

Measure/out of measure. Four renderings of time

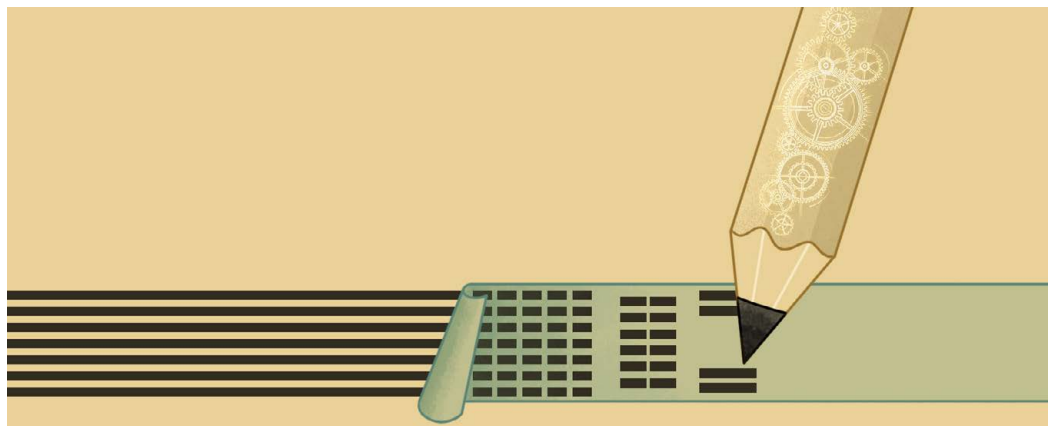
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Abstract

The increasingly sophisticated and complex methods for measuring space in the design field seem to divert attention from another dimension: time, which remains an out-of-measure element despite the technological advances. This contribution draws attention to four solutions adopted in different ages and cultural contexts to represent and measure with images a transcendent element like time. Piranesi's admiration for Roman antiquities brings him to preserve their memory by crafting drawings that show the meticulousness of the archaeologist, the collector's enthusiasm for ancient finds, and the passionate observer of a grandiose past: the measure of time becomes real in the immediacy of representation. For Gandy, a visionary artist, the present and the future coincide. The beginning and end of the project are two aspects that both evoke deep emotions, having the same rhythm as human life. Rossi finds his way to exorcise the end by recreating with memory the images of past experiences to conceive new projects, in a circular motion beyond any measure. *Superstudio* tempers its radical critique when the Continuous Monument encounters monuments of the past: its unstoppable journey through space seems to pause for a moment of reflection on time. In all these cases, a significant element always appears: the personal evaluation of time that cannot overlook the existential factor, as human experience remains the only possible measure.

Keywords

image, design, monument, decay, memory



The Timelines. Drawing
by the author.

Introduction

"L'architettura tenta i problemi esistenziali e metafisici del tempo più che quelli cartesiani dello spazio" (Architecture attempts the existential and metaphysical problems of time more than the Cartesian problems of space [1]) [Natalini 1982, p. 8].

The increasingly sophisticated and complex methods for measuring space in the design field seem to divert attention from another less-known and, above all, less 'thought about' dimension of representation: the trace of time, which remains an immeasurable factor despite technological progress. The Italian word "dis-misura" is much more meaningful than the English term "out of measure": it refers to the etymological meaning of "dis," indicating not excess, something immeasurable, but an anomaly, something that deviates from the norm. Time, an inescapable and overpowering element of measurement in everyday life, becomes an imponderable factor in the life of architecture, remaining a silent presence hidden among things, as a memory of the past and uncertainty about the future.

Four thoughts by Adolfo Natalini have been chosen as the guiding thread for a brief investigation into the "out of measure" of time. Each thought is connected to a possible solution adopted by four different personalities in different ages, who share a critique of contemporary architecture and an attention to the past as a determining factor in envisioning the future. Even in the uniqueness of each historical and cultural context, a significant element always appears: the personal evaluation that cannot overlook the existential factor which remains the only possible measure.

Piranesi

"Sono ossessionato dal tempo e dalla memoria e dalle tracce che questi lasciano sugli oggetti e sui luoghi" (I am obsessed with time, memory, and the traces they leave on objects and places [2]) [Natalini 1982, p. 8].

In the Age of Enlightenment, Giovanni Battista Piranesi captures the darker side of ancient Rome, seemingly destined for oblivion. He breathes new life into it through his prints, ensuring that a memory of its beauty may survive despite the ruins of time. The monuments stand out for the extraordinary visual relief they offer, conveyed through the unconventional use of impressive perspectives. Piranesi aimed to preserve, at least in graphical representation, the invaluable heritage of Etruscan and Roman culture, which he considered superior to that of the Greeks. His figurative language had no precedents, merging pictorial effects with the spatial dynamics of the stage design tradition.

Piranesi's prints combine archaeological accuracy with a deep knowledge of architecture and construction materials. Ancient monuments are depicted in minute detail, and the atmosphere of decay is evocatively rendered through the skillful use of light and the palpable sense of silence. The observers can grasp the measure of time just through sight, ideally placing their hand on the corroded walls covered with moss and vegetation—no longer intact yet still majestic signs of a civilization now distant in memory. The materials, marble, stone, brick, are still perceptible in their concrete essence, and their fragments scattered on the ground evoke centuries of abandonment and the transience of human existence [Wilton-Ely 1984, pp. 58-80].

Piranesi's unmistakable characters, perhaps archaeologists, wander among the ruins. In contrast to the immobility of the place, they appear seized by a feverish agitation, as protagonists of a strong emotion. They hold poles in their hands, not in the act of measuring, but examining the places as if struggling to establish a connection between past and present (fig. 1). Every traditional measure seems impossible. Past and present have a meeting point only in the observer's eye.

Fig. 1. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Arch of Galienus*, ca. 1748. Etching. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image in the public domain.



Gandy

"Ora m' interessa solo un'architettura che sia capace di superare (dopo averli integrati e risolti) i problemi della 'firmitas, venustas, stabilitas' per incidere sul tempo" (Now I am only interested in an architecture that is capable of surpassing (after having integrated and resolved them) the problems of *'firmitas, venustas, stabilitas'* to leave an imprint on time" [3]) [Natalini 1982, p. 8].

The Bank of England, a vast and intricate complex of buildings, was built in London between 1790 and 1827 according to the design of John Soane. The final drawings of his works were made by Joseph Gandy, the most brilliant illustrator in England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. His watercolors were a major attraction at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy, even though only Soane's name appeared. Gandy shared Soane's admiration for Roman magnificence and an inclination towards the style and imagery of Piranesi. In Gandy's perspectives, visual effects of indeterminate vastness and grandiosity were predominant, where chiaroscuro played a key role in creating a mysterious atmosphere. Unlike Piranesi, Gandy had the newly erected Bank buildings before him, yet the issue of the passage of time was already felt as unavoidable.

Gandy's distinctive feature of transforming architectural representations into images of future ruins was linked to Soane's speculations on the decline and destruction of human achievements [Soane 1929]. The theme of ruin and death was a topic in the art and romantic literature of that time and was closely connected to the ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful expressed by Edmund Burke [Burke 2004].

The first drawing shows the hall that housed the Bank Stock Exchange, the Rotunda, built as a secular Pantheon. The light illuminates the walls of this interior utterly devoid of people, producing a mystical atmosphere. The Rotunda is represented as an empty and silent shell, while it should contain one of the busiest wards of the Bank. The onlooker expects to see people (employees and clients) moving in and out, whispering confusedly and looking at the clock on the wall since time is a primary element in making money. Instead, the hall looks like an inhabited temple where the presence of people is occasional and transient (fig. 2). Gandy crafted this drawing just after the building was completed.

In the meantime he had already envisioned the Rotunda as a superb ruin of the past. In this second representation, made just a week after the first one, the Rotunda has become an emblematic structure where time has effaced all reasons for existence (fig 3). Lukacher reports that in presenting this visionary image, more than thirty years later, Soane quoted a passage from Shakespeare: "The cloud-cap't towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve" [Shakespeare, lines

1883-1885], and adds as a comment: “in pristine condition [...] the archway of the central passage contained a clock; in the future ruin, time itself has been torn from the building, the image dramatizing its own temporal disorder” [Lukacher 1987, p. 63]. Looking closely at the picture, it can be observed that the ruins host some characters: they could be tramps, more likely treasure hunters who are searching unhurried for something of value. Their tiny silhouettes make the wrecked building appear even more imposing. The caryatids around the lantern dome look down at the tramps with indifferent eyes, as ever. This vision surprisingly anticipates the historical fate of the bank erected by Soane: less than a century later, most of it, including the Rotunda, was destined for demolition. Beginning and end annul every temporal space. One can only acknowledge the vulnerability of architecture as a living structure destined for an ineluctable end.

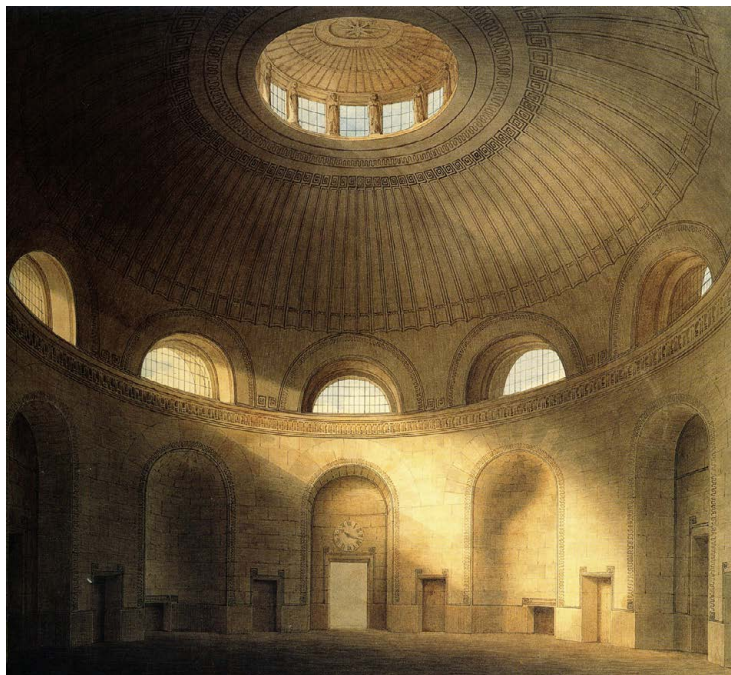


Fig. 2. John Soane, Joseph Gandy, *Bank of England, Rotunda*, 1798, watercolour on paper. Sir John Soane's Museum, London, <https://www.soane.org/> (accessed 19 July 2024). Courtesy of the Trustees.



Fig. 3. John Soane, Joseph Gandy, *Architectural Ruins-a vision*, 1798, watercolour on paper. Sir John Soane's Museum, London <https://www.soane.org/> (accessed 19 July 2024). Courtesy of the Trustees.

Rossi

"Un'architettura della memoria, come consapevolezza delle storie di tutti coloro che ci hanno preceduti e che ci seguiranno e che continuano a starci intorno, affollando la nostra disperata solitudine" (An architecture of memory, as an awareness of the stories of all those who have preceded us and those who will follow us and who continue to surround us, crowding our desperate loneliness [4]) [Natalini 1982, p. 8].

Aldo Rossi recognizes in place and time the primal conditions of architecture. Time is a motif obsessively recurring and subtly unsettling. "The dual sense of time, atmospheric and chronological, presides over every construction; this dual sense of energy is what I now clearly see in architecture, as I could see it in other techniques or arts" [Rossi 2009, p. 18]. In Rossi's thinking, weather is one of the natural unpredictable elements that can alter the perception of an object, like light, shadows, fog, but it does not impact existence as time does, leaving deep traces in stones smoothed and worn by the passage of generations of people. Time in this case is not just light or shadow or aging of things but becomes a corrosive and destructive substance. "It is difficult for me to compare myself with my contemporaries because I increasingly feel the difference of place and time" [Rossi 2009, p. 79]. Architecture and the city become, in his thinking, metaphors for human existence, scenarios in which the events of man unfold, just as people and their daily life become an image of architecture in a continuous and reciprocal exchange of roles. Each place is unique precisely to the extent that it possesses affinities or analogies with other places: real and fantastical landscapes, cabins, small houses, huts, courtyards, confessionals, one life within another. The world of architecture remains "in silent suspension between the dimensions of geography and history: geography because it constitutes a 'found world' and a second nature; history because it is inevitably generated by time and intricately tied to the tensions of human life" [Poletti 2011, p. 129].

To ward off the ultimate moment beyond which the principle of energy conservation gives way to conclusive and irreversible disintegration, Rossi grapples with the complex web of existential motions that allow a form of survival. He finds in memory and in the analogy of things an anchor of salvation against the passage of time. For him, the theater is the machine of memory and analogy par excellence. It does not represent a place but many places, it does not represent the passing of time but the instant that freezes immutable, the same temporal suspension and sense of anticipation present in the images of De Chirico, Sironi, and Hopper.

"I particularly love empty theaters, with a few lights on; at most, the partial rehearsals where voices repeat the same line, break it, resume it, remaining on this side of the action. Even in projects, repetition, collage, the shifting of an element from this to that composition always puts us in front of another project that we would like to do but is also a memory of something else" [Rossi 2009, p. 42]. "I love the beginning and the end of things: but perhaps especially the things that break and reassemble" [Rossi 2009, p. 117]. Rossi's drawings are a poetics of the fragment, of many fragments dialoguing in anticipation of reunification. The loving attention to broken things is the same that Piranesi had for ruins, fragments of lost antiquity. The magic of every beginning has a generative function, the sought and thought repetition and analogy exorcise the work of time.

Time is captured in the human dimension of memory. Memory signifies continuity, can be recovered, lost, and recovered again, generates circularity, indicates a beginning and denies the possibility of an end.

Superstudio

"Un'architettura del tempo, capace di dilatare col forcipe della bellezza la durata limitata dei nostri atti e delle nostre vite; che sia capace di modificare le scansioni meccaniche del tempo fino a contrastarne la freccia irresistibile" (An architecture of time, capable of dilating, with the forceps of beauty, the limited duration of our actions and our lives; one that can modify

the mechanical ticking of time to the point of contrasting its irresistible arrow [5]) [Natalini 1982, p. 8]. In the late 1960s, the visionary drawings of *Superstudio* became part of their critical revision of Modern Movement. Born as a subversive proposal during a competition with the theme "Architecture and Freedom," the Continuous Monument is a colossal reflective monolith, shaped like a highway viaduct, which appropriates urban and natural spaces with unstoppable force and stands present, enigmatic and silent, in Italian, European, and American panoramas. The regular and impenetrable geometry of its form invests space with a new rational order but also alludes to the cycles of history and prehistory, much like the stone monoliths arranged as trilithons. The initial concept of the viaduct as infrastructure for circulation loses any vital substance and becomes the quintessence of fixity; there is nothing that alludes "to some movement of energetic fluids, people, cars, or time" [Gargiani, Lampariello 2019, p. 32]. The lack of passage of time paradoxically denies to time itself, from its genesis, the traditional characteristic of a monument: it is neither a sign of the past nor a representation of the future. Its colossal appearance is negated by the absence of materiality and by the fragility of its surface, a mirrored enclosure, proclaiming its ephemeral essence, just as every form of dwelling on Earth is transitory. For some images, *Superstudio* uses the word "restoration," which cannot be understood in a traditional sense but as the encounter of the Continuous Monument with other famous monuments, such as the *Loggia* of the Caryatids on the Acropolis or Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza. In these cases, the Monument seems to lose its cold inconsistency to turn "a passionate embrace to its progenitors"; the monolith "envelops them to reveal the unique reason that substantiates them beyond differences in ages, culture, or techniques" [Gargiani, Lampariello 2019, p. 65]. *Superstudio's* endeavor is an extreme attempt to measure time between an architecture of the past, which has become an icon, and an architecture of the present still in search of an identity.

Conclusions

The famous passage by Aldo Rossi about the so-called Venetian column by Filarete is a personal reflection that becomes universal, addressing the measure of time as an existential journey for both man and human creation. The column, for Rossi, is both beginning and end, perceived as the survival of the past as an "insert or relic of time." When randomly incorporated into an inhabited building, it becomes the "symbol of architecture devoured by the life that surrounds it." As an element irreversibly separated from its original context, it remains a "possible fragment of a thousand other constructions." Finally, as a meeting point between man and history, it evokes encounters with other people lost in time, becoming a "fragment of ourselves" [Rossi 2009, pp. 27-28]. This passage brings to my mind, by analogy, the relics of time scattered, often hidden, in the medieval center of Genova, traces of the past that renew their centuries-old life every day (figs. 4, 5).



Fig. 4. Genova, Via di San Bernardo, Loggia of XII century with Renaissance portal, now reused as a shop. Image by the author.



Fig. 5. Genova, Via Luccoli, Loggia of XII century. The loggia has undergone multiple restorations and houses restaurants and shops. Image by the author.

Notes

[1] Translation by the author.

[2] Translation by the author.

[3] Translation by the author.

[4] Translation by the author.

[5] Translation by the author.

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