

# Architecture as a language that can bridge cultures

## learning from Rossi through Vandenhove.

*“No city ever lacked the sense of its own individuality” (Rossi, 1984).*

### introduction

This research addresses the problem of city fragmentation from the perspective of two domains. The first domain is architecture, regarding spatial fragmentation as the legacy of modernism and Rossi's theory of addressing the history and language of a city as a network of artifacts. The second domain focusses on socio-cultural aspects, addressing the absence of intercultural discourse between ethnic enclaves in Bressoux. Though the research approach to both domains differs, the first primarily addressing architectural theory and the second site analysis, theory and site research enforce each other frequently, corroborating findings and initiating new hypotheses.

### problem statement architectural domain

Since the early twentieth century, understanding the 'city' in order to determine how to design it, has been the focus of many literatures in urban theories. Thus making 'Urban architecture' - analysing and conceiving architecture as an urban phenomenon, a central theme in Western architecture. The focus of this theme however, has undergone a massive shift since the middle of the twentieth century, as the functionalism presented by the modernists of the 1920s and 1930s was challenged at CIAM 8, which had "The Core of the City" as its theme. Critique grew on the fragmented urban fabric, which was consequence of an idea regarding mass housing as the architectural substance of the city. And since the 1950s, architectural urban discourse changed trajectory onto themes involving "nourishing" the city on a more human scale (Claessens, 2006). An influential theorist of that time is Aldo Rossi, who in his book: "The Architecture of the City" studies the 'city' considering the urban form as a whole. The book speaks of architecture, not as a visible image of the city and the sum of its different architectures, but architecture as a construction of the city over time. This process of construction links the past and present and thus it addresses the ultimate and definitive fact in the life of the collective: the creation of the environment in which it lives. To Rossi, architecture is inseparable from life and society. People create architecture with an intention of aesthetic and the creation of better surrounding for life. This intention also goes with the creation of cities. With time, the city grows upon itself; it acquires a consciousness and memory. Though the scar of physical fragmentation, as well as social and economic fragmentation, is clearly visible in Liège, it does not need to define the consciousness and memory of the city. When looking at Liège through the eyes of Rossi, there's a clear individuality in the city, one that surpasses the term 'post-industrial city' as a function of the past, and focusses of the construction of the present. Though the past function and present memory are intertwined, this research choses to focus on the current state of Bressoux, investigating the position that elements give meaning to the city, making the ordinary become meaningful.

### problem statement socio-cultural domain

Undeniably, Bressoux is a multi-diverse neighborhood. Moroccans, Turks, Tunisians, Yezidi's, Armenians, Senegalese, Congolese, Kurds, Italians, Syrians and Roma have been a part of the melting pot of this industrial suburb of Liege since the sixties (van de Beek, 2019). Lured to Bressoux with the promise of starting a new life in this booming mining and metal industry region, they came to find, that the glory days of the nineteen century were no longer. Their arrival changed the demography of Bressoux completely, commencing the exodus of the original inhabitants (Tempelman, 2019). Today, Bressoux presents an isolated environment, fragmented by different ethnicities and religions. Sadly, its multi-diversity does not ensue from the "quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.), but rather hints at the "variety" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.) of ethnical groups, living in 'ethnic enclaves' in Bressoux, compartmentalizing the neighborhood. Though the exact geographical stretch of these 'ethnic enclaves' is unclear from the streetscape itself, as activity mostly takes place behind closed doors, their epicenters, can be mapped as a network of *meeting points*: shops, restaurants, and religious institutions present in the area. Just like the *primary elements* in the city, something that we will touch upon later, they are capable of accelerating the process of urbanization in city. In each of these places, we can observe a shared culture and language, a strong social network and a high degree of economic self-sufficiency, with businesses and services catering to the needs of the ethnic community. They also present a high degree of ethnic homogeneity, hinting to the assumption that there is no space or opportunity in Bressoux for 'ethnic enclaves' to interact resulting in further cultural fragmentation. It's important to note that cultural fragmentation is not always negative, and can also provide a sense of community and belonging for people within a given cultural group. However, when cultural fragmentation becomes too pronounced, it can lead to social and economic segregation, lack of understanding and mistrust between groups, and difficulty in creating a cohesive society. While there are many ways to address the absence of intercultural discourse in the fragmented cityscape of Bressoux, this research focusses on the importance of dialogue and interaction between different ethnic groups by presenting them with a commonality, not affiliated with culture, but with their "shared human condition" (Wimmer, 2008), their current place of living, their 'locus': a shared architectural language.

## research question

In this research paper, the theoretical argument about the 'City' as a definable system as developed by Aldo Rossi in his book: "The Architecture of the City", will be reviewed within the current multicultural context of Liège, in particular Bressoux. The research paper will answer the question: "How can architecture have a role in bridging the culturally fragmented neighborhood of Bressoux?". In order to give an answer to that question, we must first define the quality of Bressoux, outside of its function as a post-industrial city, using methods by Rossi and Vandenhove to define the collective memory of elements.

## design assignment

The design site is located on Liège, Avenue de la Croix-Rouge 268/270, and has entrances on both Avenue de la Croix-Rouge as Rue du Moulin. The plot consists of a currently unoccupied building and an empty space which total at approximately 3318 m2. The assignment is to make a design that is spatial, but predominantly determined by elements investigated in the research. The types of housing will be continued, while the option for a primary function will be investigated. The goal of the design is to start a new intercultural discourse, crossing cultures as well as crossing streets while keeping in mind the role the design could play in the network of urban artifacts.

## methodology

This study deals with two hypothesis by Rossi. The first, the hypothesis of the city as a man-made object built over time and retaining the traces of time, allows for a study of the construction of the city almost as an archeological site, as this seems to be the only practical method available for understanding specific urban artifacts whose historical aspect is predominant. By diving into the history of the idea of the city as defined by the collective memory of a set time, we can investigate the organization and subdivision of land as seen in the evolution of the urban area of Bressoux.

The second hypothesis, of the actual formation and structure of urban artifacts, is complementary to the first hypothesis and directly links to the idea that the city is a synthesis of a series of values, a whole of its parts, concerning a collective memory. Taking on the theory of permanences, as posited by both Marcel Poète and Pierre Lavedan, the construction – architecture - of the city will be studied through the knowledge of the past that we are still experiencing, constituting the terms of the present and the measures of the future. It is this knowledge that is the *raison d'être* of urban artifacts, and that constitutes their continuity. The persistence or permanence of an urban artifact, which is a result of its capacity to constitute the city, its history and art, its being and memory, can turn it into a monument. These monuments are signs of collective will as expressed through the principles of architecture which offer themselves as primary elements and thus as fixed points in the urban dynamic. They are propelling elements of development, but in origin urban artifacts, no more important in Rossi's theory than a simple dwelling. As so, this study will not focus on monuments, but on urban artifacts, however in order to fully understand the theory of permanences, it was necessary to touch upon this topic briefly.

There are two investigations that can shed light on the nature of urban artifacts in Bressoux as well as explain the relationship they have with the collective. The first is a study of urban morphology, presenting itself as the study of types of elements that cannot be further reduced, elements of a city as well as of an architecture. Type - being something that is permanent and complex, a logical principle that is prior to form and that constitutes it (Quatremere de Quincy) - should therefore be investigated before diving into the quality of the urban artifact itself. Rossi cautions against an explanation of urban artifacts in terms of function if the issue is to elucidate their structure and formation. However, he does note that classification based on function can contribute to an accurate classification of urban artifacts if the function constitutes an aspects of the general definition of the artifact for example is it does with dwelling. Thus we will be distinguishing between two principal artifacts found in the city, the dwelling and the primary elements.

The second investigation on urban artifacts, is a visual study regarding representational elements as urban artifacts. "Just as the walls, the columns, etc are the elements which compose buildings, so buildings are the elements which compose cities." – Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand wrote in his lessons at Ecole Polytechnique. Thus we could assume that "Buildings as moments", a position that was clear to architectural theorists in the Enlightenment, can be applied to both the level of the city as the level of the building. Such a study of elements, defining their meaning, locus, individuality and design, is an approach shown in the film "The Riddle of the Sphinx" by Jeff Cornelis, showing the oeuvre of Vandenhove not as buildings, but as a catalogue existing of essential components. The film shows the architectural language Vandenhove uses, structuring his architecture classically, like a text, almost like a poetic composition. He starts his architectural text with words, like plinth, architrave or column, the words make up sentences, the composition: symmetry, frontality, centrality. Combining all of it in an architectural whole by using stylistic principles, for example like a house or gateway does. As Violet le Duc admits, transposing a work of architecture from one place to another, could prove difficult, as the locus participates as a unique and physical space. However by trying out this exercise in Bressoux, returning to the value of images, the physical analysis of artifacts and the surroundings, this could lead to a pure and simple understanding of the value of the locus; an understanding of Bressoux as more than a post-industrial city. Through the means of film, Jeff Cornelis succeeds in bringing multiple senses together, enabling the viewer to

create their own perception of the component. As shown in the compendium of "A room with a View" adding action to a still frame engages the viewer with the urban context shown as they are let free for a personal perception of the element. As such, film could be used as a universal language, a vessel based solely on objective urban artifacts, that can speak to all cultures conveying different perceptions depending on the viewers culture. The purpose of creating this architectural language is twofold. Firstly, it will help to understand the 'city' of Bressoux as a "masterpiece, something that is substantiated in form and space, but understood in time, in its different moments. Where the unity of these parts is fundamentally supplied by history, by the city's memory and itself.". Secondly, the language itself can act as a tool to communicate between cultures, bridging the gap between them and thereby introducing a new intercultural discourse. Thus making the architectural language the method for both research and design.

## classifying findings

Following a theory by social geographer Jean Tricart, in which he states the social content of the city is the basis for reading it, this research is divided in three different scales: the scale of the entire city (i.e. Bressoux), considered as a group of districts; the scale of the district, consisting of a group of blocks with common characteristics; the scale of the street, including the build areas and the empty spaces surrounding it. Though Rossi admits that urban artifacts should be studied solely in terms of place, he does not agree with the assumption that places can be somehow explained on the basis of different scales, as that would imply urban artifacts change in some way as a result of their size. Taking both theories into account I will use these three scales not as a methods of analysis, showcasing changing relations based on changing scope, but purely to visualize different urban artifacts, without denying their parallel existence.

## reflection

The topic of this research directly relates to the studio topic of urban architecture, as it is a study into urban theories, presented by Aldo Rossi, but also Marcel Poète, Pierre Lavedan, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, Quatremere de Quincy, Charles Vandenhove and Jean Tricart (in order of appearance). The research is a critique on the use of the term post-industrial city as it acknowledges only the past function and thereby lacks in actual description of anything of the city. It tries to prove there are other ways of analyzing the city that will do it justice. Moreover it challenges the validity of spatial architecture, as opposed to architecture that is composed of elements, prevailing in Rossi's work.

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