

OBRA: THE TIMELESS ANACHRONISM OF TYPE

Nader Tehrani, 2016

The work of Jennifer Lee and Pablo Castro opens up fresh questions about the role of typology in the architectural discipline. It is maybe no accident that the academy has virtually forgotten the term 'type'; its loss, of course, has been part of a more deliberate overturning, a challenge to the return of historical patterns, organizations and forms of the 1970's and 80's.

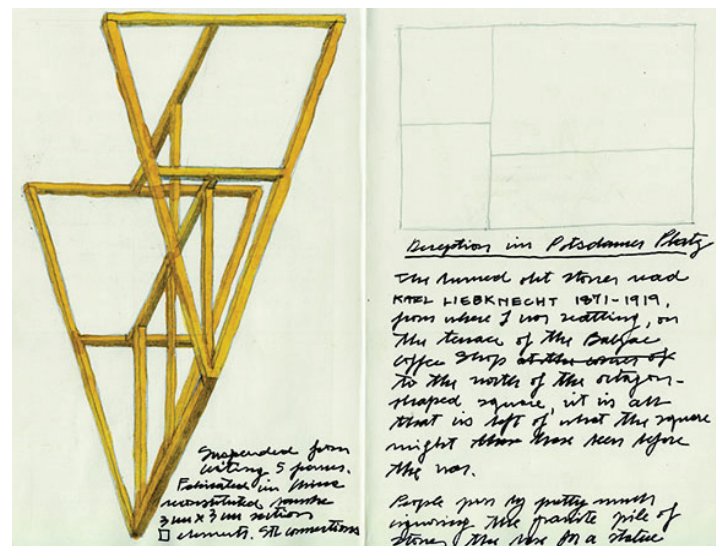
The re-emergence of the discussion on typology was set in motion in the 1960's, with a variety of critical texts, among them Giulio Carlo Argan's "On the Typology of Architecture" where he outlines the various categories within which certain foundational conventions coalesce: the configuration of buildings, major structural systems and decorative elements. Of course, many other texts ensued, producing a broader debate, and a corresponding variation on areas of emphasis, with Aldo Rossi, Joseph Rykwert, Colin Rowe, Alan Colquhoun, Rafael Moneo, Anthony Vidler and Jorge Silvetti, just to name a few, who would chime in on the conversation. Between the set, a corresponding variation on areas of emphasis was unleashed; for instance, while some may be predisposed to an iconographic reading of type, others may have sought a more abstract reading of plans or facades, as elements of a compositional system, or further that types may not only be indifferent to function, but also to iconographic definition. In all, an extensive and almost hybrid evolution of a discourse on type emerged, operating on many levels of performance. However, rich as the debate evolved for over a decade, unleashing a relationship between theory and practice that would produce buildings of far greater spatial and organizational range than what modernism could produce on its own terms, its demise was also linked to the way in which much of mainstream architecture culture sought legitimation through the crutch of history -- in this case, the valorization of typology as having the authority of an 'origin', rather than the idea of a malleable and transformable organizational system. Maybe even worse, was the way in which the type was conflated with the idea of figuration --or the icon-- and how that 'figurative' project sought to upstage some of the more nuances configurative plays in typological studies.

Of course, the power of type can be argued to be precisely the result of its configurative flexibility, to be translated at varied scales, to be mutable, deformable and malleable in its accommodation of context and function. For instance, it is the very conceptual space within which the organization of buildings comes into conversation with the morphology of cities, and the idea of site at large. As such, OBRA's work undertakes a two-fold strategy, not only to address the particularities of unique sites (accommodating history and evolution), but also to engage the autonomy of powerful types to define --or make-- the site altogether (looking forward and imagining its future). If

anything, its mutability is a repudiation of the idea of originality, and rather gains its intellectual traction from its generic characteristics making it a ready-made ripe for translation to another state. By extension, the idea of "type" gains its power of 'becoming' due to its dynamic, fluid, and evolving qualities, and thus much more open to manipulation, transformation, and reinvention.

OBRA's confident, and somewhat unfashionable, adoption of architectural typologies as a foundation for transformation is, in many ways, a critical extension of this tradition. Neither submerged under the pressure of contemporary fascination with technology, nor the historical reliance on history as the basis for legitimation, their conversation with types is at once generic and practical but also more importantly the site of deformation, mutation and critical re-evaluation --in short, architectural invention.

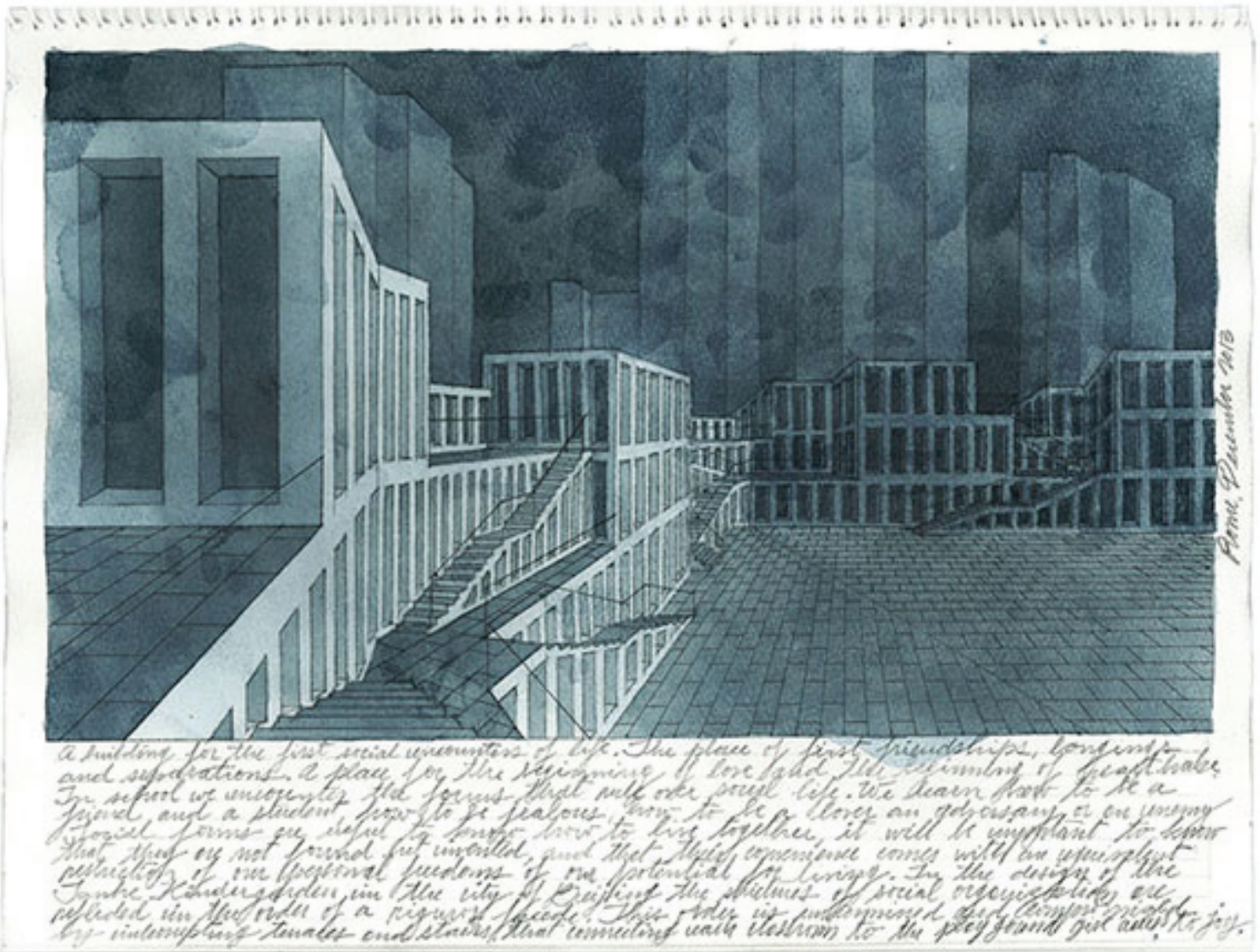
Side-stepping the more recent focus on surfaces, and the rhetorical emphasis on the continuity between architectural elements, theirs is also a research that once again, re-establishes the dead-pan acknowledgment that whether seen from a structural, functional or morphological perspective, that floors, walls and roofs simply involve different tectonic potentials. As such, they challenge the overt reliance on the parametric opportunism related to the formation of smooth, striated and continuous morphologies, while also working deftly with the very same technologies to develop a systems approach to breaking down construction elements, with an eye of means and methods, to absorb digital intelligence without falling into its rhetorical traps.



For OBRA, then, the adoption of type finds its expression in three significant guises: in organization, in figuration, and in the formation of systems.

The first, as one can witness in works such as Casa Osa, Ascoli Piceno or the Sanhe Kindergarten, where some of the more foundational configurative aspects of spatial organization come to allow for the accommodation of geographic, programmatic and material accommodation. In Casa Osa, the generic U-shaped open court is duplicated into two quasi-symmetrical spaces, reflecting the similar yet differing desires and orientations of the inhabitants -here think Doctor Doolittle's "pushmi-pullyu". This simple organization, once laid out onto the site is then called on to negotiate the treacherous terrain that informs the various accommodations of what would otherwise be a rather straight house. Indexing the topography, the roof-line and the section of the house mirrors its landscape, allowing for the geographic terrain to transform the ascent of the house to a state of estrangement. Given the location of the house in Costa Rica, the liminal connection to the site radicalizes its varied connections to the tree-line, the ground, and the vary natural fauna that is a central part of the experience of the place. In Ascoli Piceno, the

inevitable expansion of a historic center is confronted with the engagement of new typologies of the 'periferie', and the markings of vehicular and suburban necessities. However, in OBRA's reformulation, the combinatory effect of the abstract bar, bent to produce both the street wall and tower, offer an alternative to the terrain vague of the current periphery, to create the density of urban streets on the one hand, with the skyline of towers, the reflection of the old town, now altered in scale and proportion. Almost impossible in terms of constraints, the project teeters on the impossible, but always within reach of the types of spaces that draw it back into cultural rituals, forming streets, courts, piazzas that form the backdrop of the "passeggiata" and other such events that describe the public realm. The Vertical extension of the project is an attempt to establish a triangulated dialogue between the apartments inside the long skinny towers, the skyline of the old city and the Sibiline Mountains to the west. From anyone of these three one should be able to see the other two. The absurdity of the extreme slenderness of the tower, relates to the existing skyline but it allows this new relationship and gives it palpable presence. The Sanhe Kindergarten takes this same discipline and pushes it to the extreme. Beginning with a spatial module, the type is reduced to a struc-



tural skeleton, repeated three times and erased of all unnecessary elements. Stacked on three floors, almost innocently, the introduction of stairs punctuate the symmetry of the three volumes in ways that defy its stagnancy, creating out of a rational order, the chaos of a juvenile playground. In the silence of its construction, one can already witness the chaos of kids, as they run to the yard at the moment of the bell.

The second trope at work in the work of OBRA is its manipulation of the type, as icon; in projects such as the Freedom Park, MOMA PS1, and the Oxymoron Pavilion, the legibility of form is acknowledged in the figure of the buildings and their systems, but subsequently their plots are thickened by way of added spatial and tectonic elaborations, cleverly allowing these buildings to evolve beyond the immediacy of form. In Freedom Park, the obvious and acknowledged reference to the Baobab tree to form its skyline is an initial excuse to invite interpretation, but its subsequent transformation into a circular promenade challenges not only the familiar Wrightian descents we have seen at the Guggenheim, but also expands on how the coupling of other cylinders might unwind that promenade into neighboring spaces, gaining access to light and scales of difference in the framing of exhibit spaces. At MOMA PS 1, the simple arch defines its archetypal structural and spatial module, and yet the nesting of various arches into each other further invites the continuity of experience into the existing courtyard by way of a mat organization, peppering covered and courtyard spaces in relation to each other. Here, figural clarity of the arch is challenged by the geometric imperative of a Boolean, and the redefinition of the larger court becomes the expression of that negotiation: neither pure, nor unidentifiable, the project lingers delicately between conventions of recognition and the delight of discovery. The Oxymoron Pavilion, similar to the two other projects, launches its figure with the same platonic purity of the other projects, this time with a spiral. It is, however, the breakdown of the tectonic system that upholds the figure that surprises: a series of diagonally voided structural members lean on each other, in the formation of a Tipi. A tension arises out of the contradiction of the tectonic systems that uphold the figure and the

purity of the supported envelope, as it to coexist, and yet offer opposing logics. In all projects, there is an acknowledgement of the inevitability of rhetoric of one sign or another, especially if seen from the eyes of multiple audiences who bring with themselves divergent horizon of expectations; to know that the reading of their buildings will invariably operating between the sign, experience and systems is also a way for them to encrypt the layering of certain narratives within them.

It is in the third area of systems that OBRA's focus on type expands its interpretation to material and assembly configurations that help to thicken the ways in which their work defies mere form making. With an intricacy of investments in material and technical joinery, one can tell that their work is deliberate in its silence, given the vocality of its development in some projects. Beyond the Oxymoron Pavilion, the Urbia Furniture Systems project, in fact, stretches beyond the idea of furnishing to become a bona fide architectural investment in forming space, producing thresholds and envelopes, and embedding programs and functions within its finely detailed and well crafted wood joinery. It is a project that seeks to define typology not in its abstraction, but rather in the form of a DNA, as the detail scale, that can then be reconfigured in a multitude of ways to accommodate a range of architectural scenarios; here, the detail foresees multiple spatial typologies, but the typical detail is its arena of invention. It imagines that typology may also create a part to whole relationship such that the many eventualities of an architectural investigation may fore-shadowed through the microscopic scale.

Brought together, the preoccupation with type, is somehow activated by what is its most salient and dynamic agent: not that which is an innate part of a type, nor a generic condition, or a system, but rather that which deviates from it. Behind all this preoccupation lies a desire for a social contract, whereby architecture may yet again be seen as a system of communication that speaks beyond itself to many levels of audiences, such that the formation of common grounds can be seen as the foundation of poetic challenges. It is as if they are trying to build something that engages them to a broader audience --to belong to them--, and to be part of a scientific project that helps build a social project. By extension, these categories only help to advance an idea about type that reinforces the connection between architecture and the city. Less focused on authorship and the role of the individual voice, the lexicon of organizational systems that types offer create a common foundation from which a common language may be identified. The poetic, then, is achieved through the well-known strategy of de-familiarization: the overturning of conventions to produce that which is curiously familiar yet strange --common, yet unprecedented. The deliberate restraint is demonstrated through the confidence of presenting the world around us, as is, without the anxiety of invention, only as a Trojan Horse to lure us into a state of recognition, and then to summarily pull the carpet from under the stability of our foundations.

