



The Blue of Aldo Rossi's Sky

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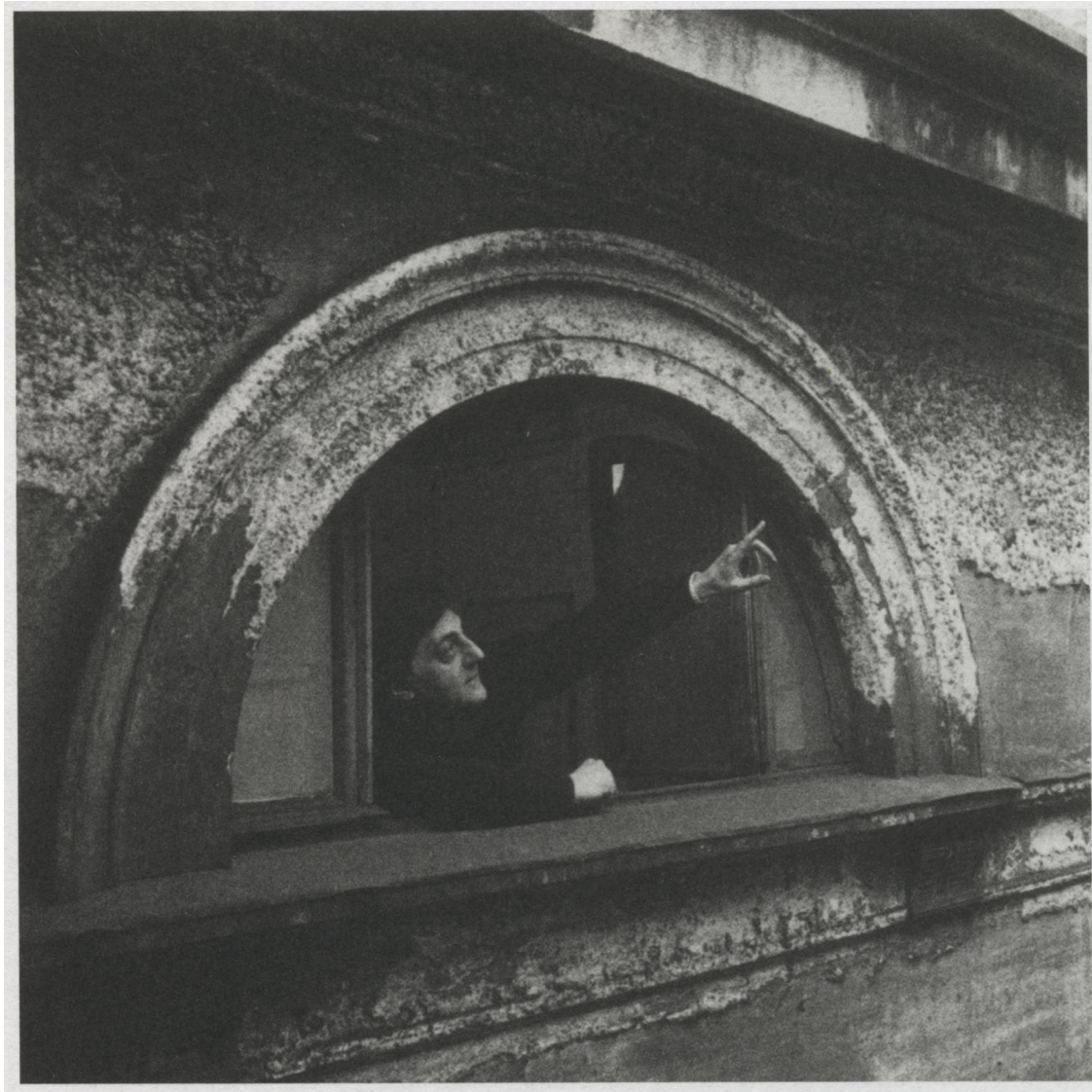


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The Blue of Aldo Rossi's Sky

Diane Ghirardo



In 1972 Italian architect Aldo Rossi won the competition for an addition to the nineteenth-century San Cataldo cemetery in Modena. Like the other participants Rossi submitted three primary views of his first-round proposal along with a project statement titled *L'azzurro del cielo* (The Blue of the Sky).¹ The first image set the project in the context of Cesare Costa's existing nineteenth-century cemetery; the second rendered the plan in more detail and the third was a bird's-eye view. The scheme – a large enclosed rectangle, a high cubic ossuary and a tall conical structure for communal graves and religious services – stood out from the other

entries as much for its monumental and diverse forms as its compelling simplicity.² Within the next two years several magazines published the project and a model, together with some of Rossi's earliest elaborations on the original proposal.³ Although the definitive design remained incomplete until 1976, the project and especially Rossi's variations on the initial drawings soon fired imaginations across the globe. Over the next 26 years, Rossi produced many revisions that would feed a sustained

Aldo Rossi at the window of his studio in via Maddalena, Milan, 1973
© Aldo Rossi Heirs

interest in the project, and secure its status as a favourite emblem of late twentieth-century architecture.

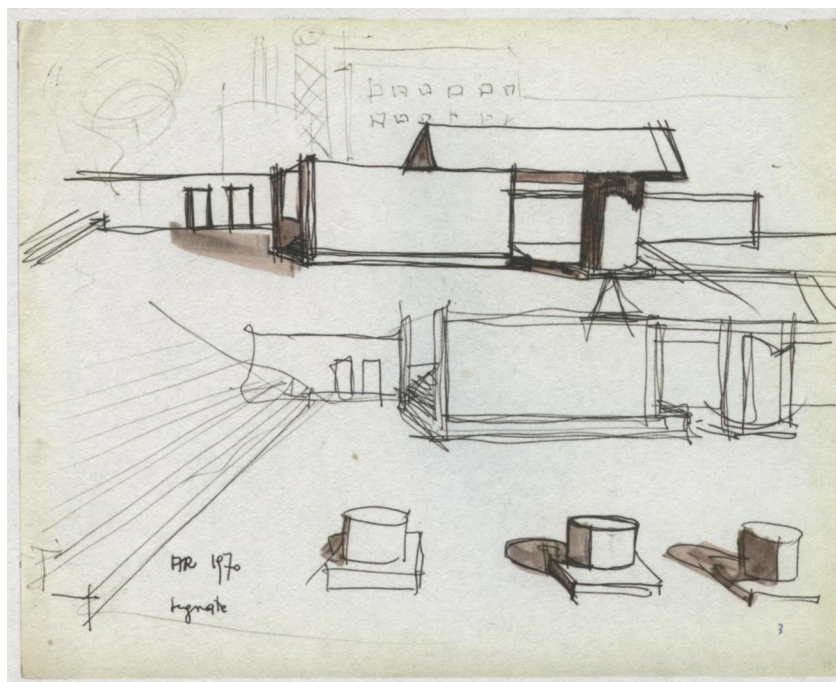
As the new cemetery itself slowly emerged, moving from image to concrete reality, photographs by Luigi Ghirri and others captured its beauty and only added to its fame. But what is it about Rossi's recurring motifs for Modena that exert such an appeal? Certainly, analyses of the cemetery published over the past 40 years have yielded assorted, although rarely satisfactory, interpretations. These typically address the formal programme, and include descriptive accounts of its various features and their

relation to earlier designs as well as to the work of Rossi's contemporaries. But however interesting and at times challenging such discussions are, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that somehow they have missed the point, or even that they ignore Rossi's most important ideas. Architectural historians' beloved formal genealogies, for example, only tell us about what Rossi had observed or studied. For the most part they do not help explain why he chose specific forms for any of his projects, much less lift the enigmatic veils with which he shrouded them.

There is another question, then, about methodology and how historians and critics see a given work. In his introduction to the first English edition of *The Architecture of the City* (published in 1982, 16 years after the original Italian), Rossi described the abstract idea of a book – like a building or a painting – as a collective artefact that 'anyone can modify in his own way, the author notwithstanding. The figure is clear, as in Henry James' "figure in the carpet", but everyone sees it in a different way.' But still, regardless of the clarity of the figure, sometimes people have difficulty in seeing it at all. To be sure, totalising and definitive interpretations are impossible here as elsewhere, but a question nonetheless remains: to what degree have the criticisms of this project depended upon the constellation of interests and concerns of a specific historical moment? Is it possible to identify that which pertains specifically to the project and not only to the contingencies of time and space? As T S Eliot once observed, 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed to the past', and although architecture indeed springs from a particular moment, over time it accretes the memories woven into and layered within a society and its institutions, leading in turn to new understandings and new interpretations.⁵

With this text Rossi challenged the dominance of the modern movement, attacking not only its failure to respect or respond to traditions of building but also its approach to urban living. By disregarding the richness and complexity of the city in history, he argued, modernism ignored the present and embraced a hypothetical future, one he believed was founded on mistaken assumptions and dangerous simplifications. Rossi arrived at this conclusion not by repeating historicist claims, but by actually studying cities to uncover how they worked – and how modernist architecture and city planning did not. What were the

principles and variations that composed the intricately functional and beautiful cities of Italy? To Rossi, the emphasis on functionalism typical of modernism reduced architecture to one or two banal variables, and the reliance on new rules and dogmas (such as the cult of Le Corbusier's five points) suffocated creativity and imagination as much as it undermined any recourse to historical precedents.⁶ In an essay written in 1972, the year of the San Cataldo competition, he argued that 'the misery of Milanese architecture was the misery of modern architecture's ideas'.⁷ That is, the damage wrought by wartime bombs had been multiplied by postwar reconstructions. In particular, he referred to the urban plans for Milan's historic centre, so proudly heralded in the magazine *Urbanistica* in 1956, as a new low in the city's urban history.



In *The Architecture of the City* Rossi went on to formulate a clear theoretical programme that emphasised the significance of typology, not only as a first step in understanding a city and its individual buildings, but also in the development of an appropriate architectural design.⁸ Rossi's reintroduction of the problem of type turned out to be a watershed, for it revived long-forgotten ideas about architecture that suggested a strategy for resisting the banalities of the modern movement. Types, he wrote, are elements that cannot be further reduced: 'no type can be identified with only one form, even if all architectural forms are reducible to types'.⁹ More specifically, 'Type is thus a constant and manifests itself with a character of necessity; but even though it is predetermined it reacts dialectically with technique, function and style, as well as with

Aldo Rossi, *Studies for the Monument to the Partisans, Segrate, 1965-67*
© Aldo Rossi Heirs

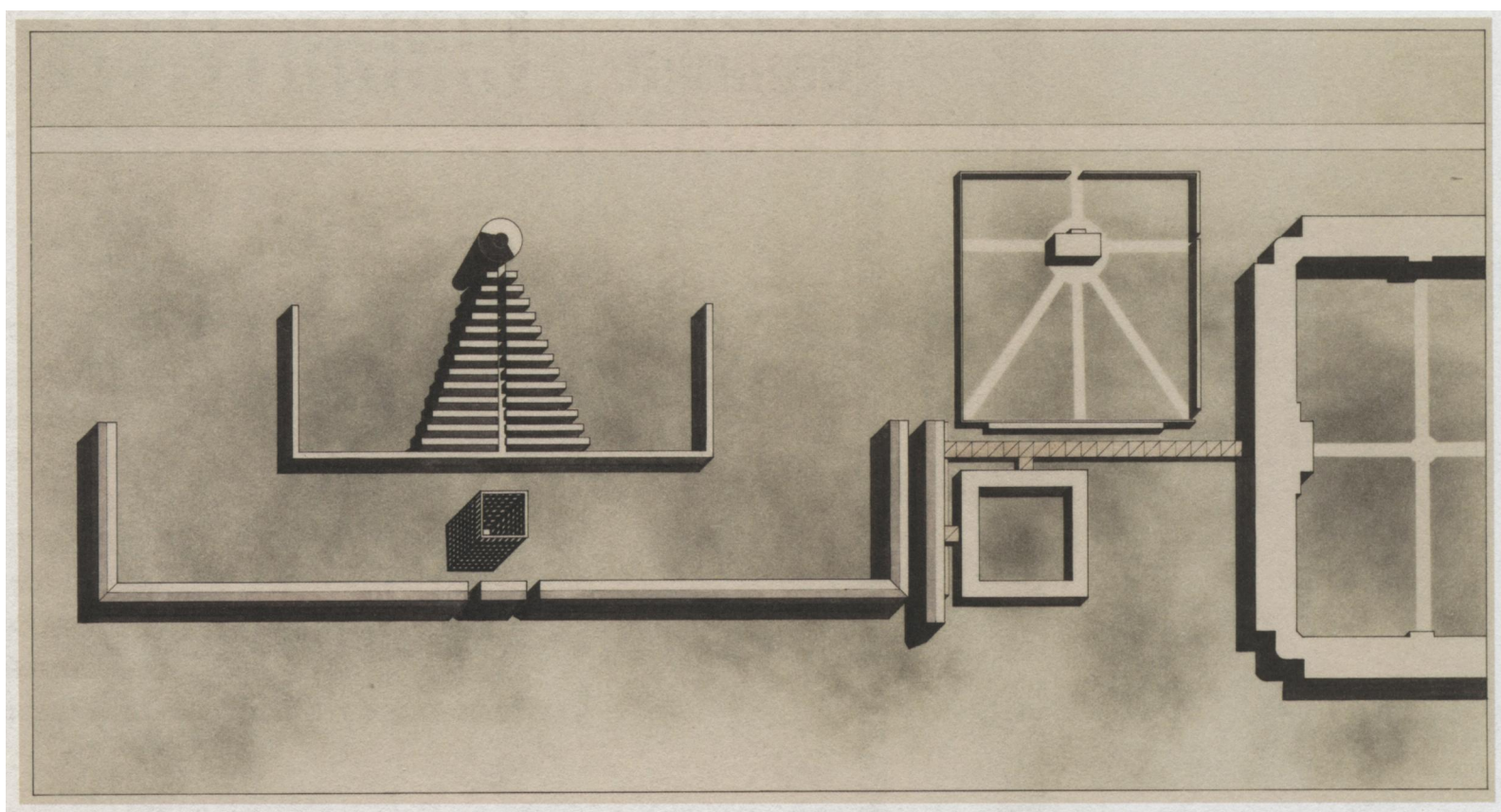
both the collective character and the individual moment of the architectural artefact.'¹⁰

No recipe or new doctrine is being proposed here; on the contrary, typology is an analytical approach through which building and urban types are identified. For Rossi, type was at once *locus* and event, form and meaning. The objective of such analysis, as he saw it, was to understand the particular building, street, neighbourhood or district with regard not just to their forms but to their specific histories prior to an architectural intervention. No dogmas, no prescriptions, no templates: Rossi elaborated the varieties of elements in cities, the diverse forces that produced them, and the need for an architect to study precisely those matters which, as he spelled out in his follow-up book, *A Scientific Autobiography* (1981), configured the second part of the equation – imagination and creativity.

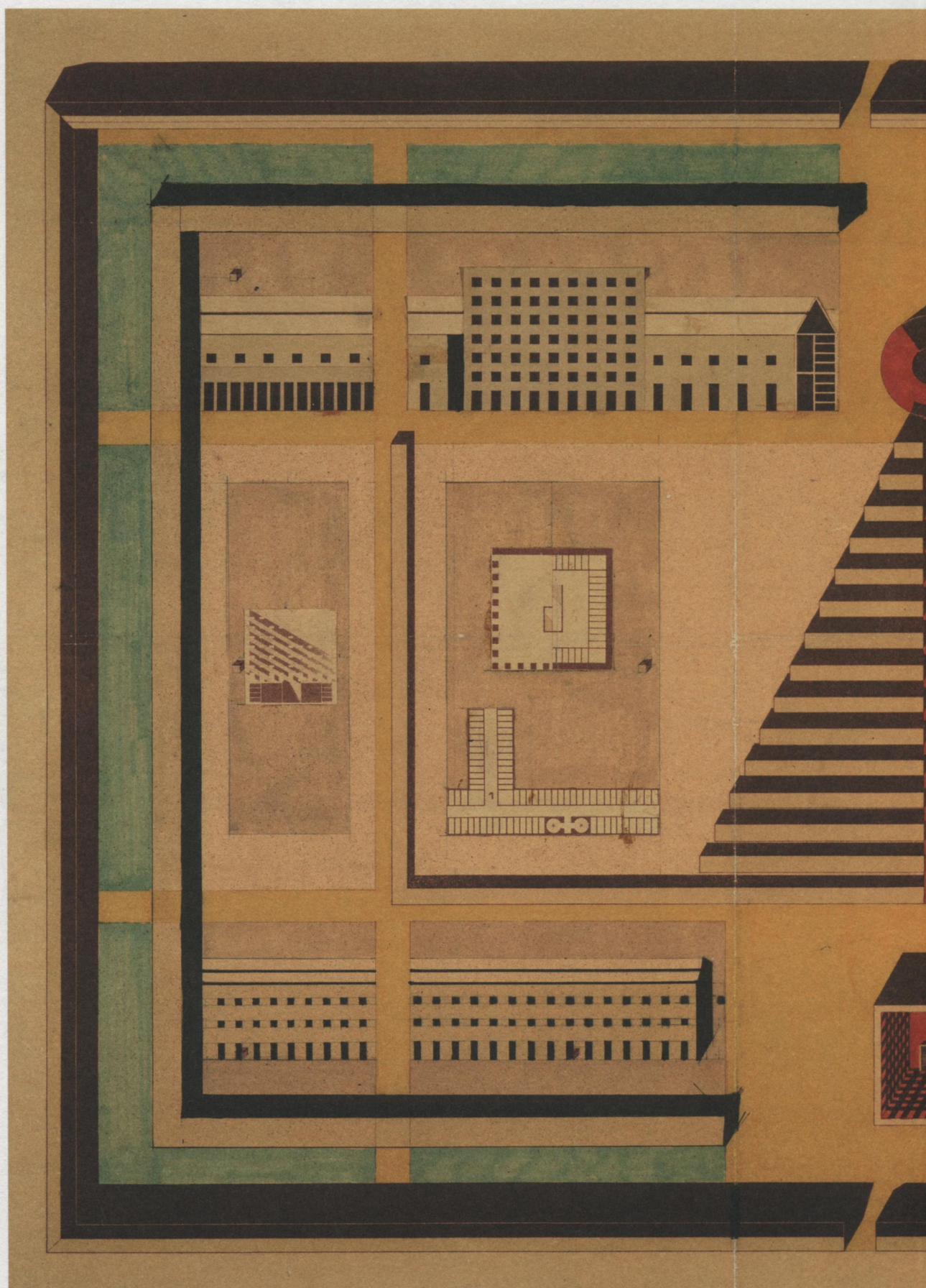
How this unfolded in the cemetery project emerges first through a comparison with the other competition entries, which invariably scattered an array of structures across the site in accordance with modernist planning principles. Rather than repeat the same mistake, Rossi noted that the first problem was to join the new addition to Costa's neo-classical cemetery and an adjacent Jewish cemetery, and took his cues from these existing structures. He enclosed the site as a walled precinct outfitted with buildings of simple, almost primitive architectural forms.¹¹ But in place of the widely spaced individual structures found in

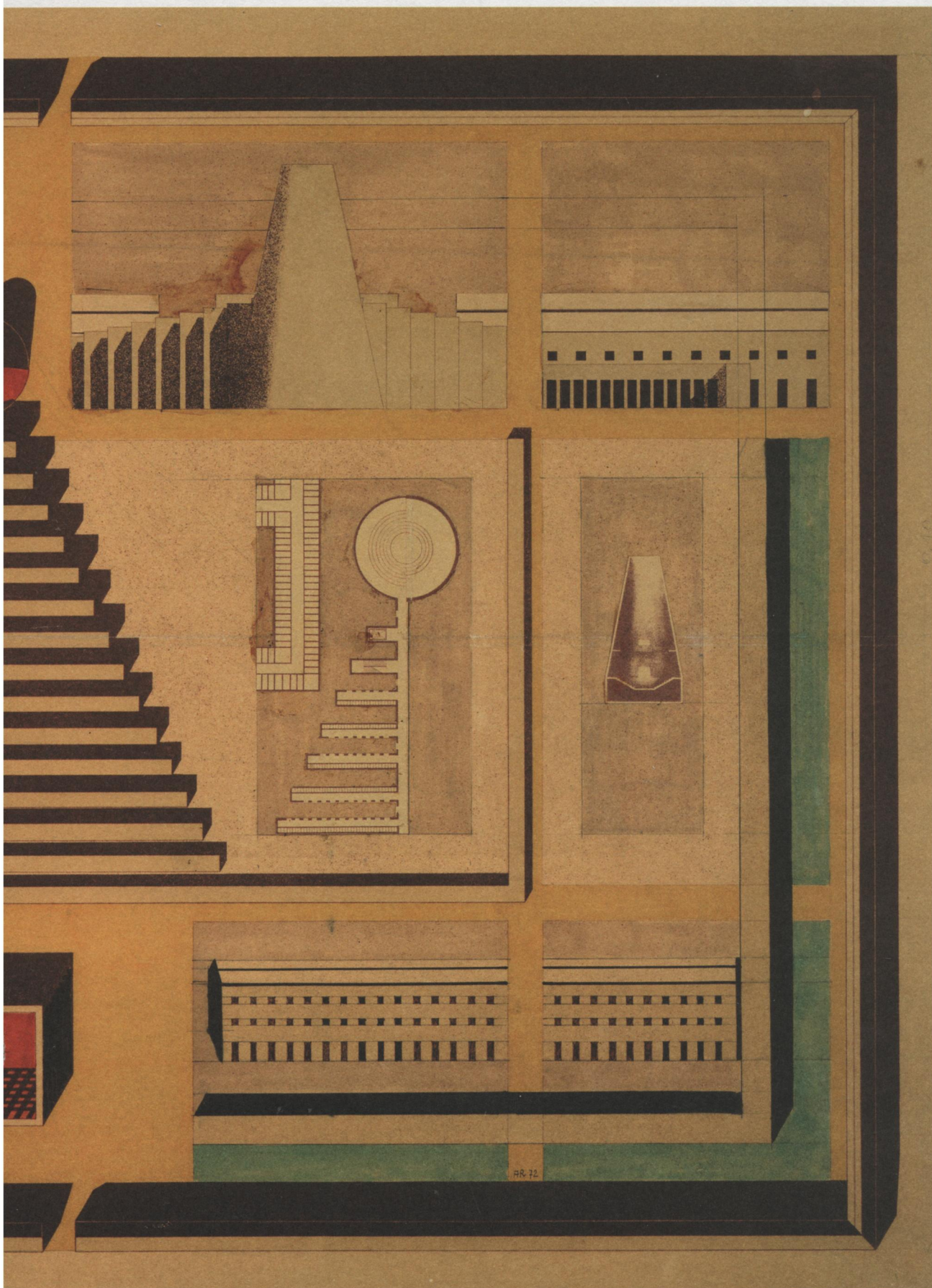
the older cemeteries, he planned three significant and unique forms (cone, ossuary and central triangular spine) surrounded by three-storey rows of *loculi*, or burial recesses.¹² Punctuated by square apertures, the cemetery wall tightly frames the open, grassy courtyards; unlike the courtyard house for the living, Rossi observed, this courtyard for the city of the dead should be empty except for its three monumental structures.

In three key respects, then, Rossi shunned prevailing fashions: first, he departed from the language of the existing Costa cemetery and reduced the features of his own architecture to the most elemental and historically consolidated forms; second, he rejected modernist planning; third, he incorporated colour – a brilliant blue, a deep red – at a time when his peers (to paraphrase Henry Ford) embraced any colour as long as it was white.¹³ In an era when flat roofs were *de rigueur*, Rossi also provided the perimeter buildings with gabled blue roofs.

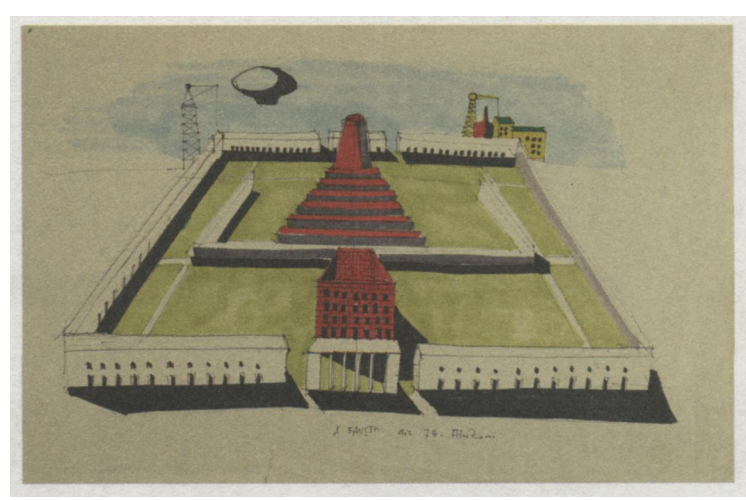
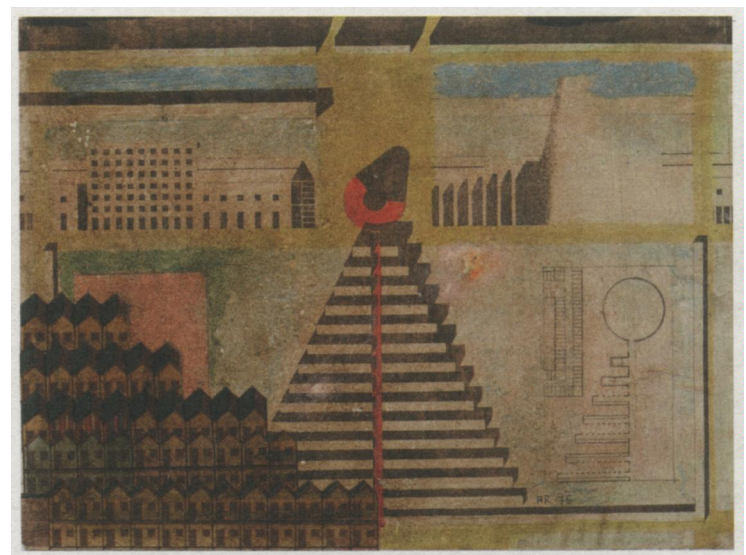
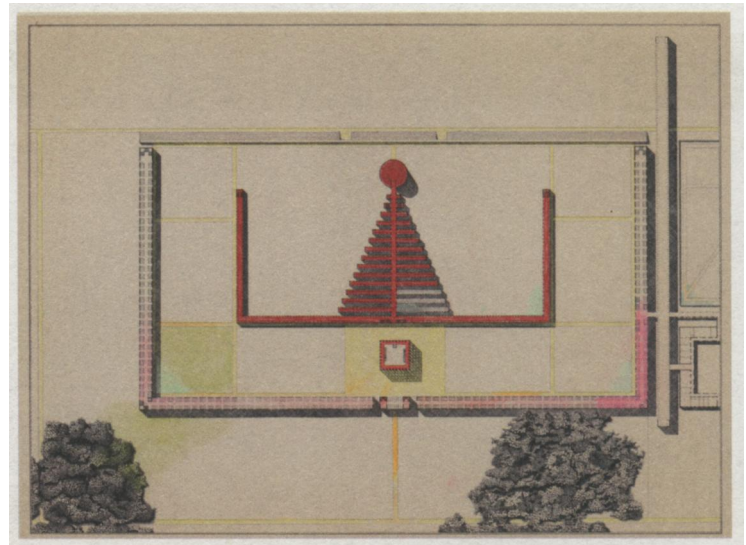
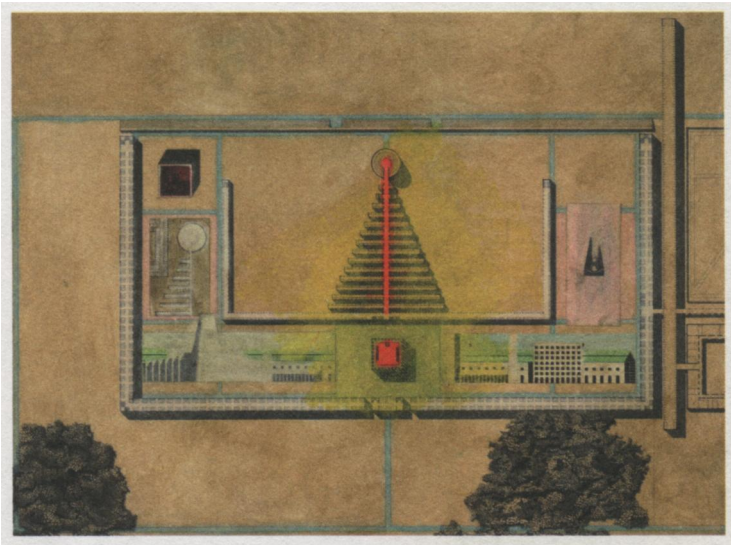


Aldo Rossi, *San Cataldo Cemetery Plan*, undated
 © MAXXI, Rome / Aldo Rossi Heirs





Aldo Rossi, *Il Gioco dell'Oca*, 1972
 © MAXXI, Rome / Aldo Rossi Heirs



From left to right, top to bottom: Aldo Rossi, View of the Buildings in the San Cataldo Cemetery, 1971-76 © MAXXI, Rome; presentation drawing, 1971 © CCA, Montreal; Geometry of Venetian Memories, 1979; Untitled, 1975; The Game of Death, 1973; Untitled, 1974
All images also © Aldo Rossi Heirs

If, as he noted in the project statement, the cemetery is a city of the dead that also enfolds the space of memory for the living, then summoning references to domestic architecture at the urban scale only gives life and body to this underlying principle. For these building blocks, the most direct reference is to his earlier design for the Monument to the Partisans at Segrate. Here Rossi envisioned a simple sarcophagus, reminiscent of those of Roman antiquity, with the top slid open and held aloft by a single thick, spherical column. Perhaps most significantly, he modified the type precisely as he had proposed in *The Architecture of the City*: engaging dialectically with technology, function and style as well as individual and collective moments.

What Rossi proposed for a city of the dead was actually a radical inversion of city planning and domestic design. In an Italian city such as Modena crowds throng the piazzas and public buildings most of the day, criss-crossing the streets in cars, buses, scooters and bicycles. These places are noisy, chaotic and full of life. Rossi's San Cataldo is everything that the city is not: it is hushed, it has no crowds, there are no vehicles of any sort except those that pull up briefly on the perimeter. The generous open spaces remain just that; they never fill up, they never bustle. The cemetery buildings may resemble others found in the city, but only on the level of form; they are dignified, even grand. Absence, then, is the most salient characteristic of Rossi's cemetery; it is nothing but bones and buildings.

One of the oddities and frustrations of architectural writing on Rossi's work is the disregard for the seemingly obvious and fundamental nature of these physical characterisations. All too often his buildings and projects are seen as by-products of discourses rather than works to be studied in their own right.¹⁴ For example, tracking Rossi through Charles Jencks' books and articles sweeps us into a rollicking run through modernism, postmodernism, late modernism and all the variations in between, and in which Rossi ends up the purveyor of a 'renewed orthodoxy', the 'new Italian Pope of architecture', busy issuing 'decrees on neo-rationalism'.¹⁵ At its worst, this methodology presents San Cataldo – an ordered, symmetrical, rather grand yet utterly compelling piece of funeral architecture – as an expression of 'relentless fragmentation and atomisation', or in Peter Eisenman's curiously incoherent words, as 'autonomous architecture expressed in the development of a typology of relationships between architecture and the city'.¹⁶ Eisenman further claimed that for Rossi, 'the European city has become the house of the dead. Its history, its function, has ended; it has erased the specific memories of the houses of individual childhoods to become a locus of collective memory'.¹⁷ More recently, for Val

Warke the cemetery is a 'silent architecture', 'unrelenting and a bit narcissistic', the silence being in some unexplained fashion related to the poetry of Rossi's writing.¹⁸ Alternatively, the importation of psychoanalysis into architectural culture from the 1980s on led Mary Louise Lobsinger to define the repetitions in Rossi's drawings and projects as an 'attempt to discharge or to disable excitation, and this discharge is pleasurable because it eliminates intense excitation'.¹⁹ Although Lobsinger recognised that psychoanalysis was alien to Rossi, that 'throughout the text [of *A Scientific Autobiography*] the psychoanalytical is more spurned than overtly embraced', her analysis nonetheless depends almost entirely on explanations derived from this field.²⁰

And yet this casuistry still appears to define the majority of analyses of Rossi's work, to the extent that nearly all writings on the cemetery and on Rossi's ideas in general meander through the shallows of confused and ultimately unintelligible notions about everything *but* the design. How, for example, is the cemetery 'narcissistic'? How does Rossi's architecture 'historicise itself to a certain extent, placing itself in a situation and reflecting on its own plight'?²¹ If Rossi believed the city is dead, its history and function ended, then why would he bother writing a book about research methodologies and principles for understanding cities? Moreover, why do so many of his drawings and sketches represent cities or parts of cities? Or indeed, why do his musings in notebooks and essays often centre precisely on understanding cities and the role of architecture in them? And yet thoughtful and relevant analyses of Rossi's projects, writings and drawings are far outnumbered by opaque prose and indulgence in unrelated disciplines – linguistic theory, psychoanalysis, literary and critical theory, etc. Beyond being dated, today these assessments seem trivial, not to say mystifying, peripheral and ultimately uninteresting.

Rossi himself was baffled by such interpretations, but ever the gentleman was too polite to say so in public. Other than somewhat tangentially, in the introduction to a book for the Milan Triennale in 1973, he neither commented on nor engaged in these polemics. Indeed, his published and private writings over the ensuing decades reflect concerns far removed from contemporary debates.²² The same is true of his architecture and design. In the heyday of postmodernism, Rossi excluded the very elements most celebrated by its proponents – irony, playfulness, brash historical allusions and deformations. In the eyes of critics, then, the cemetery and its representations could be nothing but lugubrious, exuding only melancholy.²³

But how was this possible? As Rossi himself observed, 'Hundreds and thousands of people

can see the same thing, yet each perceives it in his own unique way'.²⁴ In this he grasped what most observers have not – that the meanings attached to the cemetery's architectural forms are founded upon convention, and yet are also highly personal. For example, for Anglo-American critics such as Ada Louise Huxtable, the brick conical structure Rossi designed for San Cataldo evokes references to the chimneys and crematoria of Auschwitz,²⁵ while for historians such as Eugene Johnson it is clearly a legacy of Rossi's fascination with the theories and designs of Étienne-Louis Boullée. But for Italians, on the other hand – crucially, including Rossi – it recalls the chimneys of schools, factories and brickworks in the Po Valley and northern Italy more generally. Rossi featured just such a conical chimney in many of his public projects of the 1970s and 1980s, including the school at Fagnano Olona and the town hall at Borgoricco. His competition text even makes the connection explicit, describing the cone as like 'the chimney of a deserted factory', a reference to the process of deindustrialisation then underway throughout northern Italy.²⁶ And so while all of the above associations are theoretically legitimate, only the last one seems relevant for a formal analysis of the design.

If we continue this kind of exploration with the many drawings Rossi produced of the cemetery, it appears that they fall into two broad groups – the first could be called informational, the second evocative. In the first, Rossi utilised Xerox copies or other reproductions of the original competition plan as a base for a new version, usually coloured and with additions or modifications. A good example of this type is a drawing held by the MAXXI in Rome, where Rossi embellished a straightforward plan with lush trees and coded the conical structure, rows of tombs and ossuary in a striking deep red. Laterally, in the L-shaped spaces between the two main blocks of tombs, he provided smaller drawings in elevation that amount to explications of the project. Similarly, blocks were fleshed out so that the progressive rise in elevation toward the conical chimney became clear, while the adjacent Jewish cemetery peeks out from a corner of the drawing, separating Rossi's design from Costa's neo-classical precursor.

Variations on this particular image, such as a presentation drawing for the final submission in 1976, essentially repeat the same elements, usually with different colours. But along with these elaborations on the original plan, Rossi also produced freehand colour drawings of the entire complex, or parts of it. 'The meaning of every representation is thus fixed in advance', Rossi wrote of his drawings in his notebooks, the *Quaderni Azzurri*, 'every work or part is the repetition of an occurrence, almost a ritual since it is the ritual and not the event that has

a precise form.’²⁷ Elsewhere in these notebooks, and in the project description that accompanied his competition entry, Rossi repeatedly referred to ‘bones’ as the structural concept underlying his design – bones, of course, being appropriate here because they are the stuff of the cemetery.²⁸ Specifically, he considered the block between the cone and the ossuary as a spine or vertebral column, with ribs that rise and envelop as they reach the cone and common graves. In his project statement Rossi also noted how since antiquity death has become increasingly private, with funeral rituals reduced in scale and scope so as to keep alive feelings of regret or grief. As a consequence, architecture now becomes the main historical register for expressing the public aspect of death and mourning.

A number of the *Quaderni* drawings give shape to this more collective attitude towards death with an architecture of elemental, straightforward forms that refer to the city, its houses and public spaces. In particular, Rossi described the figure of an Etruscan funerary urn as a formal model for a house, and Rome’s ancient Tomb of Eurysaces the Baker as an illustration of the relation between the empty urban dwelling and the abandoned worksite (a notion of abandonment further emphasised in Rossi’s description of the cubic ossuary as an empty house of the dead). Similar domestic features in Rossi’s cemetery look to forge a comparable interconnection between the private home and the public sphere of the city, a point rendered vivid in drawings where elevations for the housing units Rossi designed in Chieti are overlaid onto the lower left quadrant of the plan, or where the cemetery is paired with his first major housing project in the Monte Amiata complex, known as the Gallarate. Even more directly, for the retaining wall around the cemetery Rossi chose to employ the same stucco plastering technique used for houses and factories *alla maniera antica*, a lime or stucco base beneath a mix of brick and sand.²⁹ In this way, from the very earliest days of its design development, San Cataldo was conceived as a city of the dead; an urban quarter of empty houses that are ‘at the root of every private terror’.³⁰ Rossi even went so far as to imagine resolving technical issues as one does in a house (or other typologies, like a school or a hotel). However, unlike an actual house, which is modified over time through occupancy, in the cemetery everything that will happen has already been anticipated, so ‘its time has a different dimension’.³¹ This tempo is of course that of death, its rituals both collective and private, both ineffable and binding in a way that is quite distinct from the rituals of the believer in a church.³²

Other than the actual design, then, Rossi advanced his vision of a cemetery through

drawings like these in a concerted effort to clarify, not obscure, the rationale underlying his choices of architectural forms. Far from engaging in a ‘persistent attempt to expunge meaning from architecture’, as Lobsinger asserted, Rossi was at pains to generate multiple visual and written accounts of ‘meaning’ in his architecture, and specifically in the San Cataldo Cemetery.³³ ‘I always sought the meaning of architecture in my projects’, Rossi wrote in 1972, ‘meaning that is stronger than function, use, organisation and form, but meaning that is expressed through form’.³⁴

One such meaning developed out of Rossi’s realisation, while working on the second round of the competition, that the perimeter walls of his scheme were taking on the character of a labyrinth. More specifically, they resembled the concentric paths depicted in the *Gioco dell’Oca* (Game of the Goose), a board game of obscure origins but dating at least to 1580 when the Florentine ambassador Francesco de’ Medici presented one to King Philip II of Spain.³⁵ In the game, players move around the board – 63 numbered spaces, usually organised in a spiral – by throwing dice, with their movement occasionally advanced by a bridge or a goose, or blocked by landing on a well, a maze, prison or a skull symbolising death. The Templars invented a similar game consisting of steps along a pilgrim’s journey to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela – the Way of St James. In private Rossi often described himself as a pilgrim, a wanderer travelling towards a specific objective but encountering unexpected diversions along the way, some welcome, others less so. Accordingly, he labelled a subsequent drawing for the cemetery *Il Gioco dell’Oca*, so that the architectural plan was now not only a city, but a game in which the skull signifying death merely represented one moment along an uncertain journey.

As Rossi knew, in the traditional version of the game (like many Italian card games, such as *briscola*) movement is counter-clockwise – that is, against passing time, so players move forward by in effect going backwards. This ambivalent relation of time’s forward thrust against the clock, and the desire to step backwards, emblematically inheres in Rossi’s design. ‘Death’, he wrote, ‘expresses a passage of unclear boundaries from one condition to another’.³⁶ The parallels Rossi perceived between his cemetery project and the *Gioco dell’Oca* tighten in another drawing of 1973, which he titled *Il Gioco della Morte* (The Game of Death). Rossi once remarked that such journeys are like the *Via Crucis* or Stations of the Cross, anticipating an end that is simultaneously anguished and redemptive.³⁷ The architecture of the boundary that contained this movement and defined the stops along the way was always described by Rossi with the Italian word *confine*,

from the Latin *cum finis*, a line signifying the division between one datum and another. And so the assumption here is that the boundary between life and death may not be specified or known in advance, but the halting journey of rapid progressions and stubborn pauses, even reversals, characteristic of the *Gioco dell’Oca* bears no small resemblance to the journey of life whose contours Rossi embodied at San Cataldo, with its blocks of long corridors cast in shadow but punctuated at intervals by light streaming in through single windows. By contrast with Eliot’s recognition of the pastness of the past, for Rossi the past is ever present, just as in the *Gioco dell’Oca*, where the vagaries of fortune hurtle the pilgrim backward and forward in random, but not aimless, fashion.

Deep shadows in the *Gioco dell’Oca* and in other drawings therefore appear to mark the passage of time, much like the 63 squares in the board game, but they also point to the experience of the pilgrim, who is not only aware of time’s relentless march, but must constantly engage with it, confront it, live it. Such reflections in Rossi’s notebooks are not casual; journeys and pilgrimages surface constantly in his *Quaderni Azzurri*, as do shadows. Indeed, one of his earliest sketches of the cube–spine–cone scheme emphasised what he described as the ‘problem of the shadows cast on the elevation drawing’, clearly a concern from the outset.³⁸ ‘In Italy’s piazzas’, he wrote, ‘shadows pertain to the architecture; they mark time and the seasons’.³⁹ And it was paradoxically from such shadows that Rossi learned about light, because of course the definition of a shadow is determined by the brilliance of adjacent light; without one the other is impossible. For reasons unclear, most critics of Rossi’s designs see only the shadows.

This, then, has been a series of readings of Rossi’s more informational images – those layered onto more conventional architectural drawings of the cemetery design. What of the contrasting imaginative drawings (admittedly a border blurred somewhat by the simultaneously informative and evocative *Gioco* works)? For the irony of Rossi’s work on San Cataldo is that as the project developed and moved towards its physical reality, drawings of the scheme increasingly became more lyrical, as the poetic side of his character came to the fore. In Rossi’s particular case, the poetry largely resides in the fragments and pieces of his designs, in images drawn from the world around him and then collaged into drawings often titled ‘architectural fantasies’. This second type of drawing is interested not so much in transmitting information as in conveying expressive meanings, precisely for their elusive and enigmatic qualities; they are the product of imagination, not of reason or science. And in many cases the shadow becomes the index of this imagination – the deeper the shadow

and the more black Rossi inked onto the paper, the more evocative the work.

Of course the drawings do not stand alone, but are joined by Rossi's published and unpublished writings, which constitute sustained reflections not just on architecture but on a human condition that both shapes and is shaped by architecture. Rossi read widely in philosophy, literature, theology, art and poetry as well as architecture, and would often include citations or reflections on these works in his own writing. Other notable Italian precursors would typically prioritise these separate disciplines; and so Leonardo da Vinci famously asserted the primacy of painting over poetry, whereas Dante Alighieri conversely affirmed the 'poetic foundation of both philosophical and theological knowledge'.⁴⁰ Rossi, however, explicitly rejected a hierarchical ordering of text and art. His passion for technique could only spring from an idea, he argued, and that idea could be expressed either in writing, 'the most precious, plastic and powerful means we have', or in a drawing, with 'its immediacy, its being without apparent explanations. [My] recent drawings are a kind of handwriting where writing and drawing identify with one another'.⁴¹ Accordingly, he envisioned the two as intimately bound and in constant dynamic tension. He could no more stop writing than he could stop drawing.

It is no surprise, then, that a large part of Rossi's extensive personal library consisted of books of poetry in Italian, English and Spanish, among other languages. He turned to poetry precisely because of its capacity to trigger insight and reflection, and certainly not for the promise of a rational answer or explanation. Indeed, to read Rossi's writings is to encounter an unusually rich interior life. The intricacy of this life was in turn mirrored in his drawings, which over the years, and in his introspection, repeatedly turned to motifs within the cemetery project. In these later drawings San Cataldo was rarely depicted alone but almost always lodged amid fragments of other designs, or alongside the objects of daily life. Rossi's palpable curiosity about everything merged with an almost childlike sense of wonder at the world, which led him to return especially to the objects of his childhood: coffee pots, tableware, bottles, packets of cigarettes, but also to the Duomo in his home town of Milan, and to the colossal bronze statue of San Carlo Borromeo at Arona, the saint's head slightly bowed and his right hand reaching out in blessing.⁴² As a child in a nearby boarding school, Rossi often accompanied his aunt on weekend visits to various sanctuaries and monuments, including this statue of a saint who, like Rossi, attended a Catholic boarding school, in this case in Arona, on the shores of Lago Maggiore. The statue became a recurrent element of his

drawings; at times only the hand was depicted, at other moments a silhouette of the whole right side; only occasionally do we see the monument's architectural structure. Instead, his most cherished (and long out of print) postcard of the statue from the 1950s specifically illustrated its structure in two ways. Firstly, an opening sliced through the saint's vestments and terminating at the head exposes its brick interior and a staircase leading to the narrow channel that ends in the panoramic vista through the saint's eyes. Secondly, to the left, is a list of the figure's precise dimensions – circumference of the head, the size of the eyes, ears, nose, circumference of the thumb, and so forth. Larger than life, much larger than life, Borromeo is shown to enfold mere mortals within the very depths of his immortal body, just as a saint should.⁴³

The hand raised in benediction is by far Rossi's most persistent representation of San Carlo. He was less interested in the saint's left hand, holding the breviary – emblem of Borromeo's leading role at the Council of Trent. But in contrast, the loving right hand reappears in numerous drawings by the architect. The point here is not biographical, nor is it an effort to investigate Rossi's psychological make-up, but more an indication of the impact of his spirituality on his drawing, writing and architecture.

Although consistently ignored in discussions of Rossi's work, San Carlo and other references to Catholic traditions provide an important clue to his ideas beyond the merely architectural. For Rossi, the associations with religion were not trivial. A month after he submitted the competition entry for San Cataldo he wrote a short autobiographical note concerning his formation. 'I have always been grateful', he wrote, 'for my Catholic education, which enabled me to choose extremely different types of logic and beauty inasmuch as they referred to something beyond them'.⁴⁴ The degree to which this upbringing and its associated beliefs, rituals and sense of deity infused his work is underscored by his *Quaderni Azzurri*, where time and seasons are often identified according to the church calendar – Lent, feast days of specific saints, Easter, and so on. Rossi even slipped a reference to the Liturgy of the Hours into an introduction to a book of photographs of Milan, singling out an image of the city at *vespertina*, the twilight hour of the vespers.⁴⁵

The more one looks, the more one sees references to Rossi's Catholicism. Yet secular historians treat Rossi's cemetery simply as an aesthetic trophy, detached from its roots in his spirituality and religion.⁴⁶ However, in all of Rossi's published personal writings, such as

Right and overleaf:
Postcard of the statue of San Carlo
Borromeo at Arona, c 1955





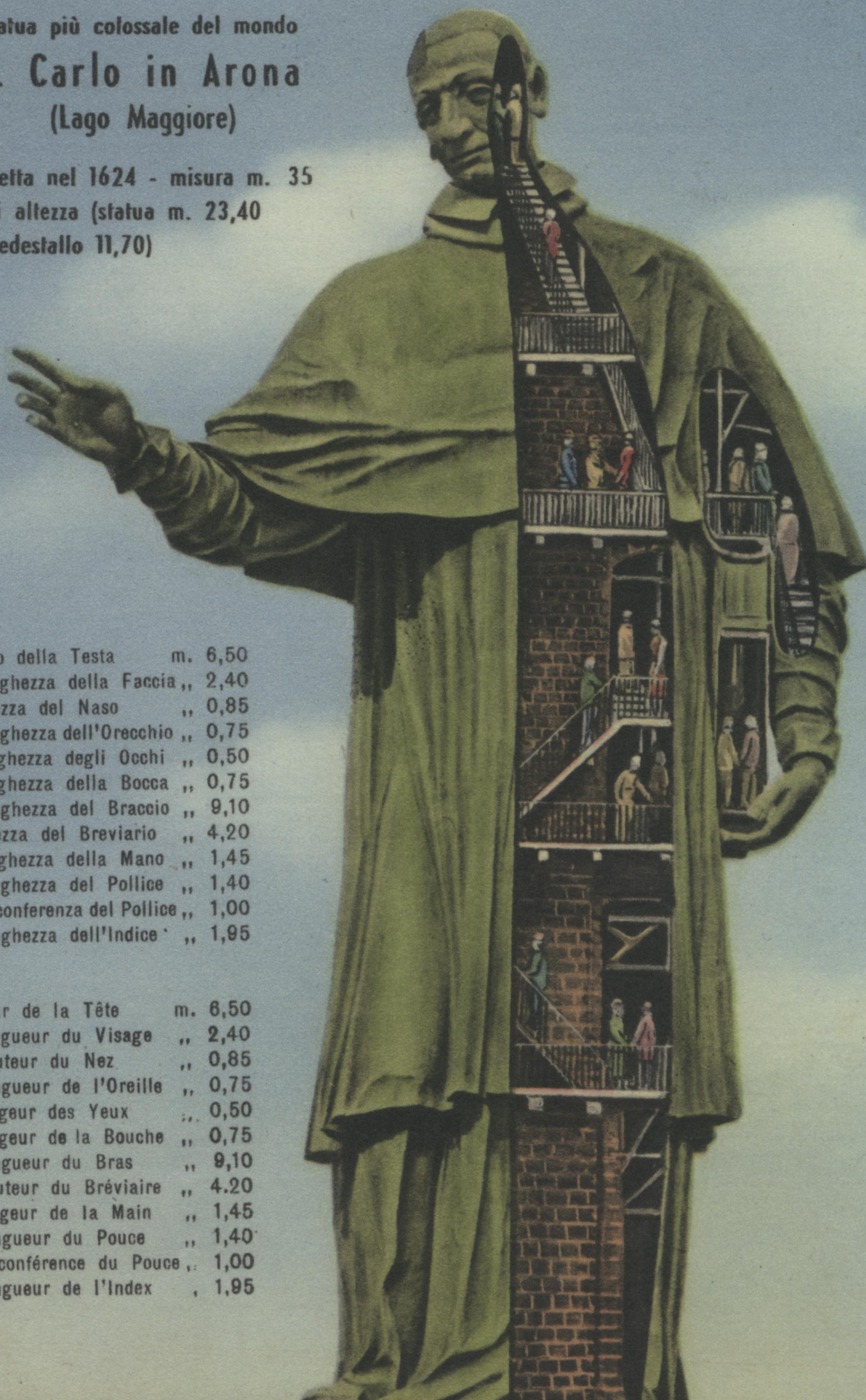
Top: Aldo Rossi, *Architectural Fantasy with the San Cataldo Cemetery, Gallarate, and San Carlo at Arona*, undated
 © MAXXI, Rome / Aldo Rossi Heirs
 Bottom: Aldo Rossi, *Untitled*, undated
 © Aldo Rossi Heirs

Statua più colossale del mondo
S. Carlo in Arona
 (Lago Maggiore)

Eretta nel 1624 - misura m. 35
 di altezza (statua m. 23,40
 piedestallo 11,70)

Giro della Testa	m. 6,50
Lunghezza della Faccia	„ 2,40
Altezza del Naso	„ 0,85
Lunghezza dell'Orecchio	„ 0,75
Larghezza degli Occhi	„ 0,50
Larghezza della Bocca	„ 0,75
Lunghezza del Braccio	„ 9,10
Altezza del Breviario	„ 4,20
Larghezza della Mano	„ 1,45
Lunghezza del Pollice	„ 1,40
Circonferenza del Pollice	„ 1,00
Lunghezza dell'Indice	„ 1,95

Tour de la Tête	m. 6,50
Longueur du Visage	„ 2,40
Hauteur du Nez	„ 0,85
Longueur de l'Oreille	„ 0,75
Largeur des Yeux	„ 0,50
Largeur de la Bouche	„ 0,75
Longueur du Bras	„ 9,10
Hauteur du Bréviaire	„ 4,20
Largeur de la Main	„ 1,45
Longueur du Pouce	„ 1,40
Circonférence du Pouce	„ 1,00
Longueur de l'Index	„ 1,95



A Scientific Autobiography (1981), *Il Libro Azzurro* (1981) and *I Quaderni Azzurri* (1999), as well as other unpublished essays, he repeatedly alludes to various saints, most notably St Augustine and St Jerome; to texts by the Church fathers or visionaries such as St John of the Cross; to the calendar of Catholic feasts; to his own visits to pilgrimage sites; and to rituals and practices in the Catholic Church. Similar references appear in his drawings. Despite this mass of evidence, critics and scholars are prepared to go to remarkable lengths to avoid dealing with the substance of this spirituality as it pertains to his work. For instance, near the end of *A Scientific Autobiography* Rossi cites a passage from St Augustine:

*Lord God, give us peace – for you have granted us all things – the peace of quiet, the peace of the Sabbath, which has no evening. For indeed this most beautiful order of things that are very good will finish its course and pass away, since in it there was morning and evening.*⁴⁷

Quoting this same passage as part of an argument about what he saw as Rossi's desire to 'halt time', the scholar Giovanni Poletti concludes that 'the theme seems to be that of an evolving fixity of things'.⁴⁸ Whatever that means, it cannot be a reasonable interpretation of what Rossi intended in citing St Augustine, especially when the passage continues:

But the seventh day is without evening. The sun does not set on it because you sanctified it to last forever... So may the voice of your book tell us in advance that we too, after our works (which are very good only for the reason that you have given them to us) may rest in you in the Sabbath of eternal life.

Here Rossi acknowledges not an end to time, but quite the reverse: he anticipates eternity as part of a sequence, a rhythm intrinsic to creation both constant and benevolent. Undeterred,

other historians have insisted that Rossi sought to stop time, a claim that seems to hinge on a refusal to see what really infuses his writings and drawings.⁴⁹ The same myopia has also led numerous commentators to repeat the falsehood that Rossi adhered to the Communist Party, all the while ignoring his profoundly Catholic roots.⁵⁰ Similarly, critics untether the cemetery and Rossi's representations of it from their moorings in his spirituality, his Catholicism, in effect cutting them loose as free-floating objects potentially to be affixed anywhere. The question here is one of degree: all is possible, but to denude the cemetery of its most salient feature constitutes a deliberate decision to ignore the architect and everything he intended.

Rather than the suspension of time, then, Rossi's faith consistently suggested time's constancy. Just like the sequential spaces in the *Gioco dell'Oca*, rituals of prayer historically signal the passage of time and the approach of death, whether we attend to it or not. But Rossi does attend to it.⁵¹ In his drawings it looms in the shadows and in the persistent representations of clocks, while at San Cataldo it is there in the settings for private and collective encounters with death. Rather than being morose or lugubrious, as some critics claim, Rossi's images essay the more complex task of revealing at once the bounty of life and its inevitable arrival at death. For this reason, where figures appear in his drawings they often have their arms raised in gestures of cheerful greeting, and they are frequently children and adults together in images of familial closeness. Anyone raised in a western culture immediately recognises the cemetery as the quintessential meeting point of life and death, endlessly nested in one another and reduced to their primordial essences in precisely the same way as San Cataldo reduces its architectonic elements.

That spirituality fundamentally informed San Cataldo is perhaps most evident in a collage Rossi produced in 1978. Here, only the central spine of the cemetery is represented, with fragments of some elevations forming a triangle – a clear reference to the Trinity, a persistent feature of Rossi's designs. On the right Rossi collaged into the image a holy card (*santino*) of St Rose of Viterbo. This was not a casual choice; Rossi had a large collection of holy cards from which he could have selected any number of saints.⁵² So, who was St Rose? A fervent laywoman (c 1233–1251) from a poor family who joined the Third Order of St Francis at the age of ten, St Rose led a pious life of prayer and solitude at home because a convent refused to admit her without an adequate dowry. She also suffered from an extremely rare physical condition – the absence of a sternum or ribcage.⁵³ Rossi, as we have seen, described the central section of San Cataldo as a spine with ribs – precisely what the young saint lacked. On her deathbed at the age of 18 Rose's final words to her parents, as reported by her hagiographers, were: 'I die with joy, for I desire to be united to my God. Live so as not to fear death. For those who live well in the world, death is not frightening, but sweet and precious', thoughts that in their own way also voice the principles of the cemetery, the architecture and the drawings.⁵⁴ Rossi chose this holy card precisely for the correspondence between the saint's dying message to her relatives and his conception of San Cataldo Cemetery as a place where death is not an end but part of a journey whose contours are unclear, to be met not with fear but with joy. Grief and remorse are for those who remain behind, just the sensibility that Rossi hoped the architecture of his cemetery would convey.

In the Roman Catholic calendar, St Rose's feast day is 4 September. Aldo Rossi died on 4 September 1997.

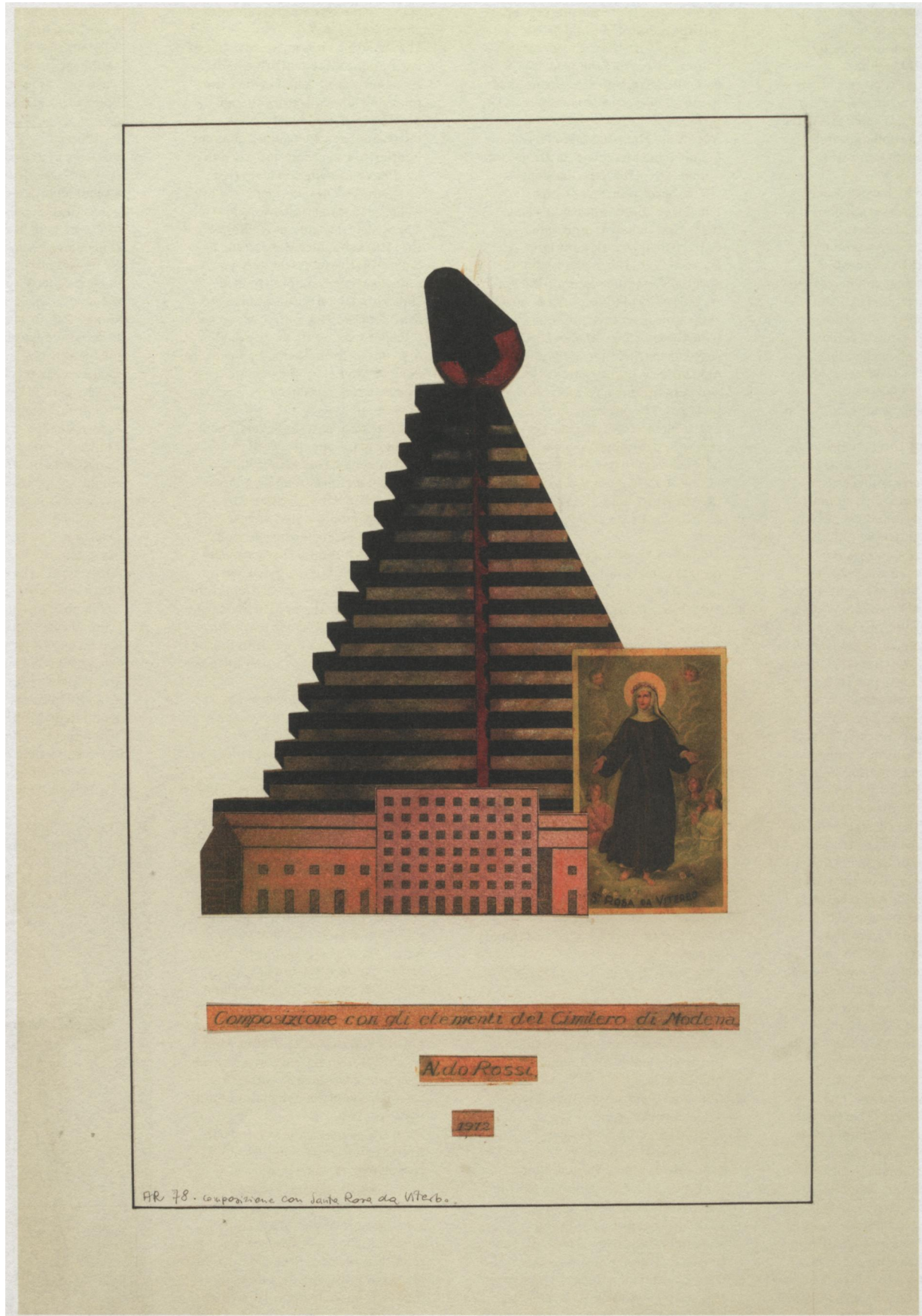
This article would not have been possible without the collaboration of Vera and Fausto Rossi and Chiara Spangaro of the Fondazione Aldo Rossi, to whom I am grateful in more ways than I can describe. I am also thankful to my colleagues Vittoria Di Palma and Victor Jones for commenting on versions of this paper; the Fondazione Aldo Rossi, the MAXXI in Rome and the Canadian Centre for Architecture for permission to print images in their possession. Above all, Giuseppe Mazzotta introduced me to a Dante I never imagined, and to the dark heart from which philosophy took belated flight.

1. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', *Controspazio*, no 10, 1972, pp 4–9, republished in Comune di Modena, *Aldo Rossi: Opere recenti* (Modena: Edizioni Panini, 1983), pp 87–90, revised and translated into English as 'The Blue of the Sky', translated by M Barsoum and Livio Dimitriu, *Oppositions* 5 (1976), pp 31–34. The title

- was based on an erotic–political novel by Georges Bataille of the same title, *Le Bleu du Ciel* written between 1935–37 but not published for another 20 years (Paris: J Pauvert, 1957), translated into English as *Blue of Noon* (London: Penguin, 2001). The competition was announced on 6 May 1971, with projects due 2 November 1971. Rossi proceeded to the second round with two other finalists, having been judged first in the first round on 8 April 1972. He received the first prize in the final round on 23 September 1972. In his submission Rossi included the name of his assistant, Gianni Braghieri, who was not responsible for the design. It is a sign of Rossi's generosity that he included Braghieri's name here as he did on other occasions. For convenience, and indeed, accuracy, with regard to any projects discussed in this essay I refer only to Rossi unless otherwise specified.
2. Eugene J Johnson published a detailed discussion of the project's various

- phases to 1982, and an architectural genealogy of the forms: 'What Remains of Man: Aldo Rossi's Modena Cemetery', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol 41, no 1 (March 1982), pp 38–54.
3. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', pp 4–9; 'Poesia contro retorica: il concorso per il nuovo cimitero di Modena', *Casabella*, vol 36, no 372, 1972, pp 20–26; José Rafael Moneo, 'New Trends in Contemporary Architecture: Formalism, Realism, Contextualism', *Space Design* (March 1978), pp 3–86; 'Aldo Rossi with Gianni Braghieri: Cemetery in Modena', *Lotus International* 25 (1979), pp 62–65.
 4. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p 13.
 5. T S Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood* (1921), cited in Hazard Adams (ed), *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p 762.

6. The bibliography on this topic is too extensive to include here; one of the best, crispest and most critical outlines of the issues is Robin Middleton, 'The Use and Abuse of Tradition in Architecture', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol 131, no 5328 (November 1983), pp 729–39.
7. Aldo Rossi, 'La costruzione della città', *Milano 70/70*, vol 3 (Milan: Edi Stampa, 1972), pp 77–83, now in Aldo Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città 1956–1972* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012), pp 447–53.
8. Most historians acknowledge that Rossi drew his understanding of type from Quatremère de Quincy, in part as filtered through Giulio Carlo Argan's essay, 'Sul concetto di tipologia architettonica', in Karl Oettinger and Mohammed Rassem (eds), *Festschrift für Hans Sedlmayr* (Munich: C H Beck, 1962), pp 96–101, in English 'On the Typology of Architecture', translated by Joseph Rykwert, *Architectural Design* 33, no 12 (December 1963).



Aldo Rossi, *San Cataldo with Holy Card of Saint Rose of Viterbo*, 1978
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9. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, *op cit*, p 41.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Indeed, Rossi's own final resting place is precisely such a small-scale, nineteenth-century cemetery overlooking Lake Maggiore.
12. The competition entry proposed two storeys above ground and one below; revisions in the final scheme presented in 1976 removed the underground portion and raised the complex to three storeys.
13. While the earliest modernists such as Le Corbusier did occasionally employ colour, since modern movement architecture was studied and presented in black-and-white photographs, for most architects then and later the banishment of history from contemporary architecture cohered with a rejection of colour.
14. See, in particular, Micha Bandini, 'Aldo Rossi', *AA Files* 1 (Winter 1981–82), pp 105–11; and K Michael Hays, 'Prolegomenon for a Study Linking the Advanced Architecture of the Present to that of the 1970s Through Ideologies of Media, the Experience of Cities in Transition and the Ongoing Effects of Reification', *Perspecta* 32, pp 100–07.
15. Charles Jencks, 'Postmodern and Late Modern: The Essential Definitions', *Chicago Review*, vol 35, no 4 (1987), pp 31–58; a more solid analysis that challenges the notion of architectural modernism as a style is Sarah Williams Goldhagen, 'Something to Talk About: Modernism, Discourse, Style', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol 64, no 2 (June 2005), pp 144–67.
16. K Michael Hays, 'Prolegomenon', *op cit*, p 101; Peter Eisenman, 'Aldo Rossi: The Idea of Architecture and the Modena Cemetery', editor's introduction, *Oppositions* 5 (1976), p 105. Exactly what a 'typology of relationships between the architecture and the city' means in reference to Rossi's design remains a puzzle. The discussion of architectural autonomy as proposed in Italy at the 1973 Triennale in Milan was widely misunderstood in the Anglo-Saxon world; for the most thoughtful discussion of the issues, see Alan Colquhoun, 'Postmodernism and Structuralism: A Retrospective Glance', *Assemblage* 5 (February 1988), pp 6–15.
17. Peter Eisenman, 'Editor's Introduction, The Houses of Memory, the Texts of Analogy', in Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, *op cit*, p 10.
18. Val K Warke, 'Type-Silence-Genre', *Log* 5 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp 122–29.
19. Mary Louise Lobsinger, 'That Obscure Object of Desire: Autobiography and Repetition in the Work of Aldo Rossi', *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002), pp 38–61.
20. Mary Louise Lobsinger, *ibid*, p 39. On this subject Rossi wrote that 'An autobiography has little to do with the psychological or psychoanalytic digressions of much criticism. It is the story of a man and of his work', see Francesco Dal Co (ed), *Aldo Rossi: Quaderni Azzurri* (Milan: Electa, 1999), no 25, p 4.
21. K Michael Hays, 'Prolegomenon', *op cit*, p 102.
22. On this point Rossi wrote, 'we spoke of *tendenza* to express the difference between our architecture and that of the international style and from professionalism. That is, we claimed that the alternative of architecture was *la tendenza*, and therefore consciously knowledgeable of inserting oneself into the political/cultural debate, to connect with the reality of the country, to rupture the academic or commercial schemes that triumphed in the schools', *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, pp 6–7.
23. Ada Louise Huxtable, 'Aldo Rossi: Memory and Metaphor', in *Architecture Anyone?* (New York, NY: Random House, 1986), p 44; Mary Louise Lobsinger, 'Antinomies of Realism in Postwar Italian Architecture', unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard, 2003; Diogo Seixas Lopes, *Melancholy and Architecture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014); at the time of writing, the book by Lopes has not appeared, but the title suggests the direction of his analysis.
24. Aldo Rossi, 'A Conversation: Aldo Rossi and Bernard Huet', *Perspecta* 28 (1997), pp 105–13. The passage continues: 'It is a little bit like love: One meets many people and nothing happens, and then falls in love with one destined person.'
25. From Charles Jencks, *The New Moderns* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1990), pp 119–20.
26. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', *op cit*, p 87.
27. Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 4, 26 January 1970–30 December 1970, pp 14–15.
28. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', *op cit*, p 90.
29. Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 9, 5 August 1971–10 October 1971, p 30; no 23, 30 July 1978–1 January 1979, p 13.
30. *Ibid*, no 13, 2 July 1972–30 October 1972, p 27.
31. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', *op cit*, p 89.
32. Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 9, *op cit*, p 5.
33. Mary Louise Lobsinger, 'Antinomies of Realism', *op cit*, p 299.
34. Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 10, 21 November 1971–13 February 1972, p 18.
35. Nerino Valentini, *Il molto dilettevole gioco dell'oca. Storia, simbolismo e tradizione di un celebre gioco* (Mantua: Sometti, 2006).
36. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', *op cit*, p 87.
37. Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 23, 30 July 1978–1 January 1979, p 2. In this passage Rossi referred to the theatre and to the dramas that unfold there.
38. Aldo Rossi, *ibid*, no 9, 5 August 1971–10 October 1971, p 13.
39. *Ibid*, no 10, 21 November 1971–13 February 1972, pp 32–33.
40. Leonardo da Vinci, 'The Works of the Eye and Ear Compared', in Martin Kemp (ed), *Leonardo on Painting*, translated by Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp 20–34; Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p 13, and especially pp 96–34; see also Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Reading Dante* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
41. Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 23, 30 July 1978–1 January 1979, pp 41–42.
42. The artist Giovan Battista Crespi designed the statue in 1614 shortly after St Charles was canonised; it was built by Siro Zanella of Pavia and Bernardo Falconi of Lugano over the course of the seventeenth century and completed in 1698.
43. For many years this postcard image of San Carlone was out of print, and when a new version appeared in the years following Rossi's death, although the dimensions remained the same, the postcard depicted quite a different interior: not an orderly progression of landings and stairs similar to New York's fire escapes set against the brick walls, but a spiral staircase followed by a perilously straight one leading to the saint's shoulder. Rossi would have enjoyed such exuberant discrepancies.
44. Aldo Rossi, 'Note autobiografiche sulla formazione ecc dicembre 1971', in Alberto Ferlenga (ed), *Opera Completa* (Milan: Electa, 2002), pp 21–24.
45. Aldo Rossi, 'Introduction', *In treno verso l'Europa* (Rome: Peliti Associati, 1993), a book of Gabriele Basilico's photographs.
46. See, for example, a similar argument applied to the altar pieces of Peter Paul Rubens, as noted by Willibald Sauerlander in *The Catholic Rubens: Saints and Martyrs*, translated by David Dollemayer (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2014).
47. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St Augustine* XIII, 35, translated by Rex Warner (New York: New American Library 1963), p 349; cited in the Italian edition of *L'autobiografia scientifica* on p 113, and in the English edition on p 77. The English edition only included the last two sentences.
48. Giovanni Poletti, *L'autobiografia scientifica di Aldo Rossi. Un'indagine critica tra scrittura e progetto di architettura* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2011), p 91.
49. See also Kurt W Forster, 'Arrested like the hands of a clock – his buildings often carry clocks or other markings of time – Rossi's buildings increasingly sought refuge from time', from 'Thoughts on the Metamorphoses of Architecture', *Log* 3 (Fall 2004), p 23.
50. See Mary Louise Lobsinger, 'Antinomies', *op cit*, pp 194–96; Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008). The person closest to Rossi in the 1950s and 1960s, his wife Sonia Gessner, affirms what his closest friends then and later knew: that he briefly joined a youth group associated with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) when he was about 17, but he never joined the PCI. Indeed, he had to initiate an administrative lawsuit in the US precisely because he was *not*, though US Immigration authorities initially believed that the youth group was part of the PCI. Rossi won the lawsuit. Pope Francis I recently responded to charges that he is a communist with the observation that 'I am far more radical than that: I am a Catholic!' Rossi might have said the same.
51. Roy A Rappaport has offered a useful definition of ritual: 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers'. See Roy A Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p 24. Among the numerous studies on rituals of the past half century, those most influential regarding religious rituals include Branislav Malinowsky, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1948); and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books 1973).
52. Rossi opened *Quaderni Azzurri* no 39 (28 February–30 April 1989) with a small *santino*, noting that he affixes one to the first page of his datebook each year, and that he conserves his collection with great care. 'Just as each year I place one of these images in my datebook, so I like to start this notebook – whose content I do not know – with this beautiful image'. Rossi visited Viterbo in 1972, in the days following winning the first prize in the Modena cemetery competition. It is likely that he picked up the holy card of St Rose during that visit. See Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni Azzurri*, *op cit*, no 13, 2 July 1972–30 October 1972, p 16.
53. Two recent articles address Rose's condition: L Capasso, S Caramiello, R D'Anastasio, 'The Anomaly of Santa Rosa', *The Lancet*, vol 353 (6 February 1999), p 504; and F Turturro et al, 'Case Report: Isolated Asymptomatic Short Stature in a Healthy Young Girl', *Case Reports in Radiology*, vol 2014, 20 July 2014, Article ID 761582.
54. Leonard Foley, *Saint of the Day: Lives, Lessons and Feasts*, revised by Pat McCloskey (Cincinnati, OH: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), entry for 4 September. St Rose's body was disinterred after her death and found to be intact even though she had been interred in a simple shroud. It was damaged by a fire in the convent church to which the body had been moved.



Postcard of the statue of San Carlo Borromeo at Arona, c 2005