Typology as a Method of Design, A case of Aldo Rossi

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Development of modern industry and western countries architecture art make a great influence to China architecture design; standardization and commercialization of architecture make China's local architectural art characteristic gradually retreat, architectural culture and city culture tend to have characteristic crisis.

Architecture is a product of the local, the meaning of the form comes from context and culture, like this can explain the history since ancient time. Now our world is developing rapidly, urban composition and architectural form has undergone great changes, it is necessary to break through the narrow point of view, standing at a new position to re-examine the architecture and urban. Although, there is no truth fitting all in the world, typology design method gives us new revelation. People restore (abstract) historical model and get type from them, then combine the type with specific scenes and restore to the form. This design process, form - type - (new) form, is a specifically manifestation of the typology application in form creation.

I. Forerunners
The first coherent and explicit formulation of an idea of type in architectural theory was developed by Quatremere de Quincy at the end of the 18th century. He defines “type” as thing which “presents less the image of a thing to copy or imitate completely than the idea of an element which ought itself to serve as a rule for the model.” Therefore a type, which is conceived as a result of a long history and is able to change; it can be fundamentally modified and evolved further, when developing a design, is entirely different from a model. Quatremere’s concept reflects the tendency in the eighteenth century which regarded the age of primitive man as a golden age, as people lived closed to the nature.

In the 19th century, Durand based the architectural research on the Geometry, and made a table of series basic elements (columns, pillars, foundations, vaults and so on). He thought the form of the buildings could be found through simply disposing these elements. It is true that it is an easy and economical way to architectural practice, but this kind of practice is no more than just editing.

As Moneo pointed out, the old definition of type, the original reason for form in architecture was transformed by Durand into a method of composition based on generic geometry of axis superimposed on the grid. The connection between type and form disappeared... It had become a mere compositional and schematic device

Although the functionalists of modern movement rejected the idea of type, some modern masters did show some quasi-typological idea in their works. Take le Corbusier as an example, in his early career, le Corbusier showed great interests in industrial prototypes which can be

1 Moneo, R., On Typology, Oppositions 13(1978), MIT Press, p29 and p32
repeated endlessly and these interests were clearly reflected in his projects such as the Unite d’Habitation: it is a unit, a result of mass production in the factory, it can be repeated anywhere without alternation. Buildings made a tribute to the auto industry, just like the admiration to the noble savages. In this way, as Moneo wrote, the singularity of the architectural object which in the nineteenth century had permitted adaptabilities to site and flexibility for use within the framework of a structure was violently denied by the new architecture, committed to architecture as mass production.

Although Louis Kahn’s practice seemed to give a good example of coming back to the origins, his followers’ works didn’t show this idea. In the projects of Krier brothers, as Moneo mentioned, they only provided a “typological view” of the city… Typology today has come to be understood simply as a mechanism of composition. The so-called “typological” research today merely results in the production of images, or in the reconstitution of traditional typologies… it is the nostalgia for types that gives formal consistency to these works.

When analyzing houses in Nantucket whose appearance obviously remind us the image of traditional wooden American house, Moneo pointed out that only the outside appearance was kept while the memory of inner structure was lost. The type was reduced to image, or better, image is type. The type-image is more concerned with recognition than with structure.

II. Theory and Works of Aldo Rossi
Rossi picks up the definition of type from Quatremere de Quincy, “the word type does not represent so much the image of something that must be copied or imitated perfectly, as the idea of an element that must itself serve as a rule for the model… The model, understood from the point of view of the practical execution of art, is an object that must be repeated such as it is; the type, on the contrary, is an object on the basis of which everyone can conceive of works that maynot resemble each other at all.

Undoubtedly, Rossi was under a great influence by the analytical psychology, Carl Jung’s theories of Archetype and the collective unconscious. Jung divides the psyche into three parts. The first part is the ego, defined as the conscious mind. Second is the personal unconscious, which he says includes anything that is not presently conscious but can be. Jung adds the part of the psyche that makes his theory different from all others, the collective unconscious. Jung says that it influences all of our behaviors and experiences, especially the emotional ones, but we are never directly conscious of it, it is only revealed by looking at those influences.

For Rossi, similar to the idea of Archetype, type is the inner law of forming a building, made not by any certain people, but by the long term accumulation of the basic life style and psycho experiences of people. Then type is the result of cultural conventions. Thus we can conclude that the idea of Typology of Rossi has two basic characters, one historical and the other abstract.

2 Ibid., p29 and p33
3 Ibid., p38
4 Ibid., p39
5 Rossi, A., Architecture of the City, 1982, MIT Press, Quotation from Quatremere de Quincy, Dictionnaire Historique de L’Architecture (Paris, 1932)
Rossi thinks the types of architecture come from the architectural form in the past and be reduced to be most basic elements. In this way, they differ from any single form in the history, but still are related to the history. In this way Rossi interpret Typology to a design method. Using the basic geometric elements, Rossi presents an idea of back to the nature. These abstract geometric elements, according to Rossi, are the best media to continue the history in modern language. Besides, the type preserves and defines the internal logic of forms. Rossi doesn’t care about technique or function, a type can be used everywhere regardless the program.

In An Analogical Architecture, Rossi describes the city also from two points of view, one is something like a series of things, or affective objects to be used by the memory or in a design, and the other is what he calls “analogical”, where our collective memory lives, and which may stand frozen in a surreal timelessness. Thus the former one is fixed, but changeable, while the latter one can be universal and unchangeable, which may exists in or come from the collective memory of those people who related to the particular context of the city. In Rossi’s point of view, archetype is one thing which cannot be expressed clearly and cannot be transformed directly to architectural things. What he tries to use in architecture design is not an archetype, unlike the theory of Abbe Laugier, but an analogical thing of the archetype, which may be a very familiar object, perhaps a barn or a shed, with common emotional appeal reveals timeless concerns. Thus the typology in Aldo Rossi’s mind is not always the same thing, however, can be repetitive in many of his projects.

In Aldo Rossi’s architectures, we can evidently see many particular and repetitive elements or fragmentations that strongly based on his memory or taken from an image relevant to the place where the architecture would be. “Such objects are situated between inventory and memory”, as Rossi claimed, so the meaning of the past or the site should be firstly comprehended and then transform to new meanings. In fact it was just like a painting by Giorgio De Chirico, the Surrealist Italian painter, superimposed of something surreal, however, expressive and powerful.

Though often compared to Robert Venturi as a post-modernist, the characteristic of Aldo Rossi sat with his background in European urbanism and his idea of progressing Modernist views, for his “lens of a modernist aesthetic”, as described by Anthony Vidler in The Third Typology. “In this sense, it is an entirely modern movement, but one that places its faith in the essentially public nature of all architecture.”

Let us take Unita residenziale al quartiere Gallaratese 2, which according to Moneo is “in effect a compendium of Rossi’s theoretical work during those years”, as an example, since here he gives the broadest answer to the problems presented by designing under the aegis of ideas of urban morphology and type, without reference to the existing city and without the support of the environment.

Title and Town: Unita residenziale al quartiere Gallaratese 2, Milano
Year: 1969/1973
Architect: Aldo Rossi
It is an extensive project of the residential complex designed by Carlo Aymonimo, another famous Italian neorationalist, in 1967. The basic idea of the project was formed of two diagonal slabs intersecting in an amphitheater, with a third building of gridiron form, extending north and west from this intersection. Later Aymonino brought Aldo Rossi into the project to design part of the northern extension. By early 1968, the scheme had evolved into the five building complex as it basically exists today. Aymonino was responsible for buildings A1, A2, B, & C, and Rossi designed the fifth building "D" that extends to the north, paralleling building "B".

There is, in Rossi’s own words, “an analogical relationship with certain engineering works that mix freely with both the corridor typology and a related feeling I have always experienced in the architecture of the traditional Milanese tenements” in his design. This kind of feeling could be the content of the collective memory, a kind of archetype which related to the daily-life of the local residents, the locus, the block or the city. Although subjectively, Rossi believed that he had found the essential aspect of such kind of memory, as a Milanese himself perhaps he really did, and intended to express it in a way appreciated many times in his articles and books. That is, to create something “between inventory and memory”. Architecture design therefore is a way of transformation from such kind of inexpressible feeling to types, and then re-composite them into a whole, in my point of interpretation on Aldo Rossi’s theory. It is the “corridor”, representing an analogical relationship to such kind of feeling which is in the collective memory but inexpressible, and now transformed by Aldo Rossi into architectural element. The corridor thus is a kind of typology, as the notion of type of Rossi.

Therefore, when we first look at this project, a strong attention could be paid to the open-sided corridor, repetitive, totally white, no other decoration. The corridor is undoubtedly the main concept of Aldo Rossi on this project and he does not want other factors, such as decorations, colors, to disturb this strong feeling. As he says in the article, “the corridor signifies a life-style bathed in every-day occurrences, domestic intimacy, and varied personal relationships”, he believes that corridor can be a typology, a fragment inherited from meanings of the past existence, a choice of the fragments related to the context. Aldo Rossi then re-composites them in a rational way, as he says, he “understood how I must have been conscious of that particular structure”. This kind of structure may be the repetition of the element, as he noticed in the way from Ticino Valley to Zurich, “the repetitive element in the system of open-sided tunnels”.

The project of Gallaratese in Milano is a typical example to represent Rossi’s notion on typology or analogical theory. The analogical relationship can be clearly shown in the collective memory of traditional Milanese tenement and the type of corridor, as well as the structure to re-composite this type.

Although Rossi himself claimed context as an important aspect in design, his works, including the Unità residenziale al quartiere Gallaratese 2, hardly present any relationship with the real context except in the linguistic term. For Rossi there is only one ideal city, filled with types (rather impure types, but types nonetheless), and the history of architecture is none other than its history...Rossi’s types communicate only with themselves and their ideal context. They become only mute reminders of a more or less perfect past, a past that may not even have
This kind of autonomy blocked Rossi to touch the reality of the world (or is it Rossi’s choice?) and thus Rossi seems to come back to the table of Durrand.

As Tafuri pointed out, here representation was everything: it was useless to worry about secondary meanings in inaccessible realms. The city—in spite of Rossi’s statement to the contrary—revealed itself as a simple pretext. But it was also representation presupposed models, archetypes, and figures as points of reference. Rossi’s typological research is confined, not coincidentally, to self-description: the type, motionless, does not make history, its repeating and being repeated recall Tessenow’s will for naivete. In this way, Rossi’s universe may still be experienced as a labyrinthine landscape in which misleading tracks, left by the memory of the artist, confuse the visitor.

Bibliography


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