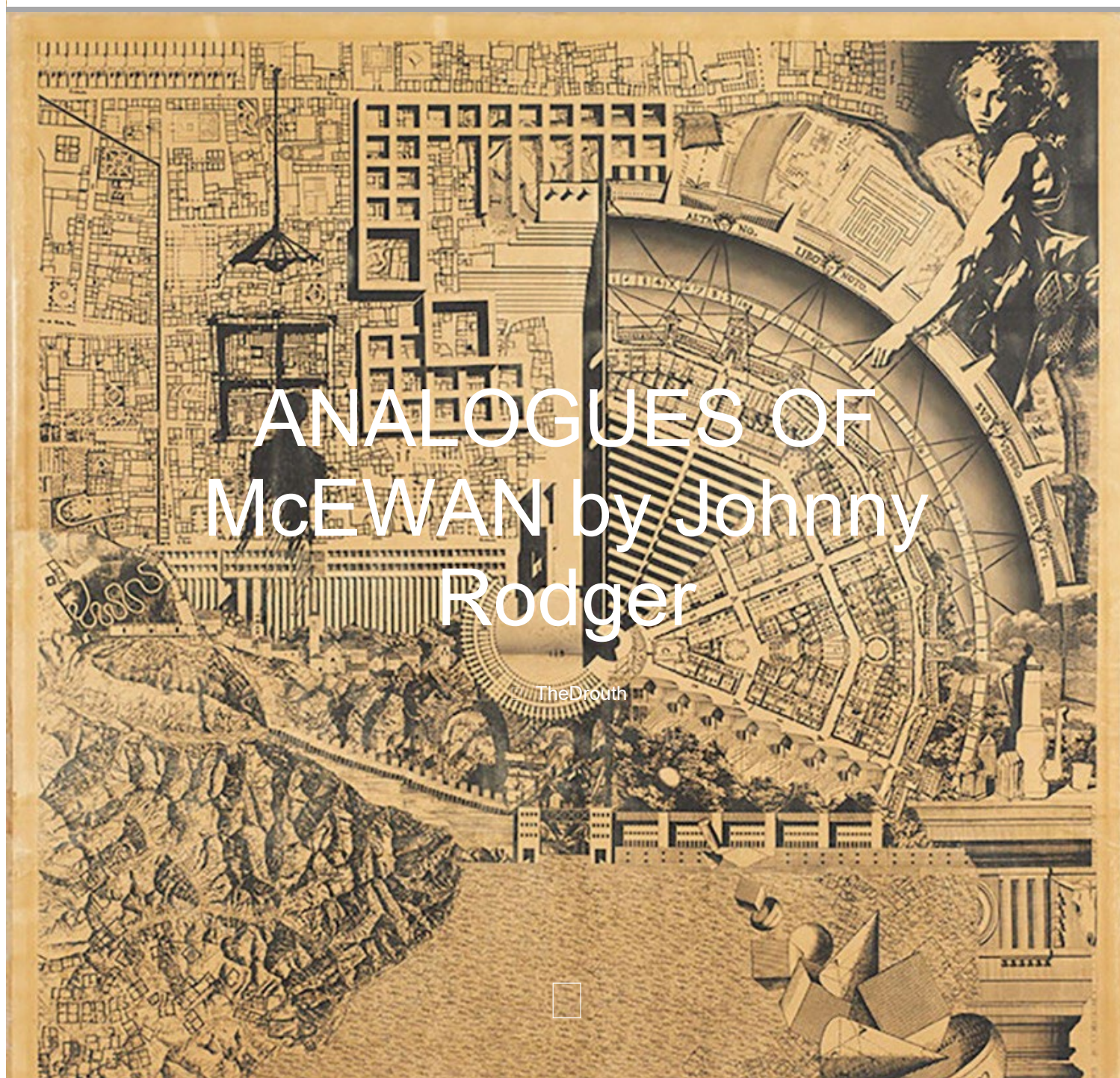




THE DROUTH

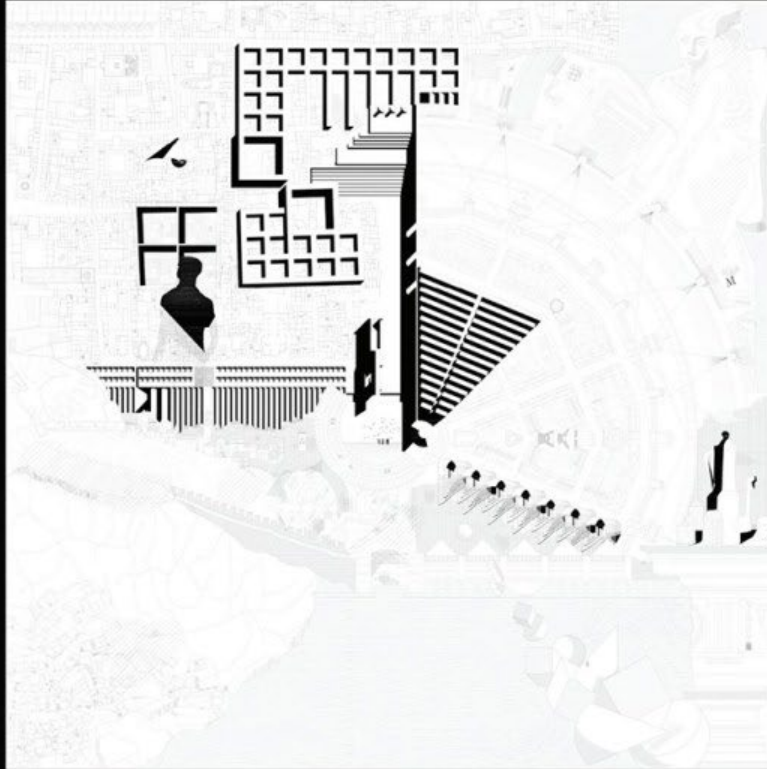


The recent opening of the exhibition of drawings 'Tracing Rossi' at the Stallan Brand studio gallery in Glasgow offered an opportunity to examine author Cameron McEwan's in-depth published study of the influential architect Aldo Rossi (1931-97). Via discussion of a relatively obscure and neglected project by Rossi, the book *Analogical City* makes weighty claims for architecture as a poetic, political and above all, critical practice. *Johnny Rodger reviews.*

In his published philosophical notebooks (*Zibaldone*), the great 19th century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi wrote how ‘truly wonderful’ it is that ‘one of the most northerly countries in Europe’ (Scotland) finds the culture ‘of one of the most southern’ (Italy) to be so ‘natural, adaptable and appropriate’ to its own. That extraordinary congeniality seems, furthermore, to have continued down to our day, if the evidence of Cameron McEwan’s work *The Analogical City* be taken into account. For it is not the least *simpatico* aspect of McEwan’s patient and close-read study that he adapts the arcane ideas, philosophy and practice of Italian architect Aldo Rossi with such a natural appropriateness for the non-Italian reader.

Never was the cliché ‘labour of love’ more apt. It is clear that McEwan brings a devotion much stronger than mere affection to bear in his detailed awareness, his sympathetic engagement, and his exposition of the key historic features of Italian cities and towns – Rome, Venice, Milan and many others – and the significance of Rossi’s work on and with them. Indeed, this book is almost Proustian in its attempt to spin from the heart an infinite tissue of preliminaries, contexts, understandings, interpretations and explanations in the quest for a love-interest which seems, ultimately, in turn, to be of elusive, reticent and reluctant and – on the face of it – insubstantial and obscure nature.

What an achievement, to write, in effect, a whole volume as an introduction to the thesis of one highly abstract, poetic and speculative architectural drawing, the work of several hands, but principally Aldo Rossi. McEwan does not turn his focus fully onto Rossi’s drawing *The Analogous City: Panel*, which was produced for the 1976 Venice Biennale, until around page 200. By then, however, he has already prepared us intellectually, architecturally, urbanistically, historically and philosophically for the revelation.



ANALOGICAL CITY

CAMERON McEWAN



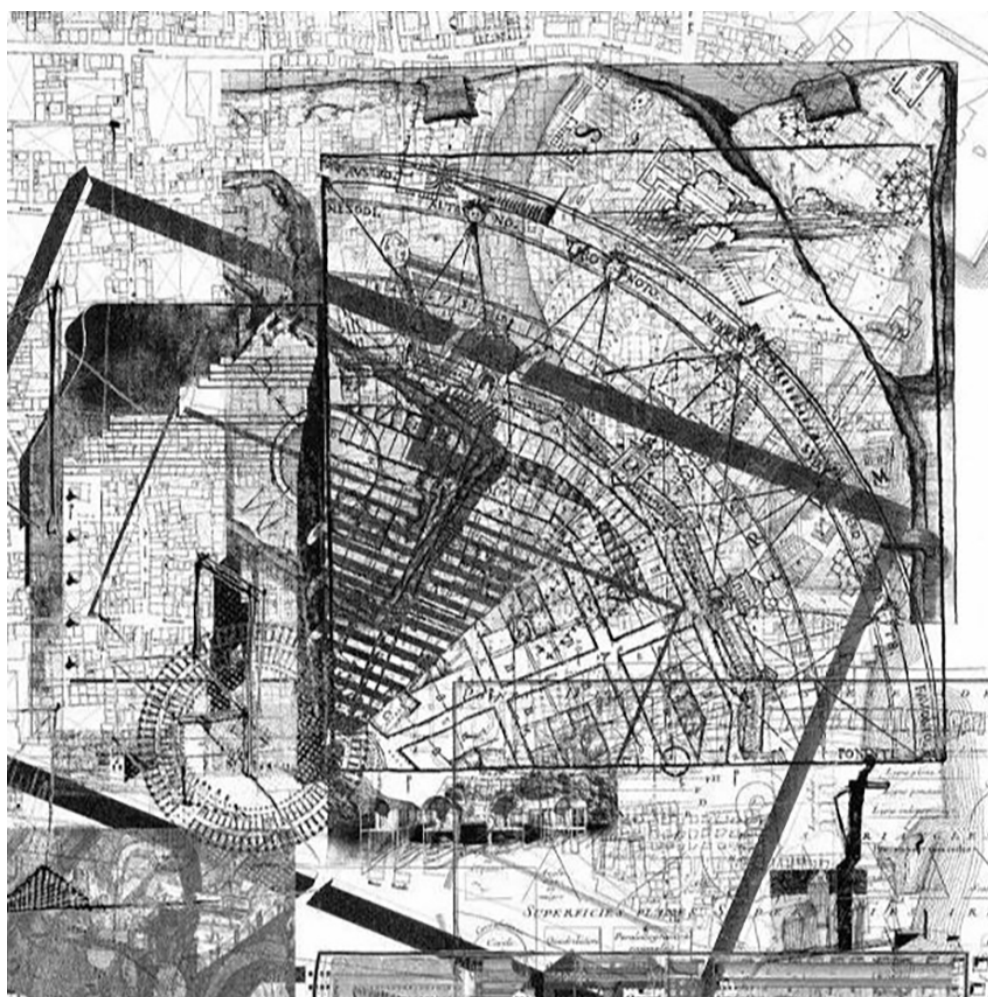
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In fact, love and ethnicity are not the real telling factors in McEwan's *atteggiamento* to the Analogous City. (What would love be in architecture? Perhaps best ask C R Mackintosh on that question...) We might say that a love force was a necessary but not sufficient condition to carry out this project. For the real heft in this book consists in McEwan's claim – and indeed his heavy intellectual work to support that claim – that architecture is a critical practice.

That intellectual work constitutes a complex thesis, which is, to put it at its most basic level, that as we live in the age of the 'multitude' then Aldo Rossi's architectural and urban concept – and potential practice – of the Analogical City is the paradigm for optimal understanding and design of the urban realm in this age. For a definition of the age of the multitude, McEwan draws on and provides an extensive, focused and forensic analysis and exposition of a broad spectrum of philosophers. These range from the Italian neo-Marxists (Negri, Berardi, Virno and so on) to Ernesto Leclau and Chantal Mouffe, Sigmund Freud and the American critical theorist McKenzie Wark (with many others in-between.) He leans especially heavily on Paolo Virno, one of whose definitions of the multitude runs as,

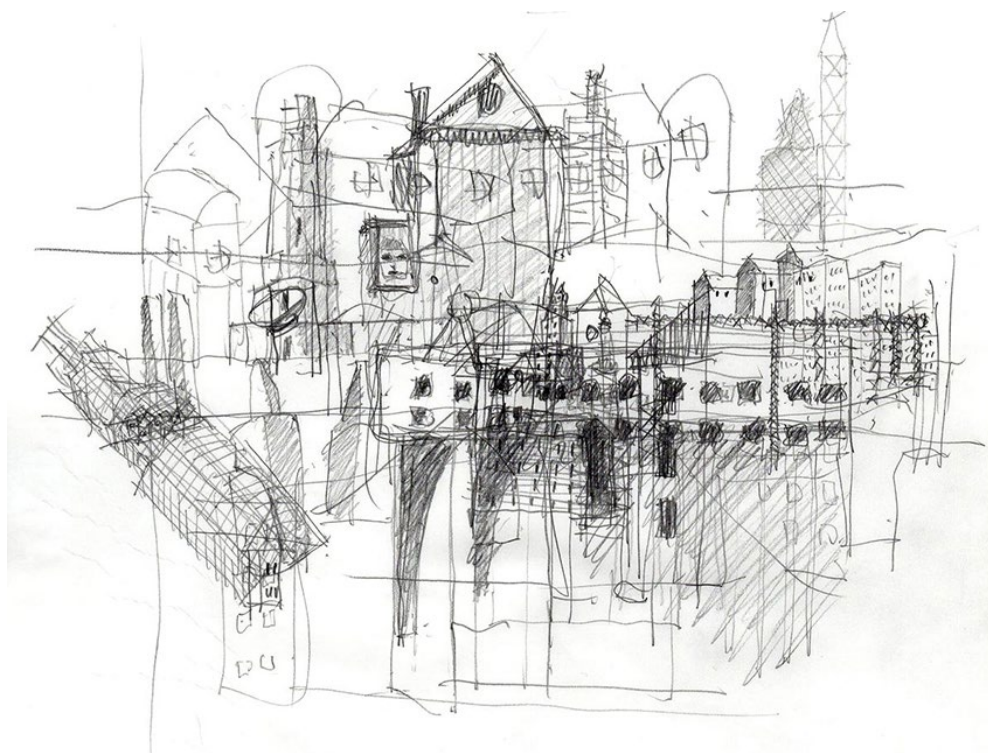
... a plurality which persists as such in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One, in evaporating within a centripetal... (A Grammar of the Multitude, 21)

The multitude is thus characterised as an age of great populations where, unlike the Fordist age, when great numbers worked together in factories at similar types of routinised and mechanised tasks, and lived in similar huge estates of housing, it is one in which individuality and plurality is forefronted, difference recognised and celebrated, and the material of production is common language as witnessed in cognitive capitalism, the culture industry and the knowledge economy. It is typical of McEwan's coupling of breadth of vision and succinctness in turn of phrase that he manages to capture the essential tone of that society of the multitude simply as, 'The condition of uniqueness attaches to everyone who makes up the multitude'.



For McEwan, then, the analogical city is the city where it is acknowledged in its design that architecture is the 'real abstraction' of that common language which society is ever producing as the set of relationships between people and groups existing in space. That, at any rate, is a much-simplified version, and it carries with it some interesting and provocative collateral consequences for the architectural process. Just as the masses no longer exist as such, replaced in this era by a great and variegated plurality of individuals, so the appropriate drawing for and of the city is no longer figure & ground (for there is no mass to 'ground' things – indeed in French 'faire la masse' means to 'ground' (or 'earth') something electrically) but figure & figure. In other words, a series of individualised forms and agents overlapping and in endlessly complex relations with one another rather than foregrounded against the neutral or the common. (This would, for example, run as one explanation for the complexity, difficulty and richness of Rossi's 'Analogous City' drawing.)

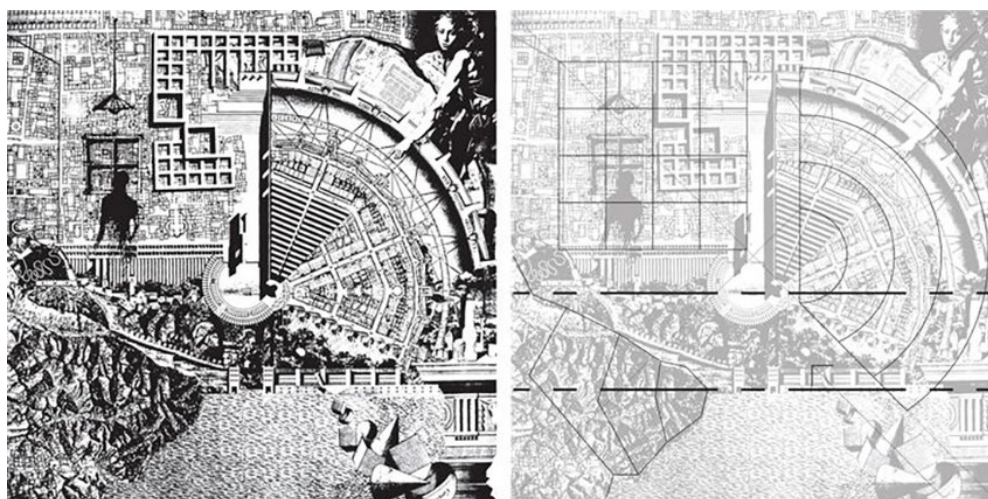
In addition to such political critique of drawing, McEwan also analyses and gives more insight into a more nuts and bolts level of Rossi's critical evolution of drawing techniques – for example, his technique of 'overdrawing' that brings the always unexpected and shocking connection between creation and destruction gradually into view.



After thus having made the case for the importance of this book's detailed and particular critique (albeit a much-abbreviated case) it may seem somewhat contrarian of me to assert that perhaps the greatest potential the book has for working a broad and enduring influence might come through its *generic* qualities. By this is meant that the Analogical City can surely be read in relation to a specific and time-honoured critical tradition which posits an architectural typology as a performative model of cultural and socio-political organisation. These models have a general cultural currency and would most famously include, for example, the Tower of Babel, where an architectural form is used to embody and symbolise the workings of the relationships between human desire, space and language, and Foucault's Panopticon (borrowed from English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham), where, again, a building type stands as an emblem/archetype, this time for the demonstration of the operation of political control and surveillance on the bodies of

individuals (biopower) in a disciplinary society. To my mind, the Analogical City (particularly in its graphic format) has great potential as a similar type of universal model which could embody in the same performative mode the political and social realities of our current age of the multitude.

Achieving such a universal status would require a bit more consolidation of the case (which McEwan is well capable of doing), and that consideration leads me in turn to an assessment of some points from which such further work could take off. There are a couple of minor disappointments to do with production and editing of this volume, which must surely dismay the author as much as they do the reader. The first and most prominent thing is the lack of an index. Such a closely argued work, one skilfully employing so many references, theories, concepts, debates and innovatory use of writing s and images demands a rereading. An apparatus to direct the reader swiftly to the desired point in the text is absolutely essential to the ends of this book. It is equally to misunderstand the type of book – an architectural publication (albeit a philosophical/critical one) – to fail to make the images of adequate clarity, scale and detail for the execution of their vital role in dialogue with the text. Beyond that and at a more engaged level with McEwan's critical operation, suggestions might be: to look into Aristotle as the *locus classicus* on the discussion of the potential and the actual, and to note that Spinoza is ultimately the source of Virno's concept of the multitude. That might seem to be mere pedantry and nit-picking as criticism, but the point is that McEwan *is* highly pedantic and fastidious – and rightly so, in his weighing up of critical value and intellectual provenance. As noted above, his discussions are forensic, and thus a careful attention not just to the grammatical but to the juridical senses of attribution as a vector of quality *and* direction of the intellectual formation of concepts and of information, as opposed to the mere commodity status of intellectual propriety or ownership, is already a vital part of his critical practice. Besides, following such lines and sources further and deeper than the admirable extent to which he already does could be one of the routes to that consolidation of the figure of the Analogical City as an archetype, which it could be argued, is needed as a counter to the established neo-liberal ethos and set credos.



McEwan sums up that latter ethos against which his critical project is aimed, writing that

The problem today is that the social imaginary is structured by a grammar of consumption. What is collectively considered appropriate has become impoverished and thoughtless. Collective imagination is too often reduced to questions of lifestyle, personality, and weakened levels of critical engagement in processes that have an impact on our lives, from education to politics, architecture to cities.

He sets up his dense critical project as a counter to an architecture of 'thoughtless spectacle and egregious forms'. His vision is sometimes breathlessly uncompromising, and the roots of it are so deep that the scope for development of this work – into, for example, the consequences of the current rise of AI – are manifold. To set out on such a project with love, inspiration, imagination, intensity and a passion for justice is a fine and humane genealogy for a critical spirit. The future for that spirit is bright.

Cameron McEwan, *Analogical City*, Punctum books, 2024

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The Drouth ('The Thirst') is a website and magazine published in Glasgow, Scotland. Founded in 2001 by **Mitch Miller** and **Johnny Rodger**, we continue to pursue our original remit, to give space to writers and artists to stimulate debate on literature, film, politics, reportage, visual culture, music, and architecture.

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