Collage Cities

Città collage

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Collage as the architect's conscience, collage as technique and collage as a state of mind.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, Collage City, 1978

Anche per la "città analoga" di Rossi non esiste "luogo".
Al di sotto della composizione potrebbe ben figurare la scritta,
vergata con calligrafia infantile, "ceci n'est pas une ville".

Manfredo Tafuri, "Ceci n'est pas une ville", 1976

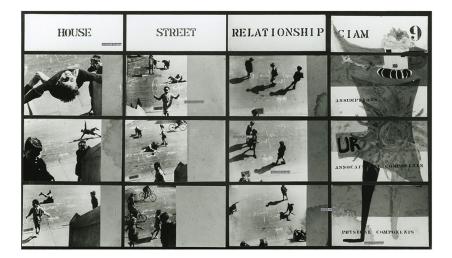
Collage Thinking

The practice of what historian Christine Boyer has termed "collage thinking" was especially active in the young art and architectural circles of mid-1950s Britain⁽¹⁾. Members of the Independent Group within the ICA constructed manifestoes, exhibition catalogues, and architectural drawings using cut outs from photographs and mass-media magazines, at once reviving the aura of the radical montages of the 30s of the Twentieth Century and highlighting the extreme social contradictions of the postwar. Photographs of the ruins of London and Coventry were deployed as the "ground" of projects for the Golden Lane housing estate by the architects Alison and Peter Smithson [Fig. 1.1]; Nigel Henderson's East-end street photographs of children at play were collaged onto presentations for the CIAM architectural congress of 1953; clippings of new consumer products from Life Magazine advertisements were assembled in a poster for the exhibition This is Tomorrow in 1956 [Fig. 1.2]. These collages, and many more, were construed in parallel with the aesthetic of "as found," a response to the conditions of scarcity and class inequality after 1945, which itself produced a form of "collage architecture," built up out of existing and low-cost materials, of which the Smithsons' 1954 Elementary School at Hunstanton became a paradigmatic example. Collage was both a material necessity and a representation of the process of picking up the pieces from the war and rebuilding a new city for a new society,

⁽¹⁾ M. Christine Boyer, Not Quite Architecture. Writing Around Alison and Peter Smithson (Cambrdige. Mass., MIT Press, 2017), 157.

Abstract: Starting from the practice Christine Boyer has named "collage thinking", this essay deals with the subject of collage in architecture, tracing its historical and theoretical bases throughout the second half of the 20th century. Relying on original texts and documents, the essay focuses on the comparison between two works based on the theme of collage by two architects who left an indelible mark on twentieth-century architecture: on the one hand, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's book *Collage City* (1983) and on the other hand Aldo Rossi's huge *Città Analoga* collage (1976).

Keywords: Collage, Figure-Ground, Città Analoga, Colin Rowe, Aldo Rossi



"Urban re-identification" grid, presented at the IX CIAM

Alison and Peter Smithson, Detail of the

congress in Aix-en-Provence, 1953. (Paris, Centre Pompidou)

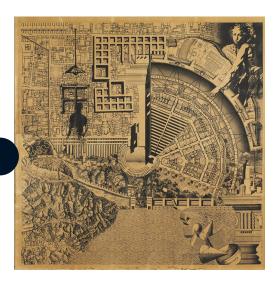
a "new" Brutalism to replace the brutal wounds of war. Collage, which, for the avant-garde architects of the 20s, had offered a dramatic means of visualizing their new urban visions in contrast with the old urban fabric, now, for the neo-avant-gardes of the 50s, collage offered metaphoric images of a world reconstructed on the bombed-out ruins of the old.

When, more than twenty years later, collage thinking was once more invoked as a means of figuring a new city, its ideological relationship to postwar thinking had faded. In its place was the felt need to resist precisely the new city produced by postwar reconstruction – the city of modernist architecture that was, by the 1970s, demonstrating its insensitivity to the old centers of European cities, and effectively destroying the inner-cities under the aegis of "urban renewal".

1.2
Richard Hamilton, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, collage, 1956.
(Tübingen, Kunsthalle Tübingen)



1.1





1.3, 1.4
Details of the "La Città Analoga" by Aldo Rossi with Eraldo
Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart,
Photoengraving on paper mounted on canvas, 1976.
(Maastricht, Bonnefanten Museum)

Thus, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's article "Collage City" published in 1975, and Aldo Rossi's huge *Città Analoga* collage unveiled at the Milan Triennale a year later, now proposed collage as an *antidote* to the new Brutalist utopia, re-envisioning it as a metaphorical and instrumental means of urban repair [*Figg. 1.3, 1.4*]. Since 1963, Colin Rowe, in his Urban Design studio program at the University of Cornell had worked to counter the destructive effects of a Modern Movement urbanism driven by the paradigm of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse; Rossi, in the context of his teaching in Venice and Zurich in the same years had worked to construe the architecture of the city, its morphologies and typologies. Similarities of technique, however, did not obscure the profound differences, ideological and architectural, between Rowe's city, dedicated to counter what he called modernism's "city of voids" and its assumed utopian premises, and Rossi's city of many histories re-assembled in collage as a form of memory theater.

Collage City

In their re-purposing of collage thinking, Rowe and Koetter drew on new theories of collage that had been developed by critics supporting a new Formalism in art re-examining the early collages of Picasso for their significance to a revived call for media-specificity. Alfred Barr, at the Museum of Modern Art, had already framed Picasso's collages as disturbing the unitary surfaces of early cubism by attaching "foreign" materials to the canvas, as in the use of wallpaper painted to simulate chair caning in *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1911⁽²⁾ [Fig. 1.5]. For Clement Greenberg, collage, utilizing trompe-l'oeil and the attachment of three-dimensional "foreign substances" to the picture-plane represented a "necessary" tactic to "discriminate more explicitly between the resistant reality of the flat surface and the forms shown upon it in yielding ideated depth" And cities were already seen as in themselves collages as

⁽²⁾ Alfred Barr (edited by), *Picasso Forty Years of his Art* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1939), 78.

⁽³⁾ Clement Greenberg, "The Pasted Paper Revolution," [1958] in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brien, Vol. 4, "Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969" (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1993), 62.



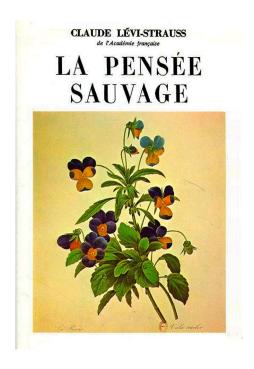
1.5 Pablo Picasso, Still Life with Chair Caning, collage of Oil on canvas, paper and rope, 1911. (Paris, Musée National Picasso)

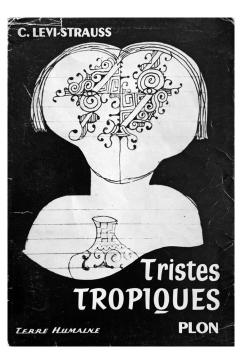
transposed to the vision of cities by Gyorgy Kepes, in his "Notes on Expression and Communication in the Cityscape" in 1961, where he proposed an almost filmic vision of collage in motion:

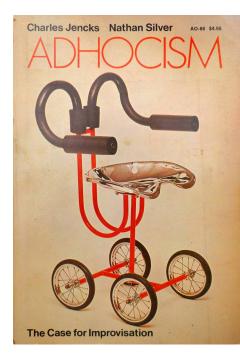
A new art form of our century is the collage, a device by which materials from the most heterogenous fields are brought into a contrasting but complementary ensemble. The cityscape is to some degree a counterpart of the collage, in which the contrast and variety of the elements produces a vitality though tension and the potential of structure. Through the cooperation of architects, designers, painters, and sculptors skilled in the expressionist nature of forms, a wealth of new architectural devices, color and textural values can be brought into play. We must learn to make every building expressive....⁽⁴⁾

Fore Rowe and Koetter, however, the overriding impetus was derived from architects' reception of the Structuralist movement in France, with Claude-Levi-Strauss's analysis of the elements of cultural production in first place. Lévi-Strauss's postwar publications had been received with great enthusiasm by the architectural community: *Triste tropiques* had been signaled by Aldo Rossi as a guide to writing *L'Architettura della città* (1966), and the translation of his *Structural Anthropology* (*L'Anthropologie structurale*) had stimulated interest in the semiotics of architecture in the work of George Baird and Charles Jencks. On its translation, *The Savage Mind* (*La pensée sauvage*) with its long introductory chapter on *bricolage*, and its practitioner, the *bricoleur* was equally taken up by theorists eager to counter the universalism and rigor of modern movement planning. Guy Debord would laud what he called the "architecture sauvage" of le facteur Cheval or Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. Among architectural theorists, Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, seized on Lévi-Strauss's

⁽⁴⁾ Gyorgy Kepes, "Notes on Expression and Communication in the Cityscape", *Daedalus*, "The Future Metropolis", 90/1 (Winter 1961), 147-165.







1.6 Book cover from Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*,

1.7 Book cover from Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1955

Paris, Presses Pocket, 1962

1.8
Book cover from Charles Jencks, Nathan Silver, Adhocism:
The Case for Improvisation, New York,
Doubleday & Company, 1972

image to support their proposition of "Ad-Hocism" as alternative to total design. Their book *Adhocism*, published in 1972 opened with a long description of the *bricoleur*, and followed with a long catalog of buildings and designed object that were the results of *bricolage*⁽⁵⁾ [*Figg. 1.6-1.8*].

Here the notion of the bricoleur, the assembler of fragments, was instructive. The bricoleur – untranslatable in French but close to what the British called "an odd job man," was a "jack of all trades" and master of none; he travelled with a bag of parts of disparate kinds, using his ingenuity to fit them together in a way that solved a problem – plumbing or electrical – but that they had not been manufactured for. For Lévi-Strauss this way of working resembled the way in which peoples naturally classified the objects of their surroundings, developing languages and practices that had no relation to Western science, but for all that had cultural and social integrity of their own. Hence the analogy:

There still exists among ourselves an activity which in the technical plane gives us quite a good understanding of what a science we prefer to call 'prior' rather than 'primitive', could have been on the plane of speculation. This is what is commonly called 'bricolage' in French. In its old sense the verb 'bricoler' applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting, and riding. It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to

(5) Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, Adhocism. The Case for Improvisation (New York, Doubleday and Company, 1972). With almost exactly the same quotation from The Savage Mind, Jencks draws a slightly different conclusion to that of Rowe: "The distinction is between appropriateness and urgency. The scientist is intent on using the tools and hypothesis appropriate to his job, whereas the bricoleur or adhocist is intent on undertaking his job immediately, with whatever resources are available" (Adhocism, 17).

avoid an obstacle. And in our own time the 'bricoleur' is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman.⁽⁶⁾

Lévi-Strauss compared this practice to that of mythical thought, a "heterogeneous repertoire" assembled in a "kind of intellectual bricolage." He even drew the parallel with "raw" or "naïve" art, and gave the example of "architectural follies like the villa of Cheval the postman or the stage sets of Georges Méliès".

The shift from collage thinking to urban thinking however was accomplished by Rowe's long-standing adhesion to the precepts of gestalt psychology. Here the principle of collage, laying down a figure on a pre-prepared ground, were easily assimilated. Wedded to the idea of re-conceiving the city as a holistic perceptual entity" (7) Rowe substituted the idea of the "perceptual". For Rowe, the reliance on so-called scientific measures of function, and specious authorizations as a counter to the "functionalism" that, under the sign of rationalism, had failed to recognize the importance of the visual experience of cities through the understanding of a city's "gestalt", its visual unity. Deploying the gestalt psychological theories of Koffka, Albers and Kepes, Rowe began to shift the argument from a modernist conception of separate monuments assembled according to zoning, to the apperception of city plans(8).

Figure-Grounds

If one of the formal strategies that develops from collage, first into synthetic and then into late cubism, it is the insistence of figure/ground reversal and the continual transposition between negative and positive form.

Rosalind Krauss, 1981⁽⁹⁾.

In his 1967 Thesis, Rowe's student Wayne Copper systematically outlined the approach of the Cornell Urban Design Program. Under the title "Figure/ Grounds", he painstakingly laid out the rationale for analyzing city plans through figure-ground diagrams⁽¹⁰⁾. Using Rudolph Arnheim's text-book of theory, *Art and Visual Perception*, he described the procedures of enclosing the figure, recognizing the ground, and enlarging the scale, transposing the notion of "field" for space, articulating fields in "zones", identifying hierarchies and establishing perimeters. An analogy throughout the essay is that of analytical cubism, a favorite object for Rowe following his work with Slutzky. "Analytical cubism" wrote Copper "and the products and ideas of that era, are singularly applicable to urbanism"⁽¹¹⁾.

(7) For a comprehensive review of the history of figure-ground theory as a background to Rowe's urban representation, see Michael Hebbert, "Figure-ground: history and practice of a planning technique," Town Planning Review 87, 6 (2016), 705-728. See also, Charles Graves (former student at the Cornell UD program), "The Legacy of Colin Rowe and the Figure-Ground Drawing," paper delivered at the International Conference of Urban Design "Urban Design and the Legacy of Colin Rowe," Rome 18-21 June 2014, https://lookingatcities.info/2020/03/23/ the-legacy-of-colin-rowe-and-the-figure-ground-drawing/; also, Charles P. Graves, "The Plan Game: The origins of Collage City", 2018, https://lookingatcities.info/2018/09/05/the-plangame-the-origins-of-collage-city/. James Khamsi offer a comparison between Rowe's and Kevin Lynch's urban diagrams in "Curious Little Diagrams, Gestalt Psychology and the Urbanism of Colin Rowe and Kevin Lynch", Urban Infill, 5 (2012), 85-89. See also Steven Hurtt, "Conjectures on Urban Form", The Cornell Journal of Architecture 2, "Urban Design" (New York, Rizzoli, 1983), 56.

(8) Christoph Schnoor "Colin Rowe: Space as well-composed illusion", *Journal of Art Historiography*, 5 (December 2011), 11-14, who analyzes Rowe and Slutzky's use of Kepes' *Language of Vision* (Chicago, P. Theobald, 1944) in their essay "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," [1955-56], *Perspecta*, 8 (1963), 45-54.

(9) Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," in *The Originality* of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985), 34.

(10) Wayne Copper, "The Figure/Grounds", The Cornell Journal of Architecture 2, "Urban Design" (New York, Rizzoli, 1983), 42-53.

(11) Ibidem.

⁽⁶⁾ Ibidem.

1.9 Ground plan of Wiesbaden from Colin Rowe, Fred Koetter, Collage City, London, The MIT press, 1983, 82



⁽¹²⁾ Ivi, 51.

(13) Ivi. 53.

(14) Rowe, wrote to Wayne William Copper (12 August 1996) just three years before his death, asking him: "So what about the figure-ground book of so long ago? I regard it as a genuine contribution to knowledge, as one of the best things ever done at Cornell, and – since it still languishes without publication – still an incomplete project". In Daniel Naegele (edited by), The Letters of Colin Rowe: Five Decades of Correspondence (London, Artifice Press, 2018), 486.

For the most part, these paintings are structured by a grid system oriented with the edges of the canvas, with numerous variations of light and dark forms played within this orientation. The definition of single objects may take up a diagonal pattern woven through the base grid, while curvilinear shapes are usually set up as another system. Larger readings within these systems are available through more local field-defining clues [...] though for the most part any super-dominant readings are suppressed in favor of a continuing collage of minor ones. The general has been fractured, in hopes that the local specifics will resemble some version of it I an ever-changing manner.⁽¹²⁾

He concluded, "one may, with some degree of abstraction, apply the principles outlined [...] to the ideas of urban structure". Here Copper introduces his analysis of Gunner Asplund and Ture Tyberg's 1922 entry for the Royal Chancellery of Stockholm – an image that, contrasted with Le Corbusier's project for "Une Ville Contemporaine" in the same year, will become a center piece of Collage City: "The Chancellery is tied to its context and is highly empirical; Une Ville Contemporaine is idealized and highly platonic" (13).

Supported by carefully categorized figure/ground studies – "dominant solids placed in a void", "dominant voids surrounded by solids", "dominant voids shaped by solids", "solids setting up a field within a void" – the series ended in the plan of Wiesbaden [*Fig. 1.9*] that was first proposed as a T-Shirt, then retained for the cover of the book, to be the perpetual leitmotiv of Collage City. Copper's thesis, as Rowe belatedly recognized, was one of the central foundations of the method and it contributed more to the illustrative and theoretical content of Collage City than has been acknowledged⁽¹⁴⁾.

Criticizing the open cities of modernism, with their spaced out superblocks of housing and institutions, Rowe and Koetter put forward an idea of "texture" – the solid and continuous physical structure of the traditional city against what they called the "matrix" of modernist voids. The central chapter of *Collage City* set out the principle with two side-by-side illustrations – the Place des Vosges, Paris, from the Turgot plan of 1739, and Le Corbusier's sketch of the *Ville Radieuse* from 1930 – illustrating the problem in its spatial dimensions. The one, a bird's eye view of a tightly woven city fabric, the other a ground-level perspective from the park-like setting of distant glass towers. The argument is then presented in a dramatic double page juxtaposition of Le Corbusier's projected postwar plan for Saint-Dié, France (1945) and the plan of the center of Parma, Italy. Saint-Dié, its center destroyed by bombing, is endowed with

a modern version of the Acropolis, Parma its tightly packed medieval streets and well-defined squares, illustrate, in figure-ground black and white plans, the contrast between the "modern city" and the "typical format of the traditional city" as "alternate reading of some Gestalt diagram illustrating the fluctuations of the figure-ground phenomenon":

Thus, the one is almost all white, the other almost black; the one an accumulation of solids in a largely unmanipulated void, the other an accumulation of voids in a largely unmanipulated solid; and, in both cases, the fundamental ground promotes an entirely different category of figure – in the one *object*, in the other, *space*. [Italics in the original]

As a design procedure, rather than an analytical strategy, then collage would be then defined as an assembly of cultural fragments, or "set pieces", subsuming history in a formal continuity that would counter the utopian totalities proposed by modernist "radiant cities".

Città Analoga

Rowe and Koetter end their book with a series of examples bundled together in an "Excursus", a litany of images illustrating aspects of urban collage. Of these, one stands out: Canaletto's fantasy painting of Venice "rebuilt" by Palladio, grouping built projects from Vicenza around the unbuilt project for the Rialto bridge. Rowe and Koetter note that it is reminiscent of the "ruins" in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and that the picture implies "some of the arguments of *Collage City*". What they fail to mention, however, is that this image had also been already widely popularized by Aldo Rossi as a favorite dreamscape of his *Città Analoga*, as exhibited as a huge Xeroxed pasteup of historical and contemporary urban projects mounted as the entry way to the architectural exhibition of the 1976 Venice Biennale⁽¹⁵⁾.

Rossi himself, however, advanced no "theory" of collage in the manner developed by Rowe and Koetter; his theoretical interventions before the mid-70s of the Twentieth Century were famously directed towards the development of a new "typology" and a new rationalism that would conceive of the city as structure – also replying on Levi-Strauss but without adopting the idea of bricolage. The analogous city of the Biennale was more the product of a last-minute curatorial inspiration. Nevertheless, a collage was produced, and one that became the dominant image of what, previously had seemed impossible to visualize.

⁽¹⁵⁾ A comprehensive survey of the literature on Rossi, Rowe, and Tafuri, with reference to *Collage City*, is Alioscia Mozzato, "Colin Rowe and Aldo Rossi. Utopia as Metaphor of a New City Analogous to the Existing One", in *Politics*, Vol. 5, (Bucharest, "Ion Mincu" University Press, 2019), 142-158.



1.10
Antonio Canaletto, Capriccio con edifici palladiani, Oil on canvas, 58x82 cm, 1750-60 ca.
(Parma, Galleria Nazionale)

Rossi had outlined the idea in the Preface to the second Italian edition of his *L'Architettura della città* of 1969. Revising his earlier structuralist vision of the city, he wrote:

After I wrote this book and from the concepts I postulated in it, I outlined the hypothesis of the analogous city, in which I attempted to deal with theoretical questions concerning design in architecture. In particular I elaborated a compositional procedure that is based on certain fundamental artifacts in the urban reality around which other artifacts are constituted within the framework of an analogous system.⁽¹⁶⁾

While this "compositional procedure" was not signaled as "collage", the example he provided was the same Canaletto view of Venice, the capriccio assembling Palladio's built and unbuilt structures along the Grand Canal [Fig. 1.10], cited by Rowe and Koetter. The result as he continued constituted a recognizable city, composed solely of architecture references, by means of "geographical transposition". "This example" he concluded "enabled me to demonstrate how a logical-formal operation could be translated into a design method and then into a hypothesis for a theory of architectural design in which the elements were preestablished and formally defined, but where the significance that sprung forth at the end of the operation was the authentic, unforeseen, and original meaning of the work" (17).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Aldo Rossi, Preface to the Second Italian edition, in *The Architecture of the City*, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press and The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1982), 166.
⁽¹⁷⁾ *Ibidem.*

While the assembling of elements in a painting might resemble a collage, but nevertheless does not fit the definition of different elements applied to a ground that is still visible, the Città Analoga that he and his colleagues (Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin, Fabio Reinhart) produced seven years later for the Triennale, was however a real collage. What Reinhart in 2015 referred to as a "map" two meters square, was, Reinhart explained, constructed self-consciously on principles of gestalt form psychology – so much so that the map itself was thought of as a visual sound poem following Jean Tinguely engendering the feelings "on screech, pant, puff, and groan", all resulting in the layered vision of a triple city - the royal, the memorial, and the ideal. At its center, standing in silhouette, was the figure of the architect looking out of a square window and lit from above by a single shade: Aldo Rossi. Reinhart evoked Magritte's 1965 painting Le blanc-seeing as inspiration for this figuration: an equestrian figure passing, ghost-like, through a grove of trees. Here we are returned to the Surrealist origins of the collage, the fabrication of images that fuse history and the present, space and time, so as to induce the possibility of a future, an ideas that could not be more opposed in its proto-utopian sensibility to that of Rowe and Koetter, with their literalist attempt to re-construct the historical matrix of the city out of its lost fragments.

Manfredo Tafuri, commenting on Rossi's collage, under the title "Ceci n'est pas une ville", a title drawn from Magritte's painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, that itself had occasioned a series of critical responses after Michel Foucault's own interpretative essay on the image. Foucault, in response to the painting's primary title, "La trahaison des images", had contested the normal, structural relation between image and text, claiming that rather then a direct negation of the one by the other, Magritte's combination had constructed a complex commentary on the act of naming itself.

In "re-naming" Rossi's analogous city, Tafuri questions the collage itself as having anything to do with a city, returning to the origins of collage itself in the 18th century capriccio, in Canaletto's Palladian Venice, and in the Carceri of Piranesi. The former, Tafuri sees as a negative collage, dismantling and reconstructing Venice in favor of Palladio's Roman vision; Piranesi, transforms the very structure of space, turning it into its opposite, emptiness, and a labyrinth of hollow spaces. In this sense, one also recognized by Rowe, "collage contains utopia":

D'altronde, il collage – e non solo quelli pittorici, ma anche Kinoglaz di Dziga Vertov – non contiene forse un'utopia? Estraniando immagini e parole, non presentano forse come possibilità sottaciuta il recupero (dialettico, certo) fra segno e significato?⁽¹⁸⁾

⁽¹⁸⁾ Manfredo Tafuri, "Ceci n'est pas une ville", Lotus International, 13 (December, 1976), 12.



1.11 Maastricht, Bonnefanten Museum Building, 1992-1995. (photo K. Zwart)

Tafuri's judgement on Rossi's collage was brief. Unlike the collages of the modernists, whether political like John Heartfield or propagandistic like Rodchenko, Rossi's "combinatory manipulation of real and ideal places" hovers between "analogy" and archaism, as an "assemblage of de-historicized images":

Pensiero analogico come pensiero arcaico esprimibile solo attraverso immagini destoricizzate? E perché, ora, tale ulteriore proposta di un itinerario nel dedalo di un sogno urbano in cui il frammento di un trattato rinascimentale vale un progetto settecentesco o uno rossiano? Anche per la "citta analoga" di Rossi non esiste "luogo".⁽¹⁹⁾

Yet for Rossi it is precisely the de-historicization of the image that permits it to be brought into the same plane as other, often contradictory images from the city's history. In a comment written after the Triennale of 1976, Rossi referred to another panel, a Mannerist painting by Tanzio da Varallo exhibited the year before at the Venice Biennale, where "history and geography are merged". In such merging, by means of painting or collage, lies a technique that allows for imagination and concrete intervention, understanding "monuments also a pieces of cities, sedimentations of materials that can be transformed, adapted and arranged for a fresh life. Rossi's *Città Analoga* here stands as an open city for the constructive imagination, against the "museum city" academically and coldly construed by Rowe and Koetter. Indeed, in 2015, in Rossi's Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht, [*Fig. 1.11*] a veritable collage that absorbs the motifs of its context into an analogous architecture.

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