

The Timelessness of Form

An Apocryphal Interview with Aldo Rossi and Christopher Alexander

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The Timelessness of Form: An Apocryphal Interview with Aldo Rossi and Christopher Alexander

Nelson Mota

THE STRUCTURE OF URBAN ARTIFACTS
Typological Questions

This interview never happened. The answers provided by Aldo Rossi were all collected from the chapter subtitled “Typological Questions” in the first American edition of his *The Architecture of the City*, published in 1982. The answers given by Christopher Alexander were gathered from the chapter “The Timeless Way” in his *The Timeless Way of Building*, published in 1979.

Nelson Mota (NM): The reason for bringing you two together is your common interest in time and temporality as key factors in the rapport between nature and urban artifacts. Aldo calls it the creation of an “artificial homeland” and Christopher names it “the timeless way of building”. How far back should we look in order to make sense of this relationship?

Aldo Rossi (AR): The “artificial homeland” is as old as man. Bronze Age men adapted the landscape according to social needs by constructing artificial islands of brick, by digging wells, drainage canals, and watercourses. [...] Neolithic villages already offered the first transformations of the world according to humankind’s needs.

Christopher Alexander (CA): [The timeless way of building] is thousands of years old, and the same today as it has always been. The great traditional buildings of the past, the villages and tents and temples in which

man feels at home, have always been made by people who were very close to the core of this way of thinking.

NM: Both of you describe the act of building as being fundamentally a social practice. Does this mean though that building practices are particular to a specific time and place?

AR: The first forms and types of habitation, as well as temples and more complex buildings, were [...] developed according to both needs and aspirations to beauty; a particular type was associated with a form and a way of life, although its specific shape varied widely from society to society. [...] I would define the concept of “type” as something that is permanent and complex, a logical principle that is prior to form and that constitutes it.

CA: At the core of all successful acts of building and at the core of all successful processes of growth, even though there are a million different versions of these acts and processes, there is one fundamental invariant feature, which is responsible for their success. Although this way has taken on a thousand different forms at different times, and in different places, still, there is an unavoidable, invariant core to all of them.

NM: You both highlighted permanence or invariance as a key feature in successful acts of building. Can these acts still be copied or replicated in this day and age?

CA: There is a definable sequence of activities that are at the heart of all acts of building, and it is possible to specify, precisely, under what conditions these activities will generate a building that is alive. All this can be made so explicit that anyone can do it.

NM: Could you clarify what that sequence of activities is, Christopher? Have you discovered a sort of formula that everybody can use to create great buildings?

CA: This one way of building has always existed. [...] In an unconscious form, this way has been behind almost all ways of building for thousands of years. [...] But it has become possible to identify it, only now, by utilising a level of analysis that is deep enough to show what is invariant in this way in all its different versions.

NM: Aldo, do you agree with Christopher on the idea that there is a sort of inherent rule that performs as a structuring principle of architecture and that we need to be able to identify?

AR: In fact, it can be said that this principle is a constant. Such an argument presupposes that the architectural artefact is conceived as a structure and that this structure is revealed and can be recognised in the artefact itself. As a constant, this principle, which we can call the typical element, or simply the type, is to be found in all architectural artefacts. It is also then a cultural element and as such can be investigated in different architectural artefacts; typology becomes in this way the analytical moment of architecture, and it becomes readily identifiable at the level of urban artefacts.

NM: Does this mean that we can glean information on how to build a housing complex today from, for example, a Roman *insula*?

AR: I tend to believe that housing types have not changed from antiquity up to today, but this is not to say that ways of living have not changed, or that new ways of living are not possible. The house with a loggia – a corridor that gives access to rooms – is an old scheme, necessary in plan and present in any number of urban houses. But there are a great many variations on this theme among individual houses at different times.

CA: The power to make buildings beautiful lies in each of us already. It is a core so simple, and so deep, that we are born with it.

NM. Do you mean that metaphorically?

CA: This is no metaphor. I mean it literally. Imagine the greatest possible beauty and harmony in the world – the most beautiful place that you have ever seen or dreamt of. You have the power to create it, at this very moment, just as you are.

NM: Could you clarify that? How do I have that power? How do architects have that power? What do we need to activate it?

CA: To become free of all these artificial images of order that distort the nature that is in us, we must first learn a discipline that teaches us the true relationship between ourselves and our surroundings. Then, once this discipline has done its work and pricked the bubbles of illusion that we cling to now, we will be ready to give up the discipline, and act as nature does. This is the timeless way of building: first learning the discipline – and then shedding it.

NM: Aldo, do you think that typological studies can help us in “pricking the bubbles of illusion”, as Christopher puts it, which are created by dogmatic architectural systems, codes, or methods?

AR: Ultimately, we can say that type is the very idea of architecture, that which is closest to its essence. In spite of changes, it has always imposed itself upon “feelings and reason” to serve as the principle of architecture and of the city. [...] Typology is an element that plays its own role in constituting form; it is a constant. The problem is to discern the modalities within which it operates and, moreover, its effective value.

Nelson Mota is Assistant Professor at TU Delft and guest scholar with The Berlage Center for Advanced Studies in Architecture and Urban Design. He holds a PhD from TU Delft and is a founding partner of comoco arquitectos. He is production editor and member of the editorial board of the academic journal Footprint.