

Collage City: The Architectural Theory and Urban Morphology of Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter

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In the history of 20th-century architectural theory, few publications have exerted as profound an influence on urban design as **Collage City**, authored by **Colin Rowe** and **Fred Koetter** and published in 1978. Emerging from a period of deep disillusionment with the failures of Modernist urbanism, the book serves as both a critique of the **totalizing utopias** of the early 20th century and a proposal for a more pluralistic, fragmented, and historically grounded approach to city-making. This article provides a comprehensive technical analysis of the theoretical framework, morphological principles, and long-term legacy of *Collage City* within the broader context of urban morphology and postmodern architectural discourse.

The Historical and Theoretical Context

To understand the significance of *Collage City*, one must first examine the architectural climate of the 1960s and 1970s. The post-war era was dominated by the principles of the **Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM)** and the vision of the **Ville Radieuse** (The Radiant City) championed by Le Corbusier. These Modernist paradigms emphasized functional zoning, high-rise blocks in open parkland, and the total destruction of the traditional street grid in favor of efficient transportation and hygienic living conditions.

By the 1970s, the physical reality of these projects—often resulting in desolate public spaces and the destruction of historic urban fabrics—led to a systemic crisis. Colin Rowe, an influential teacher at Cornell University, and Fred Koetter responded to this crisis by questioning the very foundations of **Modernist Scientism**. They argued that the attempt to design a city as a single, unified, and perfectly functioning machine was not only impossible but fundamentally anti-democratic. The *Collage City* thesis represents a pivot away from the "Engineer" of modernism toward the "Bricoleur" of pluralism.

The Archaeology of Urban Knowledge

Rowe and Koetter's work is often compared to **Michel Foucault's 'The Archaeology of Knowledge'** in its approach to history. Rather than viewing history as a linear progression toward a perfect future, they viewed the city as a series of **overlapping layers** and fragments. This "archaeological" perspective allows for the coexistence of disparate architectural styles, ideologies, and time periods within the same physical space. This concept of the city as a museum of diverse artifacts is central to their theory.

Core Theoretical Mechanisms: The Hedgehog and the Fox

One of the most famous analogies used in the book is derived from **Isaiah Berlin's** essay on Tolstoy, which distinguishes between the "Hedgehog" and the "Fox."

- The Hedgehog: Relates everything to a single central vision, a universal organizing principle. In architecture, this is represented by the Modernist planner who seeks a singular, totalizing solution.
- The Fox: Knows many things, pursues many ends, and accepts a variety of experiences. In urbanism, this is the Bricoleur—the designer who uses what is at hand, adapts to the context, and works with fragments.

Rowe and Koetter argue that for a city to be truly vibrant and resilient, it must be designed by the "Fox." It should be

a **collage of ideologies** rather than the manifestation of a single utopian dream.

Technical Analysis: Figure-Ground Relationships

The technical core of *Collage City* lies in its analysis of **urban morphology** through the use of **figure-ground diagrams**. Rowe and Koetter popularized the comparison between the traditional city (pre-industrial) and the modern city (post-CIAM).

The Traditional City vs. The Modern City

In their analysis, the traditional city (e.g., Rome as depicted in the 1748 **Nolli Map**) is characterized by a "solid" urban fabric where the buildings (the ground) define the public spaces, such as streets and piazzas (the figures). In contrast, the modern city is characterized by "isolated objects" (the figures) floating in an undefined, continuous green or paved space (the ground).

Feature	Traditional Urban Fabric	Modernist Urbanism
Primary Element	The Void (Street/Piazza)	The Solid (The Building Object)
Boundary Definition	Buildings define public space	Public space is leftover space
Morphology	Continuous and contained	Discontinuous and fragmented
Context	Contextual and adaptive	Autonomous and self-referential
Human Experience	Defined by the street wall	Defined by the isolated icon

Rowe and Koetter proposed a synthesis of these two conditions. They did not suggest a simple return to the past, but rather a **Contextualism** where new modern objects could be integrated into the existing fabric through a process of formal collage.

The Concept of Bricolage in Urban Design

Borrowing from **Claude Lévi-Strauss**, Rowe and Koetter introduce the term **Bricolage** as a methodology for urban design. The *bricoleur* is someone who creates using a diverse range of things that happen to be available. In an architectural context, this means:

1. Reusing Existing Structures: Not just physically, but formally.
2. Fragmentary Intervention: Designing small pieces of the city that acknowledge their surroundings rather than imposing a master plan.
3. The Collision of Geometries: Allowing different organizational grids to meet and overlap, creating complex, "poche" spaces that accommodate diverse functions.

Mathematical and Algorithmic Analogies

While *Collage City* is primarily a theoretical text, its principles can be translated into **procedural urban modeling**. If we consider the city as a set of datasets (Grids A, B, and C), the collage approach does not seek a least-squares fit or a unification of these sets. Instead, it utilizes **Boolean operations** (Union, Intersection, Difference) to maintain the integrity of each fragment while creating new, complex spatial outcomes at their boundaries.

Case Study: Roma Interrotta

A primary application of the *Collage City* theory was the 1978 **Roma Interrotta** exhibition. Twelve architects, including Colin Rowe, were asked to imagine a redesign of Giambattista Nolli's 1748 map of Rome. Rowe's contribution was a masterpiece of urban collage. He introduced fragments from other cities—the Uffizi from Florence, the Place de la Concorde from Paris—and integrated them into the Roman fabric. This exercise demonstrated that the city could be a collection of **idealized fragments**, each with its own internal logic, coexisting within a larger, non-totalizing framework.

Practical Implementation: A Field Guide for Urban Designers

For modern practitioners, implementing the lessons of *Collage City* requires a shift in workflow from the "tabula rasa" (clean slate) to the "palimpsest" (layered) approach. Below is a procedural checklist for contextual urban intervention:

- Morphological Audit: Map the existing figure-ground relationships within a 500-meter radius of the site.
- Typological Analysis: Identify the recurring building types and street sections that define the local character.
- Fragment Identification: Determine which historic or existing elements can be treated as "found objects" within the new design.
- Boundary Management: Focus the design effort on the edges where the new intervention meets the old, using "poche" (thick walls or transition spaces) to resolve geometric conflicts.
- Programmatic Overlap: Avoid single-use zoning; introduce varied programs within a single block to mimic the organic complexity of the traditional city.

Comparative Analysis of Planning Philosophies

The following table illustrates how *Collage City* sits between the extremes of historicism and modernism.

Criteria	Modernism (Technocratic)	Collage City (Contextualism)	New Urbanism (Traditionalism)
Attitude to History	Rejection/Erasure	Irony/Fragmentary Reuse	Replication/Pastiche
Organizing Tool	The Master Plan	The Collage/Bricolage	The Form-Based Code
Vision of Utopia	Predictive and Final	Utopia as an Artifact	Nostalgic and Prescriptive
Role of Architect	Social Engineer	Cultivated Critic	Traditional Craftsman

Troubleshooting Modern Urban Failures through Collage

Many contemporary urban problems, such as the **homogenization of global cities** (the "Generic City" described by Rem Koolhaas), can be addressed using Rowe's framework. When an urban area feels sterile or disconnected, it is often because it lacks the "collisions" and "contradictions" that *Collage City* celebrates.

Common Failure Modes and Solutions

- Failure Mode: The "Object in Space" isolation (typical of office parks).Solution: Introduce "liner buildings" or landscape elements that redefine the ground and create a legible street wall, transforming the isolated object into a component of a collage.
- Failure Mode: Geometric Monotony.Solution: Superimpose a secondary grid or axis derived from a nearby historical landmark or geographical feature to create productive tension in the plan.

The Legacy of Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter

The impact of *Collage City* extends far beyond its initial publication. It provided the theoretical scaffolding for **Postmodern Architecture**, but more importantly, it laid the groundwork for **Contextualism** and **Urban Design** as a distinct discipline from both Architecture and Planning. By arguing that the city is a "collection of souvenirs" and that the designer should be a "bricoleur," Rowe and Koetter offered a path forward that respected the past without being enslaved by it.

Today, as we face the challenges of densification and sustainable urbanism, the principles of the collage remain more relevant than ever. The ability to integrate high-density modern infrastructure into the sensitive historic cores of our cities is a task that requires the nuance, irony, and technical morphological skill championed by *Collage City*. The book remains a fundamental text for anyone seeking to understand the city as a complex, multi-layered, and fundamentally human artifact—a place where, in the words of Rowe, "the collision of ideologies" is not a problem to be solved, but a condition to be celebrated.

In the final analysis, *Collage City* is a plea for **urban pluralism**. It suggests that the best cities are those that refuse to be finished, those that allow for the unexpected encounter, and those that recognize that the pursuit of a singular utopia is often the fastest route to a dystopian reality. By embracing the fragment, the city becomes a resilient and adaptable framework for the complexities of human life.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

- [The Philosophy of the Anti-Object: Kengo Kuma's Theory of Architectural Dissolution and Environmental Integration](http://alaskawriters.com/kengo-kuma-anti-object-architectural-dissolution-theory.pdf)

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Tags: #Colin Rowe #Fred Koetter #Urban Morphology #Postmodernism #Contextualism

