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# **Drama and Project:**

The Little  
Scientific Theatre  
of Aldo Rossi

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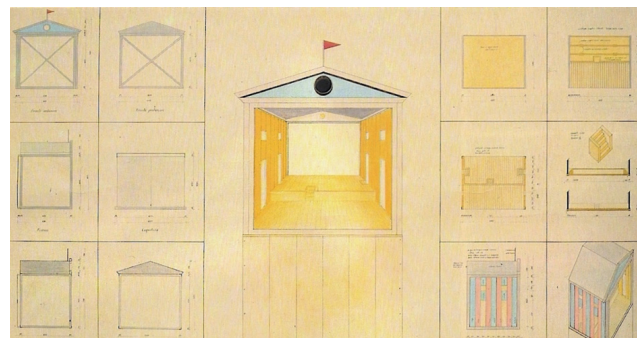
## Abstract

This paper will focus on a singular approach concerning the relation between Architecture and Theatre, regarding their methods, techniques and instruments. Through the presentation of a particular piece – the *Teatrino Scientifico* of the Italian architect Aldo Rossi – we consider a hypothetical analogy between these two disciplines in their own ways of thinking and performing. This way, we aim to contribute to the understanding of how the use of clearly conventional dramatic resources such as Character, Set, or Play can become ways of architectural practice. This piece of strong theatrical features, drawn and built by a famous architect, is still very enigmatic and quite unknown. Despite its strangeness, the *Teatrino Scientifico* seems to have an extraordinary relevance in this architect's work, which, according to Rafael Moneo, has the value of *oeuvres complètes*. This small painted wood construction of 1979 is not easy to classify. It is not a puppet theatre, nor a model of other project, nor a conventional set. Inside of it, little models of Aldo Rossi's own architectural buildings seem to be put in interaction with each other as in a silent play. The analysis of *Teatrino Scientifico* would be a place for enquiring how its theatrical condition may help to disclose some of the main characteristics of his work, such as reduced elements of composition, the use of repetition or a strong formal abstraction. It may also give some substantial ground on the understanding of some of his main theoretical assumptions as the notion of rationalism, disciplinary autonomy or typology. An architect's performance of his own architecture in a stage would be traced in other similar examples in architects for to consider the hypothesis of a specific ability of Theatre as an instrument of particular revelation facing architectural practice.

**Keywords:** Aldo Rossi; Little Scientific Theatre; Autobiography; Typology; Abstraction.

Inquiring into the correspondences and analogies between Theatre and Architecture, a unique hypothesis, even if quite enigmatic, is presented in this essay about a singular piece, designed and built by an architect. The connection between these two

disciplines is taken in consideration regarding their instruments, resources and conceptions; in other words, searching a hypothesis of correspondence between them in their own specific *ways of doing*.



**Figure 1.** Aldo Rossi, *Teatrino Scientifico* [Technical Drawings], 1979

It is under this scope that here we investigate a particular theatrical device made by an architect that it is not a model of any known project, nor a puppet theatre; that is not that well-known or written about, but it is somehow taken as having the significance of a *oeuvre complète* (Rafael Moneo, 1979, p. 38); that is made by an architect, but has strong theatrical features; that we easily recognize as a theatrical set, but no action seems to be within its aim.



**Figure 2.** A. Rossi, *Untitled*, 1979

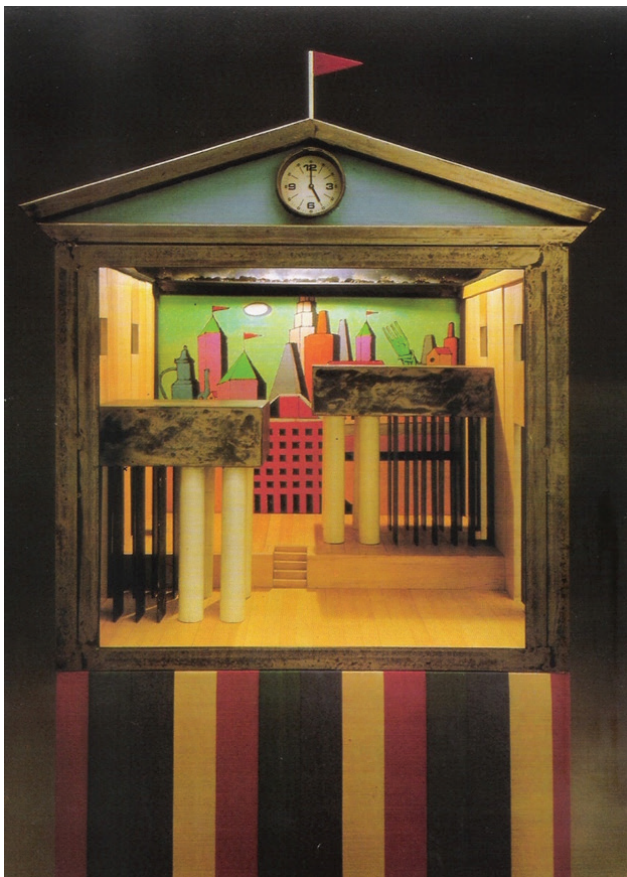
**Figure 3.** A. Rossi, *L'Architettura – Il Prólogo*, 1978.

**Figure 4.** A. Rossi, *Disegno con teatro Gallarate ed altri edifici*, 1978.

Probably, its enigma and ambiguity cannot be entirely dismissed. Moreover, this may be the very clue of the piece being close to the inner, somehow private, field of an architect's practice. That may explain the few writings and essays produced about this piece of such a well-known and published

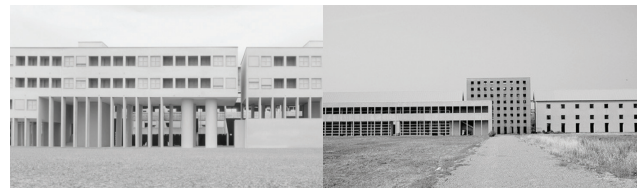
architect. Beside the author's own descriptions about the piece, that we find in two articles (Rossi, 1979a and b) and short references across some of his texts, there are no significant publications about this piece, with the important exception of Rafael Moneo (Moneo, 1979)<sup>1</sup>. Certainly, it is not easy to talk about this piece, or to definite it, and its very title can be cause of puzzlement – *The Little Scientific Theatre*.

We propose here that an insight through the practice and nature of Theatre may help to disclose some of its key points, helping not only to explore a connection between these two disciplines, from the point of view of their practices, but also a singular insight on the work of an architect and its idea of Project that had influenced so much the disciplinary field of Architecture in the second half of the twentieth century.



**Figure 5.** A. Rossi, *The Little Scientific Theatre*, 1978

The Little Scientific Theatre (*Il Teatrino Scientifico*) is made of painted wood and a steel structure of 50 x 60 x 70 cm and was designed by the architect Aldo Rossi around 1978, with collaboration of the architects Gianni Braghieri and Roberto Freno. In this piece, models of parts of his own architectural work are displayed in a scene, although not corresponding to any specific architectural project. They can be easily identified: the Cabines d'Elba, the volumetry of the Gallarate housing complex, and, painted on the scenery, Rossi's persistent and repetitive allusions to the San Carlo de Arona monument, the ossuary and chimney of the Modena Cemetery, coffee pots, palm trees and industrial towers, arranged in different compositions.



**Figure 6.** A. Rossi, *Modena Cemetery*, Modena, 1971-78.

**Figure 7.** A. Rossi, *Gallaratese Housing Complex*, Milan, 1968-1973

These pieces, alternating in between several photographs and drawings that the architect made of the Little Scientific Theatre, seem to be put in interaction with each other, as in a play. However, no action seems to be taking place. This strange arrangement of models in a clearly theatrical device doesn't have an evident meaning. Despite looking like a puppet theatre, there is no trace of figures to play in it or even a sense of action. Only models, alone, seem to have a role in it, as in a silent and still play.



**Figure 8.** A. Rossi, *Polaroids – Teatrino Scientifico*, 1979

The connection of A. Rossi with theatre and acting is a very peculiar one and in that we may find



some relevant assessments to question his little theatrical device. If he had projected and built a significant number of theatre buildings<sup>2</sup> and several settings for plays, ballets and operas<sup>3</sup> throughout his career, his connection to theatre would furthermore be related to the very nature and characteristics of its practice. Being married to an Italian actress, Sonia Gessner, some personal assertions lead us to believe that he was close to actors, directors and writers both in theatre and cinema (Bonicalzi, 1994). His many references to *empty theatres* suggest his frequent attendance of rehearsals, where the action, fragmented and repetitive, reveals a singularity of theatrical fiction.

I particularly love empty theatres with few lights lit and, most of all, those partial rehearsals where the voices repeat the same bar, interrupt it, resume it, remaining in the potentiality of the action. Likewise in my projects, repetition, collage, the displacement of an element from one design to another, always places me before another potential project which I would like to do but which is also a memory of some other thing. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 20)

I realized as much while looking at empty theatres as if they were buildings abandoned forever, even though this abandonment in reality is often briefer than the length of a day. Still, this brief abandonment is so burdened with memory that it creates the theatre. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 30)

Around the time of creation of The Little Scientific Theatre, A. Rossi designed another theatre that may be crucial to understand his interest in a specific ability of Theatre of placing reality and fiction. That work is the Theatre of the World (*Il Teatro del Mondo*), built almost coincidentally, in 1979, for the Venice Biennale.

Unlike the Little Theatre, this building had a major notoriety among architects and critics, and was profusely described and written about. In this work we find one singular characteristic that can be revealing of A. Rossi's interest in working with the nature of Theatre and it can be seen in the transversal section of the building: spectators are not positioned facing a stage, as usually happens,

but facing each other. Two stair benches are placed face to face, with a narrow stage, at a lower level, in the centre.<sup>4</sup> The conventional division of the audience as observer, and the actor as observed, is here suppressed. The audience is simultaneously watching and being watched. This particular space suggests it was designed as a device to see and to be seen. Therefore, the acting on stage, the drama that follows a playwright, loses its predominance as the main element of the theatrical phenomenon. A dramatic role is also due to those who observe, and it is, by nature, unpredictable and unforeseen.<sup>5</sup>

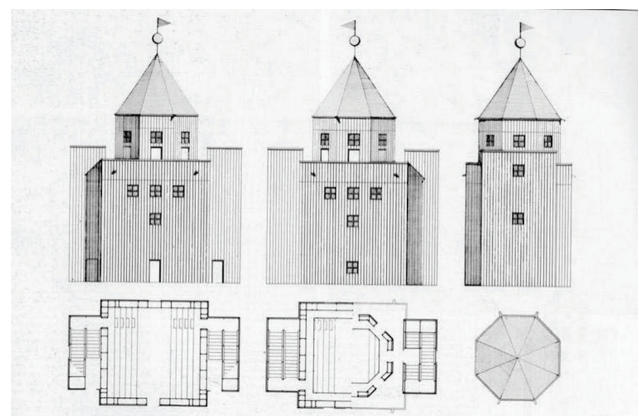


Figure 9. A. Rossi, *Theatre of the World*, 1979.



Figure 10. A. Martinelli, *The Theatre of the World*, 1978. (slide)

This dismissal of the playwright from the core of theatre ability to fiction, may find its most radical expression in the absence of action or narrative in the Little Scientific Theatre. Being one of its most

intriguing characteristics, it seems to be more than just a theatrical experiment; it may express a Rossi's specific idea of Architecture: its independence from a specific use or function as *raison d'être* (Rossi, 1966a, p. 82), dismissing the representative and functionalist understanding of architecture, as if playing a particular role. In the stillness of the Little Theatre, echoes a sense of action, past or future, as its vocation, but not as its identity.

For I have always preferred the bricklayers, engineers, and builders who created one form, who constructed that which rendered one definite action possible. Yet the theatre, and perhaps only the theatre, possesses the unique magical ability to transform every situation. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 33)

A theatre with a suspended play may be the place to observe its hypothesis of autonomy, its inner logic and rules, even if, as Rossi remembers, "Without an event there is no theatre and no architecture" (Livesey, 1994, p. 84).

Permanent sets and *scaenae frons*, like the roman Theatre of Orange or the onstage set of *Teatro Olimpico*, had always fascinated A. Rossi. Likewise, the *Palazzo Della Ragione* of Padua, the amphitheatre structure of Arles or Lucca, the mosque of Córdoba or the Diocletian Palace in Split, are taken in their exemplary formal permanence, and they are used as the central argument of his seminal book "The Architecture of the City" (Rossi, 1966a). Their permanence in the urban structure will state the hypothesis of a autonomy of form that underlies the variability of its use, of time and space, being somehow elementary, essential and intensely connected to memory.

I loved the fixed scene of the theatre in Orange; somehow that great stage wall could not but be fixed. And the great amphitheatres of Arles, Nimes, and Verona are also clearly delimited and permanent places, since they were the loci of my education. [...] the architecture of the theatre has yet to be discovered, although to me it is clear that the theatre must be stationary, stable, and irreversible – but this seems true for all architecture. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 80)

I have always claimed that places are stronger than people, the fixed scene stronger than the transitory succession of events. This is the theoretical basis not of my architecture, but of architecture itself. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 50)



**Figure 11.** A. Rossi visiting *Teatro Olimpico* – Fixed onstage scenery, Scamozzi, Vicenza, (1584-1585).

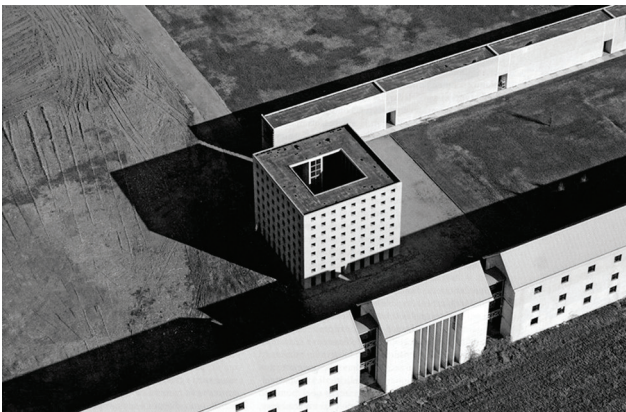
This hypothesis of a permanent set for different plays has close analogies with his conviction on a permanent formal structure that underlies the very nature of a city in the variability of its events. And, here, perhaps is the theory of architecture that gives some strong suggestions to the nature of the theatrical set. A. Rossi refers a play by Max Reinhardt (1934)<sup>6</sup>, staged in the very streets of Venice, that Le Corbusier elected as the most beautiful theatre he had ever attended – the city of Venice itself, with nothing more than a few chairs to sit upon.

The recognition of permanent features in form is the very base of A. Rossi's influential

typological studies. It demands an exercise as its basis – the difficult act of reading constancy within the different, a sense of correlation in the inevitable singularity of each work of architecture. That requires an exercise of transportation, of displacement that enable facts to be connected, besides their contingency. It is in this instrumental condition that A. Rossi places the Little Theatre – it enables, through theatre, a way of *displacement*.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 12.** *Il Mercatore di Venezia*, director Max Reinhardt, International Theatre Festival of Venice, 1934.  
**Figure 13.** *Unité de Marseille*, Le Corbusier, 1968.



**Figure 14.** A. Rossi, San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena, 1971-1978

The architectural models that figure in the Little Theatre are few, alternating with each other, and strongly repetitive. These characteristics can also be attributed to A. Rossi's architecture. A quest for essentiality and permanence leads to a progressive abstraction, a strong schematism present in the use of pure geometric forms (cube, pyramid, prism) in a restricted and obsessive personal repertoire. The Little Scientific Theatre may be the clearest expression of his formal world. Discarded from a

specific demand, this repertoire gains its autonomy expressing a projectual system in its ideal status. Inside Little Theatre, fixed and repetitive "characters" are staged as elements of a personal projectual drama. Alternating their dispositions in set, photos and drawings, they perform a still play that the architect seems to observe.



**Figure 15.** A. Rossi, *Teatrino Scientifico* - Polaroid, 1979.  
**Figure 16.** A. Rossi, *Gallaratese Housing Complex*, Milan, 1968-1973.

Repetition and obsessiveness is for A. Rossi "*what is proper of artists, and architects in particular*" (Rossi, 1966b, p. 202). Although it may produce a total silence – the repetition of objects as a tautology –, A. Rossi states that, in the best examples, it leads to a most particular improvement (Rossi, 1975, p. 10). As so, some unexpectedness can be found in the repetitive action of an actor in rehearsal, placing the uniqueness of an act one time and again.

For certainly the time of the theatre does not coincide with the time measured by clocks, nor the emotions bound to chronological time; they are repeated on stage every evening with impressive punctuality and exactitude. But the action is never extraneous to the ambience of the theatre or *Teatrino*, and all is summed up in the little wooden tables, a stage, the sudden and unexpected lights, people. Herein lies the spell cast by the theatre. [...] [The Little Scientific Theatre] became a laboratory where the result of the most precise experience was always unforeseen. Yet nothing can yield more unforeseen results than a repetitive mechanism. And no mechanisms seem more repetitive in their typological aspects than the house, public buildings, the theatre. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 30)



It is very significant that A. Rossi refers to Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) as the *other author* of this piece (Rossi, 1979b, p. 45). In his book "Locus Solus" (Roussel, 1914), Roussel describes a theatre – *Le Théâtre des Incomparables* – in which we can find some formal resemblances with the Little Scientific Theatre. One of the most intriguing sets - the one with a table and a chair in the middle - seems to be, after all, a representation of a Roussel's theatre scene.<sup>8</sup> Although, apart from some formal analogies that Rossi himself unveils, it would be in Raymond Roussel's particular idea of Literature that we may find clues for a deeper comprehension of the use and meaning of the Little Theatre. This author, taken as one of the main precursors of Surrealism, described his literary method<sup>9</sup> in a similar way to the automatism that surrealist artists would later develop. For his poetry, Roussel picked an ordinary sentence and mixed the order of words or replaced some of them for another with similar sound. The intention - he described - was to rescue the formal value of the word (in its graphic or phonetic dimension) from the predominance of meaning as its purpose. Despite the distance of both practices, it is not difficult to establish a relation into Rossi's interest on the autonomy of formal dimension of architecture. On that, the staging of architectural fragments as elements, combined as a *collage* and in a more or less automatic way can be seen as a place for observing their own laws in action. Displaced, through theatre, the work of an architect gains a peculiar autonomy and places the architect as an observer.

In its original sense, 'Theatre', from the Greek "theatron", derives from "theasthai", to behold, so it is literally a place for viewing (the "thea"). This nature and its specific condition of *speculation* seems to be of much interest to A. Rossi, in its simultaneous meaning of "speculum": both a mirror and a medical instrument to *see more*, to discover, to speculate - or in other words, to create *fiction*. His interest in the Little Scientific Theatre seems not to end in a theatrical experience, or in an exercise of representing architecture in general, but what is in display are his own projects and references in little models. And it should not be a coincidence that both this Little Theatre and his "Scientific

Autobiography" (1981) share the same adjective in their title. Although admittedly provocative (Rossi, 1981a), the Scientific Theatre expresses a particular value as a working instrument, a tool, even if it was discarded from the beginning as a hypothesis of evident outcomes.

The invention of the Little Scientific Theatre, like any theatrical project, is imitative; and like all good projects, its sole reason is to be a tool, an instrument, a useful space where definitive action can occur. The theatre, then, is inseparable from its sets, its models, the experience of their combinations; and the stage can thus be seen as reduced to an equivalent of an artisan's or scientist's worktable. It is experimental like science, but it casts its peculiar spell on each experiment. Inside it, nothing can be accidental, yet nothing can be permanently resolved either. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 43)

Following this argument, we note that around 1978 A. Rossi had worked in the project of a book plan to be called "Some of my Projects" (*Alcuni miei progetti*), never published, but later reshaped into the "Scientific Autobiography" in 1981, as some of his archival papers point out<sup>10</sup>. This book concerned a selection and description of his own work, with drawings and photographs, along with some personal notes. By this time, Rossi seemed to be particularly focused upon reflecting about his work, especially on the possibility of describing it.<sup>11</sup>

In this way the Little Scientific Theatre, as an anatomical theatre, positions itself as a peculiar instrument to *see*, making the architect face himself: his own work, his memories and analogies. The theatrical ability for *revelation* seems to expose Rossi in this double position of working and at the same time observing his own laws in action. Significantly, the actor Tommaso Salvini states about the nature of acting, quoted by K. Stanislavsky: "An actor lives, weeps and laughs on the stage, and all the time he is watching his own tears and smiles. It is this double function, this balance between life and acting that makes his art." (Stanislavsky, 1936, p. 12)

The connotations of the Cabins of Elba and the Little Scientific Theatre contain in themselves so much that is private and autobiographical that they permit me to pursue what would otherwise remain fixated within a self-consuming desire for the past. (Rossi, 1981a, p. 43)

It is not new the idea of architects staging their own work in a theatre. Similar practices can be found, even if with slight differences, with K. F. Schinkel

(1781-1841), in the stage set of both his National Theatre of Berlin and the Theatre of Hamburg drew their exterior perspectives viewed from across, within the city. Indeed, A. Rossi did quite the same thing in a technical drawing of Theatre Carlo Felice, placing in a set an exterior view of the building. Another example is the one of Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), who in the technical drawing for the Theatre placed a perspective of another project of his, the Metropolitan Church.

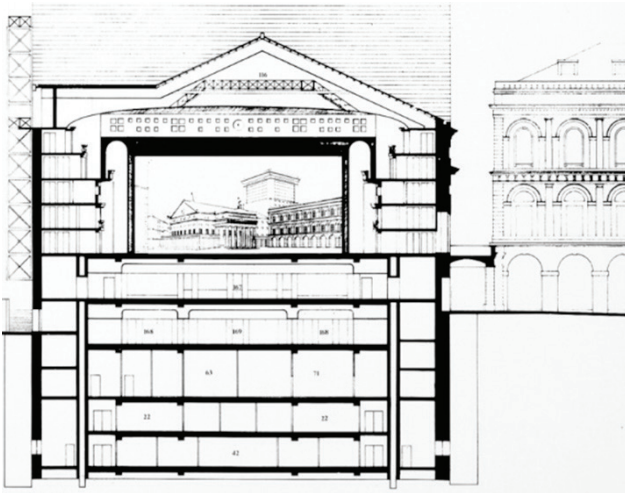


Figure 17. A. Rossi, *Teatro Carlo Felice*, Genoa, 1983-1989.



Figure 18. Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Opera Caroussel*, Paris, c. 1795.

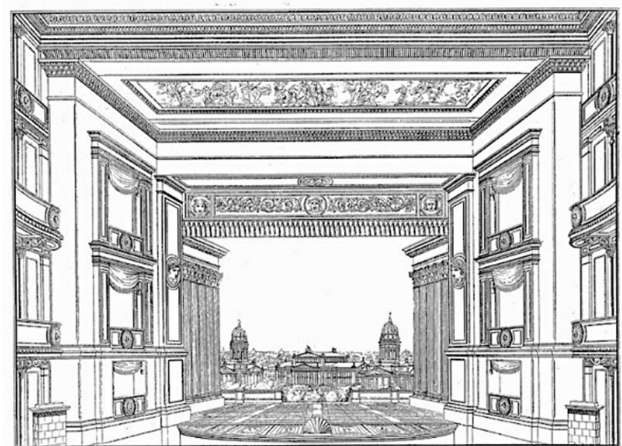


Figure 19. K. F. Schinkel, *National Theatre*, Berlin, 1818-1821.

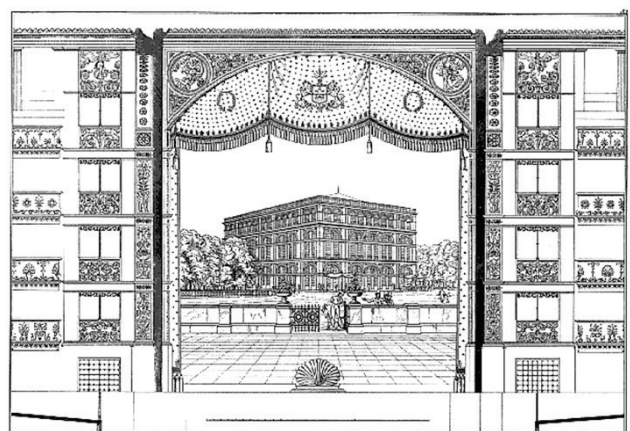


Figure 20. K. F. Schinkel, *Theatre*, Hamburg, 1825-1829.



Putting the personal development of the protagonist as the centre of a plot in literature (the *Bildungsroman*) is believed to have been inaugurated by J. W. Goethe, in 1795-95, with the publication of “Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship”, whose first title was to be, significantly, “Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Calling”<sup>12</sup>. In this connection between Autobiography and Theatre, Memory and Fiction, it is interesting to note that in Goethe’s house, in Weimar, there is a small wooden puppet theatre from his childhood, vaguely mentioned by Rossi<sup>13</sup>, that has an extraordinary formal resemblance to the Little Scientific Theatre.



**Figure 21.** J. W. Goethe, *Puppentheater*, 1753.

What may distinguish Little Scientific Theatre from other disciplinary ways of reflection and self-analysis would be its clear use of objects and their direct assemblage. Two years before, A. Rossi had presented “The Analogous City” panel (1976) (fig.) in the Venice Biennale, later described as a way of accessing the imagination that lied in concrete things, in direct contact with objects.

The definition of “analogous city” had appeared in the reading of my book *The Architecture of the City*. In its introduction of the second edition, written some years later, it seemed to me that description and knowledge must give its place to an ulterior stage; the ability of imagination that lies in the concrete. In this way, I’ve underlined the painting of Canaletto [“Fantastic View with Rialto Bridge and the Basilica of Vicenza”] where, through an extraordinary collage, an imaginary Venice was built upon the real one. And the construction is made through projects and objects, invented or real, quoted and assembled together, proposing an alternative within the real. (Rossi, 1976, p. 5)



**Figure 22.** Canaletto, *Capriccio with Palladian buildings - Fantastic View with Palazzo Chiericati, Rialto Bridge and the Basilica of Vicenza*, 1756-1759.

The *capriccios*, that Rossi mentioned so frequently, performed this ulterior stage of description and knowledge – the *discourse of objects*, and for that, the Little Theatre stands as a singular example.<sup>14</sup>

This idea of a discourse that is produced through objects contains the notion of a specific nature of cognoscibility, a singular knowledge contained in concrete objects that is somehow indescribable, hermetic, unless due to a *performance* of themselves. This exaltation of an autonomous value of objects, apart from any representativeness, can also be found in a title of an A. Rossi’s exhibition – *Things which are only themselves* (1996).

The peculiar Little Scientific Theatre can be seen as an attempt to access that knowledge, that *ulterior*

stage of revelation in which contemplation assumes its dramatic condition of an *enigmatic play*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Other significant studies are Livesey, G. (1994). *Fictional Cities, Chora*, 1, 84-109 and García, C. (2006). *Il teatrino scientifico*: Aldo Rossi, *DC. Revista de crítica arquitectónica*, 15-16, 142-145.

<sup>2</sup> Project of *Teatro Paganini*, in Parma (1964); *Teatro del Mondo* in Venice (1979); *Teatro Carlo Felice*, in Genova (1983-1989); project of Teatro de Las Indias (1989); project of Frankfurt Theatre (1994), and the rebuilt of *Gran Teatro la Fenice*, in Venice (1997).

<sup>3</sup> We have the examples of *Madam Butterfly*, Ravenna (1986); *Raimonda*, Zurich (1989); *Electra*, Taormina (1992).

<sup>4</sup> In an upper level, a balcony all around overviews the set, like an anatomical theatre. Laterally, two stairs lead to an exterior round balcony from which the city can be seen from its top, which is very significant in a territory like Venice, extremely flat and with no major upper revealing sights to view and understand the city and landscape.

<sup>5</sup> When asked what kind of theatre Le Corbusier preferred, he answered: "The circus, the circular theatre, because in the circus the actors play themselves, or, in other words, they are at the same time, actors and spectators. The bond of the roman theatre, the circus of the roman theatre that makes a kind of a magic link, which is also the human link that reproduces a psychophysical mode of that condition of actor-spectator that creates a possibility of reciprocal vision and listening. I define the amphitheatre as a plastic concentration. That plastic concentration is not only due to the architecture, it is also made by things and people." (Rossi, 1981b, p. 77)

<sup>6</sup> Aldo Rossi, *El tiempo del teatro*, Publicacions aperiòdiques, nº 08. 04, Laboratori d'arquitectura teatral i espais de potencial escènic. (trad.) Maurici Pla, p 72.

<sup>7</sup> The fact of transporting, deforming, and placing the project in diverse places and situations contains an impulse to experiment, a will to verify the work on different examples and imaginable points of view, till a kind of abstraction. In this sense I consider as a true and exemplary architectonic work, in designs and models, the Little Scientific Theatre of 1978." (Rossi, 1986, p. 9)

<sup>8</sup> Aldo Rossi, *El tiempo del teatro*, p 74.

<sup>9</sup> The book is called "Comment j'ai écrit certain des mes livres" (1935), and it is referred by A. Rossi in "Architecture of Museums" (Rossi, 1966b).

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished personal notes and documents at MAXXI – A. Rossi archive in Rome states this intention. (MAXXI-AR SCRITTI, AR SCRITTI/012 NPR 0168.)

<sup>11</sup> Around late the 70s, A. Rossi had already built some of his most famous projects (Galaratese Complex, Modena Cemetery, Segrate's Monuments, Fagnano Olona and De Amicis's School) and had started to lecture in ETH Zurich, IUAV in Venice and in the most important universities of the United States. In his pedagogy, the pursue of a Theory of Project in A. Rossi was intensely linked to practice, not so much to establish a way of doing - an academicism, as Rossi put it -, but more likely as a hypothesis of the practice of Architecture being something transmissible, therefore collective and cognoscible. Therefore his notion of Rationalism never distinguished a before and a after, a practice of theory and the making of a project, but a difficult, and sometimes contradictory, coincidence. (Rossi, 1966b)

<sup>12</sup> Often seen as an autobiography, it describes the life of the protagonist in pursuit of a life in theatre; he writes, directs and performs for a theatre company, but later discovers that his own life, decisions and acts have been already written for him as if it

was a play, by a mysterious secret society.

<sup>13</sup> "[...] the scientific use of memory of "little theatres" to which Goethe had dedicated his youthful years." (Rossi, 1979b, p. 45)

<sup>14</sup> Its tridimensionality is a step forward in relation to Canaletto's collages and in closeness to the nature of architecture.

## Acknowledgments

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