

The Politics of Managerialism

The Performative Turn in Typological Thinking and its Post-Critical Instrumentalization

Prologue: The Return of Typology

The subject matter of this article is the return of typological thinking in the area where one would least expect it to happen, in the circle of post-critics. The most pronounced demonstration of this is Alejandro Zaera Polo's essay *The Politics of the Envelope: A Political Critique of Materialism*, which is now ten years old. Here, Zaera Polo, of Foreign Office Architects fame, outlined a new theory of architecture anchored in the performative range of the building envelope and its ever-expanding technological sophistications. His classification of building envelopes according to their performative capacities is a case in point, being the most exhaustive post-critical manifesto in existence, yet Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting's idealization of the Bentham Panopticon as a template for architectural operativity also deserves mention.

This article attempts to chart this new territory with a critical eye to the ethical and aesthetic consequences of the performative and post-critical turn in typological thinking. In what follows, the themes of instrumentality and managerialism play leading roles in parsing Zaera Polo's reinterpretation of typology under the aegis of performativity. This takes us from a discussion of the roots of post-criticality in panopticism, via discussions of function, form, and organization in *The Politics of the Envelope*, to a consideration of the role of the city and the question of performativity in post-critical type formation. But let us first briefly revisit the historical background for any contemporary discussion of typology in architecture.

Themes in Typological Discourse since the 1960s

Typological thinking has been one of the hallmarks of the discourse on architectural theory, history, and criticism as it has taken shape since the 1960s. Unlike the post-critics, who regard this intensification of architectural theorization as a historical anomaly to be rectified, anyone acknowledging both the growing compartmentalization of knowledge since the Enlightenment

and the transformative power of new technologies and media under modernity would be inclined to accept the rise of theory as the logical counterpart to these drastic restructurings. This is no less so in the context of architecture. When Karsten Harries comments that we should „expect that works of architecture, too, as opposed to merely functional buildings, today need the aid of theory if they are to give us a full satisfaction,“ he summarizes this crucial impact of modernity, the condition of which is somehow hubristically nullified by post-critics“.¹ „Art and architecture of the modern period have become intrinsically theoretical,“ Edward Winters comments, and this condition is here to stay.²

1 Harries 2009: 87.

2 Winters 2007: 52.

This vast theoretical field is well-traveled territory in terms of retrospective historiographical and critical travelogues, and therefore I will only provide a few historical points of orientation necessary for characterizing the performative turn in typological thinking brought about by the post-critics. The importance of the concept of type came to the fore with Giulio Carlo Argan’s rediscovery of Quatremère de Quincy’s definition in the latter’s *Dictionnaire Historique d’Architecture, contenant dans son plan les notions historiques, descriptives, archaéologiques, biographiques, théoriques, didactiques et pratiques de cet art* (1832):

„The word ‘type’ presents less the image of a thing to copy or imitate completely than the idea of an element which ought itself to serve as a rule for the model. [...] The model, as understood in the practical execution of the art, is an object that should be repeated as it is; the type, on the contrary, is an object after which each [artist] can conceive works of art that may have no resemblance. All is precise and given in the model; all is more or less vague in the type“.³

3 Quatremère de Quincy 1977 [1832]: 148.

While imitation of a model requires resemblance, Quatremère’s introduction of the novel idea of type allows for a more profound but also more open-ended kind of imitative process, anteceding the possibility of the model and its precision. In Quatremère’s *Dictionnaire*, the new emphasis on type serves to bolster his belief that all architectural making ultimately plays out as metaphorical imitation of nature.

In Quatremère’s original context, ‘type’ has a decidedly idealistic character, typical of the search for givens and irreducible origins prevailing during the Enlightenment:

„At the same time, we see that the imitation of types is nothing that feeling and intellect cannot recognize, and nothing that cannot be opposed by prejudice and ignorance. [...] In every country, the art of regular building is born of a preexisting source. Everything must have an antecedent. Nothing, in any genre, comes from nothing, and this must apply to all of the inventions of man. Also we see that all things, in spite of subsequent changes, have conserved, always visibly, always in a way that

is evident to feeling and reason, this elementary principle, which is like a sort of nucleus about which are collected, and to which are coordinated in time, the developments and variations of forms to which the object is susceptible. Thus we have achieved a thousand things in each genre, and one of the principal occupations of science and philosophy, in order to understand the reasons for them, is to discover their origin and primitive cause. This is what must be called 'type' in architecture, as in every other field of inventions and human institutions".⁴

4 Quatremère de Quincy 1977 [1832]: 148-149.

In Argan's 1962 reception of this classic text, such Neo-Platonist motives have been tempered, if not entirely replaced, by a more Kantian sentiment where the relevance of typology lies not in its ideality but in its capacity for variation.⁵ „It is never formulated *a priori* but always deduced from a series of instances. [...] The birth of a 'type' is therefore dependent on the existence of a series of buildings having between them an obvious formal and functional analogy".⁶ It would thus be appropriate to consider typology a cognitive schema emerging from the procedures of perception, imagination, and conceptualization alike. Typology „is not just a classifying or statistical process."⁷ When Rudolf Wittkower, confronting Palladio's various rural villas in Veneto, "designs' a schema that totalizes the villa type as the geometric-mathematical systematization of the ground plan," he is engaged in type formation.⁸

5 Moneo 1978: 36.

6 Argan 1996 [1963]: 243 (emphasis original).

7 Argan 1996 [1963]: 244.

8 Hays 2016: 209.

What Argan gains from this conclusion is that type „has to be understood as the interior structure of a form or as a principle which contains the possibility of infinite formal variation and further structural modification of the 'type' itself".⁹ Typology, then, is not static but a mode of operation adaptable to change and bifurcation. Neither is typology, according to Argan, chained by historical precedent:

9 Argan 1996 [1963]: 243.

„Through this reduction of preceding works of art to a 'type,' the artist frees himself from being conditioned by a definite historical form, and neutralizes the past".¹⁰

10 Argan 1996 [1963]: 244-245.

Already at the time of Argan's lecture, typology was becoming both an interpretative tool and a defining theoretical focal point for a number of Italian theorists, notably Saverio Muratori, Carlo Aymonino, Vittorio Gregotti, and Aldo Rossi, whose contributions all embody the notion of *continuità*.¹¹ They are usually collectively referred to as *La Tendenza*. Rossi's claims, in *L'architettura della città* (1966) – that architectural type formation is co-dependent on context and urban morphology, and that a building's type can outlast its function – catapulted typology to the forefront of architectural theorizing.

11 Forty 2000: 307-309.

If we accept Anthony Vidler's verdict, in his 1976 *Oppositions* editorial "The Third Typology," the impact of the Italian Neo-Rationalism meant, regardless of methodological variations between theorists, nothing less than the emergence of a new branch of typological thinking in architecture. For the first time in history, Vidler claimed, being sympathetic to the Italian move-

ment, architectural typology was derived from a synchronous relationship with the city, not from external sources of legitimation, such as analogies to nature (the first typology, typical of Enlightenment rationalist reasoning), or to the machine (the second typology, typical of Modernist technological determinism)¹².

12 Vidler 1976: 1-2.

From Vidler's theoretical vantage point, what is achieved with 'the third typology' of Neo-Rationalism is a form-centered „ontology of the city" where architecture has attained autonomy and no longer renders services, symbolic or otherwise, to society or technology. Even functionality is secondary, because it is subjugated to the conditioning effects of type.¹³ The appeal to Vidler of this 'third' view of type formation is understandable, since it neatly allows for both stability and variation. In giving up the Enlightenment rationalization of nature, which Vidler finds eminently expressed in the theory of the 'primitive hut' of Abbé Laugier, another Enlightenment idea – the autonomization of architecture – is gained as compensation. In that sense architecture can finally find its place, joining the ranks of the other arts that have become abstract, media-specific, and emancipated from representation, if one follows the train of thought of formalists such as Clement Greenberg.

13 Moneo 1978: 36.

Rossi's theory of the architecture of the city causes both a materialist turn and a mnemonic turn, yet also carries the imprint of Enlightenment reason which is particularly identifiable in Rossi's fascination with isomorphism between language and architecture. In the end, however, the ideas of 'critical reconstruction' and the recovery of types (and of their intrinsic collective memories) stand in the way of new type formation, hence, in his *Autobiografia scientifica* (1981), Rossi abandoned his former belief in the mnemonic programming of types. Rossi's original idea of the city „is one in which time seems to be frozen".¹⁴ When Rossi arrives at his typology at the expense of the urban lifeworld, which merely occupies his city of permanence temporarily, he does so in direct opposition to the Modernist project of channeling the very forces of urbanization and social dynamics into the design process.¹⁵ If for the avant-gardes of the 1920s, the type formation, if any, was to be guided by the immediate experience of modernity, such a search for immanence and topicality of form was entirely discredited by Rossi's approach, only to return again in new disguises. This idea of making feedback from the urban lifeworld itself the subject matter of architecture reemerged in the 1970s – in two competing versions – in the rival theories of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and Rem Koolhaas, respectively. In reality, though, in many built works by Venturi and Scott Brown, architecture became its own hermetic model, its ironizing results being only decipherable and appreciable by connoisseurs.¹⁶ This retreat to the model was further radicalized in the diagrammatic practice of Peter Eisenman.

14 Moneo 1978: 37.

15 Tafuri 1976: 86, 96.

16 Moneo 1978: 39-40.

The Panoptical Birthplace of Post-Criticality

The shortcomings of Rossi's theory, and of its architectural materializations, are exposed inadvertently when Vidler celebrates Rossi's 1974 project for

a new Regional Administration Building in Trieste for its invocation of an eighteenth-century prison. To Vidler, „the dialectic is clear as a fable“ as the motivic hybridization of ‘prison’ and ‘town hall’ results in a metaphorical effect of oppositions, creating a double code.¹⁷ Still, such ‘analogous architecture’ easily becomes semantically hermetic, as for its oppositional effect to set in, one has to identify two historical building types and their confrontation in the project.

17 Vidler 1976: 3.

The eighteenth-century prison again surfaces in the most unlikely of discourses, when Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting invoke the Benthamian Panopticon and Rem Koolhaas’s Downtown Athletic Club in Manhattan, idealizing these types as the raw material for a disciplinary reorientation of architecture toward the post-critical.¹⁸ Both structures are, it should be noted, imaginary to varying degrees. Although the Downtown Athletic Club did certainly exist and was housed in a particular skyscraper in Manhattan, Koolhaas’s reconstructive – and evocative – hedonistic narrative of a building replete with stratified social life forms is nothing but a historical interpolation.

18 Somol and Whiting 2002: 75.

Somol and Whiting’s choice of the Panopticon, immortalized through Michel Foucault’s emblemizing use of this project as the very mode of operation of disciplinary society, tells us even more about what the post-critical mindset’s reprogramming of typology entails. It is a bold move to ground a new movement in architectural thinking on a model mechanism for confinement, disciplining, and surveillance, even when this mechanism is filtered through the notion of the diagram and the celebration of creativity. Foucault concludes:

„But the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use“.¹⁹

19 Foucault 1995 [1975]: 205.

Nonetheless, the Panopticon *is* actually a dream building. To begin with, its mode of existence was instructive and utopian, and it is thus not the product of type formation in Argan’s sense or in Rossi’s sense, since the Panopticon neither has a material precedent, nor derives from the repository of urban form. It belongs to a genealogy of utopian projects, some of which have been actualized, some not; and it is the unsurpassed *pedagogical* value of the Panopticon that prompted Somol and Whiting to exemplify the diagrammatic mode of operativity through Bentham’s original mind picture, and not via its particular offspring. Virtuality and instrumentality are the two recurring themes in the program for post-criticality, and the Panopticon is an optimum visualization of both.

Partial to the vitalism still popular in architecture schools today, Somol and Whiting’s polemical piece pits practice and performance against history