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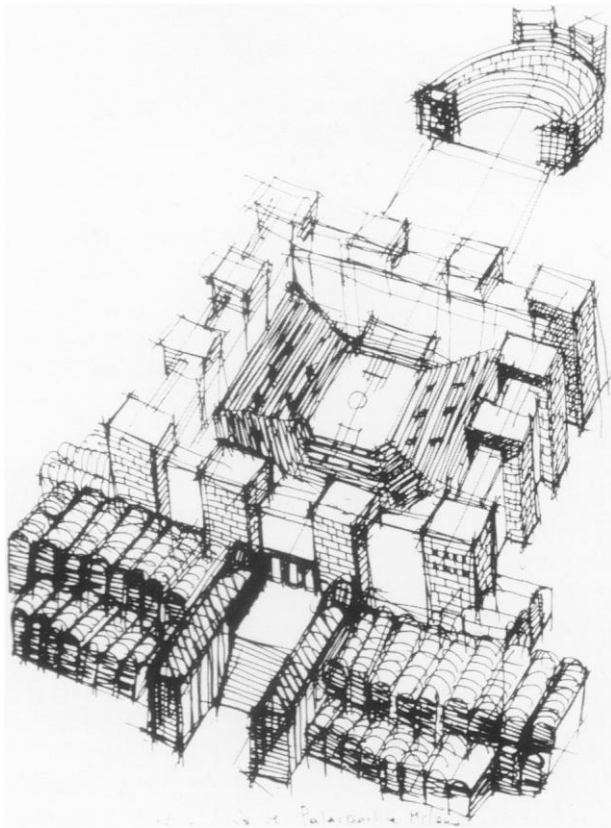
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Aldo Rossi's Palazzo dello Sport

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In his book *Architecture of the City* (1966), Italian architect Aldo Rossi outlined a theory of the relationship between individual buildings and the larger context, a relationship that he has continued to explore in his projects. Although his built work has been extensively examined, his unbuilt work tends to receive less attention. This essay examines the as-yet unbuilt project for a sports facility for the city of Milan.



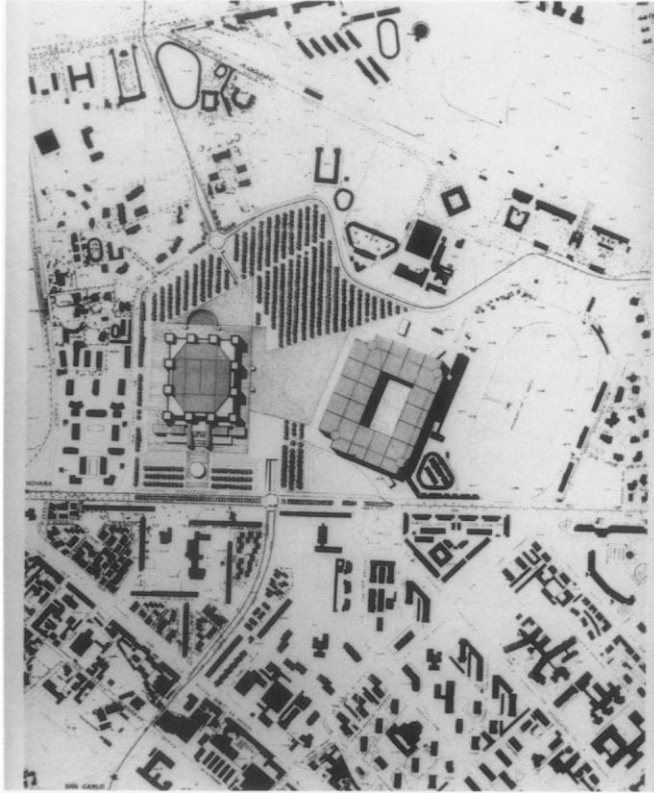
1. Aldo Rossi, Palazzo dello Sport, Milan, 1988: sketch.

"EVERY PHRASE I WRITE IMPLIES THE WHOLE, AND THEREFORE ALWAYS THE same thing. I am nothing if not glimpses of a single object observed from different angles."¹

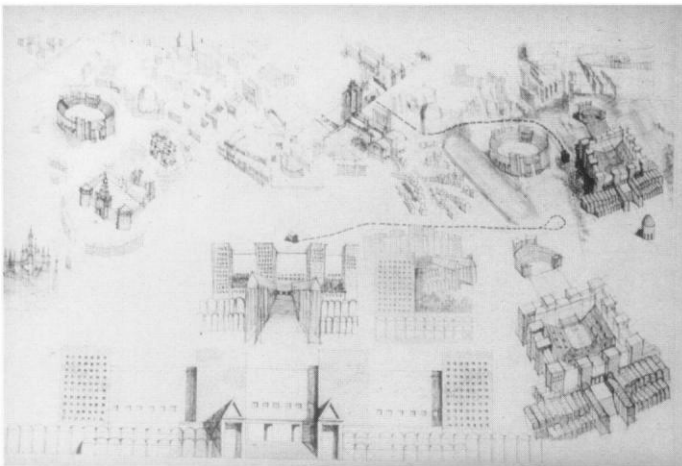
This passage from Ludwig Wittgenstein reveals the form and meaning of Aldo Rossi's projects and his conception of architecture and the city, which can be shared by all. Because his designs recount some of the most important inventions in Italian architecture over the past three decades, each of his projects constitutes a new chapter of a story that involves others and, at the same time, a further fragment in the reconstruction of a latent urban image.

Rossi's fondness for the idea of the "fragment" is always present in his projects. With Rossi, however, the fragment does not evoke melancholy allusions of an architecture bereft of identity and therefore seeking resuscitation through either postmodern overdoses or the cynical self-indulgence of someone like Daniel Libeskind, who simply offers an elegant depiction of the phenomenology of the dissolution of urban geometry. "In Italian," Rossi explains, "'fragment' means a small piece broken off of something. It therefore expresses a hope, yet another hope, rather than a leftover, which instead expresses a surfeit of broken and abandoned things."² The fragments of Rossi's cities, then, represent not only a memory of architectural and monumental values in the city, but they also recover them as the site of their survival, the starting points for sketching out a new, rebuilt urban geography. Rossi's Palazzo dello Sport in Milan offers a new possibility for a monument in this imaginary topography, a building-city that adds another essential element to Rossi's analogous collage of architecture.

The idea for a new Palasport emerged when the previous building suffered unfortunate and premature damage. Rossi's project offers an innovative conception of a sports and entertainment facility in a metropolitan area. Rossi explains in the project description that San Siro is developing into an active, year-round urban center, a pole of attraction for the polycentric region and for the outlying territory beyond its immediate borders.³ The intention, then, is not simply to erect a cathedral for major sports events that will be silent and semideserted 345 days of the year but rather a fully functioning center for the entire population. "This new leisure time 'citadel,' because of its system of urban infrastructures, is offered as the primary organizing element of the entire greenbelt and leisure area on the western flank of Milan."⁴ The new complex is planned to contain a wide range of services. Surrounding the main sports and concert arena will be smaller training and practice fields, gymnasiums, hotels, restaurants, gallery space, conference facilities, and small theaters. Beside the propylaea marking the main entrance is a shopping center specializing in sporting goods, leisure activities, theater, media, and culture. A second, smaller open arena closes the normal sequence of the modern metropolis and disperses it in the surrounding green space.



2. Aldo Rossi, Palazzo dello Sport, Milan, 1988: site plan.



3. Aldo Rossi, Palazzo dello Sport, Milan, 1988: front elevation, sketches of site and of the Palazzo dello Sport in its context.

"Rossi's work," wrote Alan Colquhoun, "attempts to exclude all but the most general types and to avoid the circumstantial. Particular figures are used not because of the associations they arouse within a particular context or in relation to particular functions, but because of their power to suggest archetypes, archetypes which are seen as belonging to the autonomous tradition of architecture itself."⁵ The use of simple, immediately recognizable forms that are not simply quotations, remains the essential foundation of Rossi's "composition by elements," where "the use of complete parts as elements, as true architectures, is a precise architectural choice."⁶

Progressively, however, the exaltation of one or another element either by formal treatment or by sheer size—cupola, column, wall—inflects the compositional will generated by the site and, above all, by the project's time frame. In Milan, as in the Centro Torri in Parma and in many other recent buildings, Rossi envisions a castelated citadel—an imposing, fortified, and closed complex. The thick walls, marked by stone towers and containing service wings, inevitably recall the medieval city, and the larger commercial mall that extends below them seems to summon memories of the grand market squares of the past, with separate roofs for each shop and the kind of monumental lightness found in the nineteenth-century construction of Les Halles. The field for external matches and tournaments and the slightly rotated design of the open stadium clearly recall the low and modest mass of the old Milanese arena.

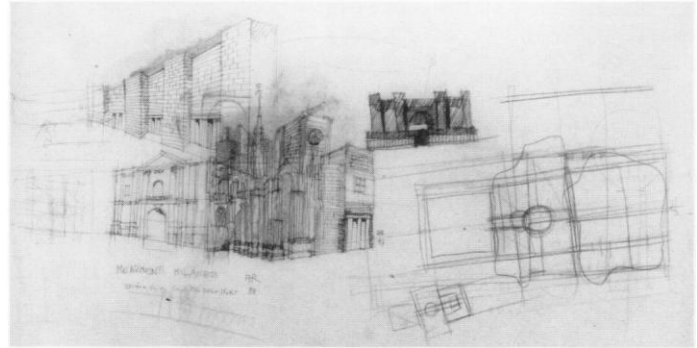
The recurrent image of towers in Rossi's projects during the last decade revolves around his happy intuition concerning the typological ambiguity of vertical structures, symbol and marker of the closing of walled cities, but also a pole of attraction and a summons, the hieratic appeal of monumental urban places. "I remember," wrote Rossi, "how someone commented of the Teatro del Mondo that the lighthouse was made in order to see but also in order to be seen. This is generally true of towers, and especially of bell towers, which are perhaps the most important elements in the landscape."⁷ In the fury of transformation currently bedeviling the metropolis, the towers of Rossi's acropolis suggest a possible alternative to the total renunciation of the modern idea of the city, to the idea of urban space as a sequence of abandoned lots and closed walls, silent shells or genially decorated by Frank Gehry, that gather and protect bureaucratic functions and parking lots. They seem like an attempt to join the irreversible tendency in America and in Europe to transfer urban functions to those enormous, museum-like urban organizers—commercial malls—with the will to design places that continue to define urban forms by means of analogical fragments and memory. "In words and designs," wrote Vittorio Savi in 1976, "Rossi has represented the decomposition of the grand urban center."⁸ What is new today is that this analytical datum becomes the clear and present element of the design process for

Rossi as it is for many other architects. What is singular about Rossi, and at the same time the inevitable continuity of his work, is the attempt to transform the deterioration of an urban form into something positive and to consider the most obvious symbols of the end of a way of thinking about the city—the malls, shopping centers, convention centers, grand interiors—as the possible starting points for a renewed system of urban monuments, perfected and metonymical urban fragments. The American tendency to classify Rossi as a vernacular architect or to link him with people like Robert Venturi or Charles Moore increasingly appears dictated by simplistic analyses remote from the reality of Rossi's work.

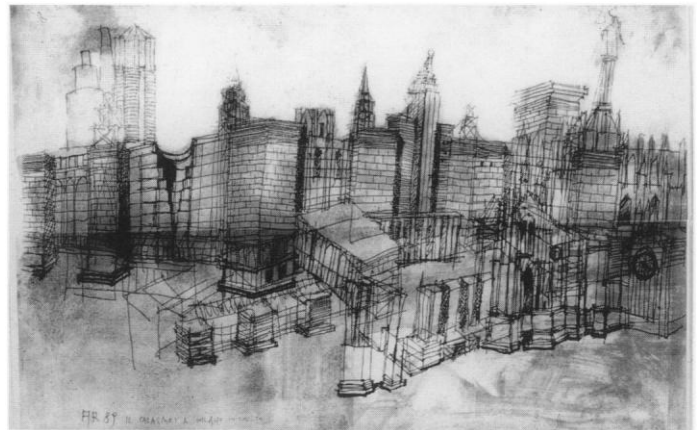
His attention to conflicts and the impossibility of dominating the urban scene draws Rossi nearest to the basic ideas of some deconstructivists and their attention to the disorder of the life and forms of the city. Rossi's response, however, is radically different: If the deconstructivist architects tend to feed passively on this decomposition, critically isolating it and representing its ephemeral elements, Rossi's architecture seems less tied to daily life and the critical event, instead drawing its order and power from within, ready to construct a necessary archaeology of the present.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Pensieri Diversi* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977), p. 28; original edition, *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977).
2. Aldo Rossi, "Frammenti," in A. Ferlenga, ed., *Aldo Rossi Architettura 1959–1987* (Milan: Electa, 1977), p. 7.
3. Gianni Braghieri, ed., *Aldo Rossi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1989), p. 220.
4. Ibid.
5. Alan Colquhoun, "Form and Figure," in *Oppositions* 12 (1978): 35.
6. Ezio Bonfanti, "Note sull'architettura di Aldo Rossi," in *Scritti di Architettura* (Milan: CLUP, 1981), p. 286.
7. Aldo Rossi's essay in M. Baracco and P. Digiuni, eds., *Centro Torri* (Milan: CLUP, 1989), p. 26.
8. Vittorio Savi, *L'architettura di Aldo Rossi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1978), p. 14.



4. Aldo Rossi, "Monumenti Milanesi," 1988: Milanese monuments as they relate to the Palazzo dello Sport.



5. Aldo Rossi, "Il Palasport a Milano," 1988: sketch.