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Rossi in America: translating cities from Buenos Aires to New York

The following paper traces the translation, framing, and reception of *The architecture of the city* in 1970s Buenos Aires and 1980s New York. The book was published in Spanish in 1971, only five years after its Italian publication (in 1971 it was also translated to Portuguese).

In Argentina it was read and analyzed by critics like Marina Waisman and Italian Roberto Segre, who weighed the similarities between European and South American cities against their different social, political, and economic contexts. It was not published in English until 1982 through the agency of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies under the leadership of Peter Eisenman. More interested in formal than contextual issues, Eisenman reframed the book through an introduction that presented Rossi’s notions of autonomy as support to his own theoretical agenda. These distances were somewhat bridged by the work of Argentinian architects writing and practicing in or near New York, such as Mario Gandelsonas, Diana Agrest, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti. Still, the different readings coming from New York and Buenos Aires resulted in different views of Rossi’s text in North and South America.

Timing also played a role in the book’s reception. In the south, it was read in the context of the disillusionment of the 1968 revolts and the rise of populist and military dictatorships. Up north, it arrived during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the rise of postmodernism. The continents had experienced modern architecture differently – one driven by the image of the state, the other by the demands of capital – and had a different relationship between modern architecture and the city. If the south had built Brasilia, it had also been able to negotiate modernity as part of the cumulative texture of cities going back to colonial or pre-Columbian times. In North America, the growth of suburbia easily appropriated modernity’s need for speed and space, and critics like Jane Jacobs and Colin Rowe lamented its urban interventions. The reception into different temporalities and contexts effectively created two books: slightly distorted reproductions that served different agendas and audiences. This paper compares these readings and their influence on the architectural discourse of the American continent.