

Type and Pattern in the Design of Collective Housing

Comparing ideas on the design of small-scale collective housing by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Christopher Alexander in the mid-1970s

Abstract

This paper looks at co-housing as a topic of typological studies in the late 1970s, a formative time for the development of co-housing as we know it today. In the 1960s, the critique of mass housing in Europe and the US had grown into an important position in societal discourse on residential building. The housing shortage that had dominated the view on housing in most western societies after World War II had been remediated by this time, and the shortcomings of mass housing in creating a stimulating urban environment were no longer accepted as necessary evils. In the 1960s and 70s this fundamental societal shift coincides with an architectural discourse that revolves predominantly around typology, in an effort to reconstruct the knowledge that underpins the continuity of architecture (Rossi, Grassi, etc.).

The paper investigates two important currents in that discourse, by focusing on the design of small-scale collective housing. We take two theoretical texts, both published in 1977, as our primary objects, their authors both influential architects, theorists and educators of the period: Christopher Alexander, in *A Pattern Language*, specifically the patterns: 35 Household Mix, 37 House Cluster and 39 Housing Hill, and Oswald Mathias Ungers in *The Urban Villa*. The research centres around the concepts used to define small-scale collective housing through the concept of pattern in Alexander's work or type in Ungers' and the implication of these concepts for the design process of such housing.

For Alexander, valid patterns are those that—proven by experience and embedded in culture—help to resolve the forces that act within a particular human situation. Consequently, small-scale collective housing is approached by him with regard to the balance of individual and group needs that have to be met, with hardly any recourse to architectural reference. In contrast, Ungers' use of type in *The Urban Villa* is deeply rooted in architectural tradition with a focus on built references of dwellings of a fitting scale that show

certain cultural and formal characteristics. While Alexander's patterns imply a domestic space that is actively defined and given form by its inhabitation (and inhabitants), Ungers' use of type suggests that the collective dwelling offers a form to the way its inhabitants live together without necessarily suggesting their involvement in the design or later adaptation of it.

The paper investigates the question how the concepts of pattern and type relate in the context of small-scale collective housing. It further aims to look at the relation of these concepts to Alexander's and Ungers' built work inasmuch as it can be understood as built critique, or what Manfredo Tafuri called "Typological Criticism." Today, at a moment that the idea of co-housing has gained prominence in many cities, it has become vital to revisit these ideas once more, to gain a deeper understanding of it from the viewpoint of typology.

Keywords

Type, Pattern, Housing Hill, Urban Villa, Collective Housing