARONI – MILAN, VENICE, ROME

Regarding Rogers’s thought, the topic of experience, the connection between forms and life that stems from his study and sharing of the ideas of Kubler, Focillon, and Husserl is central. Furthermore, there is the question of method, in Rogers’s elective affinities with the masters of the Modern Movement, particularly Walter Gropius, and, naturally, the concept of continuity and tradition. It is in the latter that the question of a relationship with history, essential for architects, becomes relevant: Rogers taught *Caratteri Stilistici e Costruttivi dei Monumenti* (Stylistic and Constructional Characteristics of Monuments), asking his students to re-draw monuments (of all times) not as a mechanical relief but as an analytical and conscious way of understanding. Rogers stated: “Penetrating structures, possessing them is already doing, leads those who understand to the threshold of compositional creation [...] An era without memory is ephemeral and condemned to produce ephemeral objects.”⁶

From these words of Rogers emerges the dynamic and evolutionary value of Tradition and the idea that it can and must be “material for the project”. Rogers demonstrates this, from theory to practice, in BPR’s project for the Torre Velasca in Milan. “[...] a Tower [that] aims to culturally summarize, without imitating the language of any of its buildings, the atmosphere of the city of Milan, its ineffable but perceptible character [...]” (Ill. 1, 2)

Continuity of tradition over time can be said, in Rogers’s view, continuity in the physical space of the city for Samonà: and these are not so different things if we define and view the city as the physical place – space – where history – time – realises its point of accumulation in reality. Samonà said that the city was “a single architecture made up of multiple houses” (similarly to Rossi’s definition of the city as a collective work of art), and he also proposed a relationship with history for the architects to be built through the appropriation of the works of the past, with a view to progress and overcoming, but also, in Samonà’s case, to a verification and advancement of theory, to be realised precisely through the projects and the works of architecture.

⁵ “It’s not difficult to clarify what architecture’s uniqueness is for us. It’s an art that creates a world, but it doesn’t directly relate to man, especially not to the individual. It does create for him (although always as he is a member of a social community) a real, adequate spatial environment, which visually evokes its appropriateness”, Architecture is also “the only art capable of directly revealing the general social being of a period, of making operative in the form of immediate, concretely sensitive evocation, the social determinations that make their way in life through the multiple mediations of the actions, thoughts, etc., of single individuals”. G. Lukács, *Estetica*, vol. 2, Einaudi, Torino 1970, respectively at p. 1210 and p. 1214.

⁶ E.N. Rogers, *Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico*, Christian Marinotti, Milano 2006, p. 40.

⁷ E.N. Rogers, *Esperienza dell’architettura*, Einaudi, Torino 1958, p. 312.

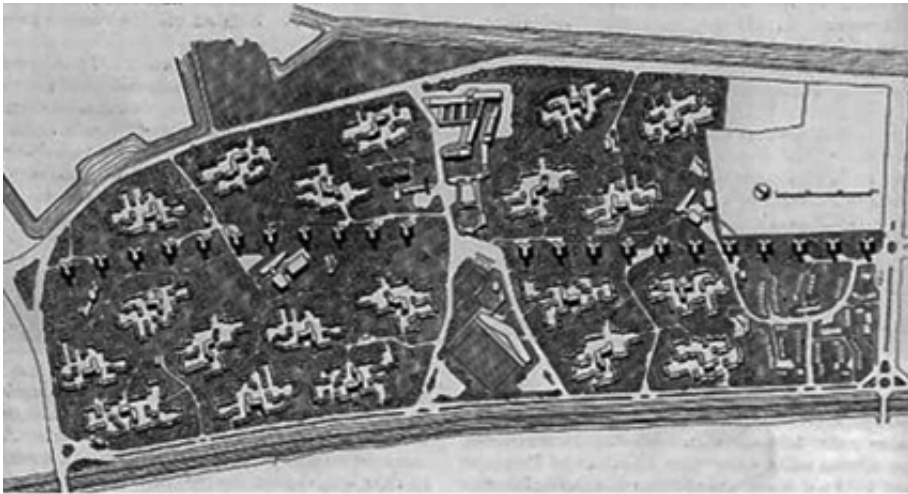


Ill. 1. BPR, Velasca Tower in Milan's landscape, source: *Censimento delle architetture italiane dal 1945 ad oggi*, Milano e l'Unità d'Italia, itinerario di architettura Milanese. Ordine degli Architetti PPC della Provincia di Milano, p. 10

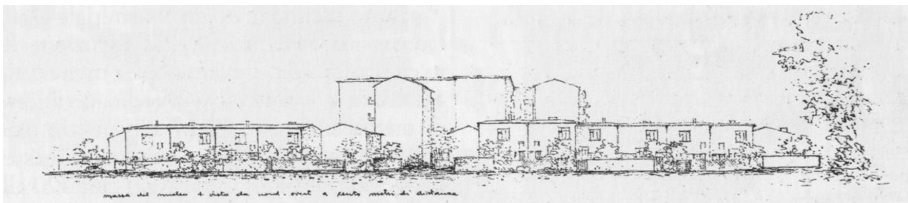


Ill. 2. BPR, Velasca Tower in Milan, source: *Censimento delle architetture italiane dal 1945 ad oggi*, Ministry of Culture, Italian Government, <https://censimentoarchitetturecontemporanee.cultura.gov.it/scheda-opera?id=2554#gallery-1> (access: 21.10.2025)

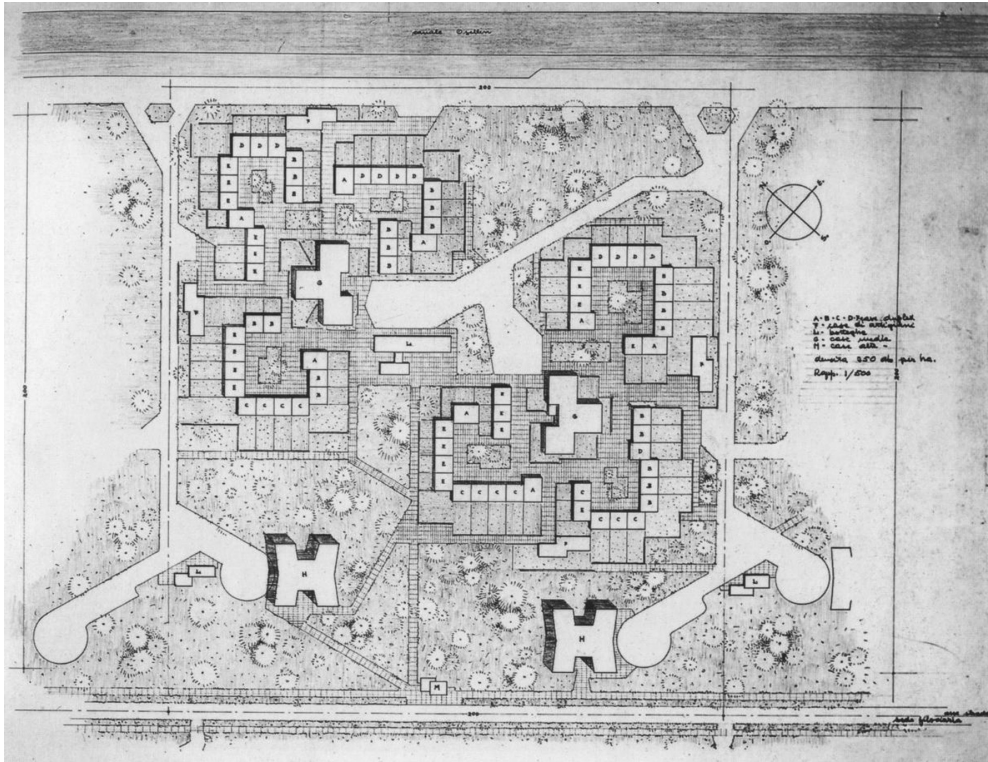
Regarding Samonà's work, the well-known project for the Bank of Italy in Padua (with its two façades facing the historic city and the "new" city, each with different architectural features) could certainly be an emblematic example of how the architect intended to interpret the "relationship with history". However, in order to attempt to identify how much of Samonà's thought and experiments become a legacy for the development of *The Architecture of the City*, it is probably more useful to recall another experience: that of the project for the San Marco district in Venice, where an effort was made to reproduce, albeit in the context of a modern "open city", the urban typology of the Venetian *campiello*. Even if the architectural features of the small houses seem to be vernacular according to the emerging neo-realistic poetics and the *campiello*-unity form seems to imitate the historical form of the lagoon city, the urban proposal is a city that refuses the dense continuity of the historical city, instead immersing the formally defines unities in the openness of nature, adding tall buildings – a line of towers – to measure it. (Ill. 3, 4, 5)



Ill. 3. G. Samonà et alii, Villaggio San Marco, Venice. General plan, source: *ArchiDiAP. Condividere l'Architettura*, "Casabella" 1958, no. 218, p. 10



Ill. 4. G. Samonà et alii, Villaggio San Marco, Venice. Sketch. General plan, source: *ArchiDiAP. Condividere l'Architettura*. <https://archidiap.com/opera/quartiere-ina-casa-villaggio-san-marco/>



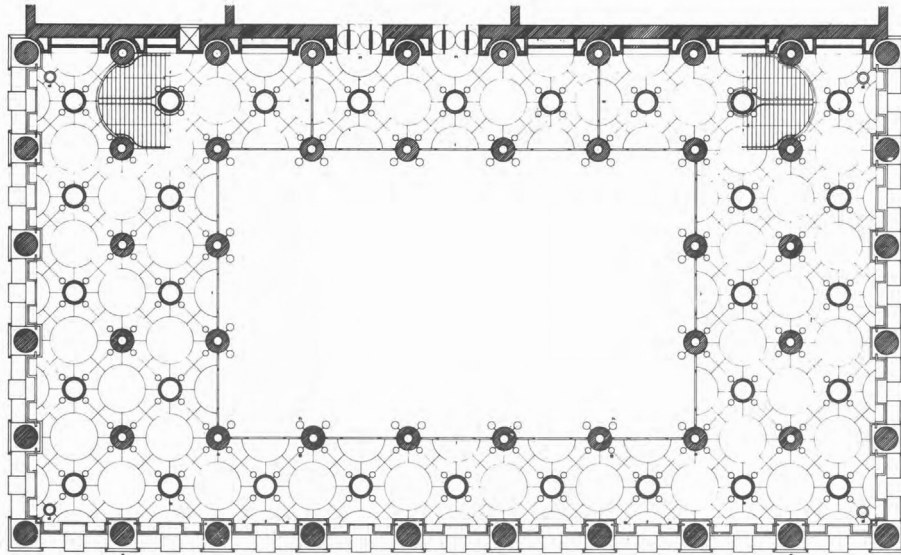
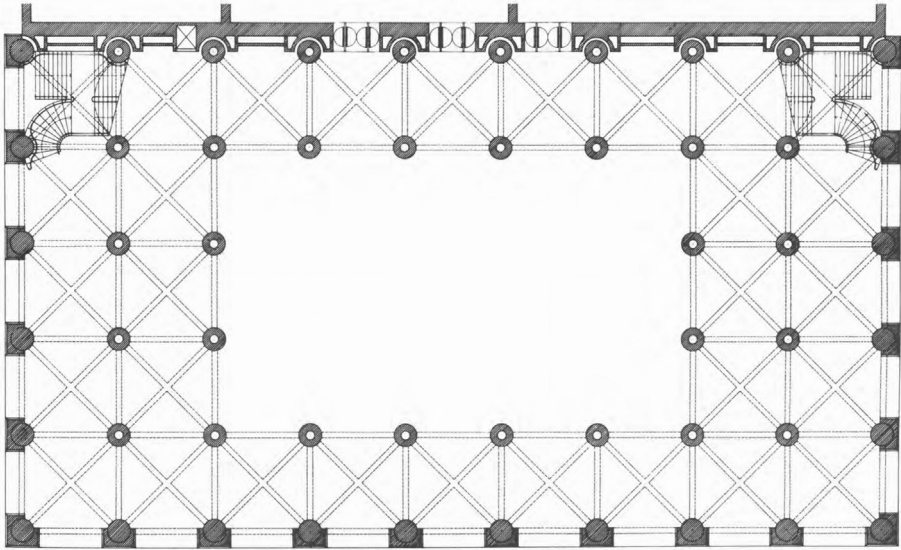
Ill. 5. G. Samonà et alii, Villaggio San Marco, Venice. Sector. General plan, source: *ArchiDiAP. Condividere l'Architettura*. <https://archidiap.com/opera/quartiere-ina-casa-villaggio-san-marco/>

Finally, Ludovico Quaroni. In the second chapter of *La Torre di Babele*, Quaroni interprets the ancient city and, in introducing the pairing of *focus/fabric* – the similarity with the Rossi's pair of *primary elements/residential areas* is evident – speaks of the beauty of the ancient city in contrast to the *ugly* contemporary city. Thus, following Quaroni, the historical city is still a lesson (as in his description of his hometown in *Immagine di Roma*) that teaches us that

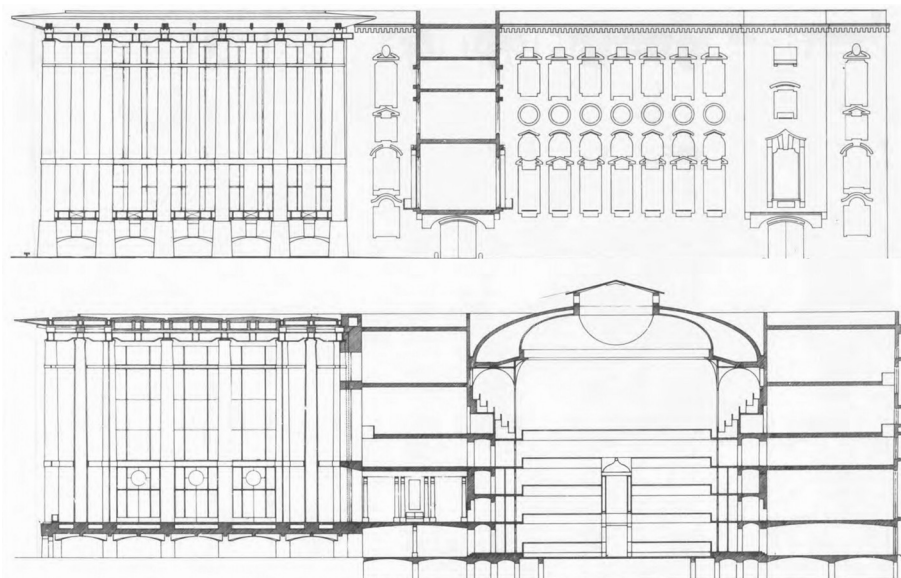
[...] the project of a building, like a city, not only took into account the functional, technological, and aesthetic aspects of the individual parts and the whole, but also composed these aspects in order to create an immediate, direct, and meaningful relationship between them, so that one supported the other, derived from the other, and in any case was impossible to separate from the other except through the forced use of an artificial *a posteriori* analysis.⁸

Quaroni interprets this lesson and, without hesitation, uses the history of architecture in the Opera di Roma project, drawing, in plan, a basilica and developing, through the various versions of the project, a cultured reworking of the architectural orders. (Ill. 6, 7)

⁸ L. Quaroni, *La torre di Babele*, Marsilio, Padova 1967, p. 63.



III. 6. L. Quaroni, Opera House in Rome. Maps, source: "Eupalino. Cultura della Città e della Casa" 1984, no. 2, p. 17



Ill. 7. L. Quaroni, Opera House in Rome. Façade and Section, source: “Eupalino. Cultura della Città e della Casa” 1984, no. 2, p. 18

3. THE HISTORY AS A FIELD OF CHOICES IN *THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY* BY ALDO ROSSI

The “synthesis” by Rossi clarifies the ultimate meaning of the relationship with history in architectural design. A history that, far from being a mere standardising chronology, is instead the “field of choice”.

“Perhaps the observation of things has remained my most important formal education; for observation later becomes transformed into memory,” said Rossi⁹, synthesising the search for continuity in tradition over time by Rogers, the idea of the space of the city as a place of physical accumulation of history by Saroni, and the need for the architect, in Quaroni’s definition, to “bring together distant things”.

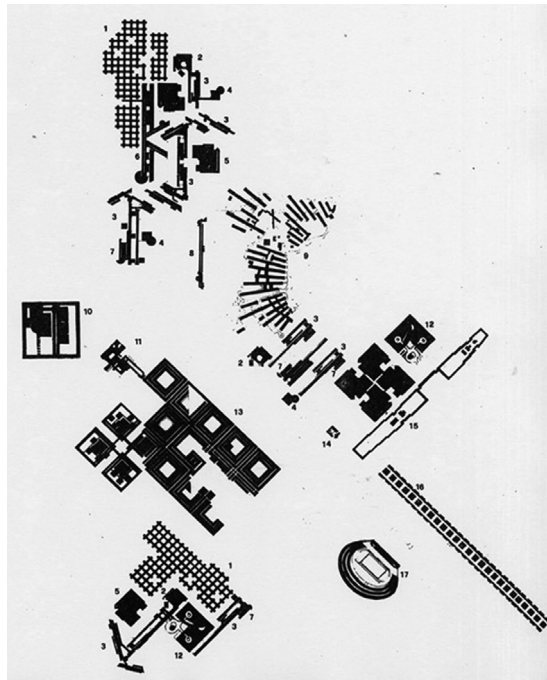
There is a choice in Canaletto’s painting (Ill. 8), beloved by Rossi, where the artist reconstructs his Venice – as unreal as it is analogous, nevertheless absolutely plausible; there is a choice in the drawing for the essay *Architettura per i musei*¹⁰, where Rossi himself assembles a Roman amphitheatre, a church, a medieval castle, and a building by Mies; there is a choice in the *Proposta architettonica per Roma Est* (Ill. 9) exhibited at the Triennale, where Carlo Aymonino “calls” well-known architecture, of all past times, to “measure” the territory of the metropolitan city; finally, at the same Triennale, Arduino Cantafora also makes “tendentious” choices when he assembles his *Città analoga*. (Ill. 10)

⁹ A. Rossi, *A scientific autobiography*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 23.

¹⁰ A. Rossi, *Architettura per i musei* [in:] A. Locatelli (ed.), *Teoria della progettazione architettonica*, Dedalo, Bari 1968, pp. 121–138.



Ill. 8. Canaletto, *Capriccio with Palladian buildings*, 1756–1759, courtesy of Galleria Nazionale di Parma



Ill. 9. C. Aymonino, C. Dardi, R. Panella, *Architectural proposal for East Rome*, 1973, source: “Controspazio” 1973, no. 6, p. 48



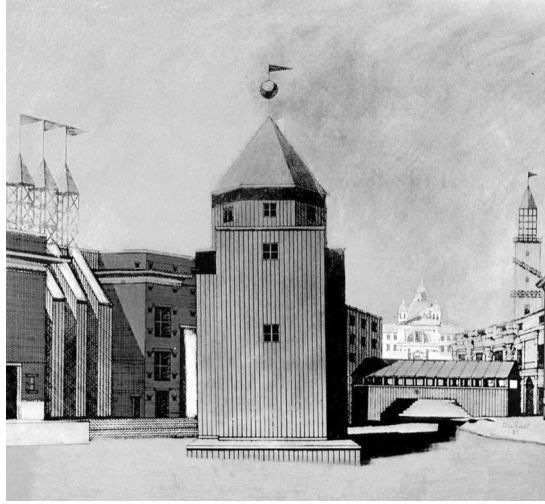
Ill. 10 A. Cantafora, *La Città analoga*, 1973, source: “Controspazio” 1973, no. 6, p. 25

Next to the *Sala degli Omaggi* – dedicated to Bottoni, Schmidt, and, indeed, Rogers – also set up at the 15th Triennale in 1973, Aldo Rossi finally screens the video *Ornamento e Delitto* (*Ornament and Crime*), created with Gianni Braghieri and Franco Raggi. The video is obviously a tribute to Adolf Loos but also a successful attempt to convene a *spiritual family* – following Focillon – that brings together people, places, and architectures, distant in time and space, but among which exist many only apparently invisible connections, according to a conception of history, and of its usefulness for the architect, not as a succession of events to be described but as works and issues to be appropriated, because they are believed to belong to a shared vision of reality and the world.

Thus, to sum up, the “fundamental points” of Rossi’s theory appear to establish an *elective affinity* (recalling that the term elective includes the topic of the choice) with history: in the awareness of the need for a process of disciplinary re-foundation that places great attention to the history of architecture, in the structuralist analysis of architecture starting from the physical and material characteristics of the city, in the faith in the value of experience and therefore of the relationship with reality, and in understanding tradition as an operative instrument of history.

What is the utility of that today? History – understood as a process of interactions, connections, bonds, and traditions – is always essential material for architectural design in order to seek in the past models and references capable of clarifying the problems of the present and, thus, restoring architecture to its status of civil art, able to represent, following Rossi, the *fixed scene of human events*.¹¹ (Ill. 11, 12)

¹¹ Rossi A., *The architecture of the city*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1982, p. 111.



Ill. 11. A. Rossi, Teatro del mondo, Collage, source: "A+U. Architecture and Urbanism", extra edition 1982, p. 109



Ill. 12. A. Rossi, Teatro del mondo in Venice, view, source: "A+U. Architecture and Urbanism", extra edition 1982, p. 110

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