Cut-ups: The architecture of the city as a collage

Hailed as a manifesto, The architecture of the city is a book with many layers. On the one hand, it professed a series of crucial concepts to architectural theory and practice. On the other hand, it comprised a wide range of sources from disparate fields. Notions such as type and urban artifact were intertwined with mentions to Francesco Milizia and Marcel Poète, to name but a few. The diversity of The architecture of the city can perhaps be explained by the way Aldo Rossi drafted the book. This paper investigates its making, based on archival sources held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

In reality, the manuscript derives from a series of assorted documents that follow a sequence of contents. Many of them were pasted one after the other, as a collage. This process allowed Aldo Rossi to incorporate the results of previous studies, namely conducted at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia. It also enabled the widespread use of citations and illustrations. Thus, The architecture of the city is a composite product that differs greatly from the dogmatic readings it prompted.

The eclecticism of the book – a mélange of genres disguised as a treatise – prefigures the fragmentary nature of subsequent work and writings. Firstly employed in The architecture of the city, collage became a modus operandi for Aldo Rossi. Similar to the literary exploits by William Burroughs and his cut-up technique, these juxtapositions began earlier than usually claimed. The paper discloses evidence of this fact, in order to reconsider the legacy of Aldo Rossi and The architecture of the city.