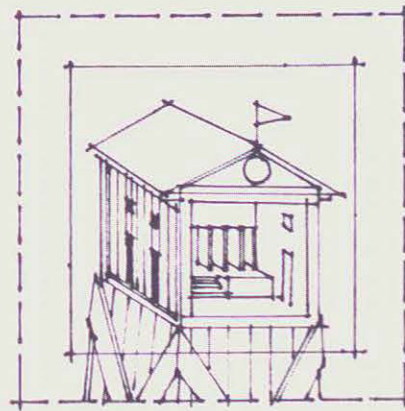
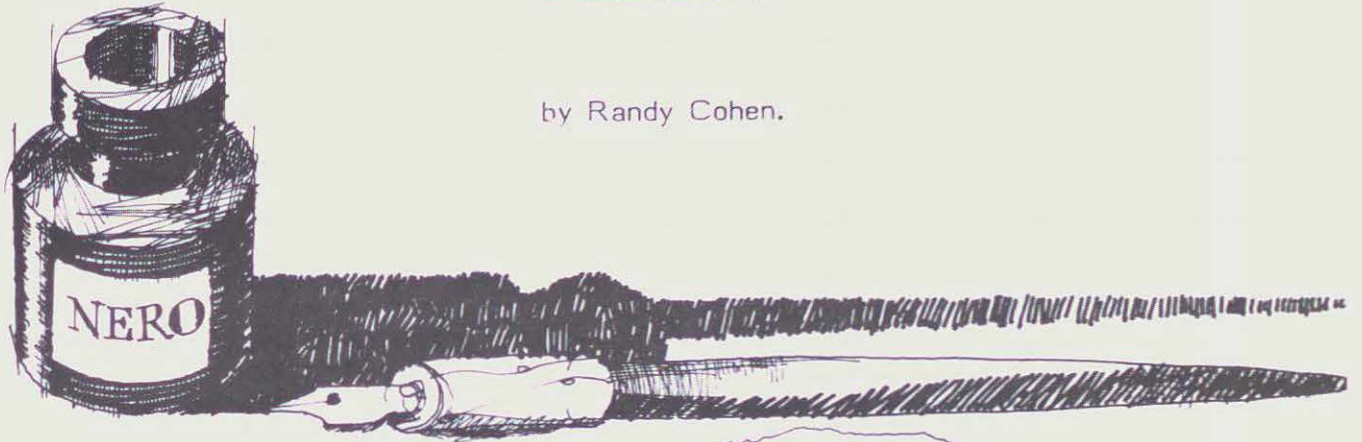


# Where 'ya comin' from, Aldo?

by Randy Cohen.



*il Teatrino Scientifico 1970*

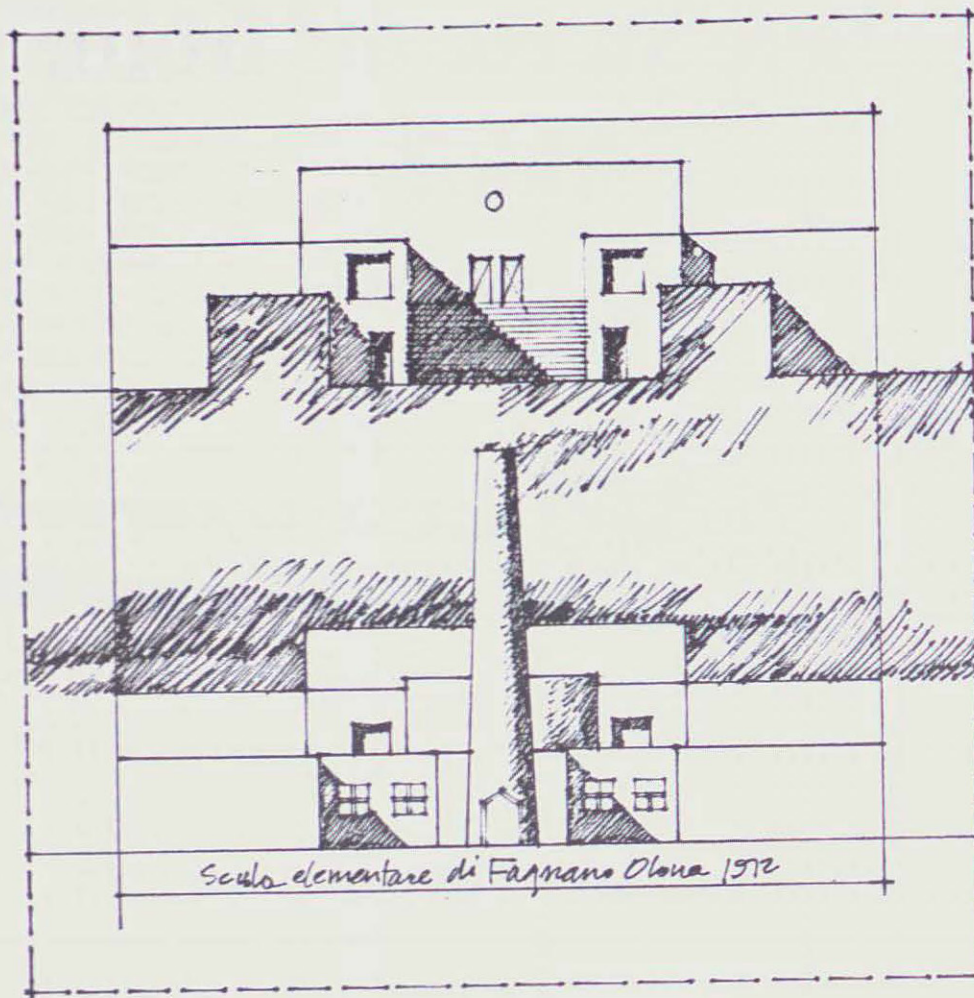
An examination of Aldo Rossi's architecture and in general the theories of his colleagues, (the group Charles Jencks refers to as the 'rats') must begin with a look at what Anthony Vidler terms the three typologies of Rational Architecture. These typologies can be traced back to the Rationalists of the 18th and 19th centuries. Of course this group of neo-rationalists must in some ways relate to the earlier great rationalists of this century. Just what this relationship is and how Aldo Rossi compares in his imagery to both the

earlier rationalists and today's post-moderns will be discussed.

The word typology can be thought of as that aspect of an object that tells us it belongs to the same category as another object with which it shares certain similarities. Peter Collins wrote of the beginning of these typologies in **Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture:**

...the classical Rationalists demanded three things of Architecture: firstly, a reappraisal





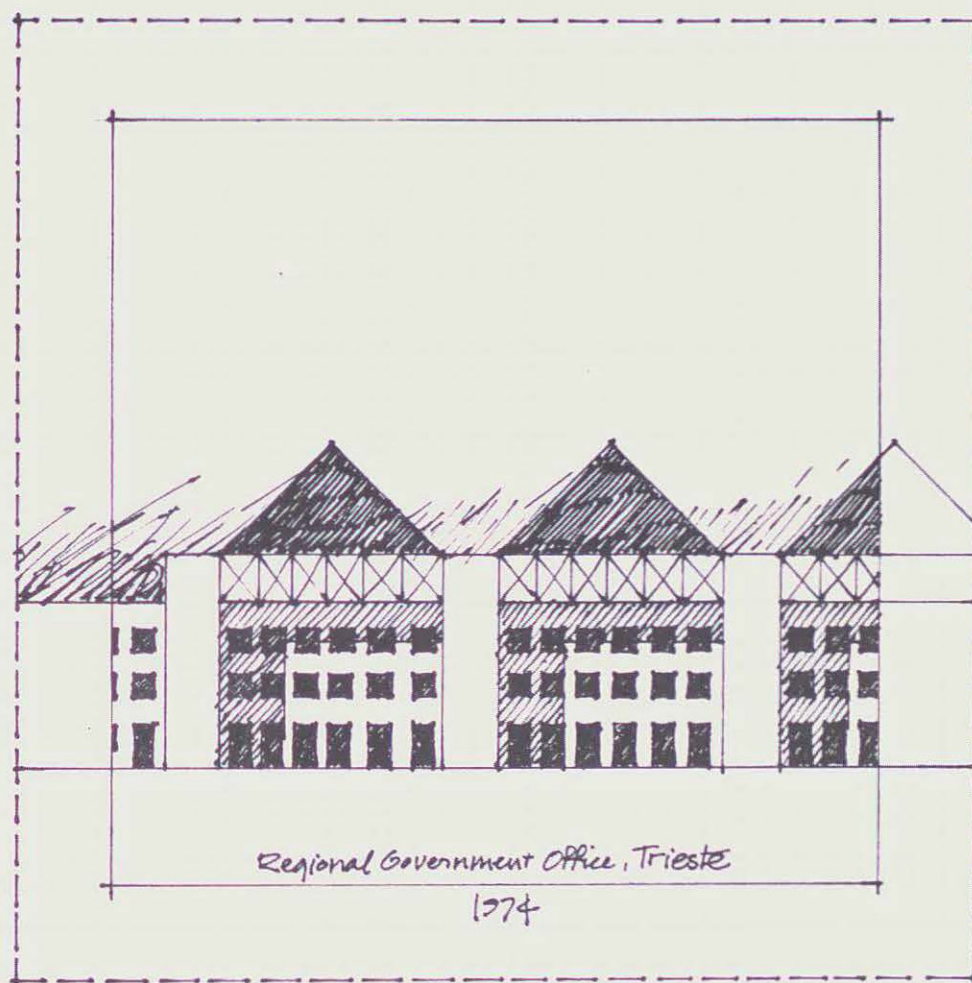
of the proportions of all structural elements with respect to the newly established science of the strength of materials; secondly, a logical approach to planning with respect to the actual needs of the intended occupants; and thirdly, a more flexible approach to the classical notions of symmetry and regularity...

From this we see the beginning of modern architecture's first typology, that being structural integrity. The second the infamous functional plan and its expression. The third typology foreshadows the functional plan being expressed, but also Venturi's ambiguities, complexities, contradictions, and double functioning elements, 'both-ands' and

whatever else you may want to throw in. What is important to ascertain is the exact meaning of the third typology and how the 'rats' look at the early modern typologies. Anthony Vidler writes:

We might characterize the fundamental attribute of this third typology as an espousal, not of an abstract nature, not of a technological utopia, but rather of the traditional city as the locus of its concern. The city that is, provides the material for classification and the forms of its artifacts overtime provide the basis for recomposition. This third typology, like the first two, is clearly based on reason, classification, and a sense of the





public in architecture; unlike the first two, however, it proposes no panacea, no ultimate apotheosis of man in architecture, no positive escatology.<sup>1</sup>

This typology of the city essentially looks at the street, the boulevard, avenue, colonnade, square, the piazza, courtyard, steps etc. While the first two typologies are obsessed with a reason found outside of itself the new Rationalists do not attempt to find reason but instead look towards a continuation of what is around. Vidler describes this:

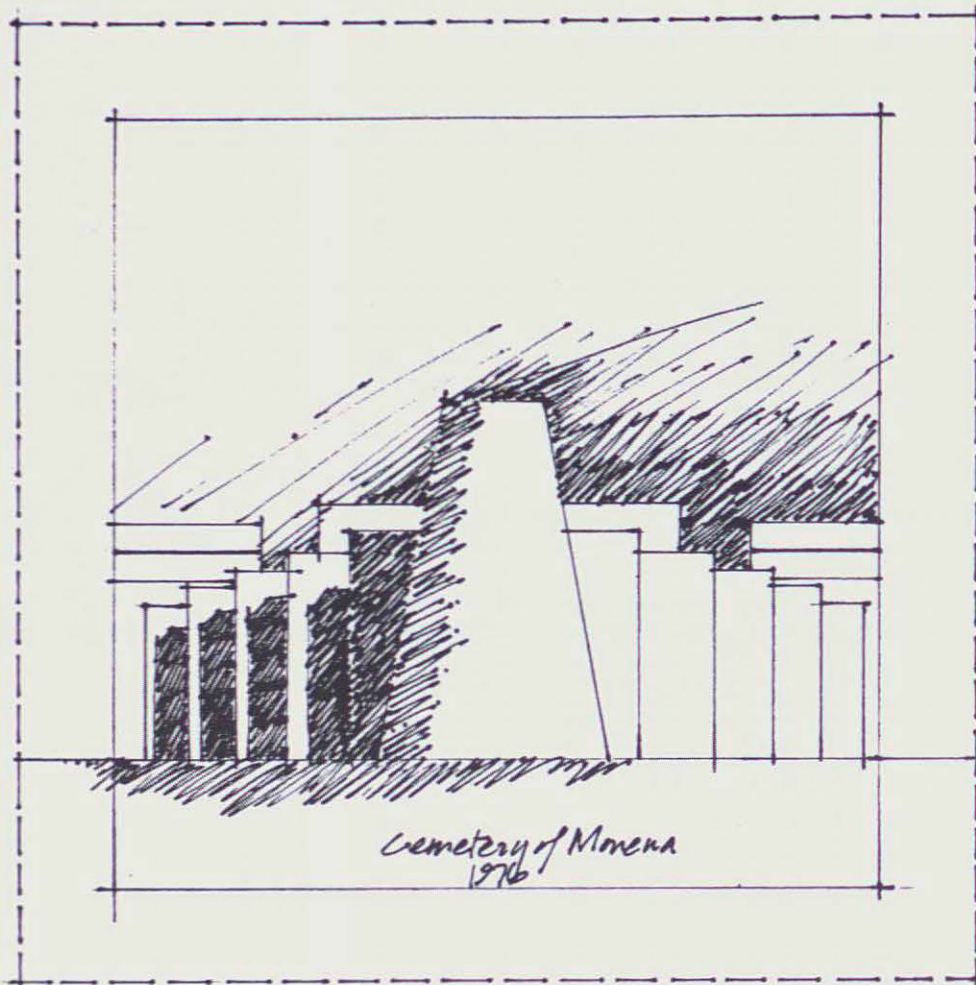
This concept of the city as the site of a new typology is evidently born of a desire to stress the continuity of form and history against the fragmentation produced

by the elemental, institutional and mechanistic typologies of the recent past.<sup>2</sup>

Form and historicism cause quite a dilemma when looking at the origins of Rationalism, especially in the light of recent work. The arguments that took place in the nineteenth century between Romantics and Rationalists quite often ended in, as Peter Collins has oft repeated, "the blackening of eyes". But the imagery that is projected by Rossi and certainly that of Kahn's work, has strong ties to the projects of Etienne Louis Boullée whom one could hardly call a Rationalist.

The existence of a relationship between the 'rats' and their predecessors of the





International Style varies according to the source. Leon Krier writes:

We want to state very clearly that rational architecture is not concerned with the revival of the rationalism of the 1920's.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is no doubt that the stripped-clean appearances and simplified forms must surely relate to the early moderns. Anthony Vidler writes about the new Rationalist's third typology:

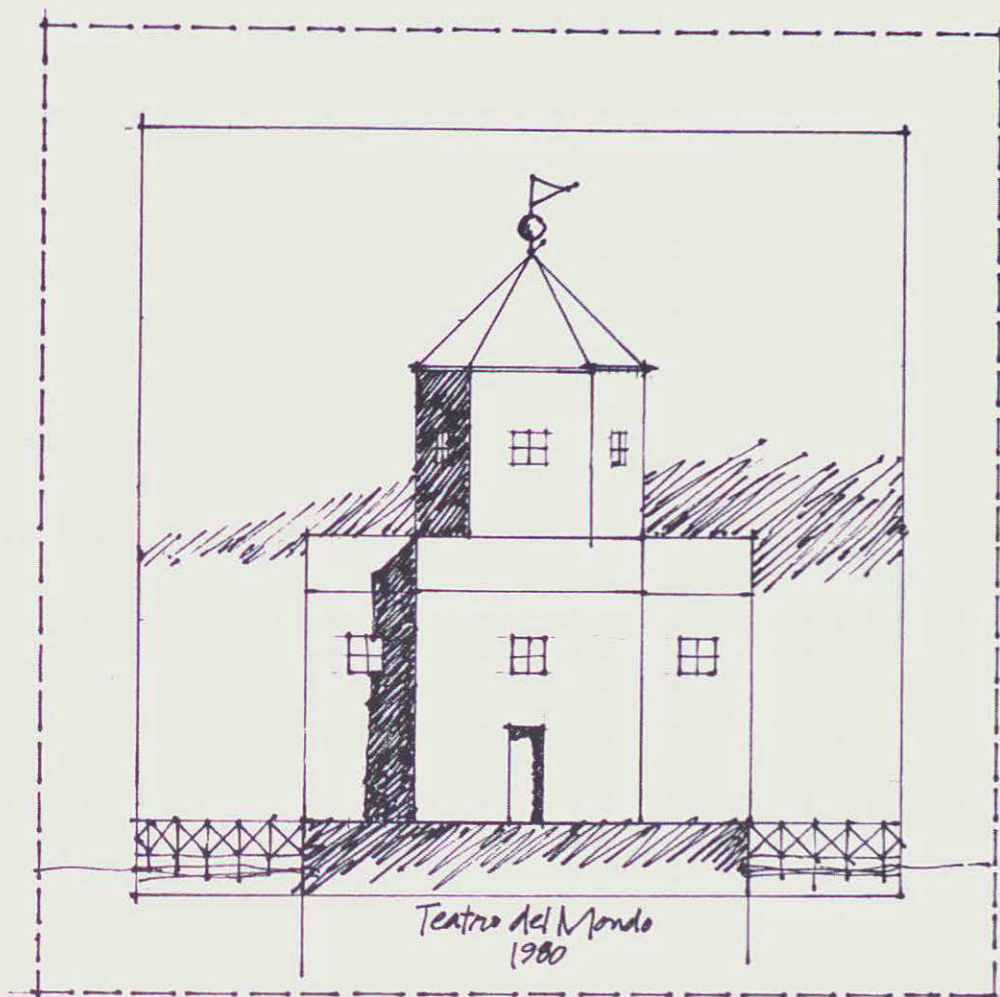
...it...refuses all eclecticism resolutely filtering its 'quotations' through the lens of a modernist aesthetic. In this sense, it is an entirely modern movement, and one that places its faith in the

essentially public nature of all architecture, as against the increasingly private and narcissistic visions of the last decade.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the 'neoclassicism' of the early modern work which Colin Rowe describes could be a link to Rossi's projects. However, in all fairness, this is just a idealistic relationship as is with Kahn and his predecessors, for symbolically neither Rossi nor Kahn, nor, for that matter, the other 'rats', look towards technology to provide them the way. Rossi adamantly states that his forms are not meant to be progressive in any way.

The imagery that is provoked by Rossian buildings has been compared to death, to resurrection and specifically to images



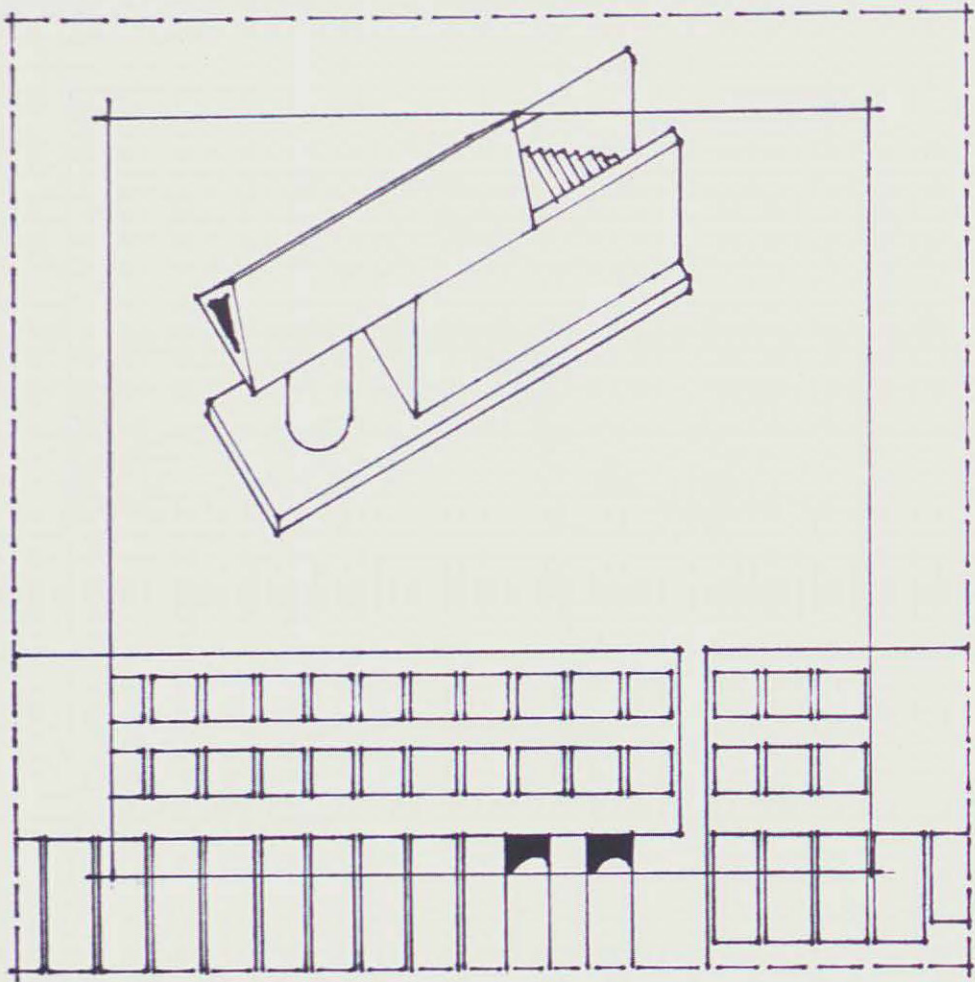


ranging from prisons to concentration and death camps. His admirers find a double meaning to be inherent in this, as in Piranesi's prison drawings. Obviously his detractors do not believe that any good comes from his imagery. In order to understand how these mixed feelings are acquired one must look at Rossi's process. The solution to the problem is put forth in an absolutely simplistic way. There are no grand ideas, no sensationalistic experiences; just straightforward, most often linear and highly scientific answers. This is where the death camp symbolism and Boullée's projects tie together: the built environment stripped like a ruin, lifeless, monoliths low to the ground, waiting to provide the backdrop for the **real** purpose - the inhabitants. This is precisely the point of departure between

the rationalists of yesteryear, the new rationalists, and the post-moderns of today, and that is in what they stand for, what they wish to express, and what relevance their gestures may have in today's society.

The early rationalists believed firmly in 'the new age' and ultimately what that age could do. Hence, buildings become lighter, higher and perform all kinds of structural feats. The most important thing though, is that the buildings express this age through the machine-like forms or machine-produced materials. At the other end of the spectrum is the reaction, the group of people who don't believe that our world should look like a machine. Instead they look to the past for the answer to our problems of today.





The new Rationalist claim to look at the city and its building types through the 'lens of modernism'. In terms of image then, both rational groups try to deal with construction and the elements there-of, in a way which is contemporary to our society. The post-moderns, whose concern for the city is commendable, deal with the problem of improving the urban fabric in barbaric ways which have very little to do with the age in which they are built.

Throughout the last half of the twentieth century Italian architects have struggled to find an architecture that could erase the memory of the work produced under the fascist regime. Vittorio Gregotti in **New Directions in Italian Architecture** writes of a search for a 'real'

architecture. This 'reality' can be found through buildings which can express the age in which they are built. It can be realized in projects which deal specifically with the problems of the day and through forms which are relevant to the urban fabric in which they are placed. In asking "where 'ya comin' from, Aldo?" the influence of several hundred years of architectural history unfolds. The struggle of the Classical Rationalists with the Romanticists has been of great influence in a Rational way and in an irrational way. The ties to this century's International Style are there, as well as the differences. But, through all of the images, beyond any of the trivialities of our day-to-day world, the concept of the city and its continuation reigns as the major concern and source for Aldo Rossi.