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“la città ha par fine se stessa”/“the city is itself its own end”

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This essay focuses on the text itself. It tries to identify the main thesis of “l'architettura della città”; to seek for the main arguments and to rearrange them in the clearest way. This operation may lose one of the quality of the book, that of being a complex collage that defines a field of thoughts rather than a linear argument. But this reduction is a necessary stage to build a critic. Before to discuss what is confused or what is lacking, the main line must be established. The first part resumes the main arguments of Rossi's thesis and highlights its consistency. The second part discusses the limits of several proposals inside this global theory.

Rossi's theory is based on three basic hypotheses:

- The city is made of discrete parts. Each of these parts is an artifact. Every artifact is the result of a decision that has been facing the whole complexity of the city.
- These artifacts evolve through time, so that the city is continuously changing.
- These artifacts are man-made objects. They do not grow naturally. Each of them has been made by people.

Secondly, Rossi proposes a method:

- The first step is the description of the form of these artifacts.
- Then, by comparison, one can observe their similarities and changes in space and time. Their permanencies and mutations can be analyzed. Through this kind of studies, Rossi points out two kinds of permanencies:
 - o Typological permanencies: building types persist even through demolitions or changes of historical conditions.
 - o Generative permanencies: some forms have the ability to focalize the development of the city; some formal properties are active in the process of formation of an urban entity.
- Thirdly, the story of the production of these artifacts must be analyzed. Why, in a particular time, in a particular place, have people chosen this form of city rather than another one? Rossi observes that historical conditions never generate directly urban forms. The production of every artifact necessitates choices. Since formal choices affects the future of other artifacts, these choices must be considered as profoundly political. But this is also what gives them such value.

In conclusion the evolution of the city is produced by two kinds of forces: the urban structure and the historical conjecture. In the middle, every architectural design is a synthetic decision facing both of them. On one side, design can be based on

knowledge of how to act on the transformation of the city. On the other side, it is always a personal commitment facing societal issues. So that design can be defined as the art of embodying political choices into the urban fabric. Such moment are valued by Rossi precisely because they are intense human event.

At this point, we've found a kind of absolute quality inherent to urban processes: they offer the opportunity for events to happen. So that one could now wonder how such opportunities could be preserved. Events depend on two kinds of conditions: a disequilibrium that calls for changes, and a structure that is able to propagate their effects and to register their impact. No change would have an effect or a value in a purely chaotic context. But now, one can note the secondary value of architectural design, beyond the event of its production. Design structures the city. Design shapes new historical conditions. Design preserves the opportunity for future events to happen. Design becomes the driving force of a consistent historical process. This may be the meaning of the enigmatic sentence "the city is itself its own end". Architecture produces the city, and, reciprocally, the city calls for architectural production. The continuity of this process of production has a value for itself: intense human events happen through its development. The value of this process depends neither on its origin, neither on its direction.

However, despite the extreme relevance of this global proposition, the theory developed through the book suffers several confusions and deficiencies. The second part of the presentation discusses the limits of the model that Rossi proposes to actually understand the urban process. This critic will be based on confrontation between the proposals made in "l'architettura della città" and a study on the construction of the historical center of Brussels.

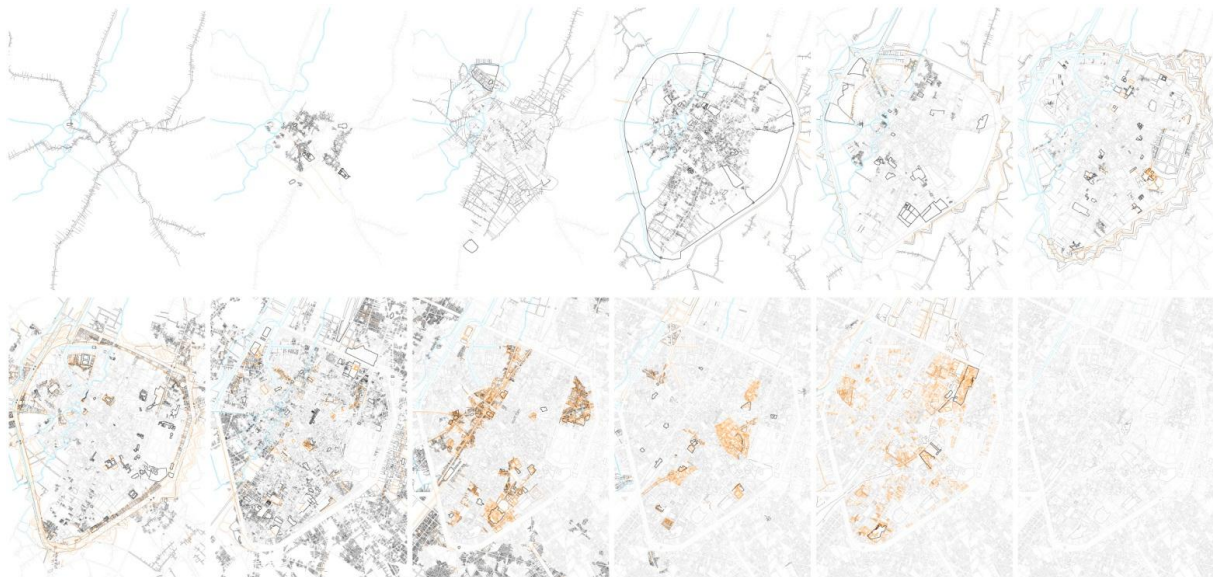


IMAGE 1: Morphogenesis of Brussels

Rossi distinguishes two categories of artifacts: dwelling areas and primary elements. He defines their properties at different levels. The first are structural properties:

- The forms of a dwelling area are mainly depicted through typological studies. The way they evolve through time is more complex. Buildings themselves have a quiet short life depending on the phenomenon of speculation and obsolescence. On the opposite, "types" are stable and evolve only through slow mutation processes. Through the phenomenon of fusion and division, the mutations of the lots register typological mutations.
- The form of primary elements tends to be a close figure, clearly identifiable in opposition to the area that surrounds them. Since their permanence has a generative role in the development of the city, beyond their initial context of production, they tend to persist completely.

The second group of properties is conjectural. By the word "conjectural", I mean that these properties are not completely determined by formal characteristics. It concerns how a building is used, appropriated and perceived at one particular moment. The nature of these properties is subject to potential evolutions through time, without changing the building itself:

- Dwelling areas are obviously dedicated to dwelling. Their buildings are private. Their aesthetical value is expressed through the concept of "locus". The whole area is an environment where every building embodies the memory of its production. Forms are appreciated as the manifestation of a cultural identity, rather than a more or less beautiful composition.
- Primary elements are mainly public buildings dedicated to equipment. Their aesthetical value is expressed through the concept of "style". The order of their material composition is analogical to the order of the actual or desired city.

These several properties are very different in nature, so that it is not always so clear to decide if an artifact is part of a dwelling area or is a primary element. Furthermore, other categories of urban artifacts are lacking. The role of the natural site is only partially discussed through the concept of locus. Networks are considered sometimes as part of areas, sometimes as primary elements. The role of the dross is only partially theorized by studies on phenomenon of obsolescence and expropriation.

The way Rossi theorizes the structural properties of urban artifacts raises also several questions. Obviously the characteristics of the site, the networks and the dross are missing. But, through the concept of type and of figure, Rossi focus very much on relations of similitude rather than relations of contiguity. Neither the simple articulation between buildings, lots and networks, neither more refined spatial composition is fully analyzed.

I propose to identify four kinds of "operativity":

- The way the natural site operates on the city may be considered as "underlying". Slopes orient streets through every historical period.

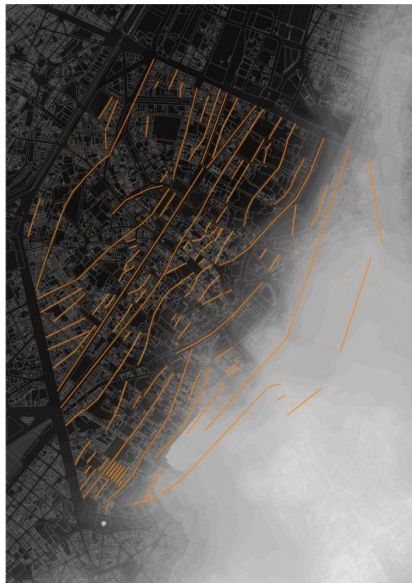


IMAGE 2: Underlying operativity (natural site)

- The internal constitution of networks, lots and buildings, or even group of networks, lot and buildings, can be similar to other artifacts and be identified as types. When they become clear enough, types tend to spread out and generate a fabric. During the twentieth century, row houses have largely disappeared in favor of offices buildings. Since the 80's, many apartment building have been built into the fabric that had been preserved from modern changes.

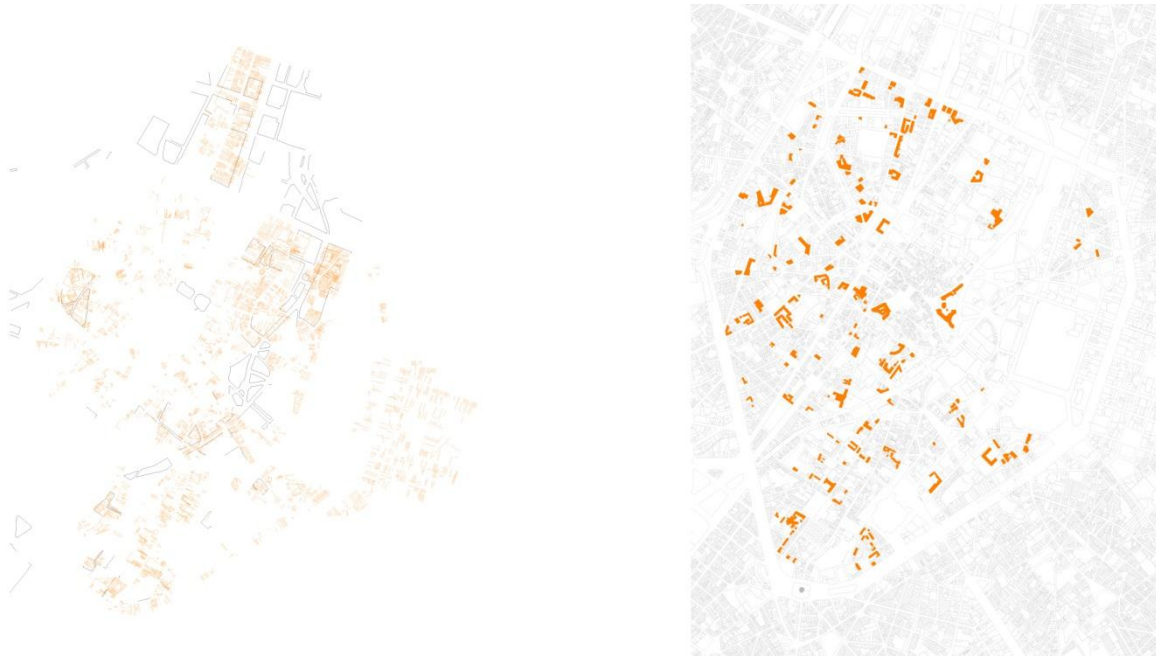


IMAGE 3: Typological operativity (dwelling areas and networks)

- The particular form of an artifact can affect the development of the places joining it. Being a closed figure is only one type of spatial articulation. Many other formal relations between artifacts could be considered: contact, axes, openness... The reconstitution of the evolution of the “stone way” of Brussels demonstrate how its importance has grown bit by bit, how its development has been oriented by the effect of several precise spatial devices.



IMAGE 4: Morphological operativity (primary elements)

- The dross, being a land that has not been urbanized yet, or being available because of the obsolescence of its buildings, draws the city in negative. It is like the potential of the future city. In the nineteenth century, very specialized artifacts like impasses for workers housing, noble and clerical urban properties or city walls became opportunities for embellishments.



IMAGE 5: Reverse operativity (dross)

In conclusion, the operativity of the natural site is underlying. The operativity of networks, lots and buildings, or combination of these elements can be typological or morphological. When it is mainly typological, the artifact acts like Rossi's dwelling areas. When it is mainly morphological, it acts like Rossi's primary elements. On the opposite, the dross constitutes a city in reverse.

The way Rossi theorizes conjectural properties raises other questions:

- His analysis focuses on stable uses like dwelling and gathering. More specialized artifacts like infrastructures, production spaces or equipment have little place in the book.
- The distinction between private and public buildings is too simplistic. Buildings can be public ownership but very private in use, like administration buildings. Inversely, buildings can be private ownership, while very public in use, like shopping malls. But even more, this distinction blurs the complexity of the relations of power between urban actors. Urban production is a class struggle. Rossi acknowledge this fact, but never develops it fully.
- Rossi gives aesthetical issues a particular importance. Firstly, he stresses the role of the image of building, as a thick and complex expression of a cultural identity, in opposition to abstract formalist perception. Image establishes analogical relationships between one particular artifact, the memory of the city and utopic desires for its transformations. But there is something very romantic in this believe in a city having an essence or having an ideal. Furthermore, the focus on image rather than space reduces the importance of spatial composition as a way of constructing relationships between the different parts of a city. Rossi gives a very little aesthetical value to morphological issues. So that his aesthetic tends to be non-situated.

The focus on stable use, the simplification of the relations of power, and the trend toward a romantic non-situated aesthetic reduce the dependence between architectural design and conjectural conditions. But at some point, this trend may lead to a melancholic feeling of being out of history, like the one Rossi expressed himself in his "autobiografia scientifica".

On the opposite, the general thesis of "l'architettura della città" argues that conjectural conditions are important because their issues are call for activism. Observing unadapt organizations, social conflicts or blind cultural codes is not a pragmatic matter of resolving problems. It is rather about discovering opportunities for new events.

In conclusion, actualizing "l'architettura della città" necessitates clarifying these different points. But more than a critic, it is an attempt to defend the relevance of the book. Partial imprecisions must not become reasons for rejecting the global thesis, radically synthetized through the sentence "the city is itself its own end".