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L'azzurro del cielo - The blue sky - of Modena.

Abstract

The projects built by Aldo Rossi represent a coherent biographical journey that, as it unfolds, more explicitly clarifies an original process of composition and decomposition of discrete pieces within a typological reasoning of architecture that is essentially aimed at interpreting a whole host of ever-changing themes. At the same time, his written reflections produced during the same timeframe, jotted down in the Quaderni Azzurri contain some profound general insights into the concept of life and death, partly conditioned by the serious car accident that left him bedridden and immobile in hospital for a significant length of time. With this in mind, the extension of the San Cataldo cemetery is what we perhaps still to this day believe is the original example of this process of assembly and disassembly as played out in the urban dimension; but this primordial machine of Modena is also the direct consequence of those existential reflections on death and the structure of his deeply marked, ailing body as a series of discrete elements - fractures to be put back together.

Keywords

Aldo Rossi — City of the dead — Typology — Composition — Memory

In mid-1971, in April, on the Istanbul road between Belgrade and Zagreb, I was involved in a serious car accident. Perhaps it was out of that accident, as I have said before, that in that small hospital in Slavonski Brod, the design for the cemetery in Modena was born, just as my youth came to an end. (Rossi 1990, p.22).

Without any particular emphasis – as is proper for any architect's design process – reason and emotion, logic and autobiography lay out, in a tight and at times disorienting dialogue, Aldo Rossi's initial reflections – both written and drawn – on the topic of life and death. Reflections that, in our eyes, unquestionably coincide with one of the most important projects in Rossi's poetics: the San Cataldo cemetery in Modena, designed in collaboration with Gianni Braghieri starting with the 1971 competition. The great city of the dead – still unfinished to this day – which, in the clear urban metaphor, distils the procedure of arranging and recomposing volumes, fragments of architecture or pure forms according to a profound typological reasoning, already exercised in the many projects that were precursors to his contribution to Modena and intent on addressing the interpretation of the theme of death and the rite of burial within the modern city. A method that was already consolidated and known to critics despite the scant number of works he had built up to that point¹, with the Modenese project marking not only the creator's declared transition from youth to a more mature stage of life, but also the deviation necessary to allow for his architecture to take on an increasingly autonomous character, made particularly evident by the introduction of colour alongside his rigorous white, marking the moment when he started to gradually gain an awareness of the role of colour and material that later became decisive in his subsequent architectures².

To those engaging with Rossi's oeuvre today, it is clear that for the Milanese architect, some projects more than others contribute to the almost yielding evidence of a strong link between individual occasions, specific architectural themes, more disciplinary musings and more general and often personal questions, deeper meanings, existential questions, finally approaching that «baseline emotional nucleus», the original canvas for his *Scientific Autobiography* in which certain "chosen" projects considered iconic in Rossi's journey – one of which is the San Cataldo cemetery – become a running theme, the thread of a line of thinking that almost becomes an obsession which he returned to time and again in order to establish the definitive link between life and architecture.

These are two parallel souls in the figure of Aldo Rossi – not, as many have often proposed, two distinct periods following on from one another, but two souls sharing a weighted coexistence to do justice to a precise idea that is also the most original image of that *architecture of the city* a title so hotly competed for between monuments and residences, between architecture and humanity. In every one of his projects, it is as if one of the two terms momentarily prevailed over the other, according to the reasons for the interpretation of the theme, both of them – translated into reality and imagination – remaining ever-present, yet alternating their roles and importance in the search for a certain adequacy of expression, a compositional clarity that uses an ever-changing hand to trace Rossi's way of describing – or rather, interpreting – the world.

In the increasingly valuable *Quaderni azzurri* number 9 bears the title *Architecture the Modena cemetery. 5 August 1971 - 10 October 1971* with a number scribbled just above it: "40", Aldo Rossi's age, confirming – should there still be any need – his continuous overlapping of thoughts, life and design in a single drawing that is drawn by the mind even before the hand has produced it. The first few pages of the slim notebook divulge his thoughts on the matter:

This collection of buildings, taken as a whole, constitutes a city; in the city, the private relationship with death once again becomes a civil relationship with the institution. As such, the cemetery is still a public building, with all the necessary clarity and rationality of pathways that that entails, and with a proper use of land, extremely closed-off by a wall with windows. The melancholy of the theme means that it is not far removed from other public buildings. (Rossi 1999a)

The osteological project, the construction of which started in 1976, is interpreted by Rossi and Braghieri as a fragment of the city, part of it yet separated from its context; a vast and imposing skeleton stretched out across the landscape as in the most abstract image, irremediably conditioned by its creator's reference to that car accident which, forcing him to remain immobile in a foreign hospital room contemplating the fractures of his body, became its perhaps involuntary figurative origin, waiting to be pieced back together into a new unity.

But beyond any singular and autobiographical image, the project – which won an international competition that saw the seamless juxtaposition of revolutionary visions, on the one hand, and purely functionalistic exercises on the other³ – is configured as a vast, open-air enclosure which, at almost exactly double the size of Cesare Costa's Monumental Cemetery, to which it is connected by means of a mechanism located below the Jewish cemetery, combines volumes that are monumental in both line and mass in a composition that transcribes the rite of places of death in a story that is an



Fig. 1

Aldo Rossi. The cemetery in Modena, September 2017. Photo by Annalucia D'Erchia.

urban route; the sacred space of memory in a city.

The landscape, here the physical boundary between the city and the “simple” outskirts⁴ without any particular quality – «largely undistinguished»⁵ in Rossi’s words – is an indispensable instrument of the project not so much for any particular intrinsic value, but rather due to the clear, critically chosen dialogue as masterfully conveyed to us visually by the photographic campaign that Luigi Ghirri produced on several occasions⁶ in the infinite construction site in Modena. Even in those faded, opaque or sunbaked colours so typical of the Modenese photographer’s technique and poetics, the vast windowed enclosure inhabited by *abandoned architectures* that are almost metaphysical in nature confidently reaffirms its post as a solitary sentinel of the passing of time, straddling the status of building site and ruin.

As in Rossi’s own lucid words (1999a) «larchitecture, often driven out of urban centres, found the cemetery as a subject to be a lofty undertaking, quickly surpassing the individual monument and making it sublime, just like hope, ‘ultima dea’, fleeing from the tombs».

In its many subsequent versions, the project never strays too far from the original idea of a familiar architecture of monumental dimensions, a docile and protected enclosed form, almost a founding city imagined in its entirety in one fell swoop – a city as a final resting place for the dead and one of memory for the living – which establishes urban relationships through entrances, pathways, pauses or long perspectives that envisage a unity between the Christian and Jewish cemeteries, together with the new extension; in this project, the analogies with the spaces of the city, perhaps even of an ideal city, are translated into the design of an extensive facility in which houses and monuments, streets and squares alternate like lines

**Fig. 2-3**

Aldo Rossi. L'architetto e la città, MAXXI Rome – section dedicated to the Modena Cemetery Project.

and points on a vast urban scene to convey the intimate link between life and death, because «this house of the dead has a time that is linked to life». (Rossi 1999a).

The galleries of the columbaria, spread over several levels around the perimeter of the enclosure, like streets of the dead – or rather, deck-access blocks of flats – are defined in the honest interpretation of the typological form that is necessary even before the geometrical form; in the centre, meanwhile, the representation of the rite of death intertwines the spaces for collective ceremonies in a tight sequence: the shrine to those who fell in war – a cube «with the structure of a house with no floors» that is an abandoned house – the lined-up bodies of the ossuaries – composed in a «regular succession inscribed in a sloping triangle» – the mass grave – a cone whose ancient form is that of a «collective tomb» – at the end of the ceremony.

Shadow, the final actor in the project, throws the geometry of the spaces into relief, creating sharp perspectives, measuring the places that are compressed or dilated in various parts, demonstrating the strength of that *Architecture of shadows* admired a few years previously, in 1967, in the work of Étienne-Louis Boullée and transcribed with a clear sense of identification in the introduction to the. *An essay eon Art*: «The Architecture of Shadows thus becomes the link and the search for the principles of architecture in nature that is B.'s primary concern.» Moreover, it is difficult for the writer to imagine the Modena project ever coming to fruition without the fortuitous "encounter" between Rossi and Boullée⁷. At the same time, shadows become such a marked stylistic signature of the design of this project that they overturn their canonical relationship in the many axonometric areas in which large black silhouettes rush towards us.

«The material of the cemetery is concrete, the plaster of houses and factories. Where use requires it, stone – both white and grey – is used»⁸.

The blue sky which was the motto of the project submitted for the competition – an explicit reference to Georges Bataille's novel (published as *Blue of Noon* in English) – is actually interpreted specifically in the chromatic definition of the triangular rooftops of the large, inhabited boundary to establish an ideal fixed background, the memory of a possible blue sky in Modena.



Fig. 4
Aldo Rossi. *L'architetto e la città*, MAXXI Rome – Project for the Marchesi Chapel at Bergamo Hospital, 1978.

After designing the San Cataldo cemetery, Aldo Rossi continued – in discrete episodes – to engage both his architecture and his thinking with the theme of death, including closer to home, in Lombardy. In the continuous parallel between the *chouse of the living* and the *house of the dead* – between the city and its memory – in Ponte Sesto (Rozzano), the Milanese architect imagined lending form to that civil sense of the end of life which, in his realistic adherence to the Lombard character, becomes a place in the city or indeed a part of it – a city whose deepest nature he revives.

Although it is but a small project, I could write a great deal about the cemetery in Rozzano cemetery, even comparing it to what I created in Modena. Unfortunately, it is nearby a horrible cemetery from the 1960s, and certainly has nothing like Costa's cemetery or the Jewish cemetery in Modena around it. (Rossi 1999b)

Rossi contrasts the complex yet silent concrete-clad “machine of death” – which perhaps seeks, albeit unsuccessfully, to work on the utopia dreamt up in Rozzano itself in 1959 by Nanda Vigo for a futuristic prototype of a vertical cemetery⁹, – with a new fragment of the city: quiet, modest, civil

and profoundly collective, the result of those *pastoral journeys*¹⁰ interpreted as a tangible opportunity to listen to the memory of the places most familiar to him in great depth. A small urban project that seems intent on using just a few gestures to restore a more human dimension, one of silence and remembrance, even in this strip of land squeezed by the most recent transformations, establishing a polite dialogue with popular tradition so earnest that it may in fact confuse contemporary visitors as to the exact chronological order of the two cemetery buildings.

The project report – which, as is often the case with Rossi, goes far beyond a simple description of the envisioned architecture, in this case embarking upon new reflections on the various possibilities of the “idea of the cemetery” – presents a bold reaffirmation of Rossi’s “credo”: «this is the authentically civil character of the cemetery, a part of the city where hope has not fled – as our great poet said – but rather where hope has been sublimated into that incomprehensible feeling that we have towards the dead»¹¹.

In the light of this, the extension to the cemetery, built between 1989 and 1999, is defined first and foremost as the construction of a road, an avenue with every last urban element carefully designed, right down to the lampposts and benches, linking the entrance to the cemetery with the small chapel located at the other end. Even in the context of this small project on the southern outskirts of Milan, where it borders with Pavia, the civil rule of architecture becomes a metaphor from which to glean the more general meaning of the project.

Very few signs make up the extension, which quietly, unassumingly doubles the surface area of the existing cemetery, in an attempt to blend in with the surrounding space: a path is marked by an aligned series of porticoed buildings which house the columbaria, dropping down from two storeys to one as they approach the sacred central space, serving to accentuate the strength of perspective and the perception of the ritual journey. The two collective buildings round off this highly ordered composition, following the pattern of the general design and positioning themselves to mark the focal points of a plan underpinned and governed by a precise geometry. The chapel and crematorium stand out as distinct from the burial volumes, representing the rite of death in the narration of a space shared by a community, once again the consolation of remembrance.

No pretence of sacredness seems to have pursued in this project: on the contrary, a domestic, intimate, down-to-earth character defines the stylistic signature of the general composition, except for the definition of the central places which necessarily take on, as already mentioned, a collective value. The avenue, which is almost perfectly symmetrical, concludes with the place where the ritual is performed and, in the median, changes to accommodate the crematorium, a filtering space that eases the transition between the avenue itself – with its almost urban character – and the area for burials on land, more traditionally linked to the rural landscape. This space, enclosed by an old wall made of Lombard bricks, is the place where in the initial sketches for the project, Rossi envisioned placing a series of chapels for the nobility; indeed, he included it in many of his preparatory drawings, echoing and anticipating his studies for the family chapels in Giussano (1980) and Lambrate (1995), as well as the almost unknown chapel for the hospital in Bergamo¹².

The study of pure geometric forms, paired with the iconic idea of creating the suggestion of a home, define the different projects for family tombs with fifteen years between them, both different yet ever united by the idea

of a possible unique characteristic, namely that of a home “for the dead”; with this in mind, whilst in Giussano the interior section conveys the theatrical tale made expressive by the wooden reconstruction of a Roman door, Lambrate lies on the other end of the scale, with the small house-cum-tomb – bereft as it is of any decorative intentions – sculpted into its peremptory form of a parallelepiped with a pyramid roof. Bricks, stone and iron – in other words, the catalogue of materials so dear to Rossi’s heart in defining the character of his architecture – here firmly remains that which most faithfully marks its physical belonging to his home region of Lombardy.

Three different scales thus summarise Rossi’s experience with the theme of death through design, bringing us back to that idea of the *architecture of the city* which encapsulates and summarises all possible interpretations thereof. A founding city, an urban project and a domestic space employ different weights and measures to express different facets of the civil value of a theme which for Rossi, was suspended between life and memory, between reason and its celebration.

Notes

¹ Please refer to the critical readings on this topic which from that moment on have also been a point of reference for Aldo Rossi himself: Bonfanti E. (1970) - “Elementi e costruzione. Note sull’architettura di Aldo Rossi”, in: *Controspazio*, n. 10, e Savi V. (1985), *L’Architettura di Aldo Rossi*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1985.

² As noted by Ferlenga A. in the context of the conference “Spazi Sacri: Il cimitero San Cataldo di Aldo Rossi e Gianni Braghieri”, 27 september 2019, Cersaie, Bologna.

³ The results of the competition and some projects are collected in *Casabella* n. 372 december 1972.

⁴ The term refers to the “naive functionalism” faced by Aldo Rossi within the *L’Architettura della città*.

⁵ Rossi A., Q/A 9 op.cit. The notebook begins with the first inspection of the Modena cemetery on the occasion of the collection of the documents of the Competition Announcement.

⁷ The first photos of Luigi Ghirri at the Modena Cemetery are contained in *Lotus International* n. 38, 1983.

⁸ In particular, in the definition of the “Exalted Rationalism of B.” in which Rossi clarifies his interest in the relationship between logic and art, rationalism and autobiography.

⁹ Rossi A., “relazione di progetto per l’ampliamento del Cimitero di Modena”. In: A. Ferlenga (1999b), *Aldo Rossi. Tutte le opere*. Electa, Milan.

¹⁰ The project is published in: *Domus*, 423, febbraio 1965.

¹¹ The term “pastoral journeys” refers to what Rossi told about projects in the Lombardy region that remain a constant commitment even when engaged in projects all over the world. In: Rossi A., “Q/A”. In: Id., *I Quaderni Azzurri 1968-1992*, op. cit. 38, 20 ottobre 1988-27 febbraio 1989 op.cit.

¹² Rossi A (1999b), “relazione di progetto per l’ampliamento del Cimitero di Ponte Sesto a Rozzano”. In: A. Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi. Tutte le opere*. Electa, Milan.

¹³ The model and some almost unpublished drawings are exhibited at the exhibition “Aldo Rossi. L’Architetto e la città”, edited by Alberto Ferlenga, MAXXI Rome 10 march 2021 > 17 october 2021.

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