

Anthony Vidler “The Third Typology” *Oppositions* 7 (Winter 1977); expanded in *Rational Architecture: The Reconstruction of the European City* (Brussels: Editions des Archives d’architecture moderne, 1978)

| see 234 |

| compare 124–125 |

The work of Anthony Vidler frequently spans between the modes of architectural history, critical commentary, and theory. His historical analyses of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Etienne-Louis Boullée, Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremere de Quincy, and others found a receptive audience among architects interested in issues of character and type, even as contemporaneous architectural production influenced Vidler’s own research trajectory. The present essay first appeared in a shorter version as an editorial in *Oppositions* 7, as part of that journal’s introduction of Italian “neorationalist” architecture to an English-speaking audience. In 1977, the essay was solicited by Maurice Culot and Leon Krier for republication in expanded form in *Rational Architecture* and soon became something of an anthem for that loosely banded movement. Its importance here lies in its distinction between different theories of type according to different epistemes and its concise formulation of typology as an agent of regeneration in an era of dispirited functionalism.

| see 332 |

Giulio Carlo Argan’s 1962 essay “On the Typology of Architecture” revived interest in Quatremere de Quincy’s idea of type, and Aldo Rossi’s 1966 *L’architettura della città* strengthened its importance. But there was a need for a distinction between the modern use of types and the “first typology” of Quatremere and the Abbe Laugier whom he followed.¹ In 1967 Alan Colquhoun formulated the first theory of types to appear in English, in an epistemological argument that recognized the discursive categories of architecture and reintroduced the ideological dimension of design operations. Colquhoun’s is fundamentally a critique of the pseudoscientific claims of architectural empiricists to arrive at a nonarbitrary form from purely functional determinants (which is related to what Vidler terms the second typology). During the design process, Colquhoun reminds us, in the inevitable absence of enough determinate information, certain formal choices must intervene, and in selecting and arranging certain conventionally constituted organizations of a building “the architect thus makes his voluntary decisions in the world of types, and these voluntary decisions explain his ideological position in architecture.”² In a properly structuralist way, Colquhoun foregrounds the arbitrary, conventional, cultural nature of architectural codes, and the use of types in the design process comes to be seen as a kind of *catachresis*: not so much a misapprehension of an architectural organism’s origins as the necessary and inevitable substitution and distortion of already known configurations to fill the gaps in an architectural “vocabulary” that can never be completely, and certainly not functionally, determined.

Vidler builds on Aldo Rossi’s discussions of “autonomous” architecture, “analogous” architecture, and the city, as well as the emergent neorationalist design projects of the 1970s, and goes beyond Colquhoun’s catachretic model to construct what might be called an interactive model of types. He seizes, first, on the conceptual open-endedness of types. By inviting the “reader” of a building to consider the primary subject (say, Rossi’s Trieste City Hall project) in the light of associated implications characteristic of the commonplace conception of a secondary sub-

ject (say, a late-eighteenth-century prison), a type operates something like a literary metaphor. “The dialectic is clear as a fable: the society that understands the reference to prison will still have need of the reminder, while at the very point the image finally loses all meaning, the society will either have become entirely prison, or, perhaps, its opposite.”

Vidler seizes, second, on the inductive open-endedness of types, revealed in the fact that, at its ultimate level, the interactive subject of a type is the city itself, considered as a whole, whose nature is induced from its architectural elements. What is most distinctive about the inductive open-endedness of types is that, from this “ontology of the city,” an architecture may be constructed that *creates* the very typological analogies on which it depends, rather than merely picking out metaphorical similarities that existed antecedently. Rossi’s Modena cemetery, for example, derives its poignancy from the constructed interaction of tomb, house, city, and cemetery. Within each of these primary subjects are insinuated — obliquely, anamorphically — all the others, producing a kind of overprinting of types and a conceptual pass through registers whose analogous moments did not exist before the architecture that conflated them.

■ see 68–71 ■

Architecture in its very autonomy thereby enables the conception of a world that may not yet have actually existed, but is nevertheless verifiable. Rossi’s meditation on Canaletto’s painting of Venice captures this paradoxical possibility of an analogous architecture:

In this view, the Palladian project for the Rialto bridge, the Basilica Palladiana, and the Palazzo Chiericati are brought together and described as if the painter rendered an urban context in perspective from his own observation. The three Palladian monuments, one of which is a project, are constructed as an analogous architecture, as well as the city. The geographic transposition of the monuments to the site of the Rialto project constitutes a city that we know which conforms to a place of purely architectural values.

The analogous Venice that was born there is real and necessary; we assist at a logical-formal operation, at a speculation on the monuments and on the disconcerting urban character in the history of art and in thought. A “collage” of Palladian architecture that conforms to a new city, and in the reunion, reconfirm themselves.³

In the paradoxical ability of architecture to produce an entire image and structure of subject-object relations in the city — to propose an understanding and experience of an actual, concrete, historical life — within what is nevertheless an irreducibly architectural modality, Vidler finds the critical role of the third typology.

Writing around the same time as Vidler, and similarly historicizing contemporaneous events, Rafael Moneo generalized the importance of typology and its mediatory potential:

To understand the question of type is to understand the nature of the architectural object today. It is a question that cannot be avoided. The architectural object can no longer be considered as a single, isolated event because it is bounded by the world that surrounds it as well as by its history. It extends life to other objects by virtue of its specific architectural condition, thereby establishing a chain of related events in which it is possible to find common formal structures.⁴

Notes

1. For a history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century typologies, see Anthony Vidler, "The Idea of Type: The Transformation of the Academic Ideal, 1750–1830," *Oppositions* 8 (Spring 1977).
2. Alan Colquhoun, "Typology and Design Method," *Arena* 83 (June 1967), p. 18. In this publication Colquhoun's formulation is pitted against Tomás Maldonado's design methodology.
3. Aldo Rossi, "L'architettura analoga," 2c. *Construcción de la Ciudad* 2 (1975), p. 8.
4. Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions* 13 (Summer 1978), p. 44.

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From the middle of the eighteenth century two dominant typologies have served to legitimize the production of architecture: The first returned architecture to its natural origins—a model of primitive shelter—seen not simply as historical explanation of the derivation of the orders but as a guiding principle, equivalent to that proposed by Newton for the physical universe. The second, emerging as a result of the Industrial Revolution, assimilated architecture to the world of machine production, finding the essential nature of a building to reside in the artificial world of engines. Laugier's primitive hut and Bentham's Panopticon stand at the beginning of the modern era as the paradigms of these two typologies.

Both these typologies were firm in their belief that rational science, and later technological production, embodied the most progressive forms of the age, and that the mission of architecture was to conform to and perhaps even master these forms as the agent of material progress.

With the current re-appraisal of the idea of progress, and with this the critique of the Modern Movement ideology of productivism, architects have turned to a vision of the primal past of architecture—its constructive and formal bases as evinced in the pre-industrial city. Once again the issue of typology is raised in architecture, not this time with a need to search outside the practice for legitimation in science or technology, but with a sense that within architecture itself resides a unique and particular mode of production and explanation. From Aldo Rossi's transformations of the formal structure and institutional types of eighteenth century urbanism, to the sketches of Leon Krier that recall the "primitive" types of shelter imagined by the eighteenth century philosophes, rapidly multiplying examples suggest the emergence of a new, third typology.

We might characterize the fundamental attribute of this third typology as an espousal, not of an abstract nature, not of a technological utopia, but rather of the traditional city as the locus of its concern. The city, that is, provides the material for classification, and the forms of its artifacts over time provide the basis for recomposition. This third typology, like the first two, is clearly based on reason, classification, and a sense of the public in architecture; unlike the first two, however, it proposes no panacea, no ultimate apotheosis of man in architecture, no positivistic eschatology.

I

The small rustic hut is the model upon which all the wonders of architecture have been conceived; in drawing nearer in practice to the simplicities of this first model essential faults are avoided and true perfection is attained. The pieces of wood raised vertically give us the idea of columns. The horizontal

pieces that surmount them give us the idea of entablatures. Finally, the inclined pieces that form the roof give us the idea of pediments. This all the masters of the art have recognized.

M. A. LAUGIER, 1755

The first typology, which ultimately saw architecture as imitative of the fundamental order of Nature itself, allied the primitive rusticity of the hut to an ideal of perfect geometry, revealed by Newton as the guiding principle of physics. Thus, Laugier depicted the four trees, types of the first columns, standing in a perfect square: the branches laid across in the form of beams, perfectly horizontal, and the boughs bent over to form the roof as a triangle, the type of pediment. These elements of architecture, derived from the elements of nature, formed an unbreakable chain and were interrelated according to fixed principles: if the tree/column was joined in this way to the bower/hut, then the city itself, agglomeration of huts, was likewise susceptible to the principle of natural origin. Laugier spoke of the city—or rather the existing, unplanned and chaotic reality of Paris—as a forest. The forest/city was to be tamed, brought into rational order by means of the gardener's art; the ideal city of the late eighteenth century was thereby imaged on the garden; the type of the urbanist was Le Notre, who would cut and prune an unruly nature according to the geometrical line of its true underlying order.

The idea of the elements of architecture referring in some way to their natural origin was, of course, immediately extensible in the idea of each specific kind of building representing its “species” so to speak, in the same way as each member of the animal kingdom. At first the criteria applied to differentiate building types were bound up with recognition, with individual physiognomy, as in the classification systems of Buffon and Linnaeus. Thus, the external affect of the building was to announce clearly its general species, and its specific subspecies. Later this analogy was transformed by the functional and constitutional classification of the early nineteenth century (Cuvier), whereby the inner structure of beings, their constitutional form, was seen as the criterion for grouping them in types.

Following this analogy, those whose task it was to design the new types of public and private buildings emerging as needs in the early nineteenth century began to talk of the plan and sectional distribution in the same terms as the constitutional organization of species; axes and vertebrae became virtually synonymous. This reflected a basic shift in the metaphor of natural architecture, from a vegetal (tree/hut) to an animal analogy. This shift paralleled the rise of the new schools of medicine and the birth of clinical surgery.

Despite the overt disgust that Durand showed toward Laugier—laughing at the idea of doing without walls—it was Durand, professor at the Polytechnique, who brought together these twin streams of organic typology into a lexicon of architectural practice that enabled the architect, at least, to dispense with analogy altogether and concentrate on the business of construction. The medium of this fusion was the graph paper grid which assembled on the same level the basic elements of construction, according to the inductively derived rules of composition for the taxonomy of different building types, resulting in the endless combinations and permutations, monumental and utilitarian. In his *Recueil* he established that the natural history of architecture resides so to speak in its own history, a parallel development to real nature. In his *Lessons* he described how new types might be constructed on the same principles. When this awareness was applied in the next decades to the structural rationalism inherited from Laugier, the result was the organic theory of Gothic “skeletal” structure developed by Viollet-le-Duc. The operation of the romantics on classic theory was simply at one level to substitute the Cathedral for the Temple as the formal and later the social type of all architecture.

II

The French language has provided the useful definition, thanks to the double sense of the word type. A deformation of meaning has led to the equivalence in popular language: a man = a type; and from the point that the type becomes a man, we grasp the possibility of a considerable extension of the type. Because the man-type is a complex form of a unique physical type, to which can be applied a sufficient standardization. According to the same rules one will establish for this physical type an equipment of standard habitation: doors, windows, stairs, the heights of rooms, etc.

LE CORBUSIER, 1927

The second typology, which substituted for the classical trinity of commodity, firmness and delight a dialectic of means and ends joined by the criteria of economy, looked upon architecture as simply a matter of technique. The remarkable new machines subject to the laws of functional precision were thus paradigms of efficiency as they worked in the raw materials of production; architecture, once subjected to similar laws, might well work with similar effectiveness on its unruly contents—the users. The efficient machines of architecture might be sited in the countryside, very much like the early steam engines of Newcomen and Watt, or inserted in the fabric of the city, like the water pumps and later the factory furnaces. Centralized within their own operative realm, hermetically sealed by virtue of their autonomy as complete processes, these engines—the prisons, hospitals, poor houses—needed little in the way of accommodation save a clear space and a high wall. Their impact on the form of the city as a whole was at first minimal.

The second typology of modern architecture emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century, after the takeoff of the Second Industrial Revolution; it grew out of the need to confront the question of mass-production, and more particularly the mass-production of machines by machines. The effect of this trans-

formation in production was to give the illusion of another nature, the nature of the machine and its artificially reproduced world.

In this second typology, architecture was now equivalent to the range of mass-production objects, subject themselves to a quasi-Darwinian law of the selection of the fittest. The pyramid of production from the smallest tool to the most complex machine was now seen as analogous to the link between the column, the house and the city. Various attempts were made to blend the old typology with the new in order to provide a more satisfactory answer to the question of specifically architectonic form: the primary geometries of the Newtonian generation were now adduced for their evident qualities of economy, modernity and purity. They were, it was thought, appropriate for machine tooling.

Equally, theoreticians with a classical bias, like Hermann Muthesius, stressed the equivalence of ancient types—the temple—and the new ones—the object of manufacture—in order to stabilize, or “culturalize,” the new machine world. A latent neoclassicism suffused the theories of typology at the beginning of the contemporary epoch, born of the need to justify the new in the face of the old. The classical world once again acted as a “primal past” wherein the utopia of the present might find its nostalgic roots.

Not until the aftermath of the First World War was this thrown off, at least in the most advanced theories—articulated with more and more directness by Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. A vision of Taylorized production, of a world ruled by the iron law of Ford supplanted the spuriously golden dream of neoclassicism. Buildings were to be no more and no less than machines themselves, serving and molding the needs of man according to economic criteria. The image of the city at this point changed radically: the forest/park of Laugier was made triumphant in the hygienist utopia of a city completely absorbed by its greenery. The natural analogy of the Enlightenment, originally brought forward to control the messy reality of the city, was now extended to refer to the control of entire nature. In the redeeming park, the silent building-machines of the new garden of production virtually disappeared behind a sea of verdure. Architecture, in this final apotheosis of mechanical progress, was consumed by the very process it sought to control for its own ends. With it, the city, as artifact and polis, disappeared as well.

In the first two typologies of modern architecture we can identify a common base, resting on the need to legitimize architecture as a “natural” phenomenon and a development of the natural analogy that corresponded very directly to the development of production itself. Both typologies were in some way bound up with the attempts of architecture to endow itself with value by means of an appeal to natural science or production, and instrumental power by means of an assimilation of the forms of these two complementary domains to itself. The “utopia” of architecture as “project” might be progressive in its ends, or nostalgic in its dreams, but at heart it was founded on this premise: that the shape of environment might, like nature herself, affect and hereby control the individual and collective relations of men.

III

In the first two typologies, architecture, made by man, was being compared and legitimized by another “nature” outside itself. In the third typology, as exemplified in the work of the new Rationalists, however, there is no such attempt at validation. Columns, houses, and urban spaces, while linked in an unbreakable chain of continuity, refer only to their own nature as architectural elements, and their geometries are neither naturalistic nor technical but essentially architectural. It is clear that the nature referred to in these recent designs is no more nor less than the nature of the city

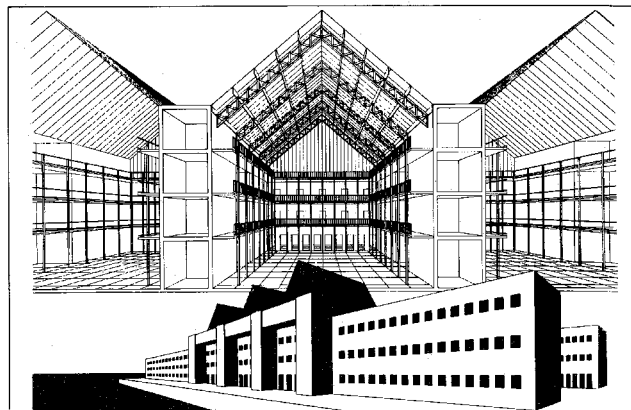
itself, emptied of specific social content from any particular time and allowed to speak simply of its own formal condition.

This concept of the city as the site of a new typology is evidently born of a desire to stress the continuity of form and history against the fragmentation produced by the elemental, institutional, and mechanistic typologies of the recent past. The city is considered as a whole, its past and present revealed in its physical structure. It is in itself and of itself a new typology. This typology is not built up out of separate elements, nor assembled out of objects classified according to use, social ideology, or technical characteristics: it stands complete and ready to be decomposed into fragments. These fragments do not reinvent institutional type-forms nor repeat past typological forms: they are selected and reassembled according to criteria derived from three levels of meaning—the first, inherited from the ascribed means of the past existence of the forms; the second, derived from the specific fragment and its boundaries, and often crossing between previous types; the third, proposed by a recomposition of these fragments in a new context.

Such an “ontology of the city” is, in the face of the modernist utopia, indeed radical. It denies all the social utopian and progressively positivist definitions of architecture for the last two hundred years. No longer is architecture a realm that has to relate to a hypothesized “society” in order to be conceived and understood; no longer does “architecture write history” in the sense of particularizing a specific social condition in a specific time or place. The need to speak of nature of function, of social mores—of anything, that is, beyond the nature of architectural form itself—is removed. At this point, as Victor Hugo realized so presciently in the 1830s, communication through the printed work, and lately through the mass media, has apparently released architecture from the role of “social book” into its own autonomous and specialized domain.

This does not, of course, necessarily mean that architecture in this sense no longer performs any function, no longer satisfies any need beyond the whim of an “art for art’s sake” designer, but simply that the principal conditions for the invention of objects and environments do not necessarily have to include a unitary statement of fit between form and use. Here it is that the adoption of the city as the site for the identification of the architectural typology has been seen as crucial. In the accumulated experience of the city, its public spaces and institutional forms, a typology can be understood that defies a one-to-one reading of function, but which at the same time ensures a relation at another level to a continuing tradition of city life. The distinguishing characteristic of the new ontology beyond its specifically formal aspect is that the city polis, as opposed to the single column, the hut-house, or

Aldo Rossi, Regional
Administration Building,
Trieste, 1974



the useful machine, is and always has been political in its essence. The fragmentation and recomposition of its spatial and institutional forms thereby can never be separated from their received and newly constituted political implications.

When typical forms are selected from the past of a city, they do not come, however dismembered, deprived of their original political and social meaning. The original sense of the form, the layers of accrued implication deposited by time and human experience cannot be lightly brushed away, and certainly it is not the intention of the new Rationalists to disinfect their types in this way. Rather, the carried meanings of these types may be used to provide a key to their newly invested meanings. The technique or rather the fundamental compositional method suggested by the Rationalists is the transformation of selected types—partial or whole—into entirely new entities that draw their communicative power and potential criteria from the understanding of this transformation. The City Hall project for Trieste by Aldo Rossi, for example, has been rightly understood to refer, among other evocations in its complex form, to the image of a late eighteenth century prison. In the period of the first formalization of this type, as Piranesi demonstrated, it was possible to see in prison a powerfully comprehensive image of the dilemma of society itself, poised between a disintegrating religious faith and a materialist reason. Now, Rossi, in ascribing to the city hall (itself a recognizable type in the nineteenth century) the affect of prison, attains a new level of signification, which evidently is a reference to the ambiguous condition of civic government. In the formulation, the two types are not merged: indeed, city hall has been replaced by open arcade standing in contradiction on prison. The dialectic is clear as a fable: the society that understands the reference to prison will still have need of the reminder, while at the very point that the image finally loses all meaning, the society will either have become entirely prison, or, perhaps, its opposite. The metaphoric opposition deployed in this example can be traced in many of Rossi's schemes and in the work of the Rationalists as a whole, not only in institutional form but also in the spaces of the city.

This new typology is explicitly critical of the Modern Movement; it utilizes the clarity of the eighteenth century city to rebuke the fragmentation, decentralization, and formal disintegration introduced into contemporary urban life by the zoning techniques and technological advances of the twenties. While the Modern Movement found its Hell in the closed, cramped, and insalubrious quarters of the old industrial cities, and its Eden in the uninterrupted sea of sunlit space filled with greenery—a city became a garden—the new typology as a critique of modern urbanism raises the continuous fabric, the clear distinction between public and private marked by the walls of street and square, to the level of principle. Its nightmare is the isolated building set in an undifferentiated park. The heroes of this new typology are therefore not among the nostalgic, anti-city utopians of the nineteenth century nor even among the critics of industrial and technical progress of the twentieth, but rather among those who, as the professional servants of urban life, have directed their design skills to solving the questions of avenue, arcade, street and square, park and house, institution and equipment in a continuous typology of elements that together coheres with past fabric and present intervention to make one comprehensible experience of the city. For this typology, there is no clear set of rules for the transformations and their objects, nor any polemically defined set of historical precedents. Nor, perhaps, should there be; the continued vitality of this architectural practice rests in its essential engagement with the precise demands of the present and not in any holistic mythicization of the past. It refuses any “nostalgia” in its evocations of history, except to give its restorations sharper focus; it refuses all unitary descriptions of the social meaning of form, recognizing the specious quality of any single ascription of social order to an architectural order; it finally refuses all eclecticism, res-

olutely filtering its “quotations” through the lens of a modernist aesthetic. In this sense, it is an entirely modern movement, and one that places its faith in the essentially public nature of all architecture, as against the increasingly private and narcissistic visions of the last decade. In this it is distinguished from those latter-day romanticisms that have also pretended to the throne of post-modernism—“townscape,” “strip-city” and “collage-city”—that in reality proposed no more than the endless reduplication of the flowers of bourgeois high culture under the guise of the painterly or the populist. In the work of the new Rationalists, the city and its typology are reasserted as the only possible bases for the restoration of a critical role to public architecture otherwise assassinated by the apparently endless cycle of production and consumption.