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De Urbanitate

TALES OF URBAN LIVES AND SPACES

Contents

Reyner Banham and Aldo Rossi
Two Possible Urban Images of the "Second Machine Age"

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KEYWORDS: Reyner Banham; Aldo Rossi; Pop Art; *Scuola di Venezia*; post-modernity

Pop Culture and the Legacy of a School

Los Angeles. The Architecture of Four Ecologies[1] was published in 1971. Reyner Banham's reflections are not the only considerations that describe the change in thinking about architecture and the city in the years that marked a turning point between modernism and postmodernism.[2] In 1966 Aldo Rossi published *L'architettura della città*[3] outlining a further possible critical reading of the urban form.

Although the surpassing of late modernism declared by Philip Johnson in 1979 should be considered more of a gradual process resulting from the progressive overhaul of architectural thinking about modernity, the two texts can be thought of as two analytical and operative paradigms relative to the topic of the city, which formalize the concepts and principles of two different cultural *milieu* of post-modernism.

From the interventions of the period by the *Independent Group*[4] to his innovative monograph on Los Angeles, Reyner Banham traced the lines of a pop aesthetic that finds its applications and theoretical foundations in art, outlining, albeit through critical naivety or ideological adherence to capitalist consumerism,[5] a *Zeitgeist* of the pop culture.

Pop Art, unlike other artistic movements of the twentieth century, did not produce manifestos that allow programmatic poetics to be deduced, nonetheless two events can be identified that provide insight into the historical setting of the phenomenon:[6] the exhibition *This Is Tomorrow* held in August 1956 for English Pop Art, and *The New Realists* exhibition held in the autumn of 1962 at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York for American Pop Art.

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1 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles. The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). Italian trans. *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009).

2 Banham's book came out one year before that by Roberto Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1971). For a critical reading of the relationships between the theoretical thinking of Aldo Rossi and that of Robert Venturi refer to the paper by Martino Stierli, "Congruenze nascoste. Differenza e Analogia in Aldo Rossi e Robert Venturi," [Hidden Congruences. Difference and Analogy in Aldo Rossi and Robert Venturi] in *La lezione di Aldo Rossi*, [The Lesson of Aldo Rossi] ed. Annalisi Trentin (Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2008), 116-121.

3 Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, [The Architecture of the City] (Milano: Città Studi Edizione, 1995).

4 For a historiographical analysis refer to the text by Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59,* (Manchester, Manchester University Press: 1995).

5 While for Reyner Banham Archigram's pop-technology proposal was an inevitable sign of vitality, Manfredo Tafuri described it, with convincing clarity and the uncompromising coldness that marks the criticism of it, as: "an anti-humanistic orgy" (in Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, [Theories and History of Architecture] (Bari: Laterza, 1968), 16.) and a "supertechnological architectural utopianism, the rediscovery of the game as involvement of the public, prophecies of 'aesthetic societies', call for the establishment of a primacy of the imagination: these are the propositions of the new urban ideologies"(in Manfredo Tafuri, *Progetto e Utopia*, Laterza, [Design and Utopia] (Roma-Bari: Laterza 1973), 127).

6 For a more in-depth historiographical analysis refer to the texts by Lucy R. Lippard, *Pop Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1966), Enrico Crispolti, *Pop Art* (Milano: Fabbri, 1966), Tilman Osterwold, *Pop Art* (Köln: Taschen 1989) and Marco Livingstone, *Pop Art. A Continuity History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990).

The dates symbolically confirm a real change within art history. Above all it was the former that proved to be decisive where, in Richard Hamilton's collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, the three magic letters POP stood out in orange-yellow on a racket-size lollipop.

Reyner Banham managed to interpret and describe the end to the trend of the first phase of industrialism, identifying the paradigms of a new aesthetic in the concepts of *imageability* and *expandability*.[7] The contemporary world found its power centre in the image and in the consumption of its manifestations. The mass produced object, an expression of popular art, represented the exemplary performance of this process. This equivalence between material and symbolic consumption exposed by the pop culture is clear in Andy Warhol's statement:

> Everybody was part of the same culture now. Pop references let people know that they were part of what was happening, that they didn't have to read a book to be part of culture — all they had to do was buy it (or a record or a TV set or a movie ticket).[8]

Fig.1: Richard Hamilton, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* 1956, Tubinga, Kunsthalle

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7   Reyner Banham, "Who Is This 'Pop'?", *Motif* 10 (1962): 3-13.

8   Andy Warhol and Pat Hacket, *POPism. The Warhol '60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980). Italian trans. *I diari di Andy Warhol*, ed. R. Ricci (Novara: De Agostini 1989), 231.

Aldo Rossi's book brings together theoretical assumptions attributable to the reflections made in the journal "Casabella-continuità" by Ernesto N. Rogers[9] with whom he collaborated from 1955 while studying at Milan Polytechnic. The appellation "continuity," added to the title of the journal for the relaunch ordered by Rogers in 1953, highlights the programmatic objectives of a new editorial research that aimed to outline possible forms of relationships between historical tradition and post-modernity.

This specific critical attitude, which looked to history as an analytical and operative tool to overcome some theoretical assumptions of the Modern Movement, developed in Milan as well as in Venice. In that period IUAV, Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, experienced great reform under the guidance of the then rector Giuseppe Samonà and produced many reflections on the topic of architecture and the city which can be attributed to what scientific literature identifies as the *Scuola di Venezia*.[10]

Giuseppe Samonà and the *Gruppo Architettura* elucidated a series of reflections on the relationship between building type and urban morphology, which led to the confirmation of "Unity" between architecture and urban planning. Aldo Rossi was involved in this research from 1964, collaborating in teaching the course by Ludovico Quaroni and carrying out research together with Carlo Aymonino, the results of which were published in the paper *Contributo al problema dei rapporti tra tipologia edilizia e morfologia urbana*[11] (1964).

In the introduction to *L'unità architettura urbanistica*[12] (1970) Giuseppe Samonà claims:

> I am convinced that history cannot be defined [...] only as an illustration par excellence of the events deemed worthy of being passed down because they characterize the situations representative of an era. [...] Linked by reciprocal relationships to this traditional form of history, which in the best sense is the research, processing and interpretation of the facts of an era deemed to be relevant, are the typical forms of the history of every cultural sphere. [...] These different forms of history are used by the different cultural spheres to recognize in their creative contents the aspect of reality characteristic of the moment in which they occur.

Samonà described a particular form of knowledge called the "history of the present." A history that is therefore not a mere record of events but, in revealing the characteristic features of a specific social culture, that becomes an instrument of knowledge of the architectural and urban form, a prerequisite of the design understood as possible configurations that the physical space can assume in relation to the intervention programs.

The "Permanence" of History and the "Impermanence" of the Present

The theoretical positions described in the book *L'architettura della città* indicate a clear cultural debt to research characterizing the Venetian environment. Aldo Rossi writes:

> All this work is conceived with this intent; here it will be maintained that: a) there is an amicable relationship between these two facts, building type and urban morphology, and that shedding light on this relationship can lead to interesting results; b) these results are extremely

9 For a discussion of Ernesto N. Rogers' thoughts on architecture and the city refer to the text *Esperienza dell'architettura* [The Experience of Architecture] (Ginevra-Milano: Skira 1997).

10 On the *Scuola di Venezia* see the text *Giovanni Samonà e la Scuola di Venezia* [Giovanni Samonà and the School of Venice]*,* ed. Giovanni Marras and Marco Pogačnik (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2006) and the monographic issue "School of Venice," guest-ed. Luciano Semerani, *Architectural Design* 5/6 (1985).

11 Aldo Rossi, *Contributo al problema dei rapporti tra tipologia edilizia e morfologia urbana* [Contribution to the issue of relationships between building type and urban morphology]*,* (Milan: Istituto Lombardo per gli Studi Economici e Sociali (ILSES), 1964).

12 Giovanni Samonà, *Caratteri morfologici del sistema architettonico di Piazza San Marco, in Piazza San Marco - l'architettura la storia le funzioni* [Morphological Characteristics of the Architectural System of St. Mark's Square, in St. Mark's Square - architecture, history, functions]*,* (Padova: Marsilio, 1970); republished in *L'unità architettura-urbanistica. Scritti e progetti 1929-1973* [Writings and Designs], ed. Pasquale Lovero (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1975), 12-50.

useful for understanding the structure of the urban facts, which does not identify with the relationship above, but is for the most part explained by knowledge of this relationship.[13]

The city is conceived as a large structure, a work of architecture and engineering, the result of a construction that occurs over time.[14] In this process the concept of "archetype" – the legacy of the *Scuola di Venezia* – becomes a logical, permanent and complex statement that precedes the form and constitutes it. The "archetype" is what is closest to the "idea," a principle that remains constant over time and is laid down in the form of the city.

Typology is attributed a role of primary importance in the process of the knowledge and transformation of the city, becoming, as Samonà claimed, a "form of knowledge, partly factual, partly creative, which expresses the method of giving physical space its urban structure."[15] The archetype allows an understanding of a specific "phenomenon of culture,"[16] which generalizes techniques, elements and methods relating to the organization of the space in a specific geographic area, describing a particular "historical reality."

The "historical method" referred to in the book gives history a morphological dimension, which describes the construction logics and reasons that led to the manifestation of the architectural and urban phenomena. The gradual construction of the city conserves its foundations in the history, specifying a sort of "morphological chronology" where "time" and "logic" converge within the process that generates the form. History, through the "archetype," describes the syntax of a hypothetical urban language, attributing the reasons and principles of the logic that structures the form of the city to "tradition." Only history provides an outline of the cultural – and therefore founding – traits of the specific society and particular territory within which the architectural and urban project implements transformations.

Fig.2: Map of Venice in the 13th century from a reconstruction by Tommaso Temanza dated 1781 (by Francesco Tentori, *Imparare da Venezia* [Learning from Venice] (Roma: Officina Edizioni, 1994)

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13 Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, 71.

14 "The city subject of this book is understood as an architecture. Speaking of architecture, I am not only referring to the visible image of the city and the whole of its architecture, but rather to architecture as construction. I am referring to the construction of the city over time." Ibid. 9.

15 Giuseppe Samonà, "An Assessment of the Future of the City as a Problem of its Relationship with Architecture," in *Architectural Design* 5/6 (1985): 17.

16 Ibid.

At the beginning of his monograph on Los Angeles Reyner Banham clarifies how history is of no importance in the processes that generated the form of the city:

> A city seventy-mile square but rarely seventy years deep apart from a small downtown not yet two centuries old and a few other pockets of anciently, Los Angeles is instant architecture in an instant townscape. Most of its buildings are the first and only structures on their particular parcels of land; they are couched in a dozen different styles, most of them imported, exploited and ruined within living memory.[17]

In working on the communication mechanisms of consumption and the immediate recognizability of the images, excluding any form of interpretation or judgement referable to the categories of the *ethos*, the Pop aesthetic aims to "document" a new human condition representing the "absence of history." In Pop artists it has always aroused the conviction of living in a "historical instantaneity," a present that does not admit a past and that represents, as Richard Hamilton asserted, a "synthetic, 'instant' view."[18]

The nature of social *reportage*, which requires an exclusive focus on the present without any concern for tradition, is clearly outlined in the 1986 interview with Roy Lichtenstein who stated:

> Pop artists were the first to be able to look at the landscape of the service station civilizations without finding it horrible, without considering it preferable to think about something else, for instance Gauguin [...]. In many American cities there are no houses more than twenty-five years old. [...] This is the landscape that fascinates me: it's not the magnificent natural landscapes of America nor the impressive skyscrapers of New York that I love to look at, but these areas that modern life has devastated. The strength of this landscape is that it has no history.[19]

Fig.3: Photograph of Fremont Street in Las Vegas (by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*)

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17 Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 3.

18 The quotation by Richard Hamilton is contained in the text by Andrea Mecacci, *L'estetica del pop* [The Aesthetic of Pop Art] (Roma: Donzelli, 2011), 71.

19 Raphaël Sorin, *Pop Art 68* (Paris: L'Échoppe, 1996). Italian trans. Pop Art. Interviste di Raphaël Sorin, ed. Elio Grazioli, (Milano: Abscondita, 2007), 9.

These are the theoretical assumptions Banham uses to describe the city of Los Angeles inviting the observer, as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown would do for Las Vegas,[20] to put aside the social conditioning and cultural bias imposed by academic traditions in order to be able to understand what is seen without prejudice and to be able to read in the post-modern American city the expression of new "values" which, undoubtedly aimed at the material and symbolic consumption of the forms and images, outline the traits of a new social and cultural reality.

In the article *Industrial Design and Popular Art*[21] (1955) Reyner Banham describes the new "aesthetics of the industrial product" as the manifestation of a social culture generated by consumption logics.

The attempt by the "machine aesthetes" of the Modern Movement to confer an "ideal" value to industrial production and product standardization, infusing the word *standard* with the sense of a brand, an idea to strive for, is completely negated by its "impermanent" nature. If a mass-produced object is in itself a "model," then Banham argues it is "far from absolute and permanent insofar it is tolerated until the latest research makes it possible to establish a new model that better meets the requirements."[22]

The nature of "consumability" and "substitutability" does not just refer to the object itself but also to the "archetype" or "model" and, therefore, to the same idea that precedes its form, excluding any possibility of the permanence of the object produced, and also and above all of everything regarding its principles and foundations.

Banham writes:

> The type or standard, of which the object is the image, far from being a permanent idea existing in absolute, is an idea that exists in the mind of the designer only up until the time the object enters the production stage, and keeping it after this time would hamper further production developments.[23]

There is therefore no typological issue understood as a relationship between history and form, because, according to the economic and cultural logic of "use and throw away," the idea only responds to the needs and requirements of an "immediate present."

In the short chronological reading of the historical facts Banham does not describe the *ranchos* or *pueblos* of Los Angeles as permanent typological elements of the urban morphology, rather he emphasizes their "transitory" nature pointing out how they were repeatedly demolished and reconstructed until they finally disappeared in the contemporary metropolis. Los Angeles was not constructed through the reinterpretation of specific architectural typologies that have been laid down over time, but as a multitude of transitional forms that have been altered or replaced according to precise needs linked to past and current "ways of living."

The Semantics of "Historical Memory" and the "Collective Imagination"

While Aldo Rossi uses the concept of "archetype" in the first part of his book to outline a "historical method" that indicates the processes relative to the construction of the city, there is also a "second point of view that regards history as a study of the very foundation of the urban facts, and of their structure. It is the complement of the other and directly concerns not only the material structure of the city but also the idea we have of the city as the synthesis of a set of values."[24]

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20 Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas.*

21 Reyner Banham, "Industrial design e arte popolare" [Industrial Design and Popular Art]*, Civiltà delle macchine* (1995): 12-15.

22 Ibid. 13.

23 Ibid.

24 Rossi, *L'architettura della città,* 174.

Fig.4: Padua, Palazzo della Regione, view from Piazza delle Erbe (from Rossi, *L'architettura della città*)

The city is formed of architectures and "urban facts," some of which are distinguished by a marked and specific "aesthetic intentionality" and their nature of "permanence," becomes a "past still experienced"[25] in the present. These entities, both historical and aesthetic at the same time, are *monuments* of the city which constitute, argues Rossi, "symbolic forms that are stronger than their function," as "function and content can be altered without changing the form of the monument."[26]

In the dynamics of the city the *monuments* persist, they remain as formal permanent features. In Venice the triangulation between San Giorgio, Santa Maria della Salute, the Doge's Palace and St. Mark's Square sees these elements of the urban structure assume the role of "fixed points,"[27] which represent formal references for understanding the city and its meaning. While the "archetype" describes abstract logics and principles, the *monument* expresses, through its form, the figurative nature of the city, becoming a linguistic entity of a communication process that transmits specific values and meanings. Aldo Rossi argues that the *Mémoire collective,*[28] namely the historical and collective memory of a society, contains the semantic codes through which the meaning of the city and its image can be understood.

> The city is the *locus* of the collective memory. This relationship between the *locus* and the citizens thus becomes the prominent image, the architecture, the landscape: just as facts become part of the memory, new facts grow in the city. In this entirely positive sense great ideas run through the history of the city and shape it.[29]

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25 Ibid. 56.

26 Aldo Rossi, "What is to be Done with the Old Cities?", *Architectural Design* 5/6 (1985): 22.

27 Ibid.

28 «Lorsque un groupe est inséré dans une partie de l'espace, il la transforme à son image, mais en même temps il se plie et s'adapte à des choses matérielles qui lui résistent. Il s'enferme dans le cadre qu'il a construit. L'image du milieu extérieur et des rapports stable qu'il entretient avec lui passe au premier plan de l'idée qu'il se fait de lui- même.» Quotation from the book by Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* [The Collective Memory] (Paris: Albin Michel, 1950) from Rossi's text *L'architettura della città,* 178.

29 Ibid.

The image of the city has no physical form but rather it is a mental construction, an abstract concept, an idea that coincides with the *Âme de la citè*, it is: "the history, the sign linked to the walls of the municipalities, the distinctive and at the same time definitive character, the memory."[30]

Sixtus V's Rome described by Giedion[31] and re-proposed in Rossi's text, highlights a process of constructing the image of the city which is expressed through the understanding of a "formal system" comprised of independent figurative parts through which specific relationships are established in order to specify the "Unity" of everything. The transmission of the meanings and values does not occur through the perception of isolated forms alone but through the reading of its morphological complexity, namely a set of "urban facts" where the whole is more important than the individual parts.

Aldo Rossi addresses the "aesthetic" question of the city through an eminently "poetic"[32] attitude, he describes a symbolic mechanism that affirms the primacy of the structural form with respect to the final image, radically opposing methods of *town design.*[33] What could be defined as a "method of constructing," the image of the city finds its theoretical reference in the description of the Acropolis of Athens contained in the *Dictionnaire historique d'Arquitecture*[34] (1832) by Quatremère de Quincy and then re-proposed by Sergei M. Eisenstein[35] to explain the cinematographic technique of "montage."

In the paper *What is to be Done with Old Cities?*[36] (1985) Aldo Rossi identifies a possible example of this type of image in Mario Sironi's pictorial research. The paintings represent a "system," a "montage" of parts that describe, claims Rossi, "an urban landscape of precise planes and object from which we glimpse the repeating and growing of the city part by part," a method, he then emphasizes, that "is completely different from collage in painting; in collage an object dissolves in the composition of the painting."[37]

This type of syntax specifies images that express their meaning through the symbolic mechanism[38] of the "metaphor." The use of this particular rhetorical device becomes, in Rossi's poetics, an instrument of knowledge insofar as it allows the understanding and transmission of complex meanings, namely ideas and principles.

The image of the city assumes an "ontological" character in the platonic conviction that the truth - providing that it exists or that there is only one - can only be found through the vision of the pure concepts. Real knowledge of the set of historical, cultural and social materials, layered and conserved in the form of the city, can only occur by removing the undefined cages of sensory experience in order to be able to seize on the "mythological" dimension.

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30 Ibid.

31 Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1941).

32 Reference is made to the concepts of *"poietica"* and *"estetica"* described in Paul Valéry, "Discours sur l'Esthétique" [Discourse on Aesthetics] in ed. Jean Hytier, *Oeuvres* [Artworks] (Éditions Gallimard: Paris, 1957), 1294-1314.

33 Aldo Rossi, referring to the theoretical positions of Camillo Sitte, argued: "But on the other hand Sitte's lesson also contains a complete misunderstanding; that the city as a work of art can be traced back to some artistic episode or to its legibility and not ultimately to its concrete experience. On the contrary we believe that the whole is more important than the parts." In Rossi, *L'architettura della città,* 30.

34 Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy, *Dizionario storico di architettura* [Historical Dictionary of Architecture], ed. Valeria Farinati and Georges Teyssot (Venezia: Marsilio, 1985).

35 Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Teoria generale del montaggio* [General Theory of Montage] (Venezia: Saggi Marsilio, 1992).

36 Rossi, "What is to be Done with the Old Cities?", 19-23.

37 Ibid. 22.

38 Rossi identifies the symbol as the very "motive" of architecture, stressing that: "the symbol therefore on the one hand summarizes the architecture and its principles, and on the other there is the same condition of constructing." In Rossi *L'architettura della città*, 154.

Fig.5: Mario Sironi, *Periferia*, 1922, Private collection
(opposite page) Fig.6: Robert Rauschenberg, *Estate*, 1963, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

With respect to Rossi's reflections on the semantic dimension of the "historical method," Banham's position leaves no room for misunderstandings:

> Simply to go from the oldest monument to the newest could well prove a short, boring and uninstructive journey, because the point about this gigantic city, which has grown almost simultaneously all over, is that all its parts are equal and equally accessible from all other parts at once.[39]

Although Banham recognizes that the "transportation palimpsest" has an organizational and founding role in the morphological structure of the city, an inconsistent and not at all unique relationship is established between the elements. The form expresses the "difficult unity"[40] of a city formed not out of "parts," but out of unitary "fragments" ordered according to a hypotactic structure that outlines a rhetoric of the typical "irony" of Pop Art.[41]

Lawrence Alloway[42] describes the *combine paintings* of Robert Rauschemberg as deliberately anti-architectural and anti-syntactic compositions, where no cause-effect relationship can be recognized between the "pieces," so that "multiplicity" constitutes the subject of the painting. The semantic dimension is not connected to the constructive structure, so each element in the composition expresses its own content independently of the whole.

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39 Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 17.

40 The meaning of "difficult unity" is taken up in the text by Robert Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

41 On the "ironic" nature of the forms of architecture and of the city that outline a clear reference to Pop Art, refer to the text by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and above all to the response to the essay by Kenneth Frampton formulated by Denis Scott Brown, *Reply to Frampton*, "Casabella" 359-60 (1971): 31-38.

42 Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 1974).

The need to immediately understand the meaning – demanded by a market and consumer society – transforms the "symbol into a message" and the "sign into a signal"[43] in order to be able to cancel out any interpretation attempt based on metaphor and to permit easy use and complete consumption of the object and its image. In the photographic work of Ruscha[44] the road does not evoke any yearning for the absolute, no projection of personal freedom in the limitless space of nature, but it exclusively becomes part of an iconographic reportage represented to describe the reality of the present through its phenomena.

The fact that the architectural and urban language of Los Angeles uses the aesthetic and poetic principles of Pop Art is confirmed by Banham himself who, in describing the hamburger, argues:

> The way in which the functional and symbolic parts of the hamburger platter have been discriminated, separated and displayed is a fair analogue for the design of most of the buildings in which they are sold. No nonsense about integrated design, every part conceived in separate isolation and made the most of: the architecture of symbolic assemblage.[45]

Los Angeles, essentially, becomes a "sign city." The autonomy of the different parts that represent the "fragments" of the urban structure highlights an expressive intentionality, the ultimate purpose of which is to transmit "messages." This produces the separation of the structure from the ornament and the shift of the semantic dimension from the construction to the surface of the architectural form. Communication of the meaning is exclusively entrusted to the phenomenon aspect of the object, namely to its image. The project becomes *design* assuming an eminently decorative character and uses the technique of *labelling* to configure the forms and urban spaces. The signs assume the role of a plastic support through which architecture transmits its meanings. In some cases the form transforms through its message,[46] specifying that coincidence between support and meaning typical of Pop poetics.

Describing the Tahiti Village in Los Angeles, Banham argues:

> This incredible and delightfully absurd construction is a characteristic example of the way in which Los Angeles sums up a general phenomenon of US life; the convulsions in building style that follow when traditional cultural and social restraints have been overthrown and replaced by the preferences of a mobile, affluent, consumer-oriented society, in which "cultural values" and ancient symbols are handled primarily as methods of claiming or establishing status.[47]

Images of the city express a set of new meanings that extract from the present its interpretation codes, which can be attributed to the dreams and desires of the pop culture of the "here and now." A "collective imagination"[48] which, according to Banham, represents "extravagant myths of private gratification and self-realization."[49]

The new language of the Pop culture inevitably produces a new "iconocity," radically transforming the forms, but also and above all the role and value of the urban elements of Los Angeles and of many other American cities. Churches and shops become *drive-ins*, the piers of the *Surfurbias,* the power plants and the *Highways* represent the new "monuments" of the city insofar as they are an expression of the economic dynamics and imagination of a social culture of mass consumption.

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43 I am referring to the distinction between "sign" and "signal" described in the text by Gillo Dolfers, *Simbolo comunicazione consumo* [Symbol, Communication, Consumption] (Torino: Einaudi, 1962).

44 Edward Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Los Angeles: Ed Ruscha, 1966).

45 Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 91.

46 I am referring to the coincidence between "building" and "billboard" described in the text by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas.*

47 Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 102.

48 A reflection on the meaning of "collective imagination" was formulated in Renato De Fusco's text, *Architettura come mass medium: note per una semiologia architettonica* [Architecture as a Mass Medium: Notes for Architectural Semiotics] (Bari: Dedalo, 1967), the term also occurs in the book by Mecacci, *L'estetica del pop*.

49 Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 103.

Fig.7: Brown Derby Restaurant, Wilshire Boulevard, 1926 (by Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*)

Banham writes: "The language of the design, architecture and urban planning of Los Angeles is the language of movement."[50] The automobile becomes a necessary instrument for a proper perception and comprehension of the city.[51] *Miracle Mile* and *Wilshire Boulevard* are described as real "passable monuments,"[52] paradigms of the classic American *Commercial Strip*[53] and of the concept of the "Pop panoramic road." The road is the *medium* through which the city transmits its images, actually becoming part of that network of mass communication systems that comprises the new plastic support of popular art.

In line with an attitude common to Pop Art, which recognizes modern *mass media* as an authentic cultural phenomenon and transforms its attributes, formula and contents, through artifice, into art, the road decorated with billboards and signals acquires the character of a real "urban artefact," just as the road network system of Los Angeles represents for Banham: "one of the greatest works of humanity [...] a work of art, both as a pattern on a map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it."[54]

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50 Ibid. 4.

51 "So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original." In Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 5.

52 Ibid. 64.

53 For a more detailed analysis of this urban element see the text by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

54 Banham, *Los Angeles: l'architettura di quattro ecologie*, 67.

The Content of the "Black Box"

In 1959 the English journal *The Architectural Review* published an article by Reyner Banham entitled "Neoliberty: The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture,"[55] which criticized the interest directed at some young Italian architects described in the paper by Aldo Rossi: "Il passato e il presente nella nuova architettura,"[56] published one year before in *Casabella-continuità*, a journal directed at that time by Ernesto Nathan Rogers. In relation to the accusations of stylistic regression to Art Nouveau through adherence to Neoliberty made by Banham, one year prior Rossi had highlighted the inadequacy of such research with respect to the "progressive criticism" of the Modern Movement[57] then underway in Italy.

It was Ernesto Nathan Rogers who explicitly responded to Banham's accusations in the article "L'evoluzione dell'architettura. Risposta al custode dei frigidaires"[58] (1959), pointing out that the attention to those particular reflections on Italian architecture should have been covered as part of broader research that looked at history as a possible instrument through which "to react to modernistic formalism."[59] Perhaps it is also due to this specification that Banham's observations on the *Velasca Tower*,[60] although they maintain the irony typical of pop rhetoric, do not denote hostility like those expressed by Peter Smithson at the CIAM in Otterlo, but rather awareness or verification that the reflections of the Milanese architects shared with the Anglo-Saxon world the same intentions to overcome the utopian technicalities and formalisms of the Modern Movement in order to bring the topic of the city back to humans and their existence.

A possible convergence between the reflections of Banham and Rossi lies in the same meaning of the term "Urbanity," which comes from the Latin *urbanitas, atis* and can be translated literally as "belonging to city living," thus expressing a very broad concept as it can refer to both the facts of the material structure, demographic and urban, and to those of the social structure, institutions and social realities, such as classes, strata and parties. Banham and Rossi seemed to want to connect the reasons for the existence of a particular material and social structure to the cultural dimension of "city living." The city is conceived as "a work of art," a collective expression of a certain culture, which allows, through a reading of the forms, an understanding of the principles and fundamentals that generate the social, anthropological, political and economic relationships of a specific society.

In the article "A Black Box. The Secret Profession of Architecture"[61] (1990) Banham proposed "to treat the architectural mode or presence as a classic 'black box,' recognised by its output though unknown in its contents."[62] In an attempt to define the content of the "black box," the paper fiercely criticizes academic teaching and the architectural profession which, rising above the masses, discriminate against the forms and tools of popular culture only allowing access to the mystical realm of architecture to those works that use an "arcane and privileged aesthetic code."[63]

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55 Reyner Banham, "Neoliberty: The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture," *The Architectural Review* 747 (1959): 231-235.

56 Aldo Rossi, "Il passato e il presente nella nuova architettura," [The Past and the Present in New Architecture] *Casabella-continuità* 219 (1958): 16-19.

57 Rossi, with regard to Hans Sendlmayr's book against modern art, stressed that that type of criticism "does not indicate development prospects, an alternative in modern culture, but it stands in denial of modern culture." In Aldo Rossi, "Una critica che respingiamo," [A criticism we reject] *Casabella-continuità* 219 (1958): 33-35.

58 Ernesto Nathan Rogers, "L'evoluzione dell'architettura. Risposta al custode dei frigidaires," [The Evolution of Architecture. Reply to the Custodian of Frigidiares] *Casabella* 228 (1959): 2-4.

59 Ibid. 3.

60 For Banham the Velasca Tower represented the trend in Italy of "ex-modernists who have abandoned the accepted moral, social, and mechanical imperatives of the modern movement, and gone native in the thickets of gusto, cultura, storia, and so forth that grow so densely in Italian critical discourse." In Banham Reyner, "Milan: the Polemical Skyline," *The Listener* 1 (1960): 338.

61 Reyner Banham, "A Black Box. The Secret Profession of Architecture," in *A Critic Writes. Essays by Reyner Banham*, ed. Mary Banham et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996), 292-299.

62 Ibid. 293.

63 Ibid. 297.

Banham describes a political attitude that aims to maintain positions of privilege over a popular culture not so learned as to be permitted access to the mysteries of architecture and its language so much as to assume that the content of the "black box" does not exist.

Let us suppose that the "black box" represents the city, that the cultural reasons for its existence coincide with its content and we attempt to describe its consistency and meaning with respect to the observations developed by Banham and Rossi.

Los Angeles – a paradigm of the American post-modern city – is the expression of a specific popular culture whose language produces and consumes images alone. Although Banham states in his article that he does not conceive architecture as "a blend of art and science,"[64] he confers on Pop Art its own epistemological status, which uses the "phenomenon" as a tool for investigation and knowledge. The Pop aesthetic identifies the objective consistency of the idea in the phenomenon, specifying the coincidence between the essence and the existence of the object. Banham's approach is eminently gnosiological and it recognizes the truth as only that which is empirically measurable and knowable, an analytical and operative thought that brings the methods and objectives of art closer to those of science.

This convergence between art and science produces an analytical discourse that becomes an anthological recording of urban fragments where the meanings of the form are always connected to the empirical existence of humans in the city. As a result, there is unconditional confidence in technology which represents – in the *neoavanguardia* and above all in the work of Buckminster Fuller – the instrument through which to scientifically respond to the needs and requirements of "city living." Immense "geodesic domes" or "megastructures" specify cities conceived as technological systems capable of optimizing the bioclimatic conditions of the internal environment, bringing human existence exclusively back to its immanent dimension.

In his *Autobiografia scientifica*[65] (1990) Aldo Rossi recounts that one of his teachers dissuaded him from pursuing architecture saying that his "drawings seemed like those produced by builders or foremen from the countryside."[66] It is interesting to note that Banham too criticized this attitude of the academies geared more towards the workmanship of the drawing than its content,[67] a custom that he believed could be removed through automatic drawing which made it possible to eliminate the "mystique of drawing" and its consequent commercial value.

Aldo Rossi's *quaderni azzurri*[68] contain some compositions of primary elements of architecture, parts of architecture actually built or only designed, everyday objects and places from his personal memory. Architectural shadows, mainly axonometric representations and the multi-scale nature of objects - which transforms coffee pots into architecture - specify the eminently constructive nature of the drawing which shifts from the inside to the outside illustrating the logic of the design. The iconographic device recurs in the different compositions; predetermined figures express the geographical and historical dimension of the places and of memory. The drawing, like architecture, proceeds by additions and by overlapping specifying autonomous formal apparatuses based on the combinatorial manipulation of real and imaginary figures.

The compositions express the meaning of a civilization through the images of a tradition restricted to a territory, proceeding through analogue allusions that describe places of pure architectural reference. Analogy and citation become figurative and semantic tools through which the image permits a relationship between historical memory and the current reality. As Tafuri notes,[69] for Aldo Rossi's "analogue city"[70] there is no place in the dimension of reality. The image of the city

Fig.8: Aldo Rossi, *Studio per grande composizione*, 1978 (from *Aldo Rossi: Drawing and Paintings*, edited by Morris Adjmi and Giovanni Bertolotto. New York: Princeton Architectural Press 1993).

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64 Ibid.

65 Aldo Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica* [Scientific Autobiography] (Parma: Pratiche Editrice, 1990).
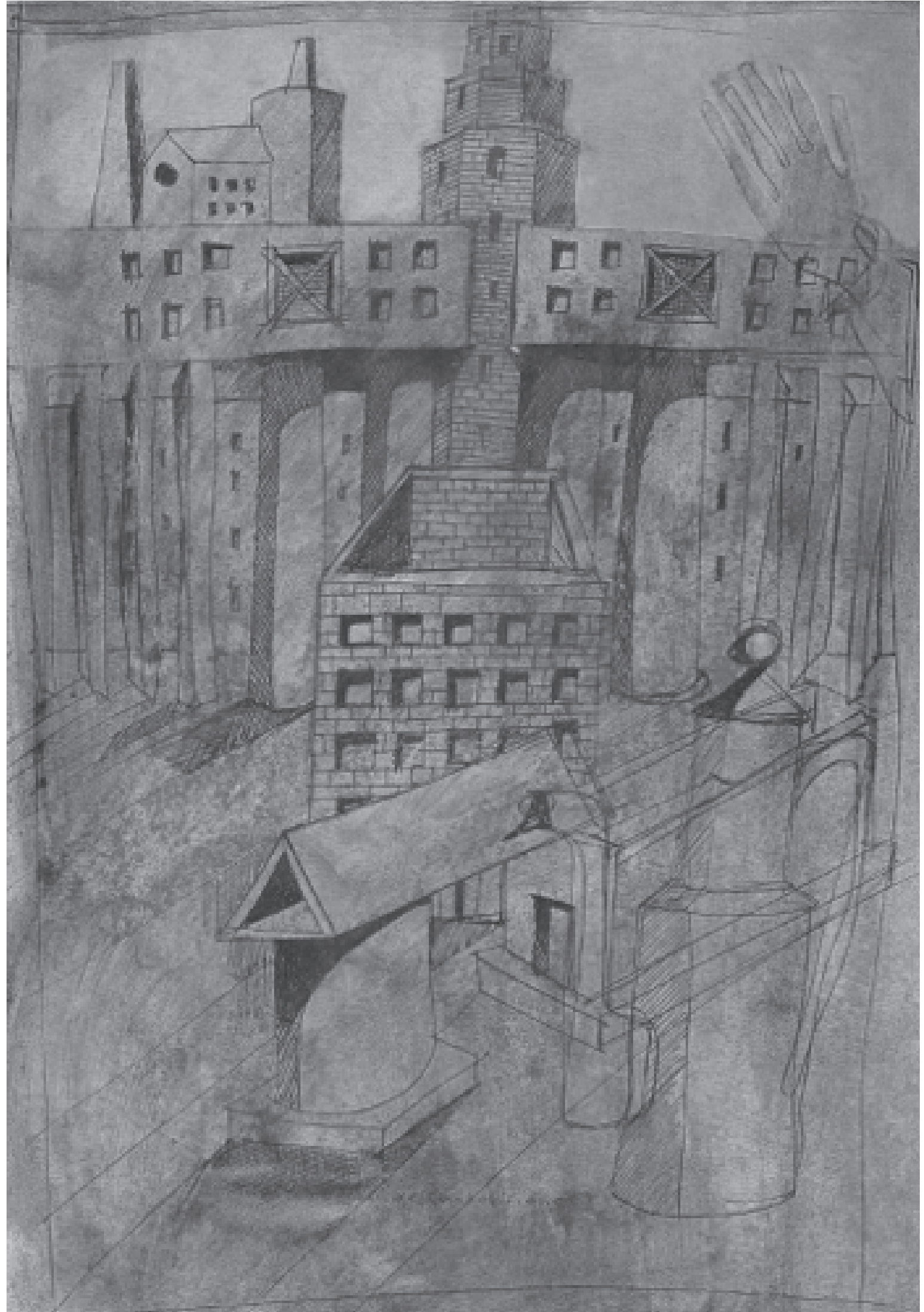
66 Ibid. 44.

67 Reyner Banham, "A Black Box," 294.

68 Aldo Rossi, *Quaderni azzurri* [Blue Notebooks] (Milano: Electa, 1999).

69 Manfredo Tafuri, "Ceci n'est pas une ville," [This Is Not a City] *Lotus International* 13 (1976): 10-14.

70 Aldo Rossi, "La città analoga," [The Analogue City] *Lotus International* 13 (1976): 5-9.

cannot be defined; it does not exist as an objective fact as the contents of its meaning belong to the world of pure concepts.

The epistemological status of art is, for Rossi, completely different to that of science as the reason for the existence of the phenomena is not an entity that shows itself or appears. The purpose of art is to describe and understand the essence of the things that bring to light those universal principles and values that coincide with the idea. But the world of ideas is by its very nature indescribable, and this is why the images of Aldo Rossi's city do not represent an object, but rather a construction logic, a rational organization of pieces of reality and fragments of history, evoking principles and concepts through, in search of that relationship between immanent and transcendent that allows us to understand the intimate reasons for the phenomenon.

Banham and Rossi address the topic of the city with the same awareness that the form contains all the information relative to the reasons for its own existence. The two positions agree on conceiving of the city as a fact with its own artistic figure, that is a thought, a collective intention that manifests. The differences on the other hand are apparent in the image of the city, which the two authors describe in terms of a relationship between form and meaning.

Los Angeles is the city of an ephemeral culture of American post-modern society which, in line with the logic of consumption, leads the meanings of its forms to the images, so that the reasons for the urban phenomena lie in the dimension of their existence. Aldo Rossi uses history as a tool to understand the culture of a territory, the images of the forms are ideas and concepts, the meanings of which, through memory and myth, express the essence that dwells beyond what is real. While Banham seems to suggest that the content of the "black box" does not exist, in the conviction, perhaps, that it coincides with its surface, for Rossi the question is not whether there is something inside the "black box" or not, but rather how, once it is opened, we can read and understand its meaning.

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