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Architectures of Nothing: Aldo Rossi and Raymond Roussel

Abstract

By the mid 1960s the modernist design ideology of the new, by which I mean the search for novel forms expressive of a future and better world, had begun to seem somewhat tired, at least to the late avant-garde architects who are the theme of this conference session. These architects were suspicious of the modernist commitment to the new because, for them, having witnessed the devastation of the Second World War and the subsequent rebuilding, justification of formal invention as a kind of message radiating backward from the future seemed no longer credible. Remaining committed to the architect's desire to formulate projects, yet in search of alternative strategies upon which to base their projections, some of these architects looked back to the early twentieth century and to the work of artists who had been associated with the Surrealist movement. One architect who is known to have looked back to Surrealism in this way was Aldo Rossi, already well noted in this respect was Rossi's interest in the painter Giorgio de Chirico. Rossi's contemporary, the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, claimed that Rossi sourced the imagery for his projects from the mute, enigmatic sign language of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, where space appears frozen and abandoned by time.ⁱ But there is another connection to surrealism via Raymond Roussel, which has received very little attention.ⁱⁱ It is this connection which I will explore in this paper, focusing on how Rossi made memory an active ingredient in the architectural imagination and hence the reference to surrealism a part within the formulation of architectural projects after modernism.

Keywords

Memory, Theatre, Autobiography, Locus, Imagination, Project

Although Raymond Roussel was not a Surrealist, many artists and intellectuals aligned with the group greatly admired his work and had even, on occasions, approached him with suggestions for collaboration, which Roussel always politely declined. A good example is Marcel Duchamp, who, in a 1966 interview, spoke of his debt to Roussel and specifically to his *Impressions d' Afrique* (1910), which Duchamp first saw as a stage performance and then read in the novel form: 'it was tremendous,' said Duchamp, going on to

explain ‘...that man had done something which really had Rimbaud’s revolutionary aspect to it, a secession...And then this amazing person, living shut up in himself in his caravan, the curtains drawn.’ⁱⁱⁱ

This notion of introversion, we will see, is important as a connector between Rossi and Roussel. *Impressions d’Afrique*^{iv} is built out of numerous scenes and events, described in meticulous and sometimes tedious detail, in which everyday objects are involved in seemingly exotic and mysterious rituals that are elaborately described. Perhaps, had he joined with the Surrealists, Roussel would have been better known in the 1960s; but without his relative obscurity Roussel would have been unavailable as a cultural resource for Rossi.

In linking Roussel’s poetic means and methods of creative practice to his own, Rossi was able to challenge modernist attitudes towards formal invention and to overturn modernism’s basic cultural premise that advocates the future at the expense of the past. It was not that Rossi wanted to abandon modernism’s commitment to solving real problems of the built environment, but Rossi was doubtful if modernist attitudes were capable of identifying what those real problems might be. Another way to put this would be to say that Rossi was looking for a new form of the new, and so to this end he turned his back to the future and looked instead, not to the past, but to the temporal notion of memory. One problem Rossi was faced with in performing his cultural innovation was the question of how to identify and critically represent memory in architectural projects, because in order to value memory it has to be recognisable as an active ingredient in the architectural work.

The earliest mentioning of Roussel in Rossi’s published writings is in his essay "Architettura per i musei" ("Architecture for Museums," 1960). The essay is based on a seminar Rossi gave at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia in the academic year 1965-66,^v around the time when *L’architettura della città* (1966) was published. At that stage in his career Rossi was not well known outside Italy and had yet to produce the projects for which he is famous today. In his museum essay Rossi momentarily sets aside the main discursive theme to announce his intention that one day, in the not so distant future, he would ‘*dirci*’ (tell us) ‘*come ho fatto alcune mie architetture*’ (how I made certain of my projects). Here Rossi was making a direct reference to Roussel’s posthumous publication *Comment j’ai écrit certain de mes livres* (1935). It is my understanding of Rossi’s *A Scientific Autobiography* (1981) as his fulfilment of that promise.

In *Comment j'ai écrit certain de mes livres*^{vi} Roussel explains how he invented a whole variety of techniques of punning that enabled him to break apart readymade language structures, taken arbitrarily from the culture of the third republic that he lived in, and weave the fragments together into texts of amazing descriptive richness, ones that are lifelike in their details yet refer to nothing real. The Surrealists too are well-known for their techniques of formal invention, such as *frottage*, *coulage*, the game of *Illot Mollo* and the infamous *cadavre exquis*. On the surface Roussel's texts seem like extraordinarily inventive feats of the imagination and it comes as something of a surprise to find they are no more than mechanical constructs, riddled with accidents and arbitrary procedures. Reading a text by Roussel is like wandering around inside an ancient memory machine, rather like the classical mnemonic described in *The Three Latin Sources for the Classical Art of Memory* in Francis Yates book *The Art of Memory* (1966).^{vii} Imagine if one were to become trapped inside such a machine. One would be a captive, entirely immersed in a world of embodied mnemonic devices, where the *loci* and the *imagines argentes* are not figures of the mind but actual bodies in space! The trapped subject would never get to hear the assembled speeches those places and images structure and represent. For the captive it would be a matter of wandering around aimlessly and endlessly, inside the artificial memory domain! Tafuri, who was perhaps Rossi's most attentive critic, theorised an entire history of modern architecture, from the Renaissance to the present, in terms of just such a trapped subject.^{viii} And in this respect it is important to note, Roussel never was interested in recalling actual memories and although he was very well travelled, he never took anything from his travels for his books, stressing the importance of this aspect of his creative practice, 'since it clearly shows just how much imagination accounts for everything in my work.'^{ix}

In *Comment j'ai écrit certain de mes livres* Roussel tells of his frustration that his work was so often ignored or, where it had attracted attention, been misunderstood. He was a great admirer of Jules Verne and Napoleon Bonaparte and he wanted to be popular and glorious in the same way he believed they had been.^x It never seems to have occurred to him that the price paid for finely crafted wordplay and exquisite precision in detailed descriptions is a lack of vivacity in the plot and lack of depth in the characters. In fact it isn't quite true to say Roussel was unaware of the consequences of his methods, because he devoted large amounts of his quite considerable wealth to adapting and performing his texts as theatre, apparently he believed they would be more accessible to mass audiences in theatrical form. He was wrong about this, however the stage

versions did attract the attention of burgeoning Surrealists, such as Francis Picabia, Guillaume Apollinaire, Robert Desnos and, as we have seen, Marcel Duchamp.

Rossi's Scientific Autobiography reads as a montage of notes rather than a sparse and precisely crafted text like *Comment j'ai écrit ...*, but what is common to both is the curious desire they induce in the reader, who feels obliged to read on and unlock the mysterious secrets inside. In the opening paragraph Rossi explains that the notes date back as far as 1971, the same year he began work on the competition to design a major addition to the cemetery of San Cataldo in Modena (figures 1 & 2). In winning the competition Rossi began to attract international attention to his work. By alluding to the cemetery project Rossi was able to introduce the theme of death into the text, which in turn allowed him to insinuate his own resurrection, or rebirth into his autobiography. In so doing Rossi was parodying Roussel's posthumous relationship to *Comment j'ai écrit ...* Another theme shared with Roussel was that of being critically misunderstood. In one note Rossi observes 'how this project provoked ferocious attacks on me,'^{xi} and he complained that critics and commentators were reading the cemetery project as 'a sort of neo-enlightenment experiment.'^{xii} This particular misunderstanding stems from Rossi's association with a movement known as the Italian Tendenza. Architects deemed to belong to the Tendenza were promoted, in the then rapidly expanding magazine and journal culture, as adopting a rational approach to design. They tended to work with clear, understated forms and to adopt a design methodology supposedly based on the theory of typology, as stated by Quatremère de Quincy and reintroduced into Italian architecture culture by Giulio Carlo Argan in the 1950s.^{xiii} By the 1980s neo-rationalism of this kind had become tremendously popular in international architecture culture and attracted adherents across Europe and Northern America. In a special issue of the London-based journal *Architectural Design*, entitled *Classicism is Not a Style*, Rossi's cemetery project was published alongside articles and projects by Leon Krier and Dimitri Porphyrios that promoted their own brand of rationalism, wherein architecture is understood as a timeless reflection on the tectonics of building.^{xiv} These architects advocated Classicism as a mode of craft building that could be held up as exemplary in the face of blatantly commercial development projects and property speculation.

Events of the 1980s notwithstanding, at the time of winning the cemetery competition Rossi should not have been entirely surprised by the neo-enlightenment readings of his work.^{xv} *L'architettura della città* was filled

with references to rationalist ideas, even going so far as to explain the classical distinction between the ‘type’ and ‘model,’ and, it is quite understandable that critics would have read the cemetery design as framed by such ideas. At Modena the buildings were modelled as sparse, reductive forms and grouped together to form a collection, but Rossi quite consciously kept the spatial relationships between them undeveloped and understated, it was as if the collection of buildings had been laid out rather like the pieces on a game board or cutlery and crockery on a table. This places Rossi’s project in an entirely different realm of speculation to those of the Tendenza, or indeed the tectonic rationalists, who tended to articulate the spaces in-between buildings through models derived from traditional urban spaces, well known from Western canons of architectural history. At Modena, thanks to the muted expression and uninflected matter of fact disposition, it is possible to experience the environment of the cemetery as if the buildings were visitors from some other world of incorporeal ideas, where they appear to shimmer on the threshold of mundane reality. The effect can be especially poignant in the often hazy atmosphere of the *Val Padana*.

As well as the thematic references to *Comment j’ai écrit...*, the Scientific Autobiography quotes Roussel directly, which, given Rossi’s stated intention of writing without quotations, is resonant. The quote is from the first chapter of *Impressions d’Afrique*, where Roussel deploys the literary device of the narrator to introduce the reader to a place called Trophies Square. It is a vast open space at the centre of Ejur, the capital city of a fictive ‘Ponukelian Empire,’ located on the West coast of Africa. Rossi selects a particular moment from the description, where Roussel’s attentive narrator is drawn toward a specific building:

On my right, in front of the trees, at a point in the middle of the row, stood a kind of red theatre, like a gigantic Punch and Judy show, whose facade bore the words ‘The Incomparables Club’ arranged in three lines of silver lettering in a glittering surround of broad golden rays, spreading in every direction like those around a sun.

On the stage at present a table and a chair were to be seen, apparently intended for a lecturer. Several unframed portraits were pinned to the backcloth and underneath was an explanatory label worded thus: ‘Electors of Brandenburg.’^{xvi}

Notice how the description is structured like a memory machine, referencing a place that is the locus of a group of images, but leaving the reader guessing as to the code that deciphers them (in the second part of *Impressions* Roussel does actually reveal the code, but for the first ten or so chapters the reader is left in the dark).

So, when Rossi, reflecting on the description, writes, ‘Here is a true architectural project’^{xvii} the attentive reader, desiring to unlock Rossi’s secrets, feels a poetic resonance reverberating in this moment and she suspects and indeed hopes that here is the key to his museum promise to ‘tell.’ The reader therefore pauses to look a little more carefully at Trophies Square, the locus of the theatre and headquarters of the Incomparables Club.

Trophies Square is a space of representation, formally combining geometry and nature in the perfect figure of a square, outlined by trees on all four sides. Beyond the outline of trees lies the major part of Ejur City, a capital city, but one that is made entirely out of huts. Trophies Square includes buildings and other objects laid out upon its surface, these are additional items that have been put there recently in order to stage a gala performance coinciding with the coronation of ‘Talu VII, Emperor of Ponukele and King of Drelishkaf.’^{xviii} The person responsible for laying out the buildings and other items upon Trophies Square is a character called Chènevillot, a notable and gifted constructor and a ‘great architect.’^{xix} In terms of the literary devices Roussel deploys to describe the square the architect is something of a novelty, the narrator on the other hand is a traditional figure used to describe situations and scenes and generally keep the reader up to speed with the plot. Like the narrator, the device of the architect plays an intermediary role, however he is a constructor, not a storyteller and his acts of building have already transformed the square and prepared it for the narrative that is about to unfold. Chènevillot is without personality himself, but he brings character to the square through the cunning contrivances he has devised to equip it for the forthcoming celebrations.

Chènevillot belongs to a group of Europeans of the *Belle Époque*, most of them French nationals. While travelling to Argentina the Europeans have been shipwrecked on the shores of Africa and are currently hostage to Talu. In order to alleviate the tedium of their days the hostages have decided to test and entertain themselves by devising a gala performance to be staged on the day of their release and, as it turns out, Talu’s

succeeding to the kingship of Drelshkaf. Chênevillot's role is to conceive and construct the necessary structures that will function as props and centres of organisation for the performance. These include four buildings: the red theatre, a miniature bourse, a tiny laboratory and a prison. There is also an altar, a large pedestal to which a man will be tied, a tombstone and a mechanism for supporting a statue as it glides along on rails. Roussel describes in some detail how Chênevillot has conceived and made the structures in Trophies Square. By focusing on the one that seems to have attracted Rossi the most, the red theatre, we can see Roussel's mind and imagination actually at work on an appropriated object, notice how inventive he is at devising techniques for transforming it. We can also see how the novel device of the architect, at work on the conception and construction of the structures, has the effect of concretising the space of representation, making the edifice of Trophies Square and the gala seem more tangible, more vivid and real.

Roussel's account of the way Chênevillot made the red theatre has nothing rational nor tectonic about it. The process is empirical, the architect worked with what he could find ready to hand, cutting down trees to form planks that were then assembled to make a timber carcass, which was then coated with paint. The finished structure appearing as a 'magnificent' red form (in treatises about ancient memory machines red colouring is given as a good example of how to make the active images more lively and hence more memorable).^{xx} At this point it is perhaps worth pausing to reflect on the way colour is used in Rossi's projects, where it has the effect of making the architecture seem reductive and cartoon-like, not only in the coloured drawings Rossi made of his projects but also in the actual realised buildings. There is a scale factor involved in Roussel's appropriation of the theatre, based on enlargement. Unlike the miniature bourse, which is modelled on the actual Paris bourse, the theatre is modelled on a kind of toy building, but the process of appropriation and transformation turns the toy into an enormous Punch and Judy booth. Again it is worth pausing to reflect on the use of scale in Rossi's projects and the child-like and toy-like quality that scale-play can sometimes bring to his architecture.

Furnished with these details from *Impressions d' Afrique* and returning to the Scientific Autobiography and to the locus of Rossi's quotation. Rossi frames his quote with musings on the difference between 'teatro' and 'teatrino,' including a reference to his own project for a kind of miniature theatre he calls the *Teatrino Scientifico*. The project was made public in 1978, just a few years before the Scientific Autobiography was

published, the mutual term ‘scientific’ bridging between text and *teatrino*. It is worth pausing here to consider Rossi’s use of the bridging term ‘scientific.’ Because the way Rossi uses it in the Scientific Autobiography should not be mistaken as standing in for ‘reason’ as in architecture’s rationalist sense of the word. Right at the start of the Scientific Autobiography Rossi makes it clear that the title of his text alludes to a book of the same name by the scientist Max Planck. The doubling of the title would seem to indicate Rossi’s desire to link his pursuit of architecture to Planck’s pursuits in the field of Modern science, which, albeit travelling through numerous set-backs, paved the way to the establishment of Quantum Physics in the first half of the twentieth century. Although Rossi did not say so, it seems likely he would have identified with Planck’s quietly frustrated explanation about the role of time in the establishing of scientific truths. According to Planck, scientific truths prevail in the long term because their opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up and is familiar with them. It was this Planckian sense of a patient, unforgiving yet highly compelling searching for truth that Rossi meant by ‘scientific’ in his autobiography. Certainly he did not mean science to imply reason in the sense of a rational pursuit of knowledge. And Rossi evokes a feeling for the scientist in the *teatrino* too, only now it is the scientist at work, he writes:

The theatre is thus inseparable from its stage sets, its models, the experience of every combination; and the stage is reduced to the artisan’s or scientist’s work-table. It is experimental as science is experimental, but it casts its peculiar spell on every experiment. Inside the theatre nothing can be accidental, yet nothing can be permanently resolved either.^{xxi}

Rossi’s *Teatrino Scientifico* wasn’t an over-scaled Punch and Judy booth like Rousset’s and neither was it painted red, however, it did play on the idea of the Punch and Judy show, only Rossi’s show had no puppets. Instead the stage was inhabited by miniature buildings, each one referring to a character from Rossi’s own preferred repertoire of architectural forms, with the backdrops reading as over-scaled versions of his coloured drawings. Again, we find the structure of a memory machine, only now it is the *teatrino* serving as locus, and Rossi’s architectural models and drawings play the part of active images.

In his History of Italian Architecture, Tafuri wrote of the *Teatrino Scientifico* that it is ‘a thoughtful and humorous work’:

A small temple in the shape of a ‘little house,’ the only one appropriate to hold Rossi’s architectural works, which are arranged there as permanent and movable sets. The space of representation coincides with the representation of space. Rossi wished to convince himself of this with his metaphysical theatre.^{xxii}

What comes out of the coincidence Tafuri remarks on here is, he claims: nothing. And, of course, nothing is to be expected from a projective methodology whose structuring paradigm is that of an artificial memory machine. Because, for a memory machine to ‘speak’ would require it to have been programmed with something to say. Rossi acknowledges this mute aspect of his architecture when he insists, again and again, that he has nothing to say. Yet, through his writings, projects and buildings Rossi did say something, because he was able to communicate a new strategy for producing projects, one that, according to Tafuri, affected ‘the very concept of architecture.’^{xxiii} Through his theory and practice Rossi came to realise that fragments, ruins and broken toys, precisely because their unified sense is lost, can serve as mechanisms to induce partial memories. He learned from Roussel how such memories could, through artificial means, falling ‘somewhere between logic and biography,’^{xxiv} trigger the imagination, ultimately leading to the systematic formulation of architectural propositions. Of course, and as Tafuri kept pointing out, Rossi’s performance of architecture as memory did not mean real places in lived space and time actually became memories.^{xxv} Rather it meant that Rossi’s methods of architectural projection acquired significance as tools, or instruments for valorising real places in lived space and time as memories.

Figure 1 Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena, Italy, Ossuary & Perimetral building, photographed by the author

Figure 2 Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena, Italy, junction of Perimetral & Entrance building showing raw block work prior to render, photographed by the author

- ⁱ Manfredo Tafuri, "L' Architecture dans Le Boudoir," in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth, Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly, (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1987), 267-290; Manfredo Tafuri, "The Case of Aldo Rossi," in *History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985*, trans. Jessica Levine, (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1989), 135-139.
- ⁱⁱ Colin St John Wilson mentions Rossi's 'expressed sympathy' with the working methods of Roussel in his *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the philosophy and practice of architecture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 195, note 9. Patricia Lombardo mentions Rossi's interest in Roussel's *Théâtre des incomparables* in her *Cities, Words and Images: From Poe to Scorsese*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 107.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Marcel Duchamp, cited in Pierre Cabanne, "A Window onto Something Else," in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1971), 28-50, 33-34.
- ^{iv} All references here are to: Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa* (London, Alma Classics, 2011)
- ^v The essay is published in Aldo Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull' architettura e la città, 1956-1972*, ed. Rosaldo Bonicalzi, (Milan: clup, 1975), 323-339. For an English translation, see "Architecture for Museums," *Aldo Rossi, Selected Writings and Projects*, eds. John O' Regan, Paul Keogh, Sheila O' Donnell, Shane O' Toole, (Dublin: Gandon Editions, 1983), 14-25.
- ^{vi} All references here are to Raymond Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, ed. Trevor Winfield, (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1995).
- ^{vii} Francis Yates, "Three Latin Sources for the Classical Art of Memory," in *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 1-26.
- ^{viii} See especially "Introduction: The Historical Project," and "The Wicked Architect: G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia and the Voyage," in Tafuri's *Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 1-21, respectively 25-64.
- ^{ix} Roussel, *How I Wrote*, 20.
- ^x For a good account of Roussel's life and work, see Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).
- ^{xi} Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1981), 15.
- ^{xii} Idem.
- ^{xiii} For an account of the Italian Tendenza, see Frédéric Migayrou (ed.), *La Tendenza* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2012).
- ^{xiv} Dimitri Porphyrios (ed.), *Classicism is not a Style*, AD 5-6/1982 (London: Architectural Design & Academy Editions, 1982).
- ^{xv} He was upset by the controversy around Joseph Rykwert's article published in *Domus* in 1974; see Joseph Rykwert, "XV Triennale," *Domus*, no. 530 (1974), 1-15.
- ^{xvi} Quoted in Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, 29.
- ^{xvii} Idem.
- ^{xviii} Roussel, *Impressions*, 6-7.
- ^{xix} Ibid., 116.
- ^{xx} See the quotation from Ad Herennium in Yates, *Art of Memory*, 9-10.
- ^{xxi} Aldo Rossi, cited in "Little Scientific Theatre," in Peter Arnell and Ted Pickford (eds.), *Aldo Rossi, Buildings & Projects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 185. The same wording appears in Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, 33.
- ^{xxii} Tafuri, *Italian Architecture*, 137-38.
- ^{xxiii} Tafuri, *Italian Architecture*, 135.
- ^{xxiv} Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, 8.
- ^{xxv} See, for example, the pair of articles "The Analogous City" and "Ceci n'est pas une ville" by Rossi and Tafuri respectively, in *Lotus 13* (December 1976) 5-8; 10-13.