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"la città ha per fine se stessa" / "the city is itself its own end"

This quote witnesses the radicalism of L’architettura della città in the history of urbanism. While modernist arguments were linking their urban proposals to moral and utopist goals and stiffing them into narrow programs, Aldo Rossi manages to think the consistency of an open urban process, independently of external normative arguments. Through morphological descriptions, he shows the city as a sequence of permanencies and mutations where architecture is able to be a driving force. Then, through interpretations that could be qualified as anthropological, he shows how the design of architecture is a political issue where society build up itself. Rossi evaluates the persistence of uninterrupted urban production, regardless of its origins and direction, because this process is an opportunity for inhabitants to literally take place. As a corollary, architecture becomes the art of preserving its vitality.

The first part of the presentation will develop this understanding of Rossi’s book by retracing in the text itself the sequence of concepts used to build the argument. In the second part, the limits of the model developed to think the way architecture acts on the city will be discussed. Urban formation is mainly presented as the product of a dialectical relation between monuments and dwelling areas. This hypothesis is very efficient to explain simply the concept of urban process but it is too simplistic to understand the role of important urban elements such as natural site, networks, wastelands... Moreover, through the concepts of type and style, relations between urban elements are mainly considered as matter of similitude while relation of contiguity remains undeveloped. Spatial composition, articulation, proportion, geometry... have little place in Rossi’s theory.

In conclusion, arguing that “city is itself its own end” enjoin us to focus on the very moment of its production through the act of building rather than seeking for goals to reach. Because this apparently tautological proposition preserves architecture from being oriented toward certainty, it offers the decisions the opportunity to become truly political: societal choices that one is responsible for, so that city making becomes intensely human. However, the knowledge of how to preserve and activate the urban process by building locally is a field that Rossi just opens.