

Embodied Time in the Urban Artifacts of Rome

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When history ends, memory begins.

--Peter Eisenman, "The Houses of Memory: The Texts of Analogy"

The educational value for the visiting American student studying in Italy, and in Rome in particular, resides in the *temporal dimension* of Italian architecture and urbanism. 'Time,' as commonly defined, is "a continuum which lacks spatial dimensions and in which events succeed one another from the past through the present to the future." A temporal dimension of a physical entity like 'the city' implies that time, paradoxically, embodies physical form. If, in this context, 'embodying' is making the intangible, tangible and perceptible, then "embodied time" is the representation of time within a spatial dimension, in this case, within the form of the city. Embodied time concretizes the history of the city within artifactual memory. This essay proposes a pedagogical structure for illustrating the embodied time within the urban artifacts of Rome.

(insert figure 1 here)

Fig. 1. San Nicola in Carcere, detail of northern wall

This pedagogy focuses on the artifacts of Rome that are the consequence of the evolutionary forces of urban civilization, instead of focusing on iconographic examples of architecture and urbanism produced within a specific moment in history. When students analyze the creative adaptive layering that produces the unique urban fabric of Rome, they can visualize the dimension of time embedded in the city. To comprehend urban history and memory, the visiting student must explore the embodied time through analytic representation. Because conventional modes of representation illustrate a building or urban space at a fixed point in time, the students are required to devise new graphic means to depict an artifact's temporality. The American student develops a critical insight into the urban artifacts of Rome by engaging the embodied time through graphic exploration.

Representing Time: A Pedagogy

Contact with the already-built expands the students' awareness of the multiplicity and availability of formal languages in architecture...Such ideas can form a good introduction to the uses of rhetorical devices that can increase future architects' knowledge of their techniques.

--Rodolfo Machado, "Old buildings as Palimpsest"

The historic center of Rome immediately impresses the American visitor with its age. Such an impression results from the quality of urban space and the city's monuments. The visitor sees that the public spaces are generated by pedestrian habit and ritual, instead of automotive efficiency. Unlike a majority of American cities, Rome's urban form has a direct correspondence between the figural public space and the solid built fabric that defines it. Similarly, there is a clear distinction between the city's monuments, such as churches or civic buildings, and the majority of the urban fabric that is consistently built to no more than five or six stories tall. Most unique to Rome, however, are the urban artifacts that reveal the layers of their own evolution, artifacts that embody time.

The pedagogy devoted to artifacts that embody time is also unique. Unlike a study of celebrated architectural and urban precedents, there is no single author, period, or style to provide a pedagogical framework. A study of embodied time, therefore, requires a new means of analysis. I conducted a seminar for American students at the Pennsylvania State University Rome Program that examined the temporal dimension of the city. The students analyzed three sites in close proximity to each other: San Nicola in Carcere, the Theater of Marcellus, and the Porticus of Octavia. The first phase of our investigation documented the composite artifacts in their current state. The second phase explored representational means to unravel the temporal dimension of the artifacts.

(insert figure 2 here)

Fig. 2. San Nicola in Carcere, exploded axonometric of the west facade

San Nicola in Carcere, for example, has elements dating from ancient Rome, medieval Rome, Baroque Rome, and twentieth-century Rome (figure 1). The image and the space of this building were formed over long periods of time. It is a composite of multiple tectonic systems, such as solid marble columns and entablatures, unit masonry walls, and cut stone revetment. I hesitate to identify such conglomerate artifacts as ‘architecture’ or ‘urban design’ because they evolved without one particular author or ideology. These artifacts gather the traces of the city’s long history and inscribe them onto the city’s own form. One student used exploded-axonometric drawings to pull apart the constituent fragments in chronological order (figure 2). The oldest Roman pieces are at the top of the drawing, and the lowest figure represents a twentieth-century archeological dig that reveals more ancient Roman ruins. This drawing not only illustrates the tectonically different architectures that occupy the same space of the facade, but also it illustrates the evolution of the form over time. This student then diagrammatically reconstructs the various facades that are implied simultaneously in the front facade of the church (figures 3). This series of hypothetical facades of San Nicola in Carcere identifies at least three coexistent facades without a hierarchy of one over the other.

(insert figure 3)

Fig. 3. San Nicola in Carcere, hypothetical reconstruction of multiple facades

I identify two categories of urban artifacts in Rome that embody time: the *diachronic* and the *synchronic*. I rely on the succinct definitions of these terms in Roland Barthes’ 1964 seminal essay, “The Structuralist Activity.” Here, Barthes provides an analytic methodology and vocabulary derived from structuralist linguistic theory and analysis. My application of these concepts in relation to urban artifacts, however, is grounded in a post-structuralist context in which the city functions as a fluid text open to multiple interpretations. A pedagogy which employs structuralist analytic rigor, as well as post-structural concepts of textual instability and multiple coexisting interpretations counters the traditional focus on precedents created at one particular historical period of time. This theoretical framework, combined with the graphic analysis, creates a critical lens through which the American student apprehends Rome.

Diachronic Rome: The Temporal City

The study of history seems to offer the best verification of certain hypotheses about the city, for the city is in itself a repository of history.

--Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*

Rome is called the 'Eternal City' partly due to its ability to persist urbanistically through centuries of great social and political transformation. This infinite trajectory of stories from the past to the present is accumulated within the city's physical form. One can infer the city's history from its urban artifacts like a detective assembling clues and making connections from the available physical evidence. Diachronic artifacts reveal their complete chronological development without obliterating any of the original or subsequent iterations. The duration of the evolutionary process is manifest: all the clues remain intact.

I. The most common type of diachronic artifact is *aggregatory*: the accumulation of subsequent structures that attach to an original artifact. The most grand example of this is Saint Peter's Basilica. The formal planning changed with successive architects from Bramante to Raphael, from Peruzzi to Michelangelo, and finally from Maderno to Bernini. A succinct history shows how Bramante's original centralized Greek-cross plan was greatly augmented by Michelangelo, and ultimately transformed into a processional Latin-cross plan first proposed by Raphael, and later manifested under Maderno. Bernini conveyed the grandeur of the Basilica in a majestic urban space by adding the embracing arms of the Piazza of Saint Peter's. Most recently, the Fascist government carved out the Via della Conciliazione from a dense urban fabric to create an axial connection between the piazza and Castel Sant' Angelo. Each generation attaches its own addition to the family of forms, an addition that at once connects to the original church and establishes its own autonomous presence. All the subsequent elements are visible without obfuscating their antecedents. At Saint Peter's, time is embodied in a legible timeline of sequential architectural and urban events.

II. Another type of diachronic artifact is *sedimentary*: one or several buildings stacked on top of an existing building like geological strata. The most explicit example of this is the Church of San Clemente. Here, a medieval church was constructed on top of an early Christian church. This church, in turn, sits atop an ancient Roman temple. Each layer uses the building below as both a structural and spatial foundation. For the efficiency of construction, each new layer repeats the structural pattern of the building below to insure structural continuity of the loads down to the ultimate "ground level." The spaces between these structural lines, therefore, translate up through each new layer as well: each layer mimics the primary spatial zones of the one below. This superimposition of form and space acts like DNA predetermining each generational layer. Even the 'program,' or use, of these spaces essentially remains consistent through time: a gathering place to practice sacred rites. The embodied time within the assemblage of layers at San Clemente can be experienced by descending the stairway that connects one layer to another. The descent in elevation corresponds to a further recession into time. The time it takes for the visitor to experience all the various levels mirrors the time it takes for the process of sedimentation.

III. A variation of a sedimentary artifact is a diachronic *template*. Here, the profile of an original artifact persists in form only in the subsequent construction; it lacks spatial or tectonic continuity. The Piazza Navona, for example, is created by building a dense urban fabric directly on top of the Roman circus. The Roman ruin acts as the foundation for the later urban development. The long and apsidal profile of the Roman circus projects through to the new layer, that is, it projects through time, to create the present configuration of the piazza. The tectonic regularity of the Roman underpinning, however, does not persist in the form of the present fabric. The rational Roman planning has in time given way to a non-rational accretion of distinct yet contiguous buildings. What translates from ancient Rome to the present is just the trace of the original form. Although the original artifact is not visible, time is embodied in the persistence of its silhouette.

Synchronic Rome: Time Without Duration

The town is not really like a natural phenomenon. It is an artefact--an artefact of a curious kind, compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled. If it related to physiology at all, it is more like a dream than anything else.

--Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town*

Up until now, I have been describing embodied time by focusing on the urban artifacts of Rome that reveal all the iterations of form and the corresponding layers of their history. There is, however, an alternative type of evolutionary form that suppresses duration, but still signifies time. The difference regarding time *with* or *without* duration is the difference between history and memory. A history, whether experienced or interpreted, is the systematic compilation of disparate yet related events. An urban history is a collective narrative wedded to a particular place. Memory, on the other hand, is the collection of events which can be recalled in any order imaginable. While histories try to relate the duration between events, memory can superimpose any past event onto any other. An urban memory, therefore, can simultaneously include all past events related to a particular place. Artifacts that evoke an urban memory instead of an urban history are synchronic artifacts.

I. One type of synchronic artifact is *coexistent architectures*: the apparent coexistence of two or more buildings within the same space at the same time. As I have already observed, the church of San Nicola in Carcere is a composite of architectural fragments, each with its own constructional logic (figure 1). The different tectonic systems signify the era of their making: the marble columns and entablature are ancient Roman, the masonry walls and tower are medieval, the front facade and interior modifications are Baroque, and the archeological site at the entry was created in the twentieth century. Although the process of intertwining these elements occurred over time, the resultant edifice erases the duration between the related events of construction. The close juxtaposition of architectural detail from the span of history compresses the temporal dimension into the present.

II. Synchronic artifacts possess several diachronic characteristics at the same time. Considering still San Nicola in Carcere, the viewer can identify both aggregation and a template. Solid masonry infill was added between the original Roman columns. Instead of adding more usable space as typified by diachronic aggregation, however, San Nicola in Carcere appropriates the existing Roman temple as a spatial skeleton. Similar to a diachronic template, the subsequent church form mimics the profile of the original form. What is different in the synchronic version of a template is that the formal mirroring occurs in the vertical dimension as well as in plan. Not only does the footprint of the Roman temple translate to the church, but also the vertical surfaces are dictated by the pre-existing structure. Although the program of the pagan temple is displaced by a Christian church, the interior space of the church retains a similar proportion and dimension to its Roman predecessor. The open and extroverted temple colonnade becomes the framework for the enclosing wall of an introverted sanctuary.

The synchronic artifact records the passage of time by exposing the interwoven array of fragments created at different periods of time. But, as I have already mentioned, synchronic time has no duration, so the synchronic artifact sends conflicting temporal signals. In San Nicola in Carcere, all the different tectonic and temporal elements are incorporated into the exterior wall, and therefore, they become an integral part of the image of the building. There are enough clues to reconstruct two or more buildings in the mind's eye. As is depicted in the exploded axonometric drawing of the front facade, no one figure is dominant, so the viewer's imagination oscillates between possible imaginary reconstructions of each set of fragments (figure 3). As if in a dream, the viewer assembles the disparate recollections into a cohesive yet surreal scene.

(insert figure 4 here)

Fig. 4. The Theater of Marcellus

III. The Theater of Marcellus intertwines all of the diachronic scenarios into its present form to create a synchronic artifact (figure 4). The program for the Theater of Marcellus and its interior spatial logic changes radically over time. Simply by recounting the history of uses for this site, one conjures up a plethora of spatial types. The original Roman theater was pillaged in the fourth century for the restoration of the nearby Ponte Cestio. In the Middle Ages, the theater is fortified as a stronghold, in the sixteenth century it is transformed into a palazzo, and currently, it serves as a multi-family apartment building. By superimposing new architectural programs onto the site and aggregating new forms to house them, The Theater of Marcellus transforms from a public institution for all the citizens of ancient Rome to separate and private dwellings for an elite few.

(insert figure 5 here)

Fig. 5. Layered urban plan of the area surrounding the Jewish Ghetto

The sedimentary stacking of the Theater of Marcellus is clearly evident when viewing its elevation. Unlike San Clemente, the layers are visible above ground in a single glance. The arches of the ancient theater form the base of this composite image. A portion of the outermost concentric wall remains intact, and much of the interior construction and spatial logic of the theater is exposed. Incongruous stucco walls from the medieval era topped by pitched roofs spring from the Roman structure. As in a diachronic template, the stucco walls conform to the profile of the plan configuration of the theater below. The interior logic of the medieval addition, however, disregards that of the Roman underpinning. The seam between the two tectonic types is not always clear. At points, Roman masonry and arches extend well up into the stucco walls. Roman arched openings sit adjacent medieval puncture-windows. Some arches are left visible but filled-in with a stucco wall and a puncture-window placed within that. This blending of the layers in the vertical surfaces renders the legibility of history ambiguous. The Theater of Marcellus embodies time with no chronological distance between temporal references; it is synchronic.

(insert figure 6 here)

Fig. 6. Urban space adjacent the Porticus of Octavia

VI. Buildings composed of recycled architectural components, such as columns, capitals, and cornices, are also synchronic artifacts: they are a *constructed archeology*. Like any archeological artifact, the found or pilfered object recalls its original cultural context. Placed into a new context, these artifacts construct dual meanings. Objects from differing histories can be juxtaposed without regard to their original chronological order or cultural connotation. One example of constructed archeology is the basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere. The nave is constructed with twenty-one large ancient columns from different Roman buildings. The columns still perform their primary structural role in the new location, that is, they support the roof above. There are, however, great idiosyncrasies in the details of each column. Not all columns are the same height, so the bases or capitals are adjusted to fit the new context. Also, the 'rhetorical content' of the columns does not match; some are Doric, some Ionic, and some are unidentified variations of the classical orders. The dislocated artifacts are arranged in a rational architectural rhythm like soldiers in a row, but they are conspicuously wearing different rhetorical armor.

The relative temporality and the cultural significance of the objects is usurped by placing them together. Once again, historic continuity gives way to mnemonic perversity.

Representing Rome: A Critique

The idea of history as the structure of urban artifacts is affirmed by the continuities that exist in the deepest layers of urban structure, where certain fundamental characteristics that are common to the entire urban dynamic can be seen.

--Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*

Tourist maps of Rome isolate the major monuments of the city to reinforce their cultural hierarchy over the rest of the urban fabric. *Le Piante di Roma*, a collection of cartographic representations of Rome through history, shows that each epoch focuses on the monuments that are most important to that time. Prime examples are the seventeenth-century pilgrimage maps that show nothing more than the major churches and the obelisks erected by Pope Sixtus V that help direct the pilgrims toward the primary cathedrals of Rome. The focus of these documents on the major monuments connotes a cultural hegemony of the institutions represented. The post-structuralist lens, on the other hand, is inclusive: it captures the continuum of all urban histories. The contemporary reading of the city forces one to confront the past, the present, and a possible future simultaneously.

The representation of the post-structuralist city is also multi-focal. Urban space that embodies time, for example, would be impossible to represent using conventional figure/ground drawings. The urban plan drawing of the area surrounding the Jewish Ghetto superimposes the traces of urban patterns accumulated through history (figure 5). A black-versus-white drawing would inadequately represent the physical and temporal layering of this district. By recording the patterns of the synchronic city with a graphic method that does not obscure any previous layer, this drawing is a critique of the two-dimensional figure/ground so often applied to urban representation. An alternative to representing urban space in plan is to represent it in elevation. The drawing of the urban space adjacent the Porticus of Octavia focuses on the assemblage of vertical surfaces (figure 6). These drawings simulate the perception of walking through the space by combining elevation projections along the path of travel. The thirty-degree projections combine to make a sixty-degree cone-of-vision. These drawings map the viewer's perception of the urban space as yet another critique of more conventional planimetric representations of urban form.

(insert figure 7 here)

Fig. 7. Porticus of Octavia, series of the elevation

Other students used a series of images to reconstruct the chronological sequence that produced the urban artifacts that embody time. The sequence of drawings of the elevation of the Porticus of Octavia first shows the existing condition, then it isolates just the existing ancient Roman elements, and culminates with a speculation of the original Porticus based on the present architectural evidence (figure 7). The sequence of images reverses the effect of time on the Porticus. Another strategy for representing time uses multiple sections that rotate around the same corner detail of the Porticus, and then splices them together (figure 8). The sequential plans at the bottom of this drawing describe the relative rotation of the sections. The sections at once imply a duration by moving around the corner, but then compress that sequence into one synchronic image. Thus, the mode of representation mimics the effect of time on this urban artifact.

(insert figure 8 here)

Fig. 8. Porticus of Octavia, rotating series of sections

As a pedagogical and theoretical alternative, I propose that looking at Rome through the lens of embodied time explodes the conventional hierarchy by challenging the representation of the city as a fixed entity. The city of embodied time is the city in flux, yet the evolving city is paradoxically apparent in fixed form. Diachronic layering in the urban artifacts reminds us that not only did the city consistently transform throughout its history, but also that it will continue to do so in the future. Furthermore, synchronic artifacts suggest that the city does not necessarily evolve in a linear chronology. What is invisible today may reappear tomorrow. For the perceptive viewer, the past actively participates in the city's present.

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Credits:

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