

# GIULIO CARLO ARGAN ON THE TYPOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE

This article appeared first in a volume of essays (edited by Karl Oettinger and Mohammed Rassem) offered to Professor Hans Sedlmayr on his sixty-fifth birthday, and published in Munich by C. H. Beck in 1962. It seemed to the translator to approach a subject which is central to speculation about architectural theory both in this country and in America—but to do so from a rather unfamiliar standpoint and so contribute a new element to current discussion.

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Most modern critics who depend ultimately on some form of idealistic philosophy would deny that an architectural typology could in any way be valid. They are right in so far as it would be absurd to maintain that the formal value of a circular temple is increased as it approaches an ideal "type" of circular temple. Such an ideal "type" is only an abstraction; so it is inconceivable that an architectural "type" could be proposed as a standard by which the individual work of art could be valued. On the other hand it cannot be denied that architectural typologies have been formulated and passed down in theoretical treatises and the work of famous architects. It is therefore legitimate to postulate the question of typology as a function both of the historical process of architecture and also of the thinking and working processes of individual architects.

There is an obvious analogy between architectural typology and iconography; typology may not be a determining factor of the creative process, but it is always in evidence much as iconography is in figurative arts, though its presence is not always obvious. How does an architectural "type" appear? Those critics who would admit that "types" have a certain importance are those who explain architectural forms in relation to a symbolism or to a ritual pattern connected with them. This kind of criticism has not

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resolved (and cannot resolve) a crucial problem: does symbolic content exist before the creation of the "type" and determine it—or is it just a subsequent deduction? This question of precedence is, however, not decisive where it is considered in the context of an historical process; when symbolic content precedes the "type" and determines it, this content is only transmitted in connection with certain architectural forms; in the same way when the reverse happens, the succession of forms transmits the symbolic content in a more or less conscious manner. There are cases in which symbolic content is sought for consciously as a link to an ancient formal tradition; such a procedure may become an important consideration by virtue of its historical and aesthetic function. Two test cases of a conscious linking of architectural form with ideological content are those of the symbolism of centralized religious building of the Renaissance studied by [Rudolf] Wittkower; and that of a Baroque architectural allegory studied by [Hans] Sedlmayr.

Quatremère de Quincy gives a precise definition of an architectural "type" in his historical dictionary. The word "type," he says, does not present so much an image of something to be copied or imitated exactly as the idea of an element which should itself serve as a rule for the model...

the model understood as part of the practical execution of art is an object which should be imitated for what it is the "type" on the other hand is something in relation to which different people may conceive works of art having no obvious resemblance to each other. All is exact and defined in the model; in the "type" everything is more or less vague. The imitation of "types" therefore has nothing about it which defies the operation of sentiment and intelligence....

The notion of the vagueness or generality of the "type" which cannot therefore directly affect the design of buildings or their formal quality; also explains its generation, the way in which a "type" is formed. It is never formulated *a priori* but always deduced from a series of instances. So the "type" of a circular temple is never identifiable with this or that circular temple (even if one definite building, in this case the Pantheon, may have had and continues to have a particular importance) but is always the result of the confrontation and fusion of all circular temples. 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. In other words, when a "type" is determined in the practice or theory of architecture, it already has an existence as an answer to a complex of ideological, religious, or practical demands which arise in a given historical condition of whatever culture.

In the process of comparing and superimposing individual forms so as to determine the "type," particular characteristics of each individual building are eliminated and only those remain which are common to every unit of the series. The "type" therefore, is formed through a process of reducing a complex of formal variants to a common root form. If the "type" is produced through such a process of regression, the root form which is then found cannot be taken as an analogue to something as neutral as a structural grid. It 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. It is not, in fact, necessary to demonstrate that if the final form

of a building is a variant of a "type" deduced from a preceding formal series, the addition of another variant to the series will necessarily determine a more or less considerable change of the whole "type."

Two salient facts show that the formative process of a typology is not just a classifying or statistical process but one carried out for definite formal ends. Firstly: typological series do not arise only in relation to the physical functions of buildings but are tied to their configuration. The fundamental "type" of the circular shrine for instance, is independent of the functions, sometimes complex, which such buildings must fulfill. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that an attempt was made to set up a typology based on the order of physical functions (typical plans for hospitals, hotels, schools, banks, etc.) which, however, has not produced any important formal results. Historical "types," such as centrally planned or longitudinal temples, or those resulting from a combination of the two plans, are not intended to satisfy contingent, practical requirements; they are meant to deal with more profound problems which—at least within the limits of any given society—are thought fundamental and constant; it is, therefore, essential to lay claim to all the experience matured in the past in order to be able to conceive forms in such a way that they will continue to be thought valid in the future. However much a "type" may allow of variation, the ideological content of forms has a constant base, though this may—indeed should—assume a particular accent or character at any particular time. Secondly, although an infinite number of classes and sub-classes of "types" may be formulated, formal architectural typologies will always fall into three main categories; the first concerned with a complete configuration of buildings, the second with major structural elements and the third with decorative elements. Examples of the first category are centrally or longitudinally planned buildings; of the second, flat or domed roofs, traviated or arcuated systems; and of the third, orders of columns, ornamental details, etc. Now, it is clear that a classification so constituted follows the succession of the architect's working process (plan, structural system, surface treatment) and that it is intended to provide a typological guide for the architect to follow in the process of conceiving a building. So that the working out of every architectural project has this typological aspect; whether it is that the architect consciously follows the "type" or wants to depart from it; or even in the sense that every building is an attempt to produce another "type."

But if the "type" is a schema or grid and the schema inevitably embodies a moment of rigidity or inertia, the presence of such a schema needs to be explained in the context of an artist's creative process. This leads one back naturally to the general problem of the relation between artistic creation and historical experience, since it is from historical experience that the "type" is always deduced. What requires further explanation, however, is the proposition that at least a part of that historical experience presents itself to an architect who is designing a building in the form of a typological grid. The "type," so Quatremère de Quincy has said, is an "object" but "vague or indistinct"; it is not definite form but a schema or the outline of a form; it also carries a residue of the experience of forms already accomplished in projects or buildings, but all that makes for their specific formal and artistic value is discarded. More precisely in the "type" they are deprived of their character and of their true quality as forms; by sublimation into a "type" they assume the indefinite value of an image or a sign. 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. He assumes that what is past is absolute and therefore no longer capable of developing. Accepting Quatremère de Quincy's definition, one might say that the "type" arises at the moment at which the art of the past no longer appears to a working artist as a conditioning model.

The choice of a model implies a value judgment: a recognition that a certain definite work of art is perfect and has to be imitated. When such a work of art re-assumes the schematic and indistinct nature of a "type," the individual action of the artist is no longer bound to a value judgment; the "type" is accepted but not "imitated" which means that the repetition of the "type" excludes the operation of that kind of creative process which is known as mimesis. In fact, the acceptance of the "type" implies the suspension of historical judgment and is therefore negative; although also "intentioned," directed to the formulation of a new kind of value in as much as it demands of the artist—in its very negativity—a new formal determination.

It is true that the assumption of a "type" as a starting point for the architect's working process does not exhaust his involvement with historical data: it does not stop him from assuming or rejecting definite buildings as models.

Bramante's tempietto of San Pietro in Montorio is a classic instance of such a process; it obviously depends on a "type": the peripteral circular temple described by Vitruvius (Book IV, Chapter 8) which integrates the abstraction of the "type" through historical "models" (for instance, the temple of Sybil at Tivoli), and so appears to claim for itself the status of both model and "type." Indeed it is characteristic of Bramantesque classicism to aspire to a syncretic union of ideal antiquity (which is essentially "typical") and of historical antiquity which has a status of a formal model. An instance of a diametrically opposed attitude is that of neoclassical architects who assume classical architectural typology, not classical architectures, as a model so that the movement produces works which are merely three-dimensional transcriptions of "type." If the concept of typology could in some way be brought back to that of "tectonics" as recently defined by Cesare Brandi (*Elizante o della archa*, 1956), one might say that typology is a notional base on which formal development of the artist must inevitably rest.

It will, therefore, be clear that the position of the artist vis-à-vis history has two aspects, the aspect of typology and that of formal definition. That of typology is not problematic: the artist assumes certain data, taking as a premise of all his work a group of common notions, or a heritage of images with all their more or less explicit content and their ideological overtones. This aspect may be compared to the iconographic and compositional treatment of themes in figurative art. The aspect of formal definition, on the other hand, implies a reference to definite formal values of the past on which the artist explicitly arrives at a judgment. This judgment, however, must itself imply a typology since, whenever a value judgment on given works of art is passed, a judgment must also be passed about the way in which the artist, in creating them, had dealt with the relevant typological scheme.

The question of the value of architectural typology has recently been examined by Sergio Bettini (*Zodiac* no. 5) and by G. K. König (*Lezioni del Corso di Plastica*, Florence: Editrice Universitaria, 1961). In these writings the opinion prevails that an architectural "type" must be treated as a schema of spatial articulation which has been formed in

response to a totality of practical and ideological demands. From this one might deduce that the formal invention which overcomes the "type" is a response to immediate demands in reference to which the "type" had lost any real value. A recourse to the "type" would therefore occur when the immediate demand which the artist is called to answer has its roots in the past. A significant instance is provided by the comparison between modern religious and industrial architecture. Industrial architecture which deals with altogether new demands has created new "types" which have, in many cases, great importance for the later development of architecture. Religious architecture which answers demands rooted in the past has resulted in typological repetition (artistically valueless) or in attempts at freeing the artist of all typological precedent (as, for instance, I.e. Corbusier at Ronchamp). These have led to the proposing of counter-types, mostly ephemeral or unacceptable—there are few instances of modern developments of historical "types."

The conclusion must be that the typological and the inventive aspect of the creative process are continuous and interlaced—the inventive aspect being merely that of dealing with the demands of the actual historical situation by criticizing and overcoming past solutions deposited and synthesized schematically in the "type."