

Alberto va in città

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«Life is flanked by architecture, to which it adds a degree of unpredictability, freedom, imagination.»

ALBERTO VA IN CITTÀ

Annamaria Prandi

Annamaria Prandi is an Italian architect based in Zürich. In 2003 she co-founded Ludens, studio of architecture based in Reggio Emilia (I), with Andrea Vescovini. She left the office in 2016. She has been assistant for four years in Mendrisio and since 2017 at ETH Zurich for Chair Jan De Vylder. She is currently the editor of Carrousel Confessions Confusion series of books for the Chair.

In 1944, Aldo Rossi returns from the college in Lecco with his brother to their house in Milan's Porta Romana, and finds a city devastated by the bombing. Profoundly shaken by the destruction, he writes a short story that was never published, entitled *Alberto (Aldo) va in città*. In this story, he imagines Alberto (Aldo) wandering through the streets in the centre of Milan, between disembowelled buildings and interrupted districts.

I imagined Aldo Rossi on a similar walk as he accompanies Alberto once more through Milan, but this time in 1966, a pivotal year for Aldo Rossi who then submitted a bid for the San Rocco housing estate in Monza with Giorgio Grassi, and published his book *The Architecture of the City*. They arrive at Monza.

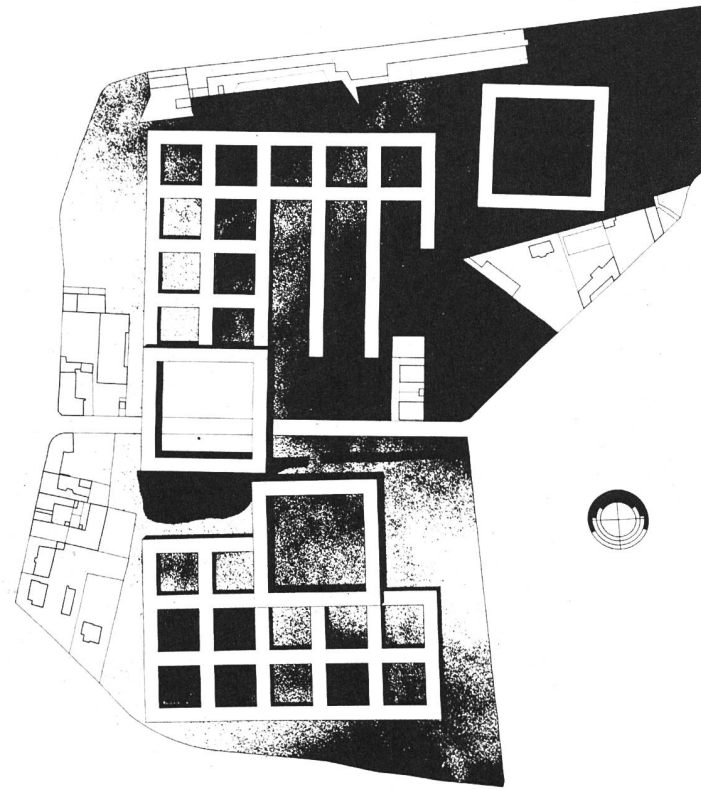
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Alberto: Here we are, walking through this Milan that is now so full of activity. I remember the last time we walked through these streets at the end of the 1940s, when they were filled with rubble. *Anyone who remembers European cities after the bombings of the last war retains an image of disembowelled houses, where, amid the rubble, fragments of familiar places remained standing, with their colours of faded wallpaper, laundry hanging suspended in the air, barking dogs—the untidy intimacy of places. And always we could see the house of our childhood, strangely aged, present in the flux of the city. Images, engravings and photographs of these disembowelled cities offer us this vision: destruction and demolition, expropriation and rapid changes in use, and as a result, speculation and obsolescence, [are] the most recognisable signs of urban dynamics. But beyond all else, the images suggest the interrupted destiny of the individual, of his often sad and difficult participation in the destiny of the collective.*⁽¹⁾

Aldo: There are many different Milans, standing side by side, layer upon layer. The Milan that I love and that I always chase, the one which represents for me the measure and the model for the way in which I view the cities of the world. The Duomo first and foremost, which I have drawn so very many times. Then the Renaissance Milan of Bramantino and Filarete. And the Neoclassical Milan of Cagnola and Piermarini. *With time the city grows upon itself; it acquires a consciousness and memory. In the course of its construction its original themes persist, but at the same time it modifies and renders these themes of its own development more specific.*⁽²⁾ And so you see Alberto, here within the thick brick walls of Bramantino's Cappella Trivulzio there is now a small trattoria.

Alberto: But today, Aldo, it is contemporary Milan that I would like to roam with you. This tower, for example, I don't know, but it reminds me of the Torre del Filarete.

Aldo: The Torre Velasca, built in the 1950s on the ruins resulting from the bombing, was designed by the BBPR studio. Ernesto Nathan Rogers' aim was to do exactly



San Rocco housing scheme
Aldo Rossi



Duomo of Milan
Aldo Rossi

what you have guessed. To overcome a certain rationalism in the Modern Movement in favour of a new Modernity that knew how to gather together the instances of the context and history; that knew how to read the very fabric of the city of Milan. Rogers never hid the fact he had been inspired by Castello's tower.

Alberto: *I walked the cities of Europe to understand their plans and classify them according to types. Like a lover sustained by my egotism, I often ignored their secret feelings; it was enough to know the system that governed them.*⁽³⁾

Aldo: Memory, what we remember, emotions. Over time they take on an increasing value, moving ever closer to the norm, to the order that regulates and measures things. Life is flanked by architecture, to which it adds a degree of unpredictability, freedom, imagination. If you want to see today's Milan we perhaps need to leave the centre and move into the suburbs, Alberto. That is the place where the city is now made, where its social life is more intense. Together with Giorgio Grassi I have just compiled a project for an area to the south of Monza, San Rocco. Let's go there, I'll show you *the future of the cities*.

Alberto: When we walk through the city, Aldo, you focus on certain episodes, which reappear like fragments in your literary meanders and your drawings.

Aldo: I see the city as an artefact composed of fragments, which I call urban artefacts, forms that hail from the values of a civil society. You know, last year I had even considered calling my book *The Architecture of Urban Artefacts*. San Rocco aspires to be a new urban artefact.

Alberto: A new district?

Aldo: Taking Le Corbusier's example, we called our project a housing unit, rather than a district. The typology—a courtyard house—becomes the form, or rather, the *typological form*, a large, unique urban object with homes, offices, shops, school and space for enjoying free time.

Alberto: But to me, the natural reference made by the layout seems to be to the large courtyards of the *cassine* (farmsteads) and the Carthusian monasteries found in Lombardy, as well as the great courtyards found in houses in Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, cities that you have visited many times.

Aldo: Yes, this is true. In Monza the structure is based on a collection of courtyards, silent places that proclaim the metropolitan binome of streets and houses. San Rocco is, in fact, entirely emancipated from the urban fabric as we know it. *The courtyard*

structure of San Rocco proposes itself as a basic form of the city, in which the Haussman system is turned on its head and the peak of the block is substituted by the emptiness of the courtyard.⁽⁴⁾ Here, the house and the street have lost their indissoluble bond. The walkways have become our streets, promenades that act as stages, giving centrality back to human vicissitudes and intensifying community life.

Alberto: The largest courtyards are four storey public courtyards, whilst the smallest are the residential spaces on two floors, which articulate only three types of accommodation. All to support regularity on the plans and in elevation. We sense, therefore, that the general structure has very rigid rules. And yet I have also often heard you talk of how *rationalism is necessary, like order, but whatever the order, it can be upset by the external factors of another order—whether historical, geological, psychological.*⁽⁵⁾

Aldo: *The project for the housing block San Rocco proposed an absolute rationality; it was the Roman grid imposed on a piece of Lombardy. It could have been extended to infinity: there was something perfect about this project, yet almost lifeless, detached.*⁽⁶⁾ I have added further references to those to Roman centuriation in the Po valley, such as the Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa, the evolution of the Piazza del Duomo in Milan. But perhaps, more than any other for San Rocco, worth close scrutiny was the plan of the city of Pavia. I have also visited Pompeii and Paestum recently and again I was fascinated by how the rules of the plan are at times disregarded by a number of irregularities; fragments that take refuge from the monotony and indulge *«a disponibilità fantastica»*.⁽⁷⁾

So, with Giorgio Grassi, *I realized that the two parts of the grid should be offset, but only slightly. The mirror remained in its frame, yet it was broken in a way that could be described not as a desire for asymmetry, but rather as an accident which slightly altered the reflection of the face. Or if the reflection was not altered, certainly it was slightly disjointed. This expressed my horror and critique of limitation. It reminded me of the farmers in the Veneto who, as a result of their centuries-old poverty, broke down the Roman measurement of the fields, building on both the cardo and the decumanus.*⁽⁸⁾

Alberto: So, are you alluding to a new form of rationalism?

Aldo: Yes. At the moment I am working on the translation of *«Architecture, Essai sur l'art»* by Etienne Louis Boullée, which I will publish with Polis.⁽⁹⁾ I would like the book to be published in Italy with an introduction in which I better define what I mean by *«exalted rationalism»*. Let me explain. I am convinced that the principles of conventional rationalism that have guided the Modern Movement are out-dated, and I believe it necessary to overcome this rationalism starting with its own presuppositions. I am talking about a new form of rationalism that knows how to contain and combine both rational and emotional instances. Rationalism as a counter to disorder, but not imagination.

Alberto: There is a famous phrase by Boullée that I fondly remember: «Walking one evening in a forest I happened to capture the shadow of the plants».

Aldo: It is exactly this, *the complexity of the irrational in architecture*. I am convinced, however, that *architecture as totality, as a comprehensive project, as an overall framework, is certainly more important and, in the final analysis, more beautiful*. But it happens that *historical obstacles—in every way parallel to psychological blocks or symptoms—hinder every reconstruction*. As a result, I believe that *there can be no true compensation, and that maybe the only thing possible is the addition that is somewhere between logic and biography*.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the fracture present in San Rocco I wanted architecture to posit itself as the tool for an action that is preordained, yes, but unpredictable. The fracture takes on this meaning. Architecture must leave space for intangible things, like the light that filters through the blinds, the fresh evening air or the shadows of a summer afternoon. But at the same time, *it is difficult to think without some obsession; it is impossible to create something imaginative without a foundation that is rigorous, incontrovertible and, in fact, repetitive*.⁽¹¹⁾ Dear Alberto, I hope this is all clear.

Alberto: Entirely. And at the same time it is ambiguous, open in its meaning, because in your words, Aldo, it seems there is no divide between what is and what can be.