



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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Habitaciones. Aldo Rossi y la casa en Ghiffa: símbolo, polvo y deseo

Rooms. Aldo Rossi and the House in Ghiffa: Symbol, Dust and Desire

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Resumen

A lo largo de la carretera que rodea el Lago Maggiore, más allá de Verbania en dirección de la frontera, hay una pequeña casa que una vez perteneció a Aldo Rossi. Una casa para el reposo después de sus largos viajes a Estados Unidos y Japón. Un mundo ha desaparecido. Las imágenes que se suceden al paso de cada umbral recogen fragmentos de una precisa génesis, de una secuencia de tiempos y narraciones obtenidas de objetos, colores y relojes. Es el sueño de una villa perdida, de algo que ya se ha convertido en mito, entre descoloridas polaroids y fotos en blanco y negro encontradas en archivos. ¿Dónde fueron a parar los colores, los objetos, su polvo? Son figuras sepultadas que reaparecen en una construcción de fotogramas cinematográficos que se alternan entre el recuerdo y la arquitectura, en ese lugar – Ghiffa– que marcó el inicio y el fin de una vida de autor.

Palabras clave: Aldo Rossi, Ghiffa, villa con interior, Lago Maggiore

Bloque temático: La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

Abstract

Along the road that runs along the coast of Lake Maggiore, beyond Verbania in the direction of the border, stands a small house which once belonged to Aldo Rossi. A house for resting after his long trips to the United States and Japan. A world has disappeared. The sequence of images that correspond to the passage of every threshold gather fragments of a precise genesis, a sequence of times and narratives taken from objects, colours and clocks. It is the dream of a lost villa, of something that has already become a myth among the faded Polaroids and the black and white photographs found in archives. Where have all the colours gone, the memories, the objects, their dust? Buried figures which re-emerge in a construction of film frames which alternate between memory and architecture, in that place – Ghiffa – which was the beginning and end in the life of an author.

Keywords: Aldo Rossi, Ghiffa, villa with interior, Lake Maggiore

Topic: The house: myths, archetypes, forms of inhabitation

1. The unknown: between the list and remembrance

The theoretical praxis with which research on Aldo Rossi has been conducted over the past few decades has habitually left out one of his most recent domestic projects, a partial work of the architect¹ which, however, traces through some of its parts and re-drawings an osteological premise as sub-discipline of both an anatomy and an archaeology, in a combination of *faraway things*.²

The house in Ghiffa on Lake Maggiore, to the north of Verbania, is the sign of the concrete passage to a further stage in Rossi's language, capable of including in a predetermined shell a specific list of conditions, of *facts* and of spaces in which the written essays – published as theoretical expression – materialise in architectural completeness, and appear in the classification of built elements as a mixture between the historical and geographical imaginary in the home interior. Ghiffa is the house of *desire*, or perhaps of the most atavistic of the author's *desires*, abandoned to a formal simplification of the built, enriched by the symbolic privileges of elements derived, retaken and fragmented in the continuous *Palladian play* between parts and fragments, in a translation between mythical image and symbolic reality. The complexity of the discussion concerning the old mill in Ghiffa, bought on the day of Saint Faustino in 1989,³ carries with it decidedly *ancient* elements, biographical links and territorial conditions that are fixed to the mind of the author. The lake in fact represents the world of long and lasting affections which from early childhood led Rossi towards unequivocal stages that follow genealogical aspects like the flow of time.



Figure 1: *House in Ghiffa*, September 1994, photo [10x15cm] by Cristiano Urban
Source: © MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma [F16762, Collection Aldo Rossi],
© Eredi Aldo Rossi, courtesy Fondazione Aldo Rossi

¹ I remember how, in October 2017, while visiting the house together with his son Fausto Rossi, he underlined the fact that this was not really an «Aldo Rossi project», and how his father had produced an excavation from the interior. (Memory by V. Moschetti).

² In the domestic system proposed by Rossi a series of architectural fragments re-emerge, as well as moulds and texts which from writing become built figures, images which are as collages of a tension continuously in search of a compositive identification.

³ Cf. Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, ed. by Francesco Dal Co (Milano: Electa; Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999), Q/A, 38, 20 October 1988 – 27 February, 1989.

Ghiffa is the epiphany of Como⁴ first, and of Mergozzo after that; it is the practical dedication which carries into the domestic space the external substance as backdrop, as memory, as design practice which always places Mergozzo, since the first edition of the *Autobiografia Scientifica*,⁵ and the image of the “palm tree by the lake” in a crossed encounter between space, means and place as categories of dwelling.

“Villa Vera”⁶ in Ghiffa remains an unexplored document in Aldo Rossi's semantic construction, in which the criteria of an architecture that becomes narrative is once again in force; in a sequence of known spaces, the house on the lake gathers an almost unknown world that lies beyond every elementary domesticity, drawing the attention of the visitor to a careful observation, through single frames, of infinite scenographies.

2. Dwelling as methodological problem: the single house as total project⁷

Dwelling in Rossi is exercised through a series of specific points, through objects that lead the observer and the dweller to the understanding of architectures, to known residential spaces, to a sort of compositional and geometrical familiarity that synthesises the subject matter while enriching it with unexpected elements.

The project of the house is part of a classification that is well known to the author, in which dwelling is carried out and interpreted as a result of architectural composition, as a *phenomenology* that was also exercised both in the projects for the school or in those for the cemetery, as representation of a methodological factor. *Dwelling* is a total undertaking to be carried out mostly as a compositional question capable of opening itself to the residential world, widely considered between the *sectorial* and *integrated* types.⁸ Rossi's dwelling falls into the deeply problematic interpretation of the cycle of *life and death* –as often noted–, elements that drive the space of the house towards a three-part figuration⁹ where Rossi finds himself and through which he reads the symbolic boundaries of a logical construction for which «dwelling always lies uncertainly between the public and private spheres and it is difficult to make a distinction at every level, I mean also at the architectural level, between the fascination of both solutions»¹⁰. Observations on dwelling bring the discussion toward the field of anthropology, and point out how it may turn into a design expression that generates an analogy between anatomy and bone structure.

⁴ Lake Como always appears in the biography of the architect as the first childhood scene, the place where his family took refuge during World War II and where Rossi studied until he began his architecture degree at the Polytechnic University of Milan.

⁵ Cf. Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT press, 1981).

⁶ This is how the house in Ghiffa was commonly called.

⁷ Text by Michelangelo Pivetta

⁸ Cf. Aldo Rossi. “I problemi tipologici e la residenza”, in Aldo Rossi et al., *Aspetti e problemi della tipologia edilizia. Documenti del corso di caratteri distributivi degli edifici 1963-1964* (Venice: Cluva, 1964).

⁹ “These seem to be the three themes of my architecture: the school, the house, the cemetery”. In Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni ...*, Q/A, 26, 11 November 1979.

¹⁰ Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni ...*, Q/A, 22, 15 May 1977 – 21 July, 1978.



Figure 2: Cemetery of Modena (chapel house), photo June 2017

Figure 3: Elementary School of Fagno Olona (gatehouse), photo September 2018

Source: Vincenzo Moschetti (2017, 2018), © Eredi Aldo Rossi, courtesy Fondazione Aldo Rossi

The articulation of the *city of the living*, such as the S. Orrù Elementary School in Fagnano Olona (1972-76) or – on the contrary – the *city of the dead*, as represented by the project for expanding the Cemetery of San Cataldo in Modena (1971-78), underline the paradox of the “great house” as anthropomorphic figure that derives from the repetition of references. In this sense the intention of the author is clear concerning dwelling as a flow that merges not only in the house in itself, but also as total manifestation between the many inlets of *his* architectures. Thus everything becomes revelation of a civil idea and representation of a certain reality which returns to work as usual as reproduction of *classical antiquity*. The meaning in terms of the project is based on a few fixed elements, on the constant regeneration as continuity of the composition, in an obsessive proof of type and form as expression to be achieved through space.

Dwelling is an epiphany of *unique repetitions*, which manifests itself in the instant of its materialisation and carries with it a precise tension. Rossi deduces its *processionality* and returns it to the state of the design of the domestic space, insisting on the passage of thresholds, opening rooms and placing doors and windows as a tool for interpreting the place and the environment. This represents the perseverance of the sense of residential identification in which the analysis, scrutinised through the distributive traits of the buildings,¹¹ investigates the meaning of a practice of architecture and of its forms as technical substance and as foundation from which to clarify the possible variations, within which images add up as an interpretative reflection.

What is a house? It is a question that triggers a multitude of answers in which only the project (maybe) finds its definitive completion.

The house, not the abstract concept of residence but the house, the *logis*, is a system, a spatial system made of two different functions: a circular function and a structural function. Domestic lives takes place in accordance with a series of functions, and these functions represent the concrete phenomenon of circulation. It is legitimate to think that this circulation must not only be possible, but also potentially optimal. The other functions of domestic life demand a variety of spaces that it is

¹¹ Cf. Aldo Rossi et al., *Aspetti e ...*

possible to understand and know; every function must have a container; the definition of this container can be determined by many factors.¹²

An accurate glance at the first production of the author, beyond historiographic evaluations which are well known to the critics, finds its maximum aspiration in the *house* as collective element, in that sense of *integrated* residence capable of establishing sections of cities, constituting fragments of the urban phenomenon. Stories which have been written that require, however, the sense of this interpretation, and of how the “isolated” house happens to be an annotation that is almost unrelated yet necessary to the research. The tension related to this unfamiliar issue has always been conditioned by a typological experience, by a sort of narrative which shoots its roots into the lands to be built and – as in the suspended bodies of Villa Bay (1973) – establishes a particular usage that connects form and admiration, where dwelling initiates the spatial/geometrical process between mimesis and imitation. The “individual house”, for Rossi, is always the victim of the *Architecture of the city*, it is an element of both geographical and topographical design, the continuation of a measure as spectrum of a *Palladian* extension that is visible, when travelling in the region of Veneto, in the means used for building its famous villas. The architectures of Andrea Palladio, among others, design the land by setting it to measure, in such a way that domestic spaces become points in a territorial mapping.

The constant typological test leads us from the philological documentation of Villa Bay, among the woods in Borgo Ticino, to Ghiffa and perhaps beyond.¹³ Rossi's *doing*, which is used to the translation of objects, reinterprets domestic space in its concrete forms that may derive from *urban considerations*, in a system that can be expressed as a “large plan for a large house”, exactly as it was for the *Mannerist* architect who passed away in 1580. The path of urban character in Gallaratese is transformed into long corridors in which the rooms, like balconied condominiums, open to new worlds. In them the actual translation between known and unknown takes place as in a vertical fall.

The lucid impression of the Andalusian house, pursued in the journeys to Seville, is an act of measure as exact scientific clarification with which Rossi addresses the subject of the *single house*, a form of interpretation, a methodology for grasping the domestic space. The *single house* is the bearer of a double meaning that can be found among «some structures deduced from reality that appear repeatedly throughout the history of architecture and that are clear representations of a way of living, establishing the relationship that links the manner of dwelling to the architectural forms that identify it».¹⁴

Ghiffa appears, in the lacustrine system, like a secret architectural document in which the whole project is consumed within in compositional fragments that room by room, precisely, compose the space of the house: the *logis* that oscillates «between the rigour of logic and the intrusive autobiographical references».¹⁵ A *logis* which follows the stages of a narrative that moves from Milan towards Como, crossing the Lombard region, capable of lightly brushing the “window” in

¹² Aldo Rossi, *I problemi ...*, 102-103. The observations presented are the result of his reading of Le Corbusier, especially the *Analyse des éléments fondamentaux du problème de la “Maison minimum”*.

¹³ In Seaside, Florida, Aldo Rossi designed a holiday home which derives directly from architectural considerations linked by memories and experiences that unite both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

¹⁴ Claudia Tinazzi, *Aldo Rossi: l'idea di abitare* (Novate Milanese: Associazione culturale Casa Testori, 2013), 9.

¹⁵ Francesco Moschini, ed., *Aldo Rossi: Progetti e disegni 1962 – 1979* (Florence: Centro Di, 1979), 8.

Mergozzo, gathering elements which can chorally respond to the design solution as composition laboratory for the composition of the *house* in the old mill in Ghiffa.



Figure 4: *House in Ghiffa*, s.d. [10x15cm]

Source: © MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma [F28499, Collection Aldo Rossi],
© Eredi Aldo Rossi, courtesy Fondazione Aldo Rossi

3. It will not be easy to find: “Villa Vera” in Ghiffa¹⁶

A consolidated recurrence, an obstinacy repeatedly appears in the graphic reproductions by Aldo Rossi: «*Dieses ist lange her / Ora questo è perduto*»,¹⁷ can be read in passages and representations from 1975. An omen which holds the experience of the house in Ghiffa, on the shores of Lake Maggiore; a short-term project that the best well-known monographs did not have the time to capture.

The house in Ghiffa, as it was when Rossi lived in it, no longer exists. Its world, the world contained between the thick *blue* walls, has disappeared. Its history, as proof of the existence of an architectural truth, has become a myth: holding on to the thousand narratives expressed among refined furniture and mouldings, in those rich *boiseries* which decorated the interiors at chest height, and transformed into new paths whenever passing thresholds or the levels of the floors. This story – derived from a reflected image of Soane – makes Rossi re-emerge as a Romantic poet, as the *author* «facing the inexorable reality of the survivor, who wishes for the possibility of a hero's return». ¹⁸ A consideration that could be defined as “journalistic”, but which

¹⁶ Text by Vincenzo Moschetti.

¹⁷ Aldo Rossi, *Dieses ist lange her / Ora questo è perduto*, 1975, Etching - aquatint, 26x35 cm.

¹⁸ “They (the drawings) represent Rossi the romantic poet, faced with the inexorable reality of the survivor, yearning for a return to the possibility of the hero.” Excerpt from Peter Eisenman from the catalogue to the American exhibition and transcribed in Aldo

the author-hero compares to a quote from Conrad's *Lord Jim*: «He had fallen from a height which he would never again be capable of climbing to», he would write in his twenty-sixth *quaderno*.

A physical alteration that is inextricably linked to the idea of *doing* architecture and to the imaginary of the real in which Ghiffa appears as a condition of estrangement, like a domestic world in which one enters and rushes in at the threshold of every room. These walls represent the need for keeping a distance from an increasingly disappointing humanity in which objects from faraway places converge, and in which every room, beginning from the great courtyard which opens on to the lake, represents a fixed *figure*, a precise narrative that is to be connected to the architecture of *recollection*.¹⁹

The old mill, built in the early 19th century, was observed several times by Rossi, who explored and studied the area between lakes Mergozzo and Maggiore; he will eventually transform it following a project that would take place through a series of layers. The general bone structure of the house was already established by the pre-existing construction which Rossi reinterprets with simplicity, in search of a new personal approach, turning every room into a *place*, piercing the walls along the shores of the lake in accordance with a new and original compositional layout. The distributive elements are defined by long corridors that reach the great living-room at the level of the entrance and on the upper floor – above the staircase – connect the rooms in a sequence that produces typological reflections based on a linear system of the «redundancy of simplicity». These are rooms that translate their essence from their Lombard-Milanese condition, as appendix and measure of it, in which cognitive elements of a *status symbol*²⁰ appear, and where the walls become perspectives from the inside in a *scientific* palimpsest that is ready to frame the melancholy lacustrine landscape. These images produce a condition of waiting, of desires and figures of a private life willingly made public, «ephemeral thoughts, openings, windows – precisely – from which to look at details».²¹ It is here that the double sense of the *Palladian education*²² emerges, in which the collection of fragments of time becomes the opportunity for reconstructing the old building, turning it into a new scenographic field, into the map of a new, altered reality. Every single room recomposes the fragments of a complex idea that guarantees the existence of the central space, that great living-room that becomes the compositional fulcrum of dwelling in its lexical link to the ancient. It is the memory of Loos, the reinterpretation of a part of the Mediterranean; the house as an infinite *machine à rêver* fulfills the wish for a life where nostalgia and affection remain safely hidden and in which a *Romanticism* appears that needs – in order to be visited – an atlas of the *flâneur*. This house holds in it social and formal spaces, and closes itself into an almost impenetrable shell that does

Rossi, *I quaderni* ..., Q/A, 26, 10 November 1979. Rossi dwells on the meaning of "yearning", which in Italian can be translated as "desiderio, brama".

¹⁹ Cf. Kurt W. Forster, "Aldo Rossi's Architecture of Recollection: The Silence of Things Repeated or Stated for Eternity" (©The Hyatt Foundation, 1990).

²⁰ It could be affirmed that "without Milan" Ghiffa would not exist. Ghiffa is a place for escaping from a world of stress, from disillusion, but is also the victory of a status symbol over all other things, it is the measure of the bourgeois living-room that reaches the blue of the lake.

²¹ Sara Marini, "L'architettura dell'autobiografia scientifica", *La Rivista di Engramma, la tradizione classica nella memoria occidentale*, n.°150 (October 2017), consulted on 6 December 2017. http://www.gramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3279

²² Aldo Rossi, "Un'educazione Palladiana" (Lecture given at the XXXVIII Course on Palladian architecture, Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, 18 September, 1996).

not announce to the passer-by the worlds it safeguards within. Along the street it indifferently blends in with the repetitive built environment.

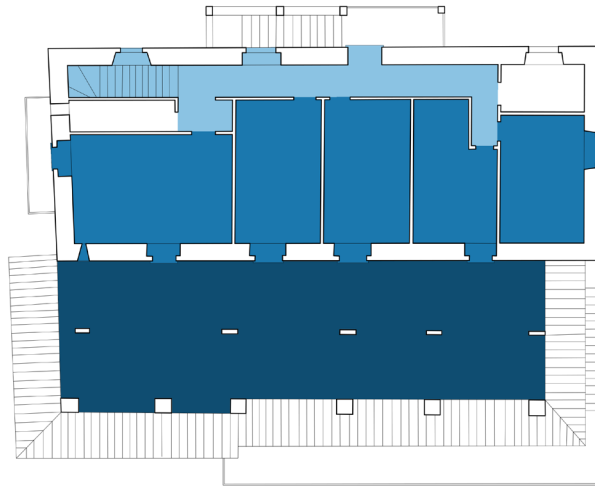


Figure 5: (Re)drawing of the 1st floor plan. Over time, this plan (at the same time the house in general) has undergone changes compared to the October 1992 design. The system of rooms connected to the corridor, the lake is downwards
Source: Original drawing private collection, (re)drawing by Vincenzo Moschetti (2018)

On the other hand, the domestic system is based on the compositional sequence of single cavities, of bodies found as if on an urban path, through which, once inside the small courtyard, one enters the house-space, composed of entrances, thresholds and rooms, of secret chambers where the theme of the overhang returns once more:

I ignore what the context of this assertion was, yet I find that a new dimension had been established: is it possible to live in rooms with an overhang? Is it possible for a project such as this to be represented beyond memory and experience? It is useless for me to declare that I have tried in vain to design this project or this room: I could, but it always stops at a void that cannot be represented. In many ways this void is both happiness and its absence [...] what I understand is that in every room there is a precipice [...] green plaster and overhangs offer us the only possible measure, in addition to the measuring tape, for determining a project.²³

Every single part of the architecture, every section of the plan is something that belongs to the world of the author, a difficult world, a written and drawn world, a biography that remains hidden, yet is declared through the colours of the walls in which one can get lost or grasp conditions while crossing the infinity of the corridors. Each of these parts is a compositional theme that returns to its domestic dimension, that goes back to being the inhabited house of a great atlas. The entire *decorum* of the fireplace in the living-room is unforgettable, it is the philological proposal based on a drawing by Vignola, re-elaborated in precious wood, in support of infinite objects that follow one another before gazes and the dust, the only true depository of the reality of every thing.

²³ Aldo Rossi, *Autobiografia Scientifica* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2009), 45-75.



Figure 6: Living-room with the decorum of the fire place (ground floor)
Source: © Cortilphoto, Laura Fantacuzzi and Maxime Galati-Fourcade (2014),
© Eredi Aldo Rossi, courtesy Fondazione Aldo Rossi

In these rooms Rossi transcribes a text that can be touched with the hands, or with the gaze, entrusting to the building an *aptic* view whose fiction prevails over its reality, and this reality at some point loses its sense, its contact: «the interior, where all sorts of things may happen, becomes the focus of our attention».²⁴

Through the various intensities and the elements of the architecture, the inexhaustible stories on paper become reality, tangible truth made of walls, signs through which one can move and experience the domestic space, where the passages from one environment to another are almost secret, never direct, but rather surprises hidden behind doors, white stairs protected by exotic objects, statues and icons: as it is along the streets in Latin *countries*. The niches still show the cabins on Elba, *shreds* of time, drawings on paper that become representations that can be touched with the hand. The lake is the *final* testing ground for the tensions and observations of a founding theory which matches the entire experience of the dreamed and pursued “project of a villa with interior”,²⁵ research of an incomplete destiny which will never truly find rest among the pages of the *quaderni*, among drawings and notes, mirror of an imagined and unforgiving villa.²⁶

The attempt is clear, the aim elusive, a memory that Rossi grafts on to the setting of Ghiffa, an architecture made of imprisoned spaces supported by a bone structure thanks to which the

²⁴ Diogo Seixas Lopes, “Puzzles Solved With the Heart: Aldo Rossi’s Polaroids” in CCA Montréal (website), 2011, Diogo Seixas Lopes contributed this text while visiting the CCA in 2011 as a participant in our Doctoral Students Programme, consulted on 21 September 2018, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/issues/25/a-history-of-references/56620/puzzles-solved-with-the-heart>.

²⁵ This theoretical project, originated in 1978 and never realised, is something that derives “from things and from memory”, as he wrote in the Autobiografia Scientifica.

²⁶ “Chère imagination, ce que j’aime surtout en toi, c’est que tu ne pardonnes pas”. Rossi quotes from André Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto* in Q/A, 2.

project develops through addenda, in which literature and architecture meet in a prose that feels like Chandler, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, maybe Joyce. The “villa with interior” is an eternal deposition, a proof that reappears and emerges in an approach that privileges the domestic space as narrative phenomenology through the juxtaposition of geographies which, determined by the individual rooms, evolve in an allegory of the world.



Figure 7: *Living-room on the lake*

Source: © Cortiliphoto, Laura Fantacuzzi and Maxime Galati-Fourcade (2014),
© Eredi Aldo Rossi, courtesy Fondazione Aldo Rossi

The maps of these landscapes unite in accordance with the idea that the villa presupposes «interiors which are infinite as labyrinths»,²⁷ and thus effectively appear the rooms in Ghiffa, whose interiors are places with *atavistic* atmospheres, cinematographic fragments, individual scripts. They are fragments and parts that compose a different whole, witnesses to the fact that there can be no metric criteria – in this house – that can affirm that the form may depend from the distribution, but rather how it may be organised following a *serial accumulation* of images. Only the living-room, a true bourgeois *salon* transferred from the city to the place of *loisir*, is permitted to open to the lacustrine narrative through the filter of the four large windows: elements and means of architecture through which architecture is retraced as in a play of mirrors. “Villa Vera” shows that circular feature that Rossi had made reference to already in 1964 and that almost thirty years later returns to the lake, making us almost feel like we are seeing the “Mother House” once again, and allowing us – passing through bodies – the possibility of hearing the same voices and of *being* in the same old *safe* rooms, in a time that is suspended by means of a still unknown domestic construction *à l’ancienne*.²⁸

²⁷ Aldo Rossi. Autobiografia 67.

²⁸ Cf. Francesco Moschini, “L’architetto ha un cuore antico”, *Rinascita*, n.°7 (1987): 20. On the occasion of the exhibition devoted to Aldo Rossi at the Accademia Albertina in Turin.

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