

# The Architecture of a Lifetime: Structures of Remembrance and Invention in Walter Benjamin and Aldo Rossi

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## Introduction

For present-day architectural criticism, the influential writings and projects of the Italian architect Aldo Rossi (Milan, 1931–1997) constitute a rich subject of study. This may be due to their resistance to easy pinpointing, despite the fact that Rossi himself explained his design theories on numerous occasions.<sup>1</sup> Among the architect's most important writings is *A Scientific Autobiography*, a book which has proven difficult to label as either an architectural treatise or a memoir.<sup>2</sup> In this collection of thoughts on architecture and on life in general, the reader learns of Rossi's affinities with other architects, artists, writers and thinkers, often expressed through quotes. The importance of literature and philosophy for the architect's theory and practice has regularly been emphasised in studies on Rossi.<sup>3</sup> It has been pointed out that Rossi's frequent use of citations essentially 'strives against the illusion that it would be possible to build the future without the past.'<sup>4</sup> This 'striving' quality is clearly present when Rossi quotes Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's writings played a crucial role in Rossi's ideology on the city and architecture, as can be gleaned from the preface Rossi writes to an anthology of his texts:

Until a few years ago, I hadn't read Walter Benjamin, and nothing but his pages seem better to explain what I haven't made clear in these pages. 'I, however, am distorted by similarity by all that surrounds me here' could be written at the beginning and the ending of this book.<sup>5</sup>

A relatively small number of scholars have hitherto focused on Benjaminian concepts in Rossi's work. The above fragment is also quoted by Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez, who highlights a number of striking affinities between Rossi and Benjamin: a political ideology shared by both, their similar evolution towards montage-technical thinking, and the city as the focal point in the reasoning of both.<sup>6</sup> Cameron McEwan retraces the origin of analogical thought in Rossi's work. In this recent study, he develops a strong link between Rossi's concept of the analogous city and one of Benjamin's 'dialectical images', a relationship which will be addressed in one of the following chapters.<sup>7</sup>

'I, however, am distorted by similarity by all that surrounds me here' is an excerpt Rossi quotes from *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, Benjamin's posthumously issued memoirs.<sup>8</sup> The same citation recurs regularly in the architect's writings; often with the two subsequent sentences from Benjamin's text added. Despite this fragment being nearly the only direct reference Rossi makes to Benjamin, there has been no in-depth study of the meaning of this excerpt for Rossi's writings; nor has there been any research conducted on the 'pages' Rossi refers to and what they might have contributed to his architecture practice. Since Rossi quotes Benjamin almost exclusively from *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, we can argue that reading Benjamin's memoir in parallel with Rossi's writings will give us a clearer view of the role Benjamin has in Rossi's thinking. Therefore

I propose a close reading of *Berlin Childhood*, in an attempt to lay bare similarities with the architect's autobiographical writings, and subsequently examine its analogies with Rossi's architecture. 'One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life', Susan Sontag writes in a famous essay on Benjamin.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the present undertaking can be seen as an elaboration on what has been termed by Brian Elliott the Benjaminian 'consideration of architecture as a crucial medium and repository for the intersection of personal and shared cultural memory', while the 'personal' here is to be understood not just as the manifestation of a city's inhabitant, but also as the presence of an architect who expresses himself through his work.<sup>10</sup>

When Rossi states that Benjamin's words could have opened and closed one of his own books, he refers to a film he made two years earlier for the architecture triennial in Milan. *Ornamento e delitto* is a montage of fragments from Italian films which alternate with footage of archaeological sites and shots of the outskirts of Milan. At the beginning and at the end of this film, someone writes an Italian translation of the same sentences from Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* on a wall, in capital letters:

I, however, am distorted by similarity by all that surrounds me here. Thus, like a mollusc in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear.<sup>11</sup>

In a study that examines the film, Belgin Turan Özkaya interprets this act as a 'return to streets' of a philosopher who has written extensively on everyday urban life.<sup>12</sup> It is an interesting observation which, as I attempt to show in the following, not only relates to a dilapidated wall somewhere in Milan, but might account for every new wall Aldo Rossi adds to urban reality.

### A self portrait in 'lifeless' things

*Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* was published for the first time in 1950, ten years after Walter Benjamin's death.<sup>13</sup> The memoir is a collection of short textual 'vignettes' each centred on a specific theme, put together according to the montage principle Benjamin had developed earlier in *One-Way Street*.<sup>14</sup> In this seminal text, short prose pieces follow each other in a 'systematic non-system, as if situated along a city street in which individual *Denkbilder* become the figurative shops, signs, buildings, and urban sites at which readers may interrupt their strolls like leisurely flâneurs on a promenade.'<sup>15</sup> According to Benjamin, these *Denkbilder* or thought-images constitute 'individual expeditions into the depths of memory'.<sup>16</sup> In 'A Berlin Chronicle', a text which may be seen as a preparatory 'draft' for *Berlin Childhood*, we read the following:

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection.<sup>17</sup>

In applying the montage principle in literature, Benjamin aims for spatiality in his writings: here, time is subdivided as a space may be, it is 'chopped up' in fragments.<sup>18</sup> We will reconsider this principle, which lends Benjamin's writings their characteristic form, in relation to Rossi's design theory and practice. But even beyond the structural level of Benjamin's memory project, space remains of great importance. From 'A Berlin Chronicle' we learn that for a long time, Benjamin had been thinking of a way to situate his life graphically on a map,<sup>19</sup> while Sontag writes that 'Benjamin, the translator of Proust, wrote fragments of an opus that could

be called *À la recherche des espaces perdus*.<sup>20</sup> Hermann Schweppenhäuser has characterised *Berlin Childhood* as a 'topographical self-portrait', an 'abbreviated biography', where every vignette concentrates life in one point.<sup>21</sup> This point, we learn from the previous citation from 'A Berlin Chronicle', is the 'form' wherein 'months and years appear at the moment of recollection'. Benjamin continues:

This strange form – it may be called fleeting or eternal – is in neither case the stuff that life is made of. And this is shown not so much by the role that my own life plays here, as by that of the people closest to me in Berlin – whoever and whenever they may have been. The atmosphere of the city that is here evoked allots them only a brief, shadowy existence. They steal along its walls like beggars, appear wraith-like at windows, to vanish again, sniff at thresholds like a genius loci, and even if they fill whole quarters with their names, it is as a dead man fills his gravestone.<sup>22</sup>

The life of individuals is subordinated to the lifeless form we encounter in Benjamin's memory project. According to Sontag, this faithfulness to things is a quintessential feature of his melancholic nature. The 'deep transactions' between the melancholic and the world 'always take place with things', and they are 'sincere', they 'reveal meaning'. This disposition of Benjamin's, Sontag writes, originates from his obsession with death:

Precisely because the melancholy character is haunted by death, it is melancholics who best know how to read the world. Or, rather, it is the world which yields itself to the melancholic's scrutiny, as it does to no one else's. The more lifeless things are, the more potent and ingenious can be the mind which contemplates them.<sup>23</sup>

It can be argued that this characterisation equally suits Aldo Rossi. Death frequently recurs in his writings and as with Benjamin, it always takes on a specific 'form'.<sup>24</sup> Because it is visualised and

incorporated in the 'lifeless thing', death carries within itself a hidden life energy. At the beginning of *A Scientific Autobiography*, Rossi refers to the memoirs of the German physicist Max Planck, from whom Rossi lends the title *Wissenschaftliche Selbstbiographie* for his own writings. Planck's first acquaintance with the law of the conservation of energy was a shocking one, with which he was presented through a story told by his school teacher: a mason lifts up a stone block on top of a roof; the force that was needed for the elevation is stored up in the block for years, until one day it slides from the roof and hits the head of a passerby, causing his death. Hence Planck, Rossi writes, links his autobiographical investigation with death, which is 'in some sense a continuation of energy':

Actually, the principle of the conservation of energy is mingled in every artist or technician with the search for happiness and death. In architecture this search is also undoubtedly bound up with the material and with energy.<sup>25</sup>

Rossi follows Planck's footsteps by equating his autobiography with an 'investigation of death', and, not unlike the child he once was, relates himself to the 'dead things' he observes. In this way Rossi writes of a find on an American beach: an empty shell, which calls to his mind verses by the sixth-century BCE Greek poet Alcaeus. In turn, it is these verses, which Rossi read at the lyceum, that brought him to architecture:

'O seashell / daughter of stone and the whitening sea / you astonish the minds of children.' The lines go approximately like this, and in them are contained the problem of form, of material, of imagination – that is, of astonishment.<sup>26</sup>

Alcaeus's shell appeared to young Rossi as a 'coalescence' of the sea, which seemed empowered to construct 'a geometrical and mysterious form, made up of every memory and expectation'.<sup>27</sup>

Is this the same initial enchantment of youth, which Rossi not only re-encounters in a shell on a deserted beach, but also experiences in one of Benjamin's *Denkbilder* from *Berlin Childhood*? 'Thus, like a mollusc in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear.'<sup>28</sup> Benjamin's hollowed-out shell deserted by all life, a 'coalescence' of the nineteenth century in which the child lived like a mollusc, is held to the ear to catch the echoes from the past. Here, the empty shell is Benjamin's strange form, 'which may be called fleeting or eternal'.<sup>29</sup>

### The statue and the nursery rhyme

The child in *Berlin Childhood* tries to comprehend the world in a true sense: there is an urge to conquer things, along with the words that name those things. The vignette that features Benjamin's thought-image of the shell and the mollusc is titled 'The Mummerehlen':

There is an old nursery rhyme that tells of Muhme Rehlen. Because the word Muhme meant nothing to me, this creature became for me a spirit: the Mummerehlen. The misunderstanding disarranged the world for me. But in a good way: it lit up paths to the world's interior.<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin gives another example of such a misunderstanding: the day after the child had overheard a conversation about a copper engraving ('Kupferstich'), a concept unknown to him, he stuck his head out from underneath a chair, to enact what he had understood as a 'head-stickout' ('Kopferstich'): 'If, in this way, I distorted both myself and the world, I did only what I had to do to gain a foothold in life.'<sup>31</sup> In the above quotation 'distorted' is the translation of 'entstellte', while 'disarranged' from the previous excerpt stands for 'verstellte'. Comprehending the world brought along the 'disarrangement' ('Verstellung') of things, but also a 'distortion' ('Entstellung') of the child that longed to

understand these things. Benjamin continues:

Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words, which really were clouds. The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words. Not those that made me similar to models of good breeding, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes.<sup>32</sup>

The 'disguise in words' seems to be inspired by the creature Benjamin brought to life by misunderstanding the nursery rhyme: 'Mummerehlen' brings to mind the verb *sich mummen* (to disguise oneself). The compulsion to disguise himself and thereby 'resemble things' is so strong that young Benjamin has a hard time looking only like himself: for example, in the photographer's studio. His mother takes him there, together with his younger brother, to be dressed up as mountaineers and put in front of a camera, backed by a 'clumsily painted' Alpine valley. While the picture that Benjamin will comment on years later is being taken, the child takes in the immediate surroundings: a potted palm tree, footstools, easels, the sombrero and the walking stick that he holds in his hands. However, it is a world not exclusively consisting of objects:

Over to the side, near the curtained doorway, my mother stands motionless in her tight bodice. As though attending to a tailor's dummy, she scrutinises my velvet suit, which for its part is laden with braid and other trimming and looks like something out of a fashion magazine. I, however, am distorted by similarity by all that surrounds me here. Thus, like a mollusc in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear.<sup>33</sup>

The room is filled with objects which distract the child so much that he fears he might turn into a thing himself. Indeed, the child's mother, herself

'distorted' by her tight bodice, only pays attention to her son's clothes, as if he were a mannequin in a shop window. But however painful it might be, this dual process of the world's disarrangement and the individual's 'distortion' remains the only way for the child to get to the core of things. When recalling how he could lose himself while painting with watercolours, distortion even seems a precondition for happiness: 'The colours I mixed would colour me. Even before I applied them to the drawing, I found myself disguised by them.'<sup>34</sup> At the end of 'The Mummerehlen' Benjamin relates this happiness to the story of the old Chinese painter, who invites his friends to look at the last painting he made. It depicts a park landscape with a path that leads to a hut. Then the spectators notice that the painter is no longer in their midst, and all of a sudden, he is there, inside the painting. Astonished, his friends look on as the old man follows the path down to the hut, stops in front of the door, turns to them and smiles, and eventually disappears through the narrow doorway. Maybe it was because of this story that the young Benjamin favoured the porcelain tableware above all other things in the household that he could 'resemble':

A mottled crust overspread those vases, bowls, plates, and boxes, which, to be sure, were merely cheap export articles. I was nonetheless captivated by them [...]. I would resemble the porcelain which I had entered in a cloud of colors.<sup>35</sup>

Disappearing into the own 'work' – an interpretation of reality taken in by the child – is a *mise en abyme* which recurs often in *Berlin Childhood*.<sup>36</sup> In a study on the significance of Benjamin's notion of mimesis for architecture, Neil Leach also mentions Benjamin's story of the Chinese painter. According to Leach, the process of mentally 'entering' an object is much overlooked and relatively under-theorised by Benjamin-scholars.<sup>37</sup> In modern architecture, Benjamin's 'mimetic faculty' is nonetheless a very useful concept to explore 'the

potential of the aesthetic expression offering access to a more empathetic engagement with the world', which could lead the way towards a 'mimetic' architecture, practiced by architects who thus overcome 'the subject/object divide of an alienated world'.<sup>38</sup> Leach notes that this potential remained unexplored by Benjamin himself.<sup>39</sup> From the following, we might argue that Aldo Rossi has rediscovered it and put it to use in his architectural practice. The above citations, one of which contains Rossi's fetishised excerpt, show a striking resemblance to fragments from *A Scientific Autobiography*. As in Benjamin's memoir, things are examined through 'assimilation', and by disappearing inside of them:

I always had a strong interest in objects, instruments, apparatus, tools. Without intending to I used to linger for hours in the large kitchen at S., on Lake Como, drawing the coffeepots, the pans, the bottles. I particularly loved the strange shapes of the coffeepots enamelled blue, green, red; they were miniatures of the fantastic architectures that I would encounter later. Today I still love to draw these large coffeepots, which I think of as structures that can be entered.<sup>40</sup>

However, to gain a better understanding of what he calls architecture's 'inside/outside aspect', Rossi must leave the kitchen to visit another place from his childhood. This is the *San Carlone*, a seventeenth century statue of Saint Carlo Borromeo in Arona near Lake Maggiore, reaching thirty three metres in height. Like the Statue of Liberty, visitors can ascend to the inside of the head; here the lake can be viewed through the eyes of the saint. Looking back, Rossi understands why the structure attracted him so much: in it, 'the limits that distinguish the domains of architecture, the machine, and instruments were dissolved in marvellous invention', not unlike the Trojan horse or the stationary locomotive to which he compares San Carlone.<sup>41</sup> Here the law of conservation of energy is again at stake: the stationary object contains a latent power which is set free in the child's imagination when

the object, with him in it, is set in motion or rather becomes 'distorted'.

In his analysis of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Olav Severijnen writes: 'The obsession with which things are observed in *Berlin Childhood* is coupled with the child's expectation that these things will look back at him. The child still possesses the auratic perceptiveness that makes things answer his gaze, a disposition which adults have lost.'<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in *A Scientific Autobiography*, it seems as though things 'look back' at the author. Rossi's experience of San Carlone epitomises this Benjaminian gaze. The statue's latent powers can be admired from the outside, but one can also quite literally take its place by climbing up behind its eyes, to look down at the spectators below.

#### **Archaeologist of an analogical city**

Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* and Rossi's *A Scientific Autobiography* both constitute a 'systematic non-system' of places and objects that evoke distinct time fragments of a worn out past. In these lifeless things from the past, a latent power is stored which the imagination – the memory of the child's gaze – is able to set free. The thought-image of the shell that revolved around the mollusc and deformed it, in fact represents a collection of 'shells': a treasure-trove of precious objects. According to Benjamin, it is the task of the 'historian of the own past' to excavate these objects and re-assemble them in a new order:

the memory is not an instrument for the reconnaissance of what is past but rather its medium. It is the medium of that which has been lived out just as the soil is the medium in which old cities lie buried. Whoever seeks to gaze more closely at one's own buried past must proceed like a man who excavates. Above all, he must not shy away from coming back time and again to one and the same object – scatter it just as one scatters earth, root it up just as one roots up the soil [...]. Indeed, the images which are extracted from all

earlier constellations stand as valuables in the frugal chambers of our later insight – like torsos in the collector's gallery.<sup>43</sup>

Excavating this 'memory-ground' means to lay bare its structure, which is a palimpsest of memories.<sup>44</sup> The archaeologist digs for objects while keeping an inventory of the ground layers which rest upon the object. Object and layers of earth together constitute a 'composite image' which evokes an entire world of memory. As we have seen in 'The Mummerehlen', one 'object' – in this case a distorted nursery rhyme – represents many 'layers' or 'moments' in the author's life.<sup>45</sup>

The above citation displays Benjamin's concept of historical materialism.<sup>46</sup> In contrast with traditional historiography which has a strong sense of purpose – each occurrence seems to participate in a 'great history of civilisation' – the new paradigm subscribed by Benjamin urges the historian to renounce all tendencies to view events in the light of either growth or decline. The 'historical continuum' of classical historiography shows a 'false context' in which things are embedded; the materialist historian is charged with the task to break these fragments from their bedding and transpose them onto the present.<sup>47</sup> Frisby writes, 'Benjamin's task is nothing less than that of releasing the enormous energy of history that lies bonded in the "Once upon a time" of classical historical narrative',<sup>48</sup> and he cites Benjamin from *One-Way Street*:

The past for (the historical materialist) becomes the subject of a construction whose locus is not empty time, but the particular epoch, the particular life, the particular work. He breaks the epoch away from its reified historical continuity, and the life from the epoch, and the work from the life's work. But the result of his construction is that in the work the life's work, in the life's work the epoch, and in the epoch the course of history are suspended and preserved.<sup>49</sup>

The fragment, the thing that is broken out of its context, must gain minute attention. Such concentration on the isolated object, as Benjamin concludes in the above citation, again leads to a *mise en abyme*. The past dwells in small but abysmal things.

Both Benjamin and Rossi aim not to relive the past, but to grasp it, in order to gain insight into the present. According to Elliott, 'recollecting childhood for Benjamin means attempting to find the meaning of one's present situation in light of a promise implicitly expressed in former years.'<sup>50</sup> Or, as Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, 'the true method of making things contemporaneous is to conceive of them [...] within our space.'<sup>51</sup> From this point on, the archaeologist becomes a *collector* who brings his valuables together in a new order. The torsos are gathered in a new sculpture gallery, put together in the spirit of an assemblage: a composition in which the contours of the parts remain clearly defined. This creation of a new order, which promises the 'own life's historian' a far-reaching insight into reality, is equally at stake in Rossi's inquiries:

Now I seem to see all things I have observed arranged like tools in a neat row; they are aligned as in a botanical chart, or a catalogue, or a dictionary. But this catalogue, lying somewhere between imagination and memory, is not neutral; it always reappears in several objects and constitutes their deformation and, in some way, their evolution.<sup>52</sup>

Rossi's catalogue shows great affinity with Benjamin's gallery of torsos. The collection is not 'neutral', as certain fragments are preferred above others. This recalls the hierarchy strived for by Benjamin, when he writes that he who excavates memory's soil must not fear to frequently come upon the same objects. Repeated descriptions of the same things, with even the most futile variations always taken into account, lend them an immeasurable depth.<sup>53</sup>

In one of his notebooks, Rossi writes that he sometimes looks at Milan 'with the eye of an archaeologist', something which occurs to him in other cities too: mostly in those cities where 'life is at its most feverish', like New York or Tokyo. When he observes these places, he feels the need to 'reconstruct' them in a single glance.<sup>54</sup> Like Benjamin, Rossi has the predisposition to see reality as a series of stills in 'lifeless' forms. Here, as with Benjamin, the archaeologist's gaze unmask the 'false continuum' of history and of everyday reality:

In this way architecture measures itself with history. Not according to some historical supposition or according to tradition [...] but because it constructs itself upon a general and universal experience of things that surround man. [...] And this is why invention, when considered separately from this growing of architecture upon itself, is always sterile, abstract, inconsistent.<sup>55</sup>

In his work, Rossi takes position against this 'sterile' way of inventing architecture, which he believes 'merely serves commercial goals'. This resistance to the inconsistency of modern architecture is demonstrated in *The Analogous City*. It is a collage of fragments from natural and urban landscapes, fragments that have subsisted or disappeared, architectural concepts that have been expressed in buildings or have remained ink on paper, together with some of Rossi's own designs and cherished objects, shown in plan projection or in perspective.<sup>56</sup> In his influential study *The Architecture of the City*, which was published ten years earlier, Rossi stated that the architect is only able to understand the city by its parts: he needs to analyse its building types and then design according to the knowledge developed from such a study. *The Analogous City* is a concretisation of Rossi's idea of 'the city by parts': it is not a scheme that proposes one clear urbanistic message, but a difficult whole in which the contours of things remain clearly visible. Typological

and morphological analogies between the fragments ensure that this fictional city is nevertheless easily considered as an 'imaginable reality'.<sup>57</sup> Rossi firmly believes in 'the capacity of imagination as a concrete thing'; as he emphasises in the text that accompanies the exhibition panel: 'description and knowledge should give rise to a further stage: the capacity of the imagination born from the concrete.'<sup>58</sup>

Cameron McEwan has developed an interesting analysis of Rossi's analogous city, building upon Benjamin's notion of the 'destructive character'.<sup>59</sup> The latter should not be taken as a proponent of *tabula rasa*, but rather as analogous to the 'Angel of history' from another famous Benjamin text, whose eyes are fixed on the ruins of the past from which fleeting time carries him away, into the future at his back.<sup>60</sup> McEwan notes that 'destruction and construction are equivalent with the process of de-montage and re-montage, which is the destructive character of Rossi's architectural production'.<sup>61</sup> Rossi's 'analogical' city proposes an alternative to the existing city with recourse to some of its most valued 'ruins'. The purpose of *La città analoga* is to formulate a 'counter project within the capitalist city, square in plan, opposing the logic of flows'.<sup>62</sup> Manfredo Tafuri in turn has singled out Rossi's composition as a 'critical act' both upon socio-economical society and upon architectural utopianism,<sup>63</sup> disconnecting utopia from the 'visionary/realism dilemma' to which it is historically attached.<sup>64</sup>

Observation and invention, description and imagination: they always meet midway in Rossi's analogical thinking process. But it is not just analogy between objects – resulting from the knowledge of typological laws in urban forms – that characterises the encounter. Analogies of 'distortion' which, as we have seen, emerge between the artist and his objects, the ability to find 'similarities' between oneself and things, enable the artist to think of them anew, to 'deform' them:

In looking at a ruin, especially in the city, I noticed that the contours of things became clouded and confusing. In the exaggerated silence of an urban summer, I grasped the deformation, not only of ourselves, but of objects and things as well. Perhaps there was a certain bewilderment in looking at things which only became more obscure the more precise they were. Out of this bewilderment, I thought, one could attempt to make a project: a house, for example.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps it is this simultaneous diffusion of object and subject, this clearing away of boundaries between the rationalism of architectural typology and the passion of a life's account, which makes Rossi stand out among most of his contemporaries. Perhaps this is what ultimately characterises his architecture, which therefore continues to resist historical categorisation.<sup>66</sup>

### Architecture recaptured

For me, the architectural work is now identified with these things: there is a street in Seville made up of superimposed balconies, elevated bridges, stairs, noise, and silence, and it seems to recur in all my drawings. Here the search has ended; its object is the architecture it has rediscovered.<sup>67</sup>

In a letter to Adorno, Benjamin describes the prose piece 'Loggias', which will later become part of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, as 'the most accurate portrait [...] of myself and of my own making'.<sup>68</sup> The loggia is a semi-enclosed balcony space which looks down on the inner courtyard of a typical Berlin apartment block of that era. It functions as a kind of threshold; it refers both to 'the particularity of a socially coded living space – that of the established Berlin bourgeoisie – and a demarcated viewing space from which to observe the theatre of the city from a distance'.<sup>69</sup> This 'loge' recurs frequently in *Berlin Childhood* due to its crucial role in Benjamin's early education, as Benjamin writes: 'nothing has fortified my own memory so profoundly as gazing



into courtyards, one of whose dark loggias, shaded by blinds in the summer, was for me the cradle in which the city laid its new citizen.<sup>70</sup> In this cradle, the child is reborn as a city dweller; here 'subject and object, family and city, "I" and "non-I" touch upon and influence each other.'<sup>71</sup> Thus, Benjamin's loggia can be seen as an introduction to the city, while the inner courtyard that is examined from the loggia might be regarded as a prototype of the Parisian arcades that will later play an decisive role in Benjamin's writings. The sounds that enter the house through the loggia are the sounds that accompany the child in his sleep and shape his dreams. But the loggia is also the 'moulding' for observations and daydreams that become memories, and from which later insights are developed:

Here, spring called up the first shoots of green before the gray façade of a house in back; and when, later in the year, a dusty canopy of leaves brushed up against the wall of the house a thousand times a day, the rustling of the branches initiated me into a knowledge to which I was not yet equal. For everything in the courtyard became a sign or hint to me. Many were the messages embedded in the skirmishing of the green roller blinds drawn up high, and many the ominous dispatches that I prudently left unopened in the rattling of the roll-up shutters that came thundering down at dusk.<sup>72</sup>

In the courtyard and its adjoining loggia, 'time comes to a halt, piles up, grows old'.<sup>73</sup> Here, chronological time is transformed into an eternal present which Benjamin terms *Jetztzeit*.<sup>74</sup> This mythical time is concretised in the simultaneity of the beginning and ending of things, which Benjamin evokes in images: the tree in the middle of the courtyard (spring and autumn); the blinds that are drawn and let down again (morning and evening). However, these images contain sounds – the leaves rustle and the shutters rattle – and thus the loggia is the shell Benjamin holds to the ear in 'The Mummerehlen'.

The edition of *Berlin Childhood* from which I quote contains a photograph of a courtyard in Berlin from around 1900. It features an elongated enclosed outdoor space which makes it look more like a street, with loggias looking out onto it. *A Scientific Autobiography* includes a photograph of a *corral* in Seville, the Spanish counterpart of the Berlin *Hof*. It is one of Rossi's most important 'rediscovered architectures', which he relates back to the courtyards of his youth. These are the Milanese *corti*, which Rossi described as 'a form of life' consisting of 'the intimacies endured there, the bonds, the intolerances':

In my bourgeois childhood, I felt excluded by these houses, and I entered the courtyard with curiosity and fear. Later, the scientific bend of my research estranged me from what was most important, namely the imagination of which such relations are made. This imagination rose up again in me in the corrals of Seville, in those larger and older corrals, in those very narrow ones with intersecting stairs and balconies, in the green cast-iron columns from the turn of the century – buildings still rich in imagination from the life of an urban proletariat.<sup>75</sup>

Rossi often makes use of the building type with courtyard. In an early, never built design for a residential complex on the outskirts of Milan, the courtyard space constitutes the project's conceptual basis.<sup>76</sup> One of Rossi's last building projects, an office block in Berlin, was also designed with courtyards as focal points; here, four *Höfe*, each differing in dimension and shape, are linked to each other. In describing the project Rossi refers to Benjamin; though instead of the Berlin courtyards he mentions the Parisian arcades: in this project, the emphasis is clearly on the courtyards' functioning as passageways.<sup>77</sup>

Though not a residential building, the ultimate architectural translation of Benjamin's courtyard is Rossi's design for the extension of the cemetery San Cataldo in Modena. The project won a national competition in 1971, and it marked a

breakthrough in Rossi's architecture practice. In *A Scientific Autobiography*, Rossi often refers to the project; through it, he writes, his thinking on architecture 'expanded', from then on it seemed to him that he was 'better able to grasp a more distant time'.<sup>78</sup> Geert Bekaert emphasises the strong link in Rossi's Modena cemetery between 'the place for life and the place for death'; here, the dead are 'a living notion', Rossi's architecture is erected to 'make them present as a reality'.<sup>79</sup> Rossi relocates Modena's dead in this new reality, moreover, he offers them their own city, as this cemetery was conceived with the Roman *castrum* in mind, with its walls, its gates, its *cardo* and *decumanus*. The project's most enigmatic feature is a flesh-coloured cubic building, its walls pierced by seven rows of square 'window' openings. This structure serves as an ossuary containing the bones of the war dead and the remains of the dead from the ancient burial ground. In one of his notebooks, Rossi describes it as an 'unfinished house'. It lacks a roof and has no floors, there are no glass panes in its 'windows'. To Rossi, nothing else comes this close to a true definition of architecture.<sup>80</sup> It is a monument which at the same time is 'simply' a structure that serves its function as a storing place for deceased bodies. But as we have seen, architecture is also Alcaeus's shell that captivates the child, and likewise, it must be Benjamin's shell which still contains the echoes of a life that has withdrawn from it. Such is the reason why Rossi also describes his 'house of the dead' as 'a space for the memories of the living' or as a 'civil architecture'.<sup>81</sup> The dead, enclosed in niches on the inside of the house's walls, can be visited by means of a steel construction of stairs and galleries. Or should these in fact be loggias? Perhaps this unfinished house could also be thought of as a courtyard lined with loggias, a space which is inside and outside at the same time, in whose walls the sounds of reality enter from the top. A courtyard where 'time comes to a halt', like the courtyard from Benjamin's memoir.

'Nothing but Walter Benjamin's pages can explain what hasn't been described here', Rossi wrote in an introduction to one of his books.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps there is no better way to express what has not already been said about Rossi's San Cataldo cemetery, than in these words from *Berlin Childhood around 1900*:

In the years since I was a child, the loggias have changed less than other places. This is not the only reason they stay with me. It is much more on account of the solace that lies in their uninhabitability for one who himself no longer has a proper abode. They mark the outer limit of the Berliner's lodging. Berlin – the city god itself – begins in them. The god remains such a presence there that nothing transitory can hold its ground beside him. In his safekeeping, space and time come into their own and find each other. Both of them lie at his feet here. The child who was once their confederate, however, dwells in his loggia, encompassed by this group, as in a mausoleum long intended just for him.<sup>83</sup>

## Notes

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1. Aldo Rossi has left behind an impressive quantity of written work. For years he was the editor of the influential magazine *Casabella continuità*. His urban case studies and polemical writings were also published in other journals. The better part of these articles, originally collected in 1975, was recently reissued in: Aldo Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città 1956–1972* (Macerata: Quodlibet Abitare, 2012). Rossi's most famous theoretical work, *L'architettura della città*

- from 1966, was translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman as *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).
2. S. Umberto Barbieri, 'Dierbare architectuur – nawoord', afterword to the Dutch translation of *A Scientific Autobiography: Aldo Rossi, Wetenschappelijke autobiografie* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1994), 157. The book's first edition appeared in English: Rossi, Aldo. *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981)
  3. For example the studies published in Annalisa Trentin (ed.), *La lezione di Aldo Rossi* (Bologna: Bnomia University Press, 2008). Another valuable study: Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: A Scriptive Approach to the Experience, Use, and Imagination of Place* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014). This author examines the common grounds of architecture and literature in many writers and architects; she notices a 'prescriptive' approach in the way Rossi makes use of literary concepts in his architecture.
  4. Giovanni Poletti, *L'Autobiografia scientifica di Aldo Rossi: Un'indagine tra scrittura e progetto di architettura* (Milan/ Turin: Bruno Mondadori, 2011), 4.
  5. Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull'architettura*. Author's translation.
  6. Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez, 'Las distancias invisibles. Aldo Rossi y Walter Benjamin', *Thémata. Revista de Filosofía* 41 (2009): 372–399.
  7. Cameron McEwan, *The Architecture of Analogy: An Inquiry into Aldo Rossi's Theory of the City, the Discipline, the Type, and the Analogue*, PhD dissertation, University of Dundee, 2014.
  8. Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), from the German *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1950).
  9. Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 111.
  10. Brian Elliott, *Benjamin for Architects* (London: Routledge, 2011), 1.
  11. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 132. The German original is as follows: 'Ich aber bin entstellt vor Ähnlichkeit mit allem, was hier um mich ist. Ich hauste so wie ein Weichtier in der Muschel haust im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, das nun hohl wie eine leere Muschel vor mir liegt. Ich halte sie ans Ohr.' From: Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit*.
  12. Belgin Turan Özkaya, 'Visuality and architectural history' in *Rethinking Architectural Historiography*, ed. Dana Arnold et al. (London: Routledge, 2006), 186–187. For another recent study of this film, see: Luka Skansi, 'Ornamento e delitto: un film di Aldo Rossi, Gianni Braghieri e Franco Raggi', in *La lezione di Aldo Rossi*, ed. Annalisa Trentin (Bologna: Bnomia University Press, 2008), 260–265.
  13. Benjamin began writing it in the summer of 1932 in the Tuscan seaside village Poveromo. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, vii.
  14. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Verso, 1997), from the German *Einbahnstrasse* (Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt Verlag, 1928).
  15. Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images. Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 45–46.
  16. Cited in Howard Eiland, translator's foreword in Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, xii.
  17. Walter Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle', in *One-Way Street*, 316.
  18. In 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Benjamin quotes Marcel Proust from a study on Charles Baudelaire: 'Time is peculiarly chopped up in Baudelaire (...).' Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 177.
  19. Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', 295.
  20. Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 116.
  21. Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 'Physiognomie eines Physiognomikers' in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 159. Cited in: Olav Severijnen, *Individuum est ineffabile. De modernistische autobiografie tussen Goethe en Leiris* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), 179. Author's translation.
  22. Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', 316.
  23. Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 119–120.

24. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Victoriano Sainz for drawing my attention to this. Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez, e-mail message to author, 23 April, 2014.
25. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 1.
26. *Ibid.*, 25.
27. *Ibid.*, 25.
28. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 132.
29. Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', 316.
30. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 130–131.
31. *Ibid.*, 131.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 132.
34. *Ibid.*, 134.
35. *Ibid.*, 134–135.
36. The notion of the 'mise en abyme' in Benjamin is discussed in: Severijnen, *Individuum est ineffabile*, 203.
37. Neil Leach, 'Mimesis' in *Walter Benjamin and Architecture*, ed. Gevork Hartoonian (London: Routledge, 2010), 131.
38. *Ibid.*, 132.
39. Its potential for aesthetics has been acknowledged by Adorno, see: Leach, 'Mimesis', 132.
40. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 2. The still lives drawn by Rossi are also known as 'paesaggi domestici' (domestic landscapes), as he coined them.
41. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 2–3.
42. Severijnen, *Individuum est ineffabile*, 198. Author's translation.
43. This fragment from Benjamin's text 'Ausgraben und Erinnern' is quoted by David Frisby in his study *Fragments of Modernity. Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 223. It exists in another version in 'A Berlin Chronicle', where the first sentence is: 'Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its *theatre*', in: Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 314. 'Theatre' is the translation of 'Schauplatz'. Benjamin's first acquaintance with the theatre took place in the 'loggia' (see the last paragraph of this paper).
44. According to an observation from the translator's foreword in Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, xii–xiii.
45. However, in *Berlin Childhood* this 'layering' is mostly applied to places ('Tiergarten', 'Markthalle', 'Hiding Places') or furniture and appliances ('The Desk', 'Cabinets', 'The Sewing Box').
46. Benjamin developed this theory in one of his last texts, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' (1940). In this study I have mainly drawn from Frisby's insights in a section of his *Fragments of Modernity*, 187–265.
47. *Ibid.*, 216.
48. *Ibid.*, 218.
49. *Ibid.*, 217–218.
50. Elliott, *Benjamin for Architects*, 12. Benjamin's idea of history's 'promise' is beautifully analysed in: Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past' in Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 1–33.
51. *Ibid.*, 225.
52. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 23.
53. Six months before Rossi died, Arduino Cantafora, an architect friend, published an article on Rossi in *Casabella* with the title 'Poche e profonde cose' ('A few and profound things'), which captures Rossi's artistry in a few words. Arduino Cantafora, 'Poche e profonde cose', *Casabella* 654 (1998): 7.
54. Aldo Rossi, 'Architettura. 20 ottobre '88 / 27 febb '89' in *I quaderni azzurri 1968–1992*, ed. Francesco Dal Co (Milan/ Los Angeles: Electa/ The Getty Research Institute, 1999), notebook n. 38.
55. Aldo Rossi, '2 luglio 1972/ 30 ottobre 1972', in *I quaderni azzurri 1968–1992*, notebook n. 13. Author's translation.
56. 'The analogous city' resulted from a collaboration between Rossi and three fellow architects: Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart. It was conceived for the 1976 Venice architecture biennale.
57. Havik, *Urban Literacy*, 181. According to Havik, Rossi's panel perfectly illustrates how historical reality and the imagination of a future world are brought together in one image.
58. Aldo Rossi: 'The Analogous City: panel', text accompanying the exhibition panel, in *Forum International*, 13, (December 1976): 5–6. Also cited in Havik, *Urban Literacy*, 168.

59. Walter Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character (1931)', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 301–303.
60. Walter Benjamin, 'Agesilaus Santander', in *Selected Writings. Vol. 2*, ed. Michael Jennings, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, 2005), 714–16.
61. McEwan, 'Architecture of Analogy', 142.
62. *Ibid.*, 144.
63. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1987), 15.
64. This process is analyzed in the work of Benjamin, Lefebvre and Tafuri in: Frank Cunningham, 'Triangulating Utopia: Benjamin, Lefebvre, Tafuri', *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 14:3 (2010): 268–277. While the article reminds us of Tafuri's negative views of architectural utopia (he dismisses utopia's redemptive value because of its inscription within capitalist logic) and presents Benjamin's 'dialectics of awakening' as a less hostile stance towards utopia, it can be argued that Rossi's utopianism shows more affinity with Benjamin's views than with Tafuri's.
65. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 23.
66. For instance, the label of 'postmodern architecture' as is commonly used when attempts are made to designate Rossi's oeuvre could prove problematic if it simply covers the idea of architecture as 'historical pastiche'. While it certainly can be said that the latter concept recollects time fragments from history, similar in Rossi's case to Benjamin's thought-image of the collector, it is important to bear in mind the preliminary figure of the archaeologist who 'proceeds according to plan'. One might note that in Rossi's case, this 'plan' is laid out in *A Scientific Autobiography*, which guides us across significant 'architectures' in the author's life that 'distorted' him as he entered them. These historic architectures are never simply imitated in Rossi's own architecture, but are always brought to the present in a process of 'assimilation' that is in line with Benjamin's concept of mimesis.
67. Aldo Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 19.
68. Cited in Severijnen, *Individuum est ineffabile*, 179.
69. Gerhard Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Wayne University Press, Detroit, 2000), 215.
70. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 38.
71. Severijnen, *Individuum est ineffabile*, 180. Author's translation.
72. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 39–40.
73. Severijnen, *Individuum est ineffabile*, 180. Author's translation.
74. *Ibid.*, 207–208. Severijnen also reminds us that the imagined time in *Berlin Childhood* is viewed by Bernd Witte as 'Bilder der Endzeit' ('Images of End Time').
75. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 19.
76. This is the design for the living quarter 'San Rocco' in Monza, from 1966. A large model of San Rocco was one of Rossi's cherished objects and hung on one of his studio walls for years. For a description: Alberto Ferlenga (ed.), *Aldo Rossi: Tutte le opere* (Milan: Electa, 1999), 40.
77. Rossi's design for this building block was erected in Berlin's Schützenstrasse between 1992 and 1998. See Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi*, 402–407 and Marco Brandolisio et. al., *Aldo Rossi: Disegni 1990–1997* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 1999), 90–97.
78. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, 15.
79. Geert Bekaert, 'The analogue of a proletarian architecture. Notes for an article on Aldo Rossi', in *Rooted in the Real*, ed. Christophe Van Gerwey (Ghent: WZW Editions and Productions, 2011), 327.
80. Aldo Rossi, 'Architettura – Il cimitero di Modena – 5 agosto 1971–10 ottobre 1971' in *I quaderni azzurri 1968–1992*, no. 9. This can be viewed as a reference to Adolf Loos's famous statement 'Das ist architektur.' See Adolf Loos, 'Architektur', in *Der Sturm*, 15 Dec. 1910.
81. Aldo Rossi, 'L'azzurro del cielo', *Controspazio* 10 (1972): 4–9. English translation: 'The blue of the sky' in *Oppositions* 5 (1976): 31–34.
82. Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città 1956–1972*, XIII. Author's translation.
83. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 42.

### **Biography**

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