ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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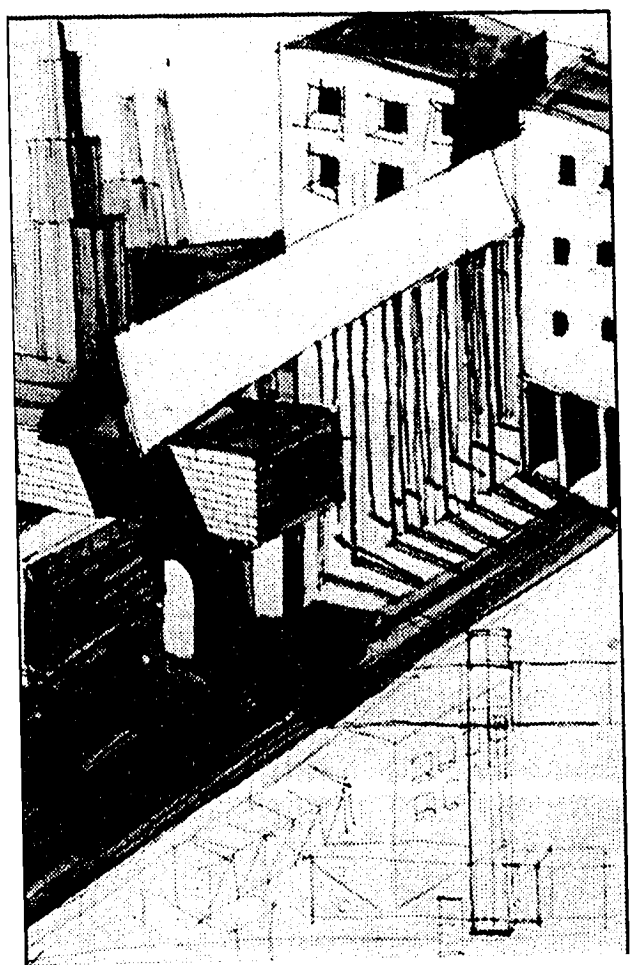
The Austere World of Rossi

In 1976, the Italian architect, Aldo Rossi, created one of the most compelling images in architecture today with his competition-winning design for the Modena Cemetery. A rigidly rectangular space was surrounded by an endless, wall-like structure in which the architectural components were reduced to an elemental simplicity; repeated voids of blank, empty windows suggested a place from which all life had fled forever. Once seen, the project is unforgettable. Its spare, surreal geometry invokes a haunting and timeless symbolism of death and the eternal with an extraordinary intensity, far beyond architecture's more usual effects. In avant-garde circles, the Modena Cemetery achieved instant status as an almost legendary work of art.

This is so strong a design, in fact, that its influence has spread through architectural schools here and abroad; Rossi's work is much imitated by the young. Not only is his austerely reductive style immediately recognizable, it also seems to call forth a universal set of emotional responses. There is a distinct "Rossi world." Entering that world through his projects and drawings — there are only a few executed works — is like going through the looking glass, leaving reality behind for something that transcends it. One finds his vision incorporated into one's own experience, imposed on a landscape that will never be innocent of it again.



"Certain objects appear repeatedly—special images burned into Rossi's mind."

Whether Mr. Rossi's world is art or architecture or a purely visionary excursion into private terrain, whether it is a structural, political, philosophical or poetic act, is the subject of much debate. But he has a way of attracting the kind of arcane critical comment that makes his work seem simple and open by contrast.

There is an unusual opportunity to judge for oneself right now, with two Rossi exhibitions running concurrently in New York through Oct. 13. "Aldo Rossi; Architectural Projects," at the Max Protetch Gallery (37 West 57th Street) covers his built work and projects; "Aldo Rossi in America: 1976-79," at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (8 West 40th Street) is devoted to a series of drawings made on recent trips to the United States. This Rossi explosion is not surprising; he has been a much-admired figure in Europe since the 1960's. The concentrated showing reinforces the uniqueness of his product, but it does not make it any easier to categorize it within conventional definitions.

I am not sure that comprehension is aided by the two handsome catalogues that accompany the shows. One, with an essay by Peter Eisenman and a statement by Mr. Rossi, is being published by the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies as part of its excellent "Oppositions" series. The other, a Centro Di catalog edited by Francesco Moschini, with an English translation from the Italian, is being distributed by Rizzoli in this country. Both are daunting flights of erudition and interpretation.

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Mr. Rossi himself expresses surprise about the views of his work offered by the critics. His candid eyes widen with wonder at the theories propounded. But his work invites this kind of exercise. That wise-child gaze suggests as much of an inward vision as an eye attuned to the world around him. After all, how does one explain a style that combines a concentration camp imagery of cell blocks and towers with lyrical touches of striped cabanas and flying pennants that keep recurring in his drawings like elements in a dream? You know that Mr. Rossi does not see these stripped, unrelieved barracks of buildings in anything resembling either human or inhuman terms; he is quite surprised at the suggestion that this might not be an architecture of joy, or that its forms related tenuously or arbitrarily to its programs.

For him, this insistence on what turns out to be a subtly sinister and highly suggestive vocabulary is the elimination of "easy art" (for which, I suppose, read "bourgeois art") for a "true art" reduced to the basic essentials of form (currently called "rationalist" architecture). What is important is that these forms then take on an overwhelming visual life of their own.

Much has been made of Mr. Rossi's apparent preoccupation with death, and of his connection with Marxist politics. For Marxists, architecture has lost all public meaning; its only role is a destructive or nihilist one. To those practicing architects who still believe that building is a positive, creative and problem-solving necessity, this makes Mr. Rossi not an architect at all.

And they are not all wrong, by conventional yardsticks of successful design. When Mr. Rossi builds, the results are remarkably unsettling. I cannot imagine putting children in his Elementary School of Fagnano Olona in Lombardy. Its images are absolutely memorable, from its crematorium-like chimney to the round, baptistry-like "common classroom and library" pierced by a few strategic openings, placed precisely in a small, walled courtyard. Meticulously minimal, these are unbelievably eloquent forms, and they are not without echoes in some of the bleaker Italian landscapes.

Mr. Rossi sees the design as a pleasant microcosm of the town square in the city; to others, it looks more like a jail or gas chamber. In photographs, however, the "poverini" who are committed to it look cheerful enough, and Mr. Rossi expresses a considerable affection for the ambience he creates. It is clear that it is totally that "life of their own" of these forms, however, that concerns him. Such insistent minimalism, repeated without variation, makes his housing in Milan look like a penitentiary. But it also carries the impressive surreal impact of a Di Chirico painting. Mr. Rossi's understanding and manipulation of basic geometry for its emotional content is particularly skilled. If nothing else, it is great for monuments and cemeteries.

What interests Mr. Rossi increasingly now is the series of drawings that he calls "Analogues of the City." I think I know what he means, but I do not have the space, or desire, or competence to explain it here. It is safe to say that these

Continued on Page 32

"THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE 1876-1917"—Charles C. Curran's "On the Heights" is part of the exhibition of more than 225 works that opens Saturday at the Brooklyn Museum.

Rossi's World

Continued from Page 31

are essentially drawn and painted collages of elements stored in Mr. Rossi's mind, all of which relate to his impressions of various cities and landscapes. An extremely thoughtful analysis of these "analogues" will be found in Peter Eisenman's essay, which is equally full of penetrating insights and impenetrable prose. In fairness, these are not easy ideas to express, but neither is it unfair to say that the life of the mind does occasionally seem to get carried away with itself. And Mr. Rossi does not make it any easier by saying that "the idea of analogy can never be fully possessed by the conscious and rational mind." If he means that these juxtapositions and relationships are made as much by instinct and unconscious memory and conditioning as by calculated intent, that seems obvious. And so is the outpouring of interpretations that this makes possible.

Without apologies, then, I offer some superficial responses that at least have the merit of comprehensibility to those who read and run. Certain objects appear in Mr. Rossi's work repeatedly — towers, chimneys, arcades, trusses, small, discrete structures like baptistries or farm buildings, the upraised arm of a saint from a Baroque statue, a giant coffee pot, palm trees, long, arcaded structures, often on stilts, those box-like bath houses and banners, all seen as a set of special images that have burned their shapes into Mr. Rossi's mind at some point in his life. The palm trees, for example, are from Spain; the bath houses are from Elba. Many complex explanations are offered for these choices and their meanings. Mr. Rossi's own explanation is much more direct. "These are the things that I remember, that I have seen in my travels, that have stayed with me. These are things that I like and use over and over again."

It is the way in which he uses them, however — obsessively, lyrically, evocatively — that ultimately makes it possible to define his work. Mr. Rossi is a poet who happens to be an architect. He is making poetry out of visual devices, much as a writer employs literary or aural devices. In his case, the uses of the eye parallel the uses of the ear. As words become symbols, so do objects; the architectural world is an endless source of symbols with unique ramifications in time and space. Architecture has given Mr. Rossi his poetic and artistic vocabulary. And now, to hear him tell it, he is ready to move on from architecture to another medium; he wants to work with film.

Peter Eisenman says "explaining a poet isn't simple," and of course, he is right. Particularly when architecture is a means to a non-architectural or supra-architectural end. It is the power of Mr. Rossi's poetic images that explains his fascination for students, and why they copy his work without understanding his sources. It is why flights of interpretive rhetoric accompany all of his drawings and projects. And it how the boundaries of art continue to expand. ■