To raise the question of typology in architecture is to raise a question of the architectural work itself.
— Rafael Moneo, ‘On Typology’, 1978

The concept of ‘type’ in architecture has a function inherently related to the one of language wherein type enables a manner in which to name and describe the artefact, primarily as part of a group of objects. Therefore, as Moneo succinctly points out, ‘the question of typology’ — ‘typology’ being a discourse (logos) on ‘type’ — becomes ‘a question on the architectural work itself’, a question of what kind of object is a work of architecture.

This article will begin by pointing to two characteristics of the question that could help to explain the specific functions of the concept of type in architecture. The first is that accounts of type are informed by the different ways of seeing, thinking and producing the work of architecture. The second characteristic, following on from the first, is that the notion of type, in its various meanings, has played an effective critical role in the confrontations between architecture and the city. Typological debates seek to delineate the ways in which the architectural work, by virtue of its specific conditions of production, engages with its broader milieu — material, urban, civil, political. It is in the basis of these arguments that it seems still possible and relevant to raise the question.

When it first appears in architecture during the 18th century, the word ‘type’, coming from the Greek ὑπός meaning model, matrix, the imprint or a figure in relief, carries a sense of origin closely joined to a universal law or natural principle.

The notion of type, as the law or principle that might explain how forms are generated thus endowing every element with symbolic significance, gained considerable presence among the Enlightenment architectural theorists. In the article ‘Type’, which Quatremère de Quincy wrote for the third volume of his Encyclopédie, published in 1825, type further implied the ‘characteristic form’ or ‘particular physiognomy’ that enables a building to be read as to ‘its fundamental purpose’.

Transferring ideas developed in the natural sciences and studies of language into the theory of architecture, the word ‘type’ was employed in De Quincy’s text not only to indicate the search for origins but to organise ‘all the different kinds of production which belong to architecture’ by expressing at once general characteristics and their ‘particular physiognomy’. The link between form and purpose, general principles and ‘the imprint of the particular intention of each building’, as JF Blondel would describe the physiognomy or character of the singular artefact in 1749, turned type from its overtly symbolic function to a more signifying one. The meaning was to be derived from the formal and functional context of the work itself, a set of pre-existent or fixed referents in outside reality and a system inherent in architecture.

Nonetheless, this amalgam of type as origin, natural principle, symbolic mark and legible form of a purpose, would be fixed in the practice of the academic architect in the first quarter of the 19th century. The establishment of architecture as a distinct discipline and profession, however, took place largely in the context of a view of its practice as socially embedded.
This introduced a historicity into architecture that also reconfigured the notion of type. Conflated with the idea of an artefact socially determined, that is, an outcome of changing social customs and needs rather than of divine or natural origin, type began to designate the process of the formation of a particular building.

Signifying a process as much as an object, type claimed a functional justification as well as an active role in the process of design. It was in these terms that it became extraordinarily evocative in late 19th and early 20th century. Not a fixed ideal to imitate or aspire to, but instead a historically contingent idea, subjected to functional and programmatic changes and eventually, as we shall see, to the overriding law of economy.

Having established a fundamental connection between architecture and society within an abstract and flexible view of history made the notion of type more instrumental to ‘a comprehension of a kind of evolution in architecture’ and, ultimately, to a cultural genealogy of society.” Suspended between an evolving architectural specificity and a general schema, the notion of type brought together the appeal to specificity, the myth of cultural (and ultimately national) integrity and historical dimension. At this point, the question of type and typology became a logical extension of the ideology that extended architecture’s boundaries far beyond the limits customarily ascribed to it either as an art or as a prosaic utility, transforming the figure of the architect into a social redeemer.

**Objet-Type and Standard Product: The New City**

In these terms, the Modernist categories of the ‘typical object’ and the ‘standard product’ are symptomatic of the new understanding of the role of architecture in the articulation and expression of ‘external change or internal demands’ – spatial, material, economic, social. In fact, external changes and needs were internalised and as Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co put it, the notion of typical, now identified with the standard, succeeded in ‘expressing the presuppositions for the construction of the New City’.

Walter Gropius’ rhetoric in *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, published in 1937, is telling: ‘the reiteration of “typical” (ie typified) buildings while “increasingly approximating to the successive stages of a manufacturing process”, “notably enhances civic dignity and coherence”’. Here the ‘typical building’, identical with the ‘typified’ object, became, primarily through industrial manufacturing, a fusion of the best of its anterior forms – a fusion preceded by the elimination of the personal content of their designers and all otherwise ungeneric or non-essential features.’ It was precisely this particular mode of production that, while addressing ‘the needs of the urban industrial population’,

entailed the principles for the emergence of a new harmonious social order. Such an impersonal standard, which was also described by Gropius as a ‘norm’, a word derived from the carpenter’s square, functioned as an ideal to educate and nurture the inhabitants of the new city, as citizens of a democracy linked in an intrinsically spatial field.

The connection between industrial production and a normative framework for the growing urban population had already been established in the early days of Modernism: typisierung and the objet-type are but examples of it. What was different now was that the concepts of the typical and standard, incorporated into a set of new economies – material, technical, spatial, visual and graphic – became the physical prerequisite for producing the social field. In fact, they provided, through the very features of their design, a diagrammatic manifestation of this field. Their graphic formulizations exemplified a form of production of the urban environment, considered as the logical precondion of moral regeneration and civic happiness.

The ‘typical’ did not provide just a model for the production of the singular artefact – it was a built component, a piece of furniture, a dwelling unit or the urban block. It provided a framework for conceptualising architecture as part of a social and ideological agenda. It had a strong bearing on architectural arguments that sought to formalise the connection between the singular and processes of production of the collective. It was precisely this articulation of the individual and the collective that insinuated type in the social and political aspirations of Modernism.
In these terms, the ethical value of the Modernist type consisted in the combination of the ideal of architectural perfection with the laws of economy and the reality of mass production. This sense of architectural perfection was succinctly expressed in Karel Teige’s words, written in 1932, as ‘any “ideal proposal” that would be technically and economically capable’ of realisation.’ Thus, the ‘ideal proposal’, ‘a strictly standardised element’, was an analytical scheme in which programmatic functions and architectural elements on the one hand, and economic and technical variants on the other, could be unified around an idea of dwelling in the modern city.

Furthermore, this idea of dwelling was not so much concerned with the domestic in terms of spatial scale, but incited a programmatic and ideological link between the reality of mass production, a culture of dwelling and the ideals of the future – the ideals of the new relationship between the individual, the social and the city. This is reflected in the plans of individual dwelling units which were specific enough yet strategically general, on the one hand, to represent a fragment of inhabitable terrain that could be mapped and regulated, and on the other, to effectively project a schema of life across the entire social body.

To recapitulate, at the heart of the programme of the objet-type is a procedure by which a series of distinct but repetitive functions or activities are imposed on the individual. By incorporating the individual, thus controlled, within a system, the growth of that system is both ensured (by multiplication of the typified elements) and regulated (by repetition of established functions). Put succinctly, the individual is rendered typical, in order to contribute to the generative and regulative operations of the city, that is, a type of development.

Urban Typologies: The City as History
The conceptual and visual engagement of the different scales in the above account of the typical and type paradoxically exposes a desire for ultimate synthesis and visual coherence to be achieved in the New City. The question raised in the rethinking of the modern city in the 1950s and 1960s is what happens to the immediate conformity between the sequence of unitary elements and the synthetic instant, when we confront the complex and rather ambiguous figure of the ‘existing city’.

But to define the ‘existing city’, how its identity is to be understood and engaged with, proved a rather complex task. Nothing illustrates more clearly this difficulty than the historic research done in Italy by Saverio Muratori and Ernesto Rogers in the 1950s, and later, Aldo Rossi and Giulio Carlo Argan. Despite the often conflicting attitudes involved in these explorations, the aim was to stress by means of a typological permanence the cultural continuity of what Rogers would describe as the ‘pre-existing conditions’ (preesistenze ambientali). In these studies, undoubtedly displaying aspects of the
contemporaneous critique of the Functionalist city, any construction was thought as 'a completed cultural history'. The architectural work was analysed and conceived as a singular entity (not a unitary element), and at the same time an expression of the development of the urban aggregate within a given place, which was the region, and within a precise historical space, the city.

On the one hand, the city was read as a structure that constantly evolves and changes, yet certain features were constant in time, and therefore typical; that is, constituent factors of that structure. On the other, this was an attempt to develop a working method; a method which invoked history in a series of transformations rather than a sequential unfolding of time. This method brought together ideas on history and principles of morphology already formulated in the 1930s by thinkers such as Henri Focillon. In particular, Focillon's idea of art as a system in perpetual development of coherent forms and of history as a superimposition of geological strata that permits us to read each fraction of time as if it was at once past, present and future is interestingly relevant.

A work of art, according to Focillon, was 'an attempt to express something that is unique', but it was likewise 'an integral part of a system of highly complex relationships'. Forms thus acquire in their stratified evolution a life that follows its own trajectory and can be generalised only on the level of method. It was in very similar terms that Ernesto Rogers, editor of Casabella – Continuità during the 1950s, understood the architectural work and project. For Rogers, the individual artefact was a sensible form, a singular and specific outcome, here and now, but also part of a broader structure, and as such a process in search of laws by means of which this structure might receive a greater degree of clarity. Thus the architectural project consisted primarily in a 'methodological process' (processo metodologico) seeking to identify the 'most salient qualities' (emergenza più saliente) of the existing structure (material, urban, civil, cultural) and capture its 'specific essence' (essenza specifica).

Moreover, if the 'ideal of an individual architecture' was 'an element distinct in the time and space of experience', it was only 'the successive experiences' of these distinct moments in the life of the individual artefact that ultimately 'achieve a synthesis'. History here shifts into the realm of memory, and the singular form was not only to signify its own distinct individuality; it became a sign of forms and events that were part of a collective – that is, urban – memory. In these terms, any architectural form, existing or new, was the expression of its particular character at a specific time and place, but also embodied the memory of previous forms and functions.

If the work was to be read, by means of associations, within the construct of this collective memory, type was the 'apparatus' (using Aldo Rossi's term) which, fusing history and memory, could produce a dialectics between the individual object and the collective subject, between the idea of the object and the memory of its multiple actualities. It is precisely this dialectics which, for Rossi, was to ultimately constitute the structure of the city, a 'collective possession that', in its turn, 'must be presupposed before any significance can be attributed' to the individual work.
For Rossi, the relationship between locus and citizenry is to inform the city’s predominant image. Many of the emerging forms of urbanity, however, are partially or completely novel systems of relations and, often, novel institutional orders. New processes of economic and cultural activity problematise the traditional bond between territory and people, and citizenship is often constituted in a radically different way.

As he wrote in the early 1960s, ‘the city is in itself a repository of history’. This could be understood from two different points of view. In the first, the city is above all ‘a material artefact, a man-made object built over time and retaining the traces of time, even if in a discontinuous way’. Studied from this point of view, ‘cities become historical texts’ and type is but an instrument of analysis, to enter into and decipher this text, a function similar to the archaeological section. The second point of view acknowledges history as the awareness of the historical process, the ‘collective imagination’. This leads to one of Rossi’s prominent ideas that the city is the locus of the ‘relationship of the collective to its place’. And it is type, this time as an element of design, which enables the formal articulations of this relationship.

In this notion of type, we see an attempt to reinvest the work of architecture with a dimension of meaning, something that is not dissimilar to de Quincy’s understanding of type within a system analogous to language. Only, in this case, the meaning depends on a kind of collective memory. Nonetheless, the suggestion of type as a formal register of the collective but also an instrument of analysis as well as an element of design that can transform theoretical speculations into operative means for making architecture in the present was mostly evident in these studies, yet always recurrent in the critical discourse of architecture.

Politics of Type: The Contemporary City

One could now attempt to reinstate this suggestion in contemporary terms. Prior to that, however, the question ought to be posed as to whether the question of type and typology is still pertinent. If it is concerned with ‘a question of the architectural work itself’, there are certain criteria that provide an overall different framework for thinking about the architectural work and its engagement with the city.

The first of these criteria is, broadly speaking, historical. Every time brings specific conditions to the manner in which the claims on architecture and the city are made. So, the very meaning of type, architectural work and city cannot be separated from the historical situations within which it functions. It is worth noting at this point that in the ideas discussed here, type as model and natural principle, legible form of a purpose, a diagram of the new and the locus of collective memory, the relation to language has always been implicit, and indeed, operative. As Moneo writes, even ‘the very act of naming the architectural object is a process that from the nature of language, is forced to typify’. Yet this can only operate within a general logic of signification that confers meaning on the object by situating it in a relational structure or network.

This brings us to the second criterion, which is social. In order for an artefact to be recognised as such, it has to abide by the broad parameters operative in a particular community.
This is, for instance, what the categories of the ‘typical object’ and the ‘standard product’ attempted to entirely reconfigure. They were part of a rhetoric whose aim was to produce a new and distinctive way of talking about architecture by turning ‘particulars into abstract generalities’ such as the individual, the ‘dwelling unit’, the ‘collective’ and so on. In new urban formations, however, or existing cities which are inscribed with a multiplicity of economies and identities – ethnical, racial, cultural and religious – representations of a globality which have not been recognised as such or are contested representations, a single model or method cannot be imposed. The material (and immaterial) forces that mould these communities are diverse and produce a distinctive inter-urban and intra-urban geography. Each of these communities establishes a logic of signification that presupposes a specific understanding of what meaning is, how it operates, the normative principles it should abide by, its social function and so on.

For Rossi, the relationship between locus and citizenry is to inform the city’s predominant image. Many of the emerging forms of urbanity, however, are partially or completely novel systems of relations and, often, novel institutional orders. New processes of economic and cultural activity problematise the traditional bond between territory and people, and citizenship is often constituted in a radically different way.

In this context, how can the work of architecture engage with the city in terms of its structuring? How can the multiple regimes of the architectural project address the new modes of production of the urban environment and a very different account of the political role of architecture in this environment? Is it possible that the architectural project still engages conceptions of space, norms of use and modes of appropriation that are not simply forms of mediation between polarities such as individual/collective, architectural/urban, past/present, new/existing but become effective in a more relational configuration?

It seems to me that the question of type and typology could become extremely effective if the architectural project is rethought in terms of a method that may define the general coordinates within which architectural works and urban strategies can be distinguished, yet their delimitations are precisely negotiated. Moreover, the question cannot be framed simply in relation to formal or methodological issues, but within a scheme that redefines the aesthetic coordinates of the community through implementing the connections between spatial and formal practices, forms of life, conceptions of thought and figures of the community. At the very end, it is an architectural question which implements the presupposition of politics, if politics ‘revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’.

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Hannes Meyer, Co-op Vitrine with Co-op Standard Products, Basel, 1925

E May and E Kaufmann, Furnishings of Small Apartments with Folding Beds, Frankfurt, 1929

below: The virtues of economy in the production of forms of living considered ‘typical’ of the ‘modern age’.
Notes

4. ‘While a simple notion of type of progress might aspire to the “perfectionity” of each type, only an internal understanding of the constructive laws of types, and the dynamic transformations of these laws under the threat of external change or internal demands, could open the way to a comprehension of a kind of evolution in architecture.’ Anthony Vidler, ‘The Idea of Type: The Transformation of the Academic Ideal, 1750–1830’, in Oppositions, 8, 1977, p.108.
7. ‘A standard may be defined as that simplified practical exemplar of anything in general use which embodies a fusion of the best of its anterior forms — a fusion preceded by the elimination of the personal content of their designers and all otherwise ungeneric or non-essential features. Such an impersonal standard is called a “norm”, a word derived from a carpenter’s square.’ Walter Gropius, ibid, p 26.
10. Ibid, p 252.
11. Saverio Muratori, Studi per un’opera re storica urbana di Venezia, Piigráfico dello Stato (Rome), 1960, p 2. An earlier version appears in Palladio 1–2 (1959), pp 97–106. Saverio Muratori (1910–73) had come from Rome where he was associated with the Gruppo degli Urbanisti Romani (GUR) and began his research on the city of Venice when he was asked to teach at the Institute Universitario di Architettura in 1950.
14. The Life of Forms in Art, op cit, p. 6. In fact, in L’avenir de l’esthétique, published in 1929, Etienne Souriau is the first one to define aesthetics in terms of a ‘science of forms’ (science des formes): a science that studies forms in their own structuring. Opposing the tendency of the time to reside on the psychological analysis of the pleasure of the artist and the viewer, Souriau and Focillon considered the artwork as if it was bearer of an autonomous sense.
20. Adrian Forty discusses these categories (the individual, the human) in relation to the rhetoric of modernism. He notes: ‘… a marked tendency to turn particulars into abstract generalities, for example, walls become “the wall,” streets “the street,” a path becomes “the route,” a house “the dwelling,” and so on.’ Adrian Forty, Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture, Thames & Hudson (London), 2000.