Selected Readings from
A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in
Architecture 1973–1984

Edited and with an introduction by
K. Michael Hays

Published by
Princeton Architectural Press
New York

OPPOSITIONS READER

Published by
Princeton Architectural Press
37 East Seventh Street
New York, New York 10003
212.995.9620

For a free catalog of books,
call 1.800.722.6657
Visit our web site at www.papress.com

Oppositions Reader 01998
Princeton Architectural Press

Printed and bound in the United States
0201009998 54321
First edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Oppositions reader : selected readings from a journal for ideas and criticism in architecture, 1973–1984 / edited and with an introduction by K. Michael Hays.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-56898-152-X (cloth : alk. paper). — ISBN 1-56898-153-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Architecture, Modern—20th century. 2. Architecture, Postmodern. 3. Deconstructivism (architecture) I. Hays, K. Michael. II. Oppositions.
NA680.069 1998
724'.6—dc21 98-33810
CIP

Contents

From the middle of the eighteenth century, two distinct typologies have informed the production of architecture.

The first, developed out of the rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment, and initially formulated by the **Abbé** Laugier, proposed that a natural basis for design was to be found in the model of the primitive hut. The second, growing out of the need to confront the question of mass production at the end of the nineteenth century, and most clearly stated by Le Corbusier, proposed that the model of architectural design should be founded in the production process itself. Both typologies were firm in their belief that rational science, and later technological production, embodied the most progressive **"forms"** of the age, and that the mission of architecture was to conform to, and perhaps even master these forms as the agent of progress.

With the current questioning of the premises of **the** Modern Movement, there has been a renewed interest in the forms and fabric of pre-industrial cities, which again raises the issue of typology in architecture. From Aldo **Rossi's** transformations of the formal structure and typical institutions of the eighteenth-century city, to the sketches of the brothers **Krier** that recall the primitive types of the Enlightenment philosophes, rapidly multiplying examples suggest the emergence of a new, third typology.

We might characterize the fundamental attribute of this third typology as an espousal, not of an abstract nature, nor of a technological utopia, but rather of the traditional city as the locus of its concern. The city, that is, provides the material for classification, and the forms of its artifacts provide the basis for re-composition. This third typology, like the first two, is clearly based on reason and classification as its guiding principles and thus differs markedly from those latter-day romanticisms of **"townscape"** and "strip-city" that have been proposed as replacements for Modern Movement urbanism since the fifties.

Nevertheless, a closer scrutiny reveals that the idea of type held by the eighteenth-century rationalists was of a very different order from that of the early modernists and that the third typology now emerging is radically different from both.

The celebrated "primitive hut" of Laugier, paradigm of the first typology, was founded on a belief in the rational order of nature; the origin of each architectural element was natural; the chain that linked the column to the hut to the city was parallel to the chain that linked

the natural world; and the primary geometries favored for the combination of type-elements were seen as expressive of the underlying form of nature beneath its surface appearance.

While the early Modern Movement also made an appeal to nature, it did so more as an analogy than as an ontological premise. It referred especially to the newly developing nature of the machine. This second typology of architecture was now equivalent to the typology of mass production objects (subject themselves to a quasi-Darwinian law of the selection of the fittest). The link established between the column, the house-type and the city was seen as analogous to the pyramid of production from the smallest tool to the most complex machine, and the primary geometrical forms of the new architecture were seen as the most appropriate for machine tooling.

In these two typologies, architecture, made by man, was being compared and legitimized by another "nature" outside itself. In the third typology, as exemplified in the work of the new Rationalists, however, there is no such attempt at validation. The columns, houses, and urban spaces, while linked in an unbreakable chain of continuity, refer only to their own nature as architectural elements, and their geometries are neither scientific nor technical but essentially architectural. It is clear that the nature referred to in these recent designs is no more nor less than the nature of the city itself, emptied of specific social content from any particular time and allowed to speak simply of its own formal condition.

This concept of the city as the site of a new typology is evidently born of a desire to stress the continuity of form and history against the fragmentation produced by the elemental, institutional, and mechanistic typologies of the recent past. The city is considered as a whole, its past and present revealed in its physical structure. It is in itself and of itself a new typology. This typology is not built up out of separate elements, nor assembled out of objects classified according to use, social ideology, or technical characteristics: it stands complete and ready to be de-composed into fragments. These fragments do not re-invent institutional type-forms nor repeat past typological forms: they are selected and reassembled according to criteria derived from three levels of meaning—the first, inherited from meanings ascribed by the past existence of the forms; the second, derived from choice of the specific fragment and its boundaries, which often cross between previous types; the third, proposed by a re-composition of these fragments in a new context.

Such an "ontology of the city" is indeed radical. It denies all the social utopian and progressively positivist definitions of architecture for the last two hundred years. No longer is architecture a realm that has to relate to a hypothesized "society" in order to be conceived and unders'tood; no longer does "architecture write history" in the sense of particularizing a specific social condition in a specific time or place. The need to speak of function, of social mores-of anything, that is, beyond the nature of architectural form itself—is removed. At this point, as Victor Hugo realized so presciently in the 1830s, communication through the printed word, and lately through the mass media has released architecture from the role of "social book" into its specialized domain.

This does not of course mean that architecture in this sense no longer performs any function, no longer satisfies any need beyond the whim of an "art for art's sake" designer, but simply that the principal conditions for the invention of object and environments do not necessarily have to include a unitary statement of fit between form and use. Here it is that the adoption of the city as the site for the identification of the architectural typology becomes crucial. In the accumulated experience of the city, its public spaces and institutional forms, a typology can be understood that defies a one-to-one reading of function, but which, at the same time, ensures a relation at another level to a continuing tradition of city life. The distinguishing characteristic of the new ontology beyond the specifically formal aspect is that the city, as opposed to the single **column,** the hut-house, or the useful machine, is and always has been political in its essence. The fragmentation and re-composition of its spatial and institutional forms thereby can never be separated from the political implications.

When a series of typical forms are selected from the past of a city, they do not come, however dismembered, deprived of their original political and social meaning. The original sense of the form, the layers of accrued implication deposited by time and human experience cannot be lightly brushed away; and certainly it is not the intention of the Rationalists to disinfect their types in this way. Rather, the carried meanings of these types may be used to provide a key to their newly invested meanings. The technique, or rather the fundamental compositional method suggested by the Rationalists is the transformation of selected types—partial or whole—into entirely new entities that draw their communicative power and potential critical force from the understanding of this transformation. The City Hall project for Trieste by Aldo Rossi, for example, has been rightly understood to refer, among other evocations in its complex form, to the image of a late eighteenth-century prison. In the period of the first formalization of this type, as **Piranesi** demonstrated, it was possible to see in prison a powerfully comprehensive image of the dilemma of society itself, poised between a disintegrating religious faith and a materialist reason. Now, Rossi, in ascribing to the city-hall (itself a recognizable type in the nineteenth century) the affect of prison, attains a new level of signification, which evidently is a reference to the ambiguous condition of civic government. In the formulation, the two types are not merged: indeed, city hall has been replaced by open arcade standing in contradiction on prison. The dialectic is clear as a fable: the society that understands the reference to prison will still have need of the reminder, while at the very point that the image finally loses all meaning, the society will either have become entirely prison, or, perhaps, its opposite. The metaphoric opposition deployed in this example can be traced in many of **Rossi's** schemes and in the work of the Rationalists as a whole, not only in institutional form but also in the spaces of the city.

This new typology is explicitly critical of the Modern Movement; it utilizes the clarity of the eighteenth-century city to rebuke the fragmentation, de-centralization, and formal disintegration introduced into contemporary urban life by the zoning techniques and technological advances of the twenties. While the Modern Movement found its hell in the closed, cramped, and insalubrious quarters of the old industrial

cities, and its Eden in the uninterrupted sea of sunlit space filled with greenery—a city become a garden—the new typology as a critique of modern urbanism raises the continuous fabric, the clear distinction between public and private marked by the walls of street and square, to the level of principle. Its nightmare is the isolated building set in an undifferentiated park. The heroes of this new typology are therefore to be found not among the nostalgic, anti-city utopians of the nineteenth century nor among the critics of industrial and technical progress of the twentieth, but rather among those who, as the professional servants of urban life, direct their design skills to solving the questions of avenue, arcade, street and square, park and house, institution and equipment in a continuous typology of elements that together coheres with past fabric and present intervention to make one comprehensible experience of the city.

For this typology, there is no clear set of rules for the transformations and their objects, nor any polemically defined set of historical precedents. Nor should there be; the continued vitality of this architectural practice rests in its essential engagement with the precise demands of the present and not in any holistic mythicization of the past. It refuses any "nostalgia" in its evocations of history, except to give its restorations sharper focus; it refuses all unitary descriptions of the social meaning of form, recognizing the specious quality of any single ascription of social order to an architectural order; it finally refuses all eclecticism, resolutely filtering its "quotations" through the lens of a modernist aesthetic. In this sense, it is ah entirely modern movement, and one that places its faith in the essentially public nature of all architecture, as against the increasingly private visions of romantic individualists in the last decade. In it, the city and typology are reasserted as the only possible bases for the restoration of a critical role to an architecture otherwise assassinated by the apparently endless cycle of production and consumption.