

# Observations on the Fantastic Nature in the Architecture of Aldo Rossi

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## Abstract

**The Aldo Rossi's project study has progressively made the writer develop the idea of a composition that moves on the level of fantasy according to a fantastic interpretation that goes beyond its obvious literary meaning. Indeed, one can consider fantastic the reality that fantasy transfigures into unreal and improbable shapes obtained by arbitrarily combining images with images, as it happens in those childish representations of childhood, hardly comprehensible to the intellect and to custom. Or you can think of applying the term fantastic to all that reality, which with its conventional and customary though not at all bizarre shapes, produces a state of wonder in contemplating and grasping the profound meaning that animates reality. Then what is fantastic is that sense of wonder that reality produces in our imagination, when it makes us perceive another imagined truth, which is ideal, but equally real, beyond the obviousness of things, beyond appearance.**

**Keywords:** Architectural Theory; Representation; Fantastic; Memory.

## 1. Introduction

Twenty years have passed since Aldo Rossi died. After his death the critics seem to have forgotten him and magazines do not publish his projects. Yet his essays, his projects and his buildings have influenced much of contemporary architecture and teaching in architecture school emphasizes the validity of his disciplinary tools. Legacy based on a theory for architectural planning where the analytical moment of awareness is an important but not definitive moment for the project. In the introduction to the Boullée's essay Aldo Rossi introduces the term "exalted rationalism", in contrast to the more academic "conventional rationalism", with whom the Master thinks the need to design a project starting from a relevant emotional core. It is known to modern historiography as Aldo Rossi has posed the problem of introducing - in the moment of composition - the emotional fact as internal to the logical-rational method: "so we build a theory of architecture where everything is explained without limiting the imagination" [1].

In fact, architecture is an art and its main purpose is to represent, in a completed architectural fact, the ultimate meaning for which the building was conceived. A sense that does not coincide with the understanding of the program, but with the understanding of the more general value of the work we have to build. The recognition of an imagined reality that overlaps with actual reality. This aim pursued in the architectural project represents for Aldo Rossi the principle on which to base his work. It pertains to the characterization of the work as a decisive choice that lies before the project itself, at the origin of the ideation.

The contribution reflects this interpretation of architecture based on the emotional moment and proposes a reading hypothesis that looks at the "fantastic dimension" to expand the understanding of the thought of the Master Aldo Rossi.

## 2. The sense of Fantastic in the Aldo Rossi's architecture

We can think that beauty is revealed in the singularity of a material, such as in the precious elegance of the onion-colored Eubea marble on the Michaelerplatz in Vienna by Adolf Loos, or in the uniqueness of a color, as in the inexpressible blue sky in the *View of Delft* by Vermeer, or in the inimitable yellow of the *Rest from the Work of*

Van Gogh or in the enticing gold of the Portrait of *Adele Bloch-Bauer* of Klimt, or even in the deep blue of the *Lovers* in the Blue of Chagall. It is equally true that the beauty of a work does not lie exclusively in the beauty of the individual aspect, but in the precise and desired relationship that the forms establish between them. We can then understand the words of Marcel Proust who invites us to consider beauty not for the single color, but for *the harmony that holds them together*. This reading of beauty finds a continuity in the thought of Aldo Rossi. Even for the Master, things are bearers of beauty when the relationships that hold them together reveal their meaning. All this presupposes that things have, in fact, meaning; in other words they represent not only themselves but another reality, an imagined reality, as claimed by Antonio Monestiroli [2], which is superimposed on reality itself, just as real and real as it belongs to life.

The meaning of things in the poetic description of the reality above all emerges through a procedure composed of a cognitive process of what must be represented, the nature of the form, then only later with the choice of elements to be arranged so as to create relationships, finding the right measure between them to achieve the representation of that imagined reality whose recognition causes the viewer to react emotionally. Therefore, this imagined reality coincides with the nature of the form, a form that through its size, proportions, and relationships knows how to restore the fundamental reason that caused it.

This is true in Aldo Rossi who repeatedly quotes a passage from Adolf Loos over the course of his life, where it is stated that it is the measures and proportions that make the meaning of the mound recognizable as a burial place: "If we find a tumulus six feet long and three feet wide in a wood, arranged with the altarpiece in a pyramidal shape, we become serious and something inside us says: someone is buried here. This is architecture" [3]. It is recognized that the true architecture is the monument and that the origin of the monument is the death from which every signification originates. This is therefore, for Aldo Rossi, the main purpose of architecture: to represent meaning through measures and relationships. The forms are not important as such but the relationships that bind them together are: "More than the things themselves, it is the relationships that cause the things to mean something" [4]. These relationships show the skill of the painter, the sculptor, the poet, the musician to reveal in their compositions the authentic sense of reality. That unspeakable that the arts have always pursued without ever grasping and that emerges in the quiet of a Morandi, in the enigmas of a Böcklin, in the surreal of a Sironi or a De Chirico, where the mystery insinuates itself between the unbridgeable voids of rediscovered architectures and dialogues impossible between mute forms that belong to different worlds [5].

There is no doubt that looking at the drawings of Aldo Rossi means shifting the focus from the scientific to the artistic level: "Even where the drawing is technical and a prelude to the construction, there is a graphic study that implies a choice of content (...) Then there are the sketches, the numerous perspectives, the urban settings, the drawings rich in color and inventiveness (...) It is in these works, in particular, that the architects reveal a painter's look" [6]. It is the will of the author to lead us into another cognitive dimension, that of the poet who, on the basis of his lived experience, connects the fragments of reality in meaningful connections from which the authentic meaning of life emerges, spirituality as a true essence in materiality of the form: "His thoughts, his dreams, his feelings, are blocked in the self-reference of the drawn or built shapes" [7].

It is not a question of looking at reality with the tools of the scientist, but with the vision of the poet who manipulates the forms of reality to describe another reality that is imagined more true and authentic with the declared aim of making the deep idea that animates manifest things, that elusive nature that is hidden between things "like a piece of sugar dissolved in a glass of water, which is and operates in every molecule of water, but is no longer a piece of sugar" [8]. We simply ask architecture to prepare itself so that our gaze can glimpse the mystery. In Aldo Rossi the relationships between things are indicative of an order or harmony when they arouse our feeling and the amazement, or sense of the fantastic, derives from the ability that possesses the reality of making clear the nature of things, the feeling, through the order that produced it: "Architecture makes objects or values higher. From visual expression to ideas that mean something to man as they order reality. Only through this order, only recognizing their mutual dependence, things come to have meaning and meaning" [9].

Here the architect is freed from being a slave to the use of the building(s) and just like a painter freely arranges objects and things according to specific objects, things, and relationships. This type of architect composes a city of memories that is dead or "painted architecture" [10] in its nature, made of inert fragments of reality such as towers, churches, town halls, chimneys, and schools, emptied of the presence of mankind but paradoxically revealing an intense interior life responding to our emotive, symbolic, and ideal investments [11].

It is surprising how the composition within an urban scene of heterogeneous fragments, citations negotiated from the inventory deposited in the collective memory, produces an architecture from unpredictable outcomes. The freedom to assemble fragments or figures, their remounting in a strange context that does not belong to them, without having to confront the urban structure, has emphasised in the compositional experience processed by the students how effective and decisive reading of the urban project is where the figurative strength is the result of thinking according to the relationships between the objects.

The most important results seem to be the ability of the compositional game to lead to the production of a multiplicity of images in which formal eclecticism combines historically diverse objects and translates them into the evocation of unexpected meanings, which is far from a search for originality. Individual as forms that do not seem to be more meaningful since they are linked to a moment in history, recontextualised, making their meaning recognisable, or in recomposing them within the context, they produce a transformation of the meaning that makes them extraordinarily actual in the present. Mute, if not even dead, the forms regenerate. Their destiny does not end in a tragic epilogue, since they become available to new life cycles, to new beginnings, showing all their vitality [12].

So the intention is not to be occupied with ideas of logical-formal building that regulate the construction of the project. A concept of beauty born out of studying the plan must correspond to this, the main place where the idea takes shape while the conclusion sought after is a reflection on the interactions between the forms in the space that aim to manifest the life of the forms according to precise relationships. Consequently, the beautiful is not produced by the application of schemas or principles but trusts its own representation to its evocation, its rhythm, its view, and to its movement. Using the stated purpose of communicating the meanings and reawakening memories in the form in order to rediscover the connection between reality and imagination: “true wonder is made of memory, not of novelty” [13]. A reading starting from the forms in the space that highlights the relationships that the imagination through the memory institute between the parts in order to “develop the images the memory has treasured into new relationships” [14].

In Aldo Rossi the memory builds relationships to bring out life and its memories in reality. The objects of affection that Aldo Rossi composes are not intended as a simple quotation of history, but as a series of things that “serve design and memory” [15]. The Rossiano project is the place where the combinations, the relationships between things seek a “primeval and real innocence of form”, where the poetic figures of the sea, of summer, of the party are the interpretative keys to the emergence in the project of a fantastic size [16].

The amazement, the sense of the fantastic that reality produces is nothing but the aesthetic emotion that comes from recognizing the nature of the form and the system of order that relates the parts between them the way in which the emotion is manifested. Emotion that the poet brings out by magic from the form and that in the form is hidden as memory: “And as soon as I recognized the taste of the piece of maddalena soaked in the lime tea that my aunt used to give me (...) all Combray and its surroundings, all this that is taking shape and solidity, has risen, city and gardens, from my cup of tea” [17]. After all, the amazement we experience is nothing but the amazement of memory that rediscovers dreams and representations of childhood: “After all, our memory is often a memory of childhood” [18]. A discovery that brings us back to a state of happiness and bliss when, children, we lived an ideal fraternity with the world of living beings and with the fairy and mysterious world of its representations. If we think for a moment about the objects we love, we understand that they belong to us because they incorporate the memories, the expectations and the passions, the sufferings and the desire for happiness of each one of us. We give meaning to them and attribute sentimental qualities because we recognize a personal history of ours that often coincides with facts and events that have gone far in time: “The symbols that each of us carries within us, and suddenly finds himself in the world and recognizes them and his heart has a gasp, they are his authentic memories. They are also true discoveries (...) This is so true that of any individual, even the most cultured and creative, it can be argued that the symbols of childhood are not rooted in his book or academic meetings, but in the mythical and almost elementary discoveries of childhood, in useful and unconscious contacts with the daily and domestic realities that have welcomed him at the beginning (...)”[19].

An object of affection is always a rediscovery of lost childhood with its discoveries full of wonder. In the same way, the forms that Aldo Rossi proposes in the project are forms of affection that welcome the lost memory of a rediscovered experience. There are numerous examples where pieces of the city are compositions of rediscovered architectures, forms of affection, recomposed even in an unprecedented way, capable of evoking meanings, building infinite relationships with the city, proposing through the imagination an alternative to reality. In this sense,

architecture can be understood as a combinatorial art with the aim of bringing feelings back to light through memory. Its task is to arrange the parts according to measurable relationships that know how to move, that is to return through the forms that emotion of which we have experienced experience in real life. Imagination through memory seems to have as its objective the recreation of that dormant emotion. In fact, after the loss of the function, forms remain the emotion that produced them. Just like the table set in Aldo Rossi's drawings, where the precise relationships between things bring out the true meaning of life. What remains after use is the form. A form full of life that becomes recognizable when, paradoxically, life has passed and remains in the arrangement of objects on the table. And so, of the ancient monuments we want to rediscover and re-propose in the project that strong emotion that we have tried to contemplate their spaces. Spaces that, despite having lost their function, keep the memory of the elevated feelings, of the values that produced it hidden in the form: "In the extreme case of the loss of its functionality or of its integrity, a construction continues to put in place a charge over time. that we call poetic: it continues to arouse emotions in us, albeit different from those it originally caused" [20].

In this sense, the ossuary of the cemetery of San Cataldo, immortalized by a snapshot of Luigi Ghirri, establishes with the rarefied atmosphere of the surrounding landscape meaningful relationships: "Aldo Rossi's architecture gives me this feeling of wonder, because in every point, moving in the space that is, movement of light, becomes like the propagation and multiplication of an echo that disperses between memories and inventions.



**Fig. 1.** Luigi Ghirri, Ossuary of the cemetery of San Cataldo.

And so, there is also a joyful aspect, in this magically wandering inside a wonderful toy, get lost and find yourself among the gears and wheels, as if we could understand the secret that arouses so much surprise and amazement in us. And it is precisely in this lost in the ruins of an architecture (...) that Rossi's architecture responds to our need and desire for the wonderful" [21].

Certainly the city is the place where feelings are manifested. If it is true, as Hölderlin states, that "poetically man inhabits on this earth", then they must be allowed to dwell in form and in things and, for this, the city must prepare itself to favor the event, even that unexpected. Even the feelings "are repeated every evening on the stage with impressive punctuality" [22]. And it is relationships, more than things, that arouse our memory, that allows life to happen. The forms of affection that Aldo Rossi recovers from his poetic imaginary, are forms that belong to history, even the personal one, but which, inserted within the urban landscape, not only end up taking on new meanings, but allow constructing endless analogous cities.

The Theatre of the World in Venice, an evocation of towers and lighthouses left in place as a reminder of theatrical constructions for the water festival, is verification of this intention, this understanding. In fact, its advance along the Venetian canals and its crossing of the Adriatic Sea until it arrives in the city of Dubrovnik produces infinite and unexpected relationships with the city by constructing equally infinite and unexpected urban scenes rich in memories and suggestions. So the theatre placed in the space formed by the basin of Saint Mark dialogues from a distance with the "fixed points" that structure the city of Venice. The buildings of the small piazza, the church of the Salute, but above all the Palladian architecture of the three churches of San Giorgio Maggiore, Le Zitelle, and the Redentore become the buildings favoured in the construction of an imagined Venice affected by a dialogue from distance.

The inclusion of the theater of the World that Aldo Rossi proposes in a real place like that of the Rialto bridge highlights a formal logical operation where the meanings that emerge unexpectedly from the composition represent the "true and authentic sense of reality" [23].

## Conclusion

We can think of interpreting the Aldo Rossi's work through the term fantastic, where the term fantastic, different from fantasy, refers to the intrinsic nature of the architectural work. Fantastic nature - as an imagined reality that overlaps with actual reality - manifests itself through the relationships that things, the parts of reality, establish between them. Through the relationships the project manifests its meaning. Through relationships we reach the characterization of the architectural work. The Rossiano project is the place where the combinations, the relationships between things arouses our memory, making reality full of meaning and therefore more authentic and real.

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