

The House of Composite Memory

Richard Findley

"The houses of the dead and those of childhood, the theater or the house of representation—all these projects and buildings seem to me to embrace the seasons and ages of life. Yet they no more represent themes than functions; rather they are the forms in which life, and therefore death, are manifested."

Aldo Rossi
A Scientific Autobiography

Introduction

The meaning of house is often trivialized into being no more than a utilitarian response to habitational need. Typically, house is defined as a "shelter, a natural covering or enclosure that protects."¹ This is the *denotation* of house. This paper seeks to explore the *connotations* of house, and the associated meanings of making place or dwelling. The positivist view of quantifying house is rejected, offering a phenomenological view in its place.² The archetypal house forms of Aldo Rossi are discussed to elaborate on this point, and the theater as a house composite is presented.

The Phenomenology of House

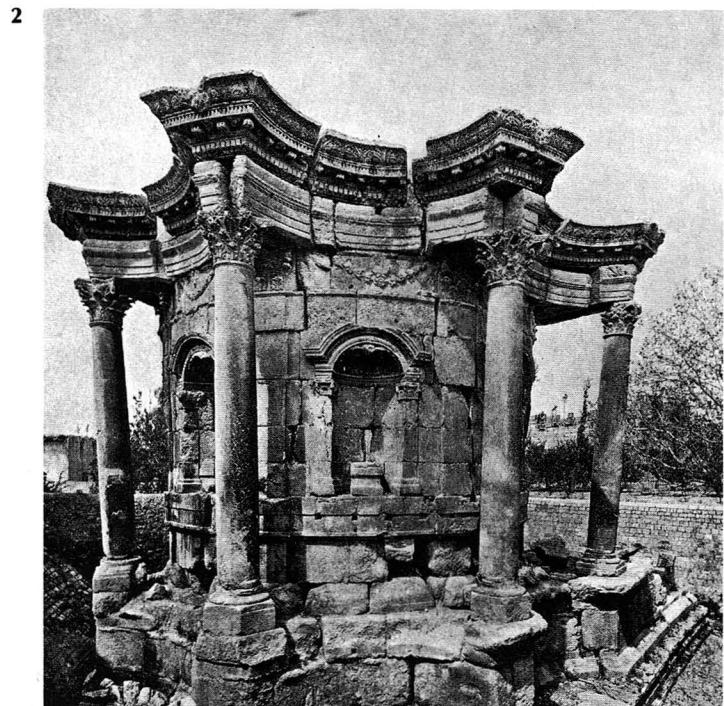
Cultural historian, Lord Raglan traces the origins of house to palatial beginnings in his book

The Temple and the House. The prehistoric chief of a tribe occupied a sanctified dwelling which later provided a model for the individual house. The temple and the tomb historically followed the palatial model. When a chieftain's house was built certain consecration rites were performed.³ Such rites were usually of a sacrificial nature and were believed to confer prosperity and protection on the dwelling and the tribe (Figure 1). The palatial house became inviolable as a sacred domain and as such was separated from the profanity of the secular world. As a sacred domain the palatial house served a dual purpose beyond that of dwelling. As consecrated, it became a house of worship and in times of emergency a communal refuge.⁴

When a human sacrifice was placed beneath the foundation stone it was believed to become the guardian spirit of the inhabitants to protect them from misfortune.⁵ This concept had a more singular identity in the Roman world. Christian Norberg-Schulz refers to this as a phenomenological principle in which "according to ancient Roman belief every independent being has its genius, its guardian spirit. This spirit gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death and determines their character or essence."⁶



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In Aldo Rossi's seminal text, *The Architecture of the City*, he states, "the selection of the location for any building as also for any city was of primary importance in the classical world. The 'situation'—the site—was governed by the *genius loci*, the local divinity, an intermediary who presided over all that was to unfold it."⁷ This notion of locus represented a particular event, marking it as a unique and physical place. To commemorate the event a sign in the form of a monument or building had to be erected to form the place and establish its uniqueness (Figure 2).⁸

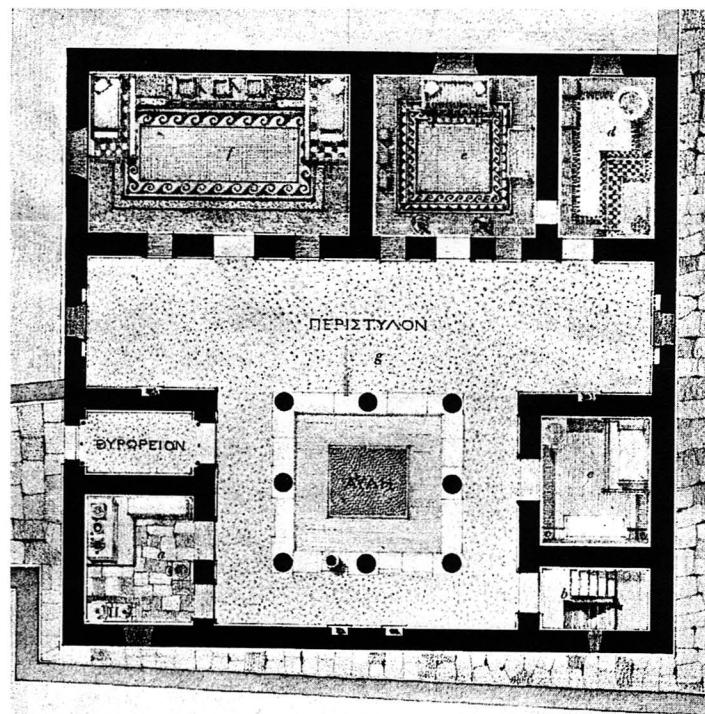
Central to the investigation of the city, which provides a source for the typological synthesis advocated by Rossi, are the twofold aspects of the primary elements and the dwelling area. The primary elements are revealed through their permanent character as in the case of monuments, and the dwelling area is represented in its most precise manner in the individual dwelling (Figures 3-4). Rossi states, "the study of the individual dwelling offers one of the best means of studying the city and vice versa. Perhaps nothing so illustrates the structural differences between a Mediterranean city such as Taranto and a northern one such as Zurich as the different aspects of their housing; I refer particularly to the morphological and structural aspects."⁹

The Phenomenology of Dwelling

Prior to making a critique of house as used in the Rossian analogy, the concept of dwelling as place requires elaboration. Not unlike the positivist view concerning house, the concept of dwelling is typically denoted as "to remain for a time, to live as a resident, to exist; or, a building or shelter in which people live."¹⁰ From a phenomenological view



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this is superficial. In the article "Building Dwelling Thinking", Martin Heidegger sites the "Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in place. The real meaning of the *bauen*, namely, to dwell, has been lost to us...To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he dwells, this word *bauen* however also means at the same time to cherish and

protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine...Both modes of building—as cultivating, Latin *colere, cultura*, and building as the raising up of edifices, *aedificare*—are comprised within genuine building, that is, dwelling."¹¹ And in making dwelling a location, a place, the *genius loci* is marked as a location signifying the humane will to exist.

In the article "Kahn, Heidegger and the Language of Architec-

ture," Christian Norberg-Shulz states: "in general we may say in the existential structures which are gathered by a place constitutes its *genius loci* and that gathering is taken care of by the language of architecture."¹² One is reminded of Louis Kahn's reference to order in architecture as "the will to be/to express" which becomes the inspiration for his concept of primordial institutions. Form, to Kahn, is that a *priori* existential structure—a discourse of what things want to be—not overtly to express one's will: "the man who discovers things does not own these things." In making form manifest, Kahn utilizes the notion of Design: "Form inspires Design...Form can be detected as the nature of something and Design strives at a precise moment to employ the laws of nature in putting that into being by allowing light into play."¹³ These dual concepts of Form and Design are, in principle not unlike, Rossi's conceptual relationships of *type* and *model*. We know from Quatremere de Quincy a distinction between the two:

"The word 'type' represents not so much the image of a thing to be copied or perfectly imitated as the ideas of an element that must itself serve as a rule for the model...The model, understood in terms of the practical execution of art, is an object that must be repeated such as it is; type, on the contrary, is an object according to which one can conceive works that do not resemble one another at all. Everything is precise in the model; everything is more or less vague in the type."¹⁴

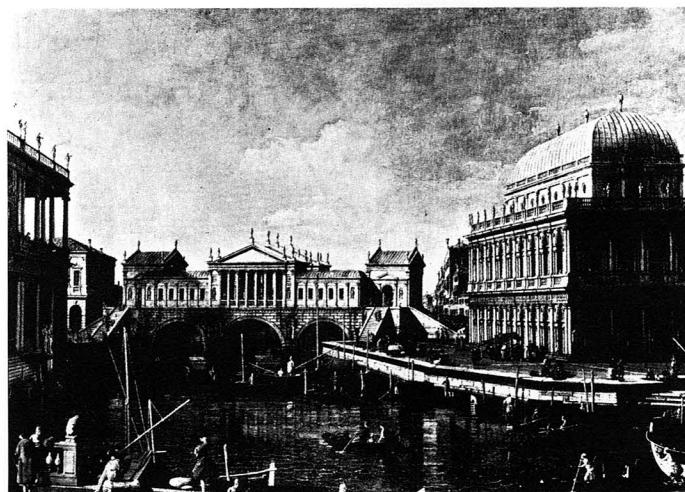
Rossi incorporates such a definition of 'type' in his thesis, and posits typology as a counter-critique to the modernist doctrine of 'naive functionalist classifications'. The latter is acceptable

"so long as they remain within the handbooks of architecture to which they are appropriate. Such classifications presuppose that all urban artifacts are created to serve particular functions in a static way and that their structure precisely coincides with the function they perform at a certain moment. I maintain, on the contrary, that the city is something that persists through its transformations; and that the complex or simple transformations of functions that it gradually undergoes are moments in the reality of its structure."¹⁵ Central to notion of transformation is the importance of ritual in that it is the permanent and conserving elements of myths which constitute a key to understanding the meaning of monuments. In *A Scientific Autobiography*, Rossi best conveys his notion of transformation: "I have seen old palaces, now inhabited by many families, convents transformed into schools, amphitheatres transformed into football fields; and such transformations have always come about most effectively where neither an architect nor some shrewd administrator has intervened" (Figure 5).¹⁶

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Memory and the Analogous Method

The function of memory and association with a sign or monument which marked an event plays a major role in Rossi's synthesis—what he describes as the 'analogous method.' Childhood memories and the fact that numerous personal observations have formed a basis for his analogous method are evident in his autobiography.¹⁷ After writing *The Architecture of the City*, he outlined the hypothesis of the analogous city and principles concerning design: "To illustrate this concept I gave the example of Canaletto's fantasy view of Venice, a *capriccio* in which Palladio's projects for the Ponte

di Rialto, the Basilica of Vicenza and the Palazzo Chierati are set next to each other and described as if the painter were rendering an urban scene he had actually observed. These three Palladian monuments, none of which are actually in Venice (one is a project: the other two are in Vicenza), nevertheless constitute an analogous Venice formed of specific elements associated with the history of both architecture and the city" (Figure 6).¹⁸ He goes on to describe how this "logical-

formal" operation can be translated into a design method and then into a hypothesis for a theory of architectural design in which the elements are pre-established and formally defined. What is significant is that the end result is a transportation, not an emulation, of the pre-established and formally defined elements. Therefore, Rossi's works must be viewed in reference to analogous method, the theory of permanences and the meaning of monuments, the concept of

genius loci, and the classification of built artifacts according to urban principles of morphology and building typology.

In the article "The House of the Dead as the City of Survival," Peter Eisenman elaborates on the concept of analogous method: "In one sense the analogue uses history, that is, what is existing to order what will be new. At the same time it is ahistorical in that it cuts off the formative stages of the process." Jungian theory describes analogy as a "dialectical concept, while it involves the purely intuitive and unconscious creation of objects which cannot be justified historically."¹⁹ Logical and rational concepts are thus combined with a conviction in a pre-existent universe, not unlike the "existential structures" as Norberg-Schulz extracts from Kahnian principles, and which I believe are necessary to appreciate Rossi's works.

Rossi and the Archetypal Triad

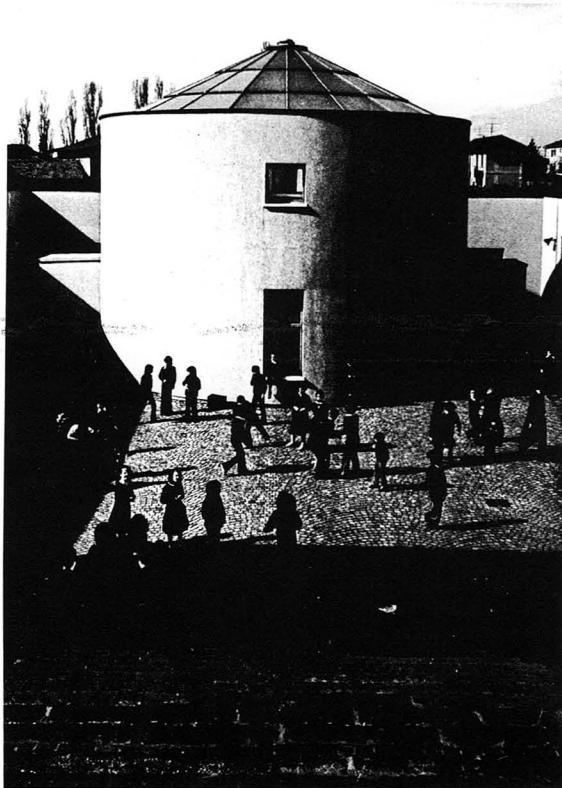
An obsessive repetition of three symbolic archetypes is present in Rossi's drawings. Eisenman believes that Rossi "comes into confrontation with an historical condition which is neither Canaletto nor the architects of the 18th and 19th centuries. Rossi's drawn architecture collapses history into the imminent reality of life and death."²⁰ What is even more significant, notes Eisenman, is that while Rossi's seminal text is entitled *The Architecture of the City*, the focus of the drawings within his oeuvre clearly depict three archetypes of house.

The first house is the *religious dwelling*, the temple. It appears often in Rossi's drawings and "there is a small square window with cruciform mullions; often the shadowy head of the

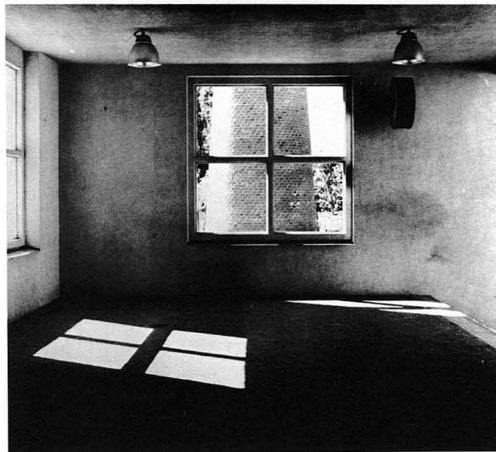


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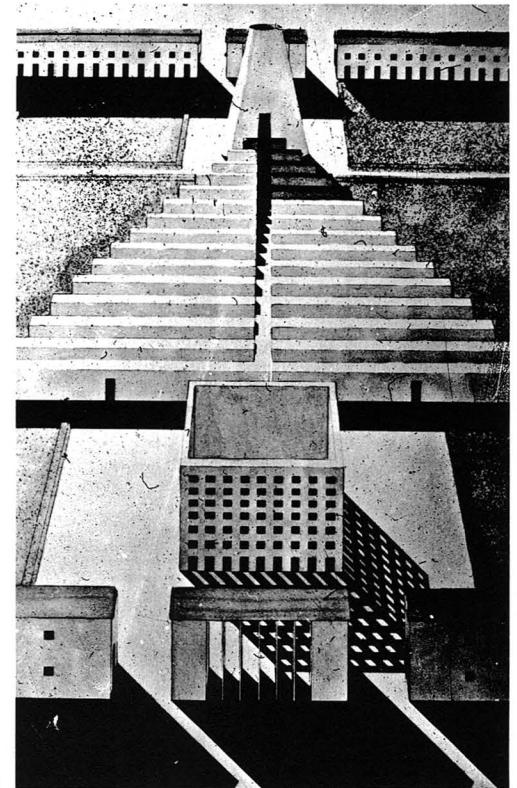
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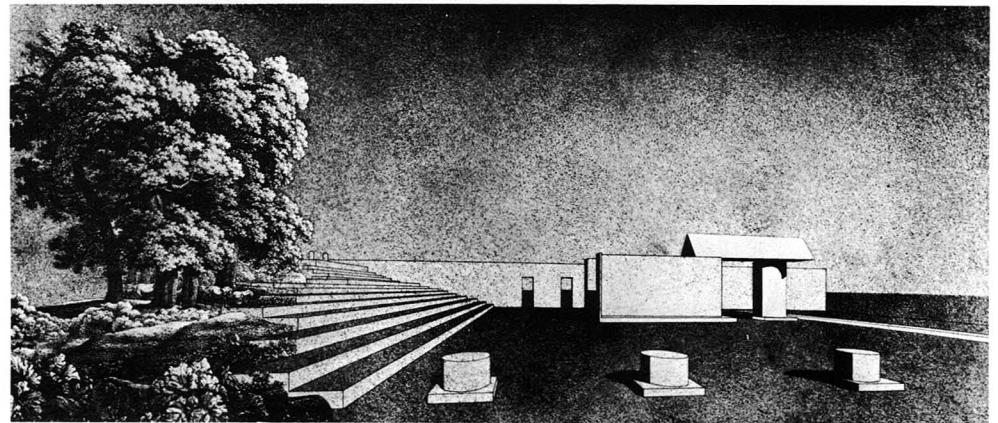
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humanist poet is at the window."²¹

The second house is the *collective dwelling*, taken from the Enlightenment institution of the communal cemetery—a collective monument established as an ordered response to the chaotic evolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth century city.

The third house is the *sepulchral dwelling*—the tomb.²² Marked by a triangular extruded pediment, it

has Platonic and Enlightenment origins as marking one aspect in the formation of bourgeois individualism.

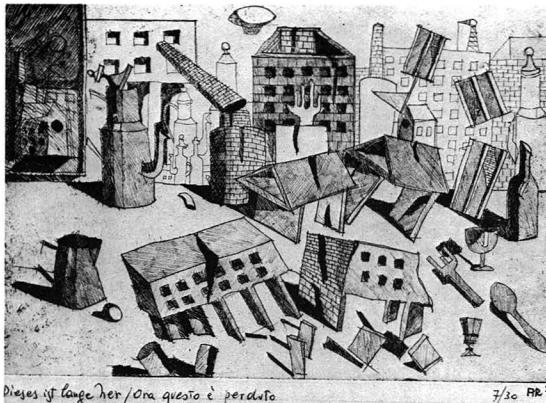
Various meanings in succession, or transpositions, are identified by Esienman in reference to Rossi's archetypal triad of house.²³ The temple or religious house has been described as a humanist retreat—or, on a second reading, is it a gallows (Figure 7)? Another transportation occurs and it becomes a library in

the courtyard of the Children's School of Fagnano Olano (Figure 8). Yet, upon entering the exterior porch, the cruciform motif frames a chimney within the yard—a reference, possibly, to death camp ante-chambers with light fixtures of gas jets (Figure 9).

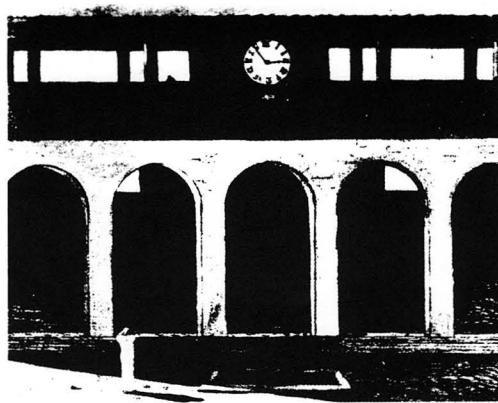
The second house, the collective dwelling, can be viewed literally as the Sanctuary of the Modena Cemetery (Figure 10). What appears to be a communal apartment block is upon second

glance devoid of floors and windows. Eisenman sees "no romantic ruin, but rather an unfinished and abandoned building analogous to death."²⁴ It symbolizes a monument to the abandoned dead and the abandoned living—a refuge for lost souls.

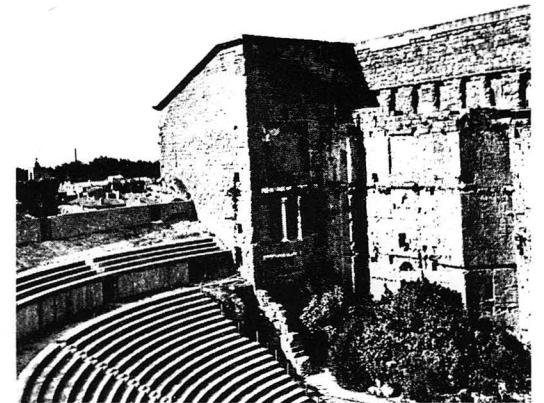
The third house, the sepulchral dwelling, is most poignantly realized in the Segrate fountain built to commemorate the Milanese partisans who died in 1944 during the German occupa-



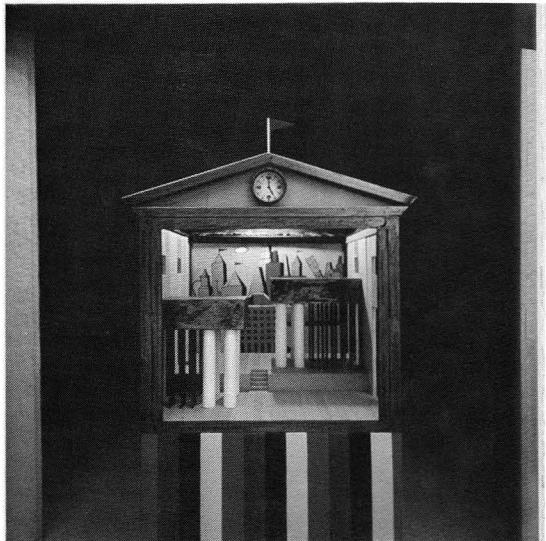
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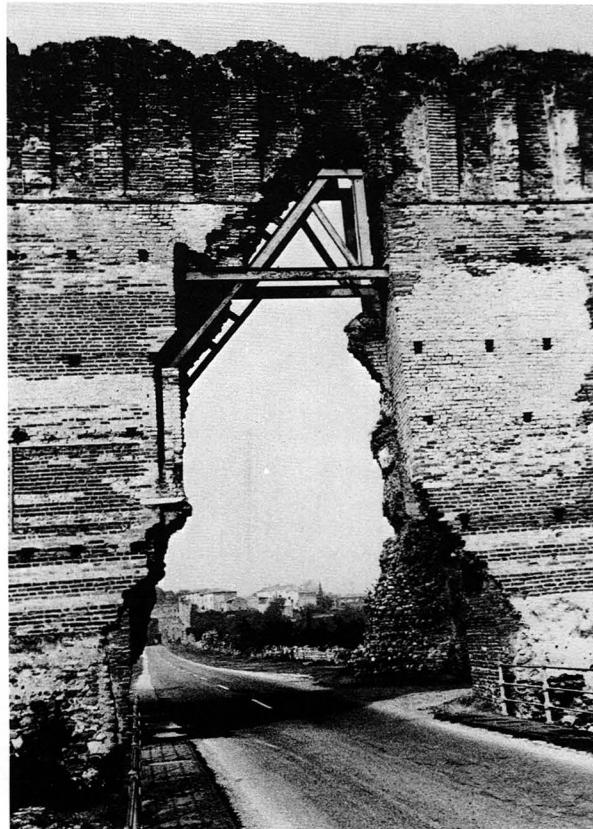
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tion (Figure 11). First, the fountain, typically viewed as a source of life, likewise memorializes heroic death. Secondly, it becomes a coffin with its pediment partially removed. These life and death transpositions, according to Eisenman, "represent analogically the interconnection of primitive man and rational man."²⁵ One is reminded of Raglan's thesis of the origins of house, where founding all sacred structures were consecrated with acts of mortality.

The Composite House as the Theater of Memory

In the article "Now This is Lost" by Francesco Dal Co, reference is made to two fundamental mechanisms characteristic to Rossi's works. Principally, "images, the object-signs evoked from their chosen source, drawn from the nebulousness of the personal store of images, appear in the drawing as fragments and finds, gaunt and fetishistic memories. As such they presup-

pose a metaphorical stage-setting where they can be displayed in their seeming lack of order, always evocative of a lost order" (Figure 12).²⁶ Periodically, Rossi threatens to leave architecture and take up making films, a medium which he maintains has more significance to our contemporary culture than that of built form.

The Little Scientific Theater of 1978 becomes a composite house in which the archetypal triad are

viewed within various scenic stills (Figure 13). One finds sets exemplifying urban landscapes, domestic scenes, village squares, beach scenes—a composite pastiche of the archetypal triad of house. This personification of archetype also occurs within the theater as a predimmed proscenium reminiscent of De Chirico's painting, "The Enigma of the Hour", in which time as we know it is trivialized by the clock attached to a facade (Figure 14).

The Little Scientific Theater becomes a composite house in which lost collective memories are composed using the archetypal triad as players—a drama almost too fatal with a fixed, atemporal scene. This fixed scene represents the genius loci of Rossi's youth:

"In time and place I have found an analogy for architecture, what I have called 'the fixed scene of human events.' And this too has focused my interest on the theater and the locus it constitutes. I loved the fixed scene of the theater in Orange; somehow that great stage wall could not but be fixed. And the great amphitheater of Arles, Nimes and Verona are also clearly delimited and permanent places, since they were the loci of my architectural education" (Figure 15).

Rossi reinforces the hypothesis that the theater is his *a priori* locus of memory in his autobiography: "Certainly the Little Scientific Theater was the theater of memory, but memory in the sense of repetition: this was its magic."²⁷ The incisiveness of Rossi's selective interpretation of history within the analogous house of composite memory has other origins, which may stem from his admitted fascination with the substitution of ritual for pain, from recent preoccupation for medicinal and psychological texts, and from his conviction in the sacrosanct presence of a material view of history.²⁸ Rossi reveals this *anatomical* obsession in a graphic description in which the "most impressive examples of this are certainly the Brantmauer in Berlin, often black and furrowed by pipes like wounds, and similarly in the buildings on Broadway in New York, where the cornices are broken, clearly revealing their sections, their design" (Figure 16).²⁹

Rossi envisions the body of history with the acute and trained eye of a physician in quiet desperation to revive the life which he fears may be indeed lost. Within the composite house of the Little Scientific Theater his most penetrating and atemporal operations have been performed—to exhume the canonical triad of the primordial temple, refuge and tomb—the archetypes of humanity's genius loci and the original artifacts of our phenomenological origins.

NOTES

1. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 8th ed., s.v. "house."
2. The word Positivism is used here as originally intended by Saint-Simon and the subsequent development as outlined by Auguste Comte. This philosophic stance held that all genuine human knowledge is contained within the boundaries of science, particularly those in which a systematic study of phenomena and the explication of laws governed by such specific findings. Whatever questions cannot be answered by such scientific methods are to be left unanswered; and under the rubric of positivism a warning is posited against all metaphysical observation as a basis for inquiry into first causes and ultimate ends in the pursuit of knowledge. See *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1979 ed., s.v. "positivism;" *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, G. Lenzer, ed., New York, 1975; and K. Frampton "On Heidegger," *Oppositions*, 4, 1974, for a refutation...
3. For a significant study of myths and origins of the house, see Lord Raglan, *The Temple and the House*, New York, 1964; and J. Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town*, Princeton, 1976.
4. Raglan, *Temple*, 14-24.
5. Raglan, *Temple*, 23.
6. C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci—Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York, 1980, 18.
7. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, especially chap. 3.
8. Rossi, *Architecture*, 103-107.
9. Rossi, *Architecture*, 72.
10. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 8th ed., s.v. "dwelling."
11. M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, 1981, 143-162.
12. C. Norberg-Schulz, "Kahn, Heidegger and the Language of Architecture," *Oppositions*, 8, 1979, 28-47. See also V. Scully, Postscript, in A. Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, 111-116; and A. Colquhoun, "Rational Architecture," *Architectural Design*, 45, 1975, 365-370, for the Rossi and Kahn comparison in relation to existentialist thought.
13. C. Norberg-Schulz, "Kahn, Heidegger and the Language of Architecture," 32.
14. As quoted in Rossi, *Architecture*, 40. For a more complete elaboration of typological theory see A. Vidler, "The Third Typology," *Rational Architecture*, 1978, Brussels, 1978, 28-32. R. Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions*, 13, 1978, 22-45; and Vidler, "The Idea of Type," *Oppositions*, 8, 1977, 94-115.
15. Rossi, *Architecture*, 55-56.
16. Rossi, *Autobiography*, 75.
17. Numerous references and the authors use of memory in a phenomenology of design are contained within Rossi's *Autobiography*.
18. Rossi, *Architecture*, 166.
19. *Aldo Rossi in America: 1976 to 1979*, P. Eisenman, ed., IAUS Exhibition Catalogue, no. 2, New York 1979, 6, 9.
20. *Rossi in America*, 11.
21. All three House constructs or archetypes as discussed were first noted in *Rossi in America*.
22. Rossi wrote more specifically on the tomb as a house in "The Blue of the Sky," *Oppositions*, 5, 1976, 31-34. In that article, he notes: Initially, no distinction was made between the typology of the house and that of the tomb...Death expressed a state of transition between two conditions, the borders of which were not clearly defined," 31-34.
23. *Rossi in America*, 4-15.
24. *Rossi in America*, 16.
25. *Rossi in America*, 14.
26. F. Dal Co, "Now This is Lost," *Lotus*, 25, 1979, 67-74.
27. Rossi, *Autobiography*, 78-80, 68. See also D. Libeskind, "Deus ex Machina"/"Machina ex Deo," *Oppositions*, 21, 1980, 1-23; D. Vitale, "Interventions, Translations, Analogies," *Lotus*, 25, 1979, 55-65; M. Tafuri, "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir," *Oppositions*, 3, 1974, 37-62, for more on The Little Scientific Theater and a criticism of Rossi's early works.
28. Rossi, *Autobiography*, 62.
29. Rossi, *Autobiography*, 23, 58-60.

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