

Forgetting Fundamentals I Paper Cameron McEwan I June 2012

"Forgetting Architecture comes to mind as a more appropriate title for this book, since while I may talk about a school, a cemetery, a theatre, it is more correct to say that I talk about life, death, imagination."

(Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography)

Here, Rossi ruminates on the alternative title for his book *A Scientific Autobiography*, and links the building types: school, cemetery, theatre; with their conceptual analogues: life, death, imagination. In this space of association, Rossi might as well be alluding to the great collective types, which are the grave and the monument, or simply "a few clods of earth." As Adolf Loos writes, "Only a tiny part of architecture has artistic value: the grave and the monument. Everything else, serving its purpose, should be excluded from the realm of art." Here, the type in architecture is both material and idea.

Architectural typologies have been formulated in theoretical treatises since Vitruvius, who classified temples, public works, and private houses in *De architectura*, which Cesariano was first to translate and illustrate in his 1521 edition. It is interesting to note those treatise that have given visual expression to the notion of type in architecture, that is through images rather than words. After the publication of Serlio's books during the Renaissance, the tradition continued in works such as those by Palladio, who catalogued his own villas in the second of his *Four Books*, which Wittkower demonstrates are derived from the same geometrical order; to Piranesi, who theatricalised an analysis of types, and Durand's manual which codifies buildings; Venturi's manifesto, and the pamphlets of Holl who has investigated the correlation between building types and the city grid in his *Alphabetical City*. In a theory of types, we can view the process of architectural history unfolding, treatise to treatise, manual to manual, and manifesto to manifesto. It is therefore legitimate to postulate type as one place to begin a discussion about fundamentals in architecture.

Rafael Moneo's 1978 essay *On Typology*, republished in a 2004 edition of *El Croquis* gives an overview of the thinking on type in architecture, and opens with the words,

"To raise the question of typology in architecture is to raise the question of the nature of the architectural work itself."

Moneo writes,

"By looking at architectural objects as groups, types, susceptible to differentiation in their secondary aspects, the partial obsolescence appearing in them can be appraised, and consequently one can act to change them. The type can thus be thought of as the 'frame within which change operates,' a necessary term to the continuing dialectic required by history."

Thus a theory of types is dialectical, constant and changing, a "frame within which change operates." For the first part, type is a way of thinking in groups, which is, analysis through classification, and appraisal. A work of architecture belongs to a group of repeatable objects, characterised by a general attribute, or something typical. In architecture, the most common theories of classification by type have been according to use: national monuments, town halls, prisons, banks, warehouses, factories, as can be seen in Nikolaus Pevsner's 1976 *A History of Building Types*; and according to form: centralised plan, linear arrangement, courtyard. Aldo Rossi tell us that the former understanding is limiting because the use of a building is independent from its form. Buildings evolve over time, so a warehouse becomes an apartment block, an apartment block becomes an office block, an office block becomes a brothel. Or as Atelier Bow-Wow show us in *Made in Tokyo*, that all of these can be contained as a hybrid, so that above the warehouse is an apartment block, which is below an office, and the building terminates with a penthouse brothel.

There is a tension, then, between a type as something belonging to a repeatable group, and as the production of something singular, unrepeatable, and irreducible. Lets take a look at Rossi's theory of types from his treatise *The Architecture of the City*. The location of his most explicit definition of type is significant. It mediates between a quotation by the Enlightenment architectural theorists Antoine Chrysôthome Quatremère de Quincy and Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, and reads,

"I would define the concept of type as something that is permanent and complex, a logical principle that is prior to form and that constitutes it."

Quatremère de Quincy's definition of type in the 1832 Encyclopédie Méthodique is often cited as the first to be introduced into modern architectural discourse. In his entry on type, Quatremère de Quincy compared it with model, which he defined as a mechanical reproduction of an object, a form to be copied directly, "all is precise and given when it comes to the model." In opposition, type is something conceptual, something that can act as the idea of works, and for those works to bear no resemblance to another, "all is more or less vague when it comes to the type." Ambiguity is everything. And it opens the way to formal operations such as the distortion of form, or the dissolution of scale, as long as there exists a recognisable antecedent. Thus type is abstract and conceptual rather than concrete and technical.

Quatremère writes,

"The word type presents less the image of a thing to copy or imitate completely, than the idea of an element which must itself serve as a rule for the model."

and continues with,

"The model, understood as practical execution, is an object that should be repeated as it is; contrariwise, the type is an object after which each artist can conceive works that bear no resemblance to each other. All is precise and given when it comes to the model, while all is more or less vague when it comes to the type."

In opposition to Quatremère de Quincy's conceptual understanding of type, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand in his Précis des leçons d'architecture, concentrated on a syntactical relationship of architectural composition, described in plans, sections and elevations, guided by a modular grid. The Précis des leçons d'architecture is divided into three parts, the first of which is on architectural elements, which include: columns, pillars, walls, and vaults. The second part is on architectural composition, which is about the assemblage of elements, and parts. Here Durand distinguishes three levels of composition: the horizontal and vertical elements (like floor and wall); which combine into architectural parts (like vestibules and atriums); and finally assembled into an entire building. The third part of the Précis des leçons d'architecture is about genre, and subdivided into public buildings and private buildings. On the compositional process, Durand writes,

"to combine different elements among themselves, and to pass from there to different parts of the building, and from these parts to the whole - this is the path that one must follow if he desires to learn how to compose; when one composes, on the contrary, he must begin from the whole, continue with the parts, and finish with the details."

Although Durand did not set out to define type, and he used the word "genre," his approach is typological, using: precedent, classification, comparison, repetition.

Both Quatremère de Quincy and Durand acknowledged, in different ways the relationship of memory and history in the idea of type. Quatremère de Quincy linked type with that which is archaic, elemental and primitive, and we could say to memory. Free from this metaphysical speculation, Durand's technical understanding geometrised history. The significance of Rossi's quote then is its mediation between the "permanent and complex," which is archaic and elemental, something "prior to form;" and of the "logical principle," which is that constituted by a reading of history. He said,

"Type is thus a constant that manifests itself with a character of necessity, but even though it is predetermined, it reacts dialectically with technique, function, and style, as well as with both the collective character and the individual moment of the architectural artefact."

"Ultimately, we can say that type is the very idea of architecture, that which is closest to its essence. In spite of changes, it has always imposed itself on the 'feelings and reason' as the principle of architecture and of the city."

Rather than in dialectical opposition, however, we find that memory and history are in extreme duality. Only here, history is a dialectic between past and present, while memory is between remembering and forgetting.

Peter Eisenman frames his introduction to the English translation of The Architecture of the City by quoting Freud's Rome analogy from Civilisation and Its Discontents. Freud raises what he calls, "the more general problem of retention in the psychical sphere," and writes that in mental life nothing that has once existed is ever lost. Freud asks us to imagine Rome to be like the unconscious, "a psychical

entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent..." Memory is a constant. Like Freud's Rome analogy, Rossi said that the past is always continuously present in certain buildings and urban formations, which endure through history and repeat in form: those which exist as types and those which become monuments. For example, in his Gallarate housing project on the edge of Milan, Italy, a linear slab form with open side corridor, we can see not only a Milanese tenement; but also a Classical colonnade; and a Corbusian Unité d'Habitation. Mixed by association, they constitute parts of a particular city, Milan, and parts of all cities. For Rossi, the fundamentals of architecture are found in the built form of the city,

"As the first men built houses to provide more favourable surroundings for their life, ... so they built with aesthetic intention. Architecture came into being with the first traces of the city; it is deeply rooted in the formation of civilisation and is a permanent, universal, and necessary artefact."

In Rossi's words we get the relationship between collective and individual; of civilisation, of civilis, belonging to citizens. Of permanence, history, memory and aesthetic development, which is the archaic form constituted by the type. And of forgetting, Rossi writes,

"In order to be significant, architecture must be forgotten, or must present only an image for reverence which subsequently becomes confounded with memories."

Freud tells us that in forgetting, we commit something to the unconscious, where it is worked over during regression, which is an impulse to the archaic; and then to surface again when remembered, only now transformed, and reverent. The type is worked over within the collective history of architecture, to be transformed by a kind of temporal and formal regression.