

PLOT

The Little Scientific Theatre of Aldo Rossi

By Daniela Sá

May 19, 2017

Maybe one of the most fascinating hypothesis regarding the connections between Theatre and Architecture, would be an intriguing piece drawn and built by the Italian architect, Aldo Rossi. The way in which this relation is considered is itself quite revealing – it is taken regarding their instruments, resources and conceptions. In other words, the relation between Theatre and Architecture is seen through their own specific ways of doing.



Aldo Rossi, *The Little Scientific Theatre*, 1978 © Cortesía Graham Foundation via Fondazione Aldo Rossi

Sá, Daniela. "The Little Scientific Theatre of Aldo Rossi." *PLOT*. May 19, 2017.

<https://www.revistaplot.com/es/drama-and-proiect-daniela-sa/>

The Little Scientific Theatre (1978) is a particular theatrical device, made by an architect, that it is not a model of any known project, nor exactly a puppet theatre. It is very little known or written about, but it is somehow taken as having the significance of a *oeuvre complète*[i]. It is made by an architect, but has strong theatrical features, in which we easily recognize as being a theatrical set, but no action seems to be in its aim.

Probably, its enigma and a certain ambiguity cannot be entirely dismissed. Moreover, it may be the very sign of being close to the inner, somehow private, architect's worktable. That would explain the few writings and essays about this piece, on such a well-known and published architect. Beside the author's own descriptions of *Teatrino*, that we mainly find in two articles[ii] and short references across some of his texts, there are no dedicated publications on this particular work, with the important exception of Rafael Moneo's[iii]. Certainly, it is not easy to talk about this piece, or even to define it, and its very title can be cause of puzzlement – *Il Teatrino Scientifico* [*The Little Scientific Theatre*].

We propose here that an insight through the nature of practice in Theatre may help to disclose some of its key points, helping not only to explore a connection between these two disciplines, but also provide a singular insight in the work of an architect that had influenced so much Architecture in the second half of the twentieth century.



Aldo Rossi, *The Little Scientific Theatre*, 1978 © Cortesia Graham Foundation via Fondazione Aldo Rossi

The Little Scientific Theatre is made of painted wood and 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 in the scenery, Rossi's persistent and repetitive allusions to the San Carlo de Arona monument, the ossuary and chimney of Modena Cemetery, coffee pots, palm trees and industrial towers, arranged in different compositions.

These pieces appear in several polaroids and drawings by Rossi, taking various positions, composed within 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.

The relation of Aldo Rossi with theatre and acting is a very peculiar one and in that we may find some relevant assessments to wonder his little theatrical device. If he had projected and built a significant number of theatre buildings[i] and several settings for plays, ballets and operas[ii], his connection to theatre is furthermore related to the very nature and characteristics of its *practice*. Being married to the 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.[iii] His many references to 'empty theatres' suggest his frequent attendance to rehearsals, where the action, fragmented and repetitive, revealed 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. — Aldo Rossi. "A Scientific Autobiography". 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. — Aldo Rossi. "A Scientific Autobiography". p 30.

Around the time of creation of *The Little Scientific Theatre*, Rossi designed another theatre that may be crucial to understand his interest in a specific ability of Theatre to placing reality and fiction. That work is the *Theatre of the World*, built almost coincidentally, in 1979, for the Venice Biennale. Unlike the Little Theatre, this building had a major notoriety among architects and critics, being repeatedly described and written about. In this work we find one singular characteristic that can be revealing of Rossi's interest in working with the nature of Theatre. It can be seen in the transversal section of the building: spectators are not positioned facing a stage, as it 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.[iv] The conventional division of the

audience as observer, opposing the actor as observed, is here suppressed. The audience is simultaneously watching and being watched. This particular space suggests that it was designed as a device to see, as the same way as to be seen. Therefore, the acting on stage, the acting 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 that it is, by nature, unpredictable and unforeseen.[v]

This dismissal of the formal 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*[vi], 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.* — Aldo Rossi. "A Scientific Autobiography", p 33.

A theatre with a suspended play may be the place to observe its hypothesis of autonomy, its inner logic and rules, beyond the contingency specific plays: even if, as Rossi remembers, *Without an event there is no theatre and no architecture*. [vii]

Permanent sets and *scaenae frons*, like the roman Theatre of Orange or the Scamozzi's onstage permanent set for Palladio's *Teatro Olimpico*, had always fascinated Rossi. In the same way, 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, significantly, they are used as main argument of his ground-breaking book "*The Architecture of the City*". Their long permanence in the urban structure will be used by Rossi to state the hypothesis of a autonomy of form that underlies the variability of its uses, 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. — Aldo Rossi. "A Scientific Autobiography", 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. — Aldo Rossi. *A Scientific Autobiography*, p 50.

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, would be the theory of architecture to give its strong suggestions to the making of theatrical sets. Aldo Rossi refers a play by Max Reinhardt, *Il Mercatore di*

Venezia (1934). staged in the very streets of the city of Venice, which Le Corbusier elected as the most beautiful theatre he had ever attended[viii]. with nothing more than a few chairs to sit upon.



Il Mercatore di Venezia, director Max Reinhardt, International Theatre Festival of Venice, 1934. © La Biennale di Venezia – Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee

This recognition of permanent features in form is the very base of Aldo 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 Aldo Rossi places the Little Theatre – it enables, through Theatre, a way of *displacement*.

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. — Aldo Rossi. "Queste immagini della mia architettura". p 9.

The architectural models that figure in the Little Theatre are few, alternating with each other, and strongly repetitive. It is curious that these same characteristics are commonly attributed to 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 or functional constraints, this repertoire gains 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, polaroids and drawings, they perform a still play that the architect seems to observe.

Repetition and obsessiveness is for Rossi *what is proper of artists, and architects in particular*.^[i] 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^[ii]. 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. — Aldo Rossi. "A Scientific Autobiography", p 30.

It is very significant that A. Rossi refers to Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) as the *other author* of this piece.^[iii] In his book, "*Locus Solus*" (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.^[iv] 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 more 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, in "*Comment j'ai écrit certain des mes livres*", 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*, 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[v], 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. — Aldo Rossi. "*A Scientific Autobiography*", p 30.

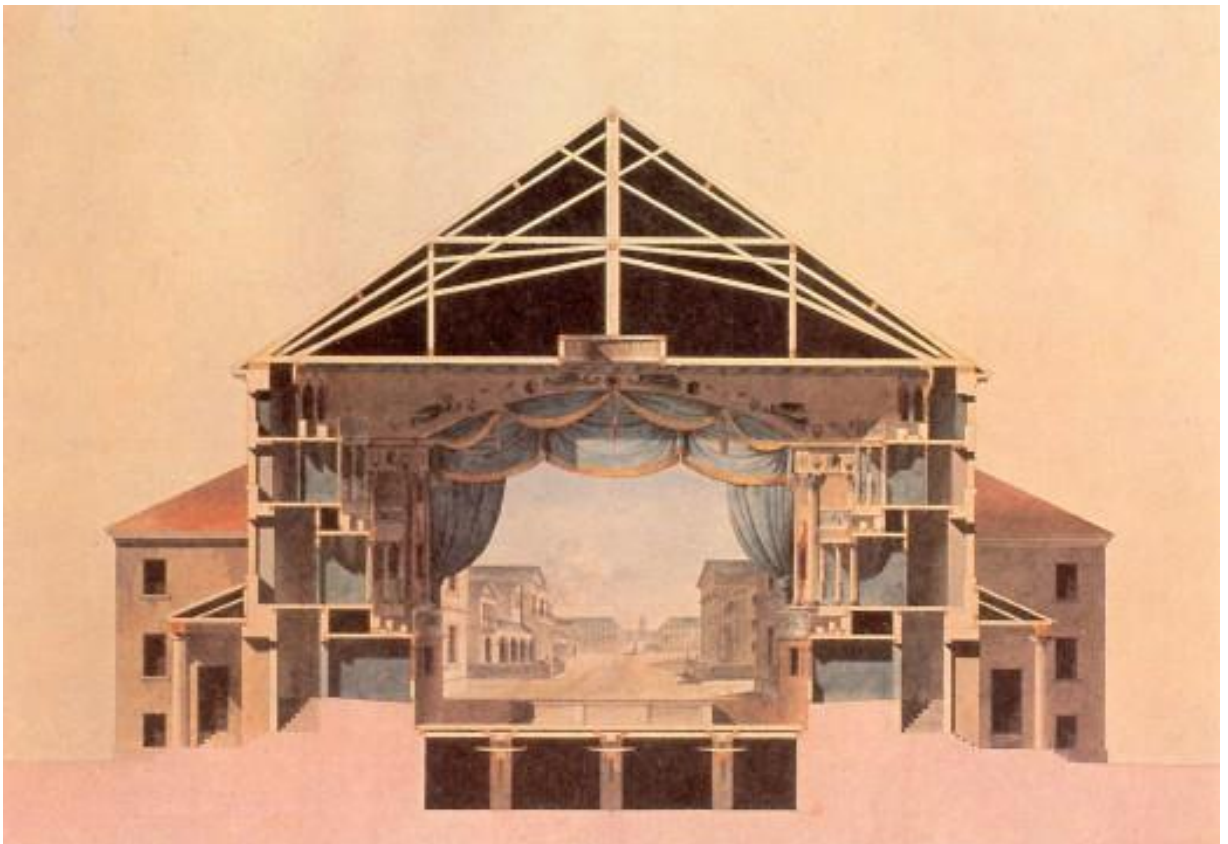
Following this argument, we make note that around 1978, Rossi had worked in the project for a book to be called "*Some of my Projects*" [*Alcuni miei progetti*], never published, but later reshaped into the "*Scientific Autobiography*", in 1981, as his archival papers point out. This book concerned a 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. 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, memories and analogies. The theatrical ability for *revealing* 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 Konstantin 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." [vi]

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. — Aldo Rossi. "*A Scientific Autobiography*", p 43. This idea of architects staging their own work as in a theatre, is not entirely new. Similar practices can be found, even if with slight differences, in Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), who in his drawing for a Theatre had placed in set a project for another building of his, the Metropolitan Church. Also Friedrich Weinbrenner (1766-1826) used a perspective of the city he planned, Karlsruhe, as the set of its Theatre, and Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841) drew for the stage set of his Theatre of Hamburg an exterior perspective of his Bauakademie, in Berlin. Indeed, Aldo Rossi did quite the same in a technical drawing of Theatre Carlo Felice, placing in a set an exterior view of the building.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Opéra au Carrousel*, Paris, c. 1795. © BNF



Friedrich Weinbrenner, *Hoft Theatre*, Karlsruhe, 1807-1808, *Proscenium*. Tab VI. © Valdenaire, Weinbrenner 1926, S. 208ff. u. Abb. 188.

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.” — Aldo Rossi. “*La città analoga – tavola. The analogous city panel*”. p 5.



Antonio Canaletto, *Capriccio con edifici palladiani* 1756 – 1759. © Galleria Nazionale di Parma

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.

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* – also a title of an 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*.

Daniela Sá (1984. Portugal)

Es arquitecta por la Universidad de Porto. Enseña Historia de la Arquitectura Moderna en la Escuela de Arquitectura de la Universidad de Porto (FAUP). Investigadora en Teoría e Historia de la Arquitectura. ha dado conferencias sobre la interdisciplinariedad en Arquitectura: IF-FLUP – Instituto de Filosofía de la Universidad de Porto. CEAA-ESAP. TU Delft en Holanda. y Escuela de Arquitectura de la Universidad de Porto. Es cofundadora y editora de monade.

-
- [1] Rafael Moneo. "La obra reciente de Aldo Rossi. Dos Reflexiones". *2C: Construcción de la Ciudad*. 14. 1979. p. 38.
- [2] Aldo Rossi. "Il prestigio del teatro. Architettura: il Teatrino Scientifico.". *Gran Bazaar*. 2. mai.-iun.. Milan. 1979. pp. 74-81. Aldo Rossi. et al. "Teatrino Científico". *2C: Construcción de Ciudad*. 14. 1979. pp. 40-47.
- [3] Rafael Moneo. "La obra reciente de Aldo Rossi. Dos Reflexiones". *2C: Construcción de la Ciudad*. 14. 1979. p. 38. Other significant studies are Daniele Vitale. "L'azzurro del cielo" in *Per Aldo Rossi*. Marsilio. Veneza. 1998. p. 56; Graham Livesey. "Fictional Cities". *Chora: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, 1. 1994. pp.109-120 and Carolina B. García. "Il teatrino scientifico: Aldo Rossi (1978)". *DC Revista de crítica arquitectónica*. 15-16. 2006. pp.142-145.
- [4] 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).
- [5] As examples. *Madam Butterfly*. Ravenna (1986); *Raimonda*, Zurich (1989); *Electra*. Taormina (1992).
- [6] Sofia Bonicalzi. "Sonia Gessner. cinquant'anni di cinema e di teatro: l'intervista". *Indie-eye Cinema*. 09.04.1994.
- [7] In an upper level, a balcony all around overviews the set, remembering 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 its landscape.
- [8] 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." in Aldo Rossi. "El tiempo del teatro". *Publicacions aperiòdiques*. n° 08. 04. trad. Maurici Pla. Laboratori d'arquitectura teatral i espais de potencial escènic. 2011. p. 77. (Based on a conference in Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, June 1981. Published in French: "Aldo Rossi – Théâtre. Ville. Architecture". 303 – *Recherches et Créations*. Nantes. 1985.)
- [9] See Aldo Rossi. *L'architettura de la ciudad*. (1966). 10ª ed.. GG. Barcelona.1999. p. 82.
- [10] Aldo Rossi. *A Scientific Autobiography*. (1981). MIT press. Cambridge. 2010. p 48.
- [11] See Aldo Rossi. "El tiempo del teatro". 1981. p. 72.
- [12] Aldo Rossi. "Arquitectura de los Museos" (1968) in *Para una arquitectura de Tendencia – Escritos: 1956-1972* (1975). trad. C. Martí Arís. Barcelona. GG. 1977. p. 202.
- [13] Aldo Rossi. "La arquitectura análoga". *2C: Construcción de la Ciudad*. 2. 1975. p. 10.
- [14] Aldo Rossi. et al. "Teatrino Científico". *op. cit.*, p. 45.
- [15] Aldo Rossi. "El tiempo del teatro". *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- [16] See Vera Rossi. "Crescendo" in *Autobiografia Scientifica* (1981). Il Saggiatore. Milano. 2009. pp.11-13.
- [17] Konstantin Stanislavskv. *An Actor Prepares* (1936). Bloomsbury. London. 2013. p. 12.
- [18] "[...] the scientific use of memory of "little theatres" to which Goethe had dedicated his youthful years." Aldo Rossi. et al. "Teatrino Científico". *op. cit.*, p. 45.