

# THE DRAWINGS OF ALDO ROSSI

by John Trahey

Interest in Rossi drawings, as Eisenman says, is perhaps greater than the understanding of them. To students in America, "who have neither read his works nor seen the few buildings, have found his drawings a fascinating source of form and invention. Whereas, in Europe, his practice has consistently been seen as a whole — writings and buildings reinforcing his often enigmatic and poetic drawings — in America it is his imagery which has had the profoundest effect."<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to me that images which appear in Rossi's drawings, with origins perhaps in European urbanism, not here in America, hold some apparent meaning, that which Eisenman notes, at this time, for North Americans. The question is, of Rossi's drawings, now — "Why are we looking at them?"

This perhaps, too, simplifies the problem in that in asking "Why do we look?", we are asking essentially what meaning do they embody and for what reason do they now hold that meaning? We ask not "Why do we look?" But rather inquire "What do we see?"

Is there some reason why the analogic that has helped determine Rossi's forms, his drawings, his objective realism, producing things like the drawing *L'architecture Assassinée*,<sup>2</sup> has some particular appeal for today in North America? Peter Eisenman hypothesizes that present-day man, so profoundly influenced by the events of World War II, in dislocation, sees no heroes — can see no heroes. The post-war dislocation / disorientation / disembodiment man-conception places a detached image of self in modern consciousness spawned in holocaust, Hiroshima, and in memory, Auschwitz.

Heroism is obsolete. An architecture anonymous, without faces, without heroes, or heroism, is now plausible. A heroless architecture cannot create utopia, it can only conjecture survival.

To give this sort of interpretation to Rossi's architecture autonomous — *Architettura Autonomia*<sup>3</sup> to the concept of 'Autonomous architecture,' is, if not blasphemy, indeed a misconception. From *Oppositions 5*, we see autonomous architecture, as represented in Rossi's architecture (buildings, drawings and writing), as the pursuit and conviction that sees architecture, like other arts, sculpture and painting, as an independent discipline, which, in that, is again unlike other disciplines, with underlying principles of its own. The search for these principles by means of the analysis of the thought and creative processes geared toward the production of architecture occupies Aldo Rossi and his generation of architectural form. It is the development of a theory of the production of architecture which not just stresses but relies upon this rudimental nature of the discipline that "cannot be understood exclusively through external parameters but which can be established through appropriate formal rules. To discover these principles and to determine how they can be incorporated into the production of architecture, and the creation of the city, should be the task of any theoretical discussion of architecture."<sup>4</sup>

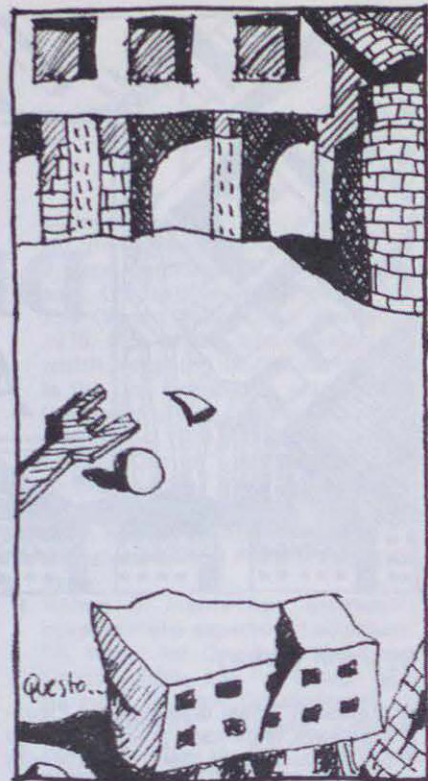
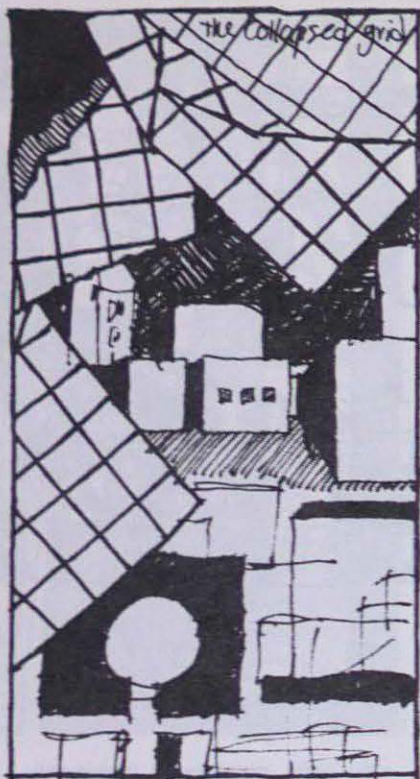
This is the autonomy of which Rossi and the editors of *Oppositions* speak. Eisenman's anonymous architecture — facelessness, dislocation — is different. The two nevertheless have a simultaneity which is basic to my reading of the significance and contem-

porary meaning of Rossi's drawings. Eisenman says:

But since the Second World War man's condition has radically altered: the events of 1945, the full comprehension of the meaning of the Holocaust and atomic destruction have changed the basis on which life can be lived. For man faced with a choice between imminent or eventual mass death, heroism, whether individual or collective, is untenable: only survival remains possible. The problem is now of choosing between an anachronistic continuance of hope and an acceptance of the bare conditions of survival. And when the hero can be only a survivor, there is no choice. The condition of man which formerly contained this alternative has ended, and the continuous "narrative" of the progress of Western civilization has been broken.<sup>5</sup>

This is the architecture of the Apocalypse.

Eisenman's view, to my mind, is somewhat retrospective (in light of his argument, you might say, how else?) It fails, I think, to be forward-looking, arguing, as it does, that progressivism, at least in the positive sense, is defunct. The Modern Movement's utopian-purest visions seem to us somehow naive. We no longer see the 'complexity of reality'<sup>6</sup>, through benevolent, modificatory, remedial eyes. We perhaps observe more and contemplate reality and its perception. But a result of this outlook is, of necessity, negativism. Eisenman is perhaps observing the past and assessing the altered state of



continuity and presence of history. Incompletion suggests the rupture and emptiness of the void. The *Cita Analoga* drawings possess a consciousness of this interruption.<sup>10</sup>

You may feel that I here catch onto mere images, just words, verbal images; however, we are all affected by that which surrounds us, socially and culturally. Our perception is biased by the things we are shown or see around us. The meaning images hold for a society depends upon the poignancy of truthfulness they embody in their recognition. When a thing is impressed upon an individual, be it an image or a thought, the vividness of its remembrance and of its impression relates to the apparent truth or illumination seen in it at the time. One's particular predisposition, of course, colours one's affinities, nevertheless being a member of a particular society and associated with a particular cultural milieu (North America) one is bound to have shared perceptions with people of similar position. This collective recognition, perhaps indoctrination, is the basis of many artistic movements, especially in popular music and aesthetic fashion. The point I wish to make is that perhaps North American appreciation of Rossi drawings is a result of such cultural conditioning. Is it that we see now through ugly eyes?

Peter Eisenman is obviously not influenced by this cultural context. His view of Rossi — his interpretation — is essentially a North American one. One is afraid perhaps that in this trans-Atlantic observation-analysis that the true and complex basis of Rossi's work could be abated i.e. the touch with European urbanism and the concept of his own collective memory subtracted from the work. Yet this goes further along the way to discovering why the drawings of Aldo Rossi hold such meaning for students of architecture in America. They cannot possibly see the perceptions of urbanism that Rossi himself sees. They have no shared experience! But like the drawing *L'architecture Assassinée* — "A vision of the city today and a description of the society which brings about that vision" — they

can appreciate a particular sentiment towards modern society and living which to them has meaning i.e. is recognizable in their own society and has appeal in its contemporary recognition. Disillusionment, perhaps nihilism, disorientation, and alienation is seen, nevertheless, negativism, brought on by harsh economic conditions, hopelessness, and apprehension about a volatile global political situation. Indeed Rossi himself says that architecture is influenced or "aided by" the analysis of political, social and economic systems.

Perhaps it all seems somewhat implausible, a little tenuous and that somehow it denies the basic conception of Rossi ideology that architecture is "an autonomous discipline not assimilated within sculpture and painting."<sup>11</sup> Yet simultaneous explorations with similar intellectual affinities are possible with little direct intercommunication within locally dissimilar cultural milieus in completely different geographic locations — an argument for the pervasiveness of global cultural context. If we are conditioned to think certain things in a given historical context, particularly in an age of fluid global communication, then architects like Rossi, concerned with "architecture as an expression of thought,"<sup>12</sup> holding that conviction, will think in a mode appropriate to their conditioned context. Rossi pursues an autonomous architecture because of the dislocation of modern urbanism, perhaps, in face of Tafuri's "end of architecture — the exhaustion of purely architectural alter-

man's perception and concluding that there is no future. I propose that in looking into the future with the inevitable conditioning of the post-1945 reality and, as Rossi does, analyzing perception, projecting into the future, does one inevitably see destruction? No, nihilism. *Architecture Assassinée: Architecture Abandonnée*<sup>7</sup> — forsaken and dissected. Disembodied and reassembled with a new soul, a new condition of this perception. Perhaps it is black: a void in which the elements of architecture swim. The perception is one of doubt: "Where do we go from here?" In a world with no future there is no direction. We must, like Rossi, find analogy or like Eisenman be retrospective. Of the drawing *L'architecture Assassinée*, P. Eisenman says: "On the most obvious level it is a vision of the city today and a description of a society which brings about that vision."<sup>8</sup> This is most significant — a reflection of the society which produces it. "But *L'Architecture Assassinée* is not a typical Rossi drawing. It is a drawing of ruin and fragmentation... the drawing which constitutes the majority of Rossi's work, those of *Cita Analoga* are not about ruin. Rather they are drawings of emptiness, incompletion and abandonment."<sup>9</sup> Architecture, says Eisenman, is not 'dead' but surviving — 'Abandonee.'

The ruin is a part of a specific architectural tradition, brings with it the nostalgia of history: incompletion, by contrast, is without sentiment. Nostalgia links ruin to man; incompletion distances life from the remorse. Ruin assumes the

natives."<sup>13</sup> In this light, he sees what he wishes to see. In pursuing an autonomous discipline, is he doing more than those who respond to the world with anarchistic, discordant art?; with excessive pluralism, as do the eclectic post-modernists? Is not world pluralism in many and/or all fields mere or profound dislocation? A response to or symptom thereof?

The present condition of man is coloured by many things: things that he sees, things that he remembers, things he reads and things he has been told. History is nostalgic, yes, but it is also profound. To deny it and to look ahead cannot be denying it at all for at once this is a response to some element or condition of history which inspires that activity. In this sense, Autonomous Architecture then is not a pure pursuit at all. It is rooted in all history. Detached, it is a break away. In Rossi's analogy is a search through the depths of consciousness, of memory, the unconscious, and through history for the 'principles' of our collective architecture.

Rossi says:

Now it seems to me that everything has already been seen; when I design I repeat, and in the observation of things there is also the observation of memory. I design my projects with a discreet sense of affection for each one but I reduce them to things that surround me: country houses, smoke stacks, monuments and objects, as if everything arose from and was founded in time; in this beginnings and endings are confounded."<sup>14</sup>

The monument — (to him):

There are, in the city, urban facts which are permanent, that withstand the passage of time; these ur-

ban facts are the monuments that, in one way or another, constitute or make up and configurate the city. The monument has more than an intelligible and atmospheric value, it is not only architecture as anecdote, as the picturesque, but it gives meaning to the life of the city, which, through these monuments, both remembers the past and uses 'its memory.'"<sup>15</sup>

To Rossi they "embody the current moment — the city's present."<sup>16</sup>

But not only is man's condition changed but also the nature of his relationship to objects. Inevitably, after 1945, the significance of the 'movement' as a record of history has been called into question. Since the dignity of an individual death is no longer certain, the symbolic permanence provided by the memorialization of death — the capacity to mark the continuity between the end of life and death with a slab, a star, or a cross — also becomes tentative. Can the values of the physical symbols of individual life — that is, the house and its relationship to collective life, the school, the church and the

public square — be the same when the capacity to make the symbolic end of life is gone? Without an end there can be no 'beginning.'<sup>17</sup>

The question to be addressed: "Where are we now?"

#### Notes

1. Peter Eisenman, Preface, *Aldo Rossi in America 1976 to 1979*, Catalogue 2, MIT Press, p. 1.
2. *L'architecture Assassinée* - a drawing made by Aldo Rossi in 1975 which he dedicated to Manfredo Tafuri, the Italian writer and thinker on things concerned with architecture and urbanism. The drawing is shown in notes in Catalogue 2.
3. Rapael Moneo, *The Idea of Architecture and the Modern Cemetery, Oppositions 5*, MIT Press, p. 3.
4. Moneo, p. 4.
5. Eisenman, p. 5.
6. Moneo, p. 1.
7. Eisenman, p. 4.
8. Eisenman, p. 4.
9. Eisenman, p. 6.
10. Eisenman, p. 6.
11. Moneo, p. 4.
12. Moneo, p. 4.
13. Eisenman, p. 4-5. Also Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*.
14. Aldo Rossi in *Aldo Rossi in America 1976 to 1979*, p. 3.
15. Moneo, p. 6.
16. Moneo, p. 6.
17. Eisenman, p. 5.

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