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The Locus
Inside

Victoria Watson
During the earliest excavations of the ancient citadel of Troy archaeologists unearthed the remains of a house which, although far from small, was organised in a very simple way, as an inner chamber preceded by a porch. They called it house 11a and it is important for the subject of architecture because it conforms to the megaron, or great hall, type, an axiomatic form lying at the very core of the disciplinary practice we know today. One highly influential book that featured the megaron was Julien-David Le Roy’s The Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece, first published in 1758. With the book’s reprinting in 1770, Le Roy introduced a new kind of drawing which he had invented as a means of communicating what he termed ‘a history of architecture’.

Emblematic of this new drawing technique, the book’s very first plate offers a morphological matrix showing tiny plan diagrams of 30 buildings, supplemented by a handful of elevations and sections. Although the Plate 1 diagrams are not of tiny buildings at all, part of its charm is that the reader can imagine picking the buildings up from the page and holding them, like perfectly formed creatures, in the palm of their hand. To call the matrix of relationships depicted in Plate 1 a history is a misreading – it is a typology, in this case the megaron type, all the plans being single-cell structures with a porch, presented as if one single family group.

In this sense Plate 1 is a perfect product of its time, reflecting the late-eighteenth-century fascination with taxonomy, classification and containment, as they emerged through the study of living forms and spilled over into other domains, including architecture. For this reason one way to get to grips with typology is to draw a parallel with the science of entomology. In entomological space the type Coleoptera regulates approximately 40 per cent of all known insects, including Snout beetles, Stag beetles, Hercules and Rhinoceros beetles, predacious divers and Whirligigs, to name but a few. What is especially compelling about beetles is their bilateral symmetry and part-to-part organisation, combined with a hard, metallic look. To human eyes the beetle appears as if every part has been carefully thought out in a preconceived design and then manufactured in a machine and carefully assembled with microscopic instruments, just like the tiny buildings in Le Roy’s Plate 1. And just as the family of buildings in the plate share characteristic features, such as porches, colonnades, chambers and courtyards, so does the family of beetles.

The analogy can be taken further. Like a building, the body of a beetle can be divided into parts, with the head, thorax and abdomen being the prime divisions, each having features specific to the beetle. For example the head has a bulging mouth and eyes, antennae that detect smells, and integrated body cutlery, including mandibles for grasping, cutting and crushing, and palpi, which shovel food into the mouth. The beetle legs and wings arise in the region of the thorax: legs come in three pairs and have claws, while wings come in sets – the inner ones do the flying, while the outer ones, probably the beetle’s most characteristic feature, form a protective sheath known as an electra, a beautiful coloured casing that covers the beetle’s thorax and inner wing but folds back when it takes flight. With this introduction of the idea of flight, however, the analogy between entomology and typology immediately breaks down, spoilt not so much by the fact that buildings don’t fly, as by the reminder it gives us that actual beetle behaviour eludes taxonomic classification. Buildings, on the other hand, are not living forms but artefacts, and for this reason it is plausible that in those fields where entomology must keep silent, typology has things to say.

Conceiving of form in typological terms – a fairly natural act for an eighteenth-century Beaux-Arts architect like Le Roy – had, by the early twentieth century, come to be seen as an archaic, if not totally misguided approach. So when a small group of Italian architects began to take an active interest in typology, in the years of postwar reconstruction, they attracted not only a great deal of interest but also a huge amount of suspicion and scorn. This twentieth-century revival of typology is associated, above all, with the figure of Aldo Rossi. What is extraordinary about Rossi’s work is the way in which it brings typology to life, as evidenced by the collection of drawings, paintings, notes, papers and buildings that he produced. It is as if he had found a way of observing buildings that enabled him to get to know them, as friends. There is a word for this kind of relationship – sympathy – and amongst them the megaron type is prolific in its recurrence.

The small house... seems without place, because the locus is inside, or is identified with whoever lives in the house for a time – a stay which we know may be brief but which we cannot calculate.

Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography, 1981

Despite a certain reductiveness, Schopenhauer’s theory of what bonds human subjects to their artefacts is interesting because it suggests that getting to know something is impossible without a shared feeling between the knower and the thing known.

This idea was an important motivation for Rossi’s own interest in typology and he tried to use it as an alternative way of thinking about the forms of urban artefacts – an alternative, that is, to the ‘vague notions’, ‘second-hand sociology’, ‘political deception’ and ‘suspect aestheticism’ typical of the discourse of his day. However, in attempting to pursue the logic of the types to their morphological limits, Rossi found himself entering into sympathetic relationships with them, as an unavoidable consequence of the fact that he was not, as Schopenhauer would put it, merely ‘a winged cherub without a body’, but a fully embodied, socially networked creature ‘deformed by connections with everything that surrounds me’. In seeing urban artefacts as things that affected him, Rossi was creating for himself a world of architectural characters. It is these characters – effectively Rossi’s architectural forms – that appear in his projects, and amongst them the megaron type is prolific in its recurrence.

Rossi was very well informed about the history of architecture, and was doubtless aware of the megaron presence at Troy and of Le Roy’s Plate 1. He would also have understood the Trojan megaron as the primitive ancestor of a much more famous character, namely the ‘shadowy hall’ in the palace structures that feature in Homeric myth. ‘Shadowy’, here, means not only shaft-filled but intangible, since it is thought that the architecture Homer evoked was not available to him as physical form but only as a memory of something past,
the Mycenaean culture which had collapsed 400 years previously. The megaron is therefore an idea that is both axiomatic (a single-cell structure with a porch) and mnemonic (triggering ideas beyond its formal silhouette).

Archaeologists have in fact unearthed the remains of ancient palace complexes which are thought to be of precisely the kind described by Homer. In the reconstructed plan diagram of the palace at Tiryns, for instance, a large megaron hall and colonnaded court dominates the composition. It is possible to diagram both volumes as discrete entities, separated from one another and from the unity of the palace complex as a whole. Presented as independent forms, the court and hall can be brought together in seemingly endless configurations. In Rossi’s work, however, they are consistently illustrated only in one particular form. A very good example is his project for a student hostel in the town of Chieti, near Pesaro on Italy’s Adriatic coast, which Rossi worked on in the mid-1970s. A large communal building occupies the centre of an open space, which is defined and surrounded on all four sides by linear ranks of smaller terrace structures. The central building conforms to the type of the megaron; just like the hall at Tiryns, it is articulated as two distinct zones, corresponding to an internal chamber and a porch. Its formal expression, by contrast, is quite distinct. Where the great hall at Tiryns was twice as long as it was wide and covered by a flat roof, at Chieti the megaron is three times as long, and features a 45-degree gable roof marching along its entire length. Like its ancient ancestor, the Chieti porch is a two-component structure, made up of an inner and an outer lobby. However, unlike its ancestor, which was framed by two hefty columns in antis, the Chieti porch is open and light, made from steel and glass, only the chamber behind is interiorised, with solid brick walls punctuated by square window openings. The great halls of Homeric legend were the residence of a single warrior man – and the life of the hall was determined by him. In Rossi’s work, however, there is no single personality by contrast, there is no single personality determining the operations of the space – it is anonymous, discrete and diffuse, the polar opposite of the Mycenaean king.

There is one particular drawing of the Chieti project in which Rossi depicts the houses, not as terraces, but as individualised forms, their walls and roofs decorated with vertical stripes reminiscent of beach huts or Punch and Judy stalls – or even the electra of the Colorado beetle. No longer assembled as a terrace, the cabins are clustered in a group, standing just in front of the hall, with its porch closing in behind them. But the megaron has changed too – its porch is more like the one at Tiryns, with the sides enclosed by walled colonnades which extend out from the body of the hall as if an enormous Stag beetle were welcoming a group of tiny Colorados into the confines of its enormous claws. What is striking about the cabins set in front of the hall is the fact that they themselves do not have a porch (or claws, to carry the analogy a little further). The only interface between the interior and the outside world are the black figures, drawn in the manner of heraldic markings – as rectangles, squares and circles – onto the body of the cabin, where they are read as doors and windows.

Evidently Rossi had complex and intimate relationships with his cabin forms and by drawing them in various arrangements of shape, size and colour (they had already appeared in an earlier drawing titled The Cabins of Elba) he presents them as a kind of symbolic achievement, which in turn becomes emblematic of his architectural achievements. In his Scientific Autobiography Rossi continually returns to ponder over the cabins, eventually deciding they are better understood as belonging to the typology of the theatre, rather than the megaron: ‘The cabin, as I see it, always has four walls and a tympanum; the tympanum is more than functional, since it also suggests a banner and its colour. The coloured stripes are an integral and determining part, perhaps the most obviously architectonic part of the structure. This part above all makes us aware that there has to be some event in the interior, and that somehow in the acting out of the event a performance will take place. How, then, can one separate the little cabin from another of its meanings – the theatre?’

The word theatre is rooted in a verb, theaisthai, meaning ‘to view’ or ‘make a spectacle for the mind’, suggesting that theatre be understood as a kind of viewing instrument, a means of abstracting from the world in order to gain a degree of detachment, similar to the way Le Roy used Plate 1 as a device for objectifying the megaron type. For Rossi the most important feature of the theatre is that it is contextualised by the events that unfold inside. What he means by this is that the theatre is a space of representation, positing an alternative space–time to that of its immediate surroundings. In his Scientific Autobiography Rossi gives his reader some idea of what this theatrical form of interiority might be like. One particularly vivid account describes a theatre that he himself had designed – the famous floating theatre for the 1979–80 Venice Architecture Biennale. On its inside, this Teatro del Mondo took the form of a tower, with three tiers of galleries looking vertiginously down onto a stage, but on the outside it looked like a very large house – not a large house in the sense of a villa, but a large house in the sense of an exaggeration or repetition of many smaller houses. In this sense the Teatro del Mondo retains something of the emblematic look of Rossi’s cabin forms, with its pyramidal roof, tympanum-like ball and flag and striped facade. But what is especially notable about the floating theatre are the black figures that punctuate its facade. These are the very same circles, squares and rectangles that characterise his cabin forms. Rossi notes that these markings contribute to the house-like appearance of the theatre, but at the same time there is something else about them that he wants to say. Just as Schopenhauer had once used the image of the theatrum mundi to explain his concept of genius, so Rossi uses his Teatro del Mondo to explain his concept of locus, describing an actual event taking place within it. He observes crowds of theatre-goers entering and moving up the stairs to the galleries, but then is distracted by the view through a window of passing boats and the Venetian lagoon. For Rossi, this aquatic image constitutes a fixed yet mobile scene within the theatre, and is something that would have been impossible had he not cut the windows into the walls. But what is especially interesting about Rossi’s doubly theatrical experience is that just like Schopenhauer he defines his own involvement in terms of being simply a witness – an innocent bystander rather than the overbearing megaron man. In this respect Rossi’s classicism is merely a ruse, but it still has an important role to play. The dummy megaron is there to constitute a scene, and the scene in turn is there for the purpose of being witnessed – a witnessing acted out by the cabin crowds, where each and everyone bears a locus inside.
Contributors

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Laurent Stulder is professor of architectural theory at the ETH Zurich. His research focuses on the intersection of the history and theory of architecture with the history of technology. Recent publications include Hermann Muthesius: Das Landhaus als kulturegeschichtlicher Entwurf (2008), Valeria Diligi (2008), Der Schwellentaus (2009), with Ilke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Kim Förster and GOD & CO: François Dallegret Beyond the Bubble (2011), with Alessandra Ponte and Thomas Weaver.

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