Did Someone Say Typology?

100,000 houses for San Francisco

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Introduction
In his seminal essay “On Typology” the Spanish architect Rafael Moneo wrote that to raise the question of typology is to raise the question of nature of architectural work itself. Moneo stressed how for each generation of architects to answer the question of what typology means is to redefine the essence of architecture “and an explanation of all its attendant problems.” Although Moneo acknowledged that architectural types are rooted within social conditions, discourses on type are often an excuse to understand architecture in vacuo, to remove architecture from its inevitable social and political entanglement. Typology has often been used as a “safe zone;” a way to enclose architecture within its disciplinary boundaries. It is for this reason that discourse on typology has emerged in a period of crisis and disillusionment with an architecture too easily reliant on given “programs” and “functions” and thus devoid of its intrinsic integrity. We believe that is precisely by taking architecture itself—understood as a composition of boundaries and spaces—seriously (and rigorously), it is possible to broaden the discussion about architecture as one of the most tangible indices of its political context. The study of Typology thus may allow us to understand how even the most mundane aspect of architecture such as the disposition of passages, rooms, and partitions is the result of specific ways in which the subject’s experience of space is constructed.

The ambition of this advanced year studio is to revisit the issue of typology as a way to link the essence of architecture as built form and at the political forces that make its production possible. We will follow Theorists and Architects such as Quatrèmere de Quincy and Aldo Rossi for whom type is the expression of a deep structure, yet we will understand this deep structure not as an a-priori, but as the embodiment of contingent politics of class, race, gender, ownership through which our capitalist society is administrated. The understanding of typology will allow us to reclaim political agency not beyond but within architecture itself.
Context
We will study the issue of typology within the architecture of domestic space, which is arguably the architectural domain from which the discourse on typology arose. Our site of both investigation and project is San Francisco, a city that, beyond its picturesque image, has had one of the most turbulent histories in terms of typologies of domestic space. This history has culminated in the current housing crisis, which casts a long shadow, rooted in decades of housing commodification and capital accumulation through aggressive real estate politics. The history San Francisco is a continuous stream of conflicts, crises and dispossessions, which have been deeply registered in the city’s rich assortment of domestic types. From California’s early Franciscan Missions to the wealthy robber barons’ mansions, from boarding houses to the artists communes, from the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) to public housing, from the infamous live/work lofts to the rise of micro-flats, from the luxury condos to the new network of communes, San Francisco’s urban history can be read as an atlas of the domestic and counter-domestic spaces of the United States in its entirety. The studio will depart from a close reading of these typologies by unfolding their history as it is embedded in the materiality and disposition of each architectural element such as façade, corridor, lot-size, etc. The close reading of these typologies will be the critical basis for the elaboration of counter-typologies whose aim is to de-commodify housing and make the latter not just a product but a space for social emancipation. The goal of the studio is to continue the work of the previous two studios in this series, building the scenario for 100,000 new houses in San Francisco. The particular aim of this semester will be focused attention on the existing context and the development of proposals stemming from San Francisco’s historical background.

The Problem of Typology
Typology is not a timeless architectural concept, but a historically specific way to read architecture that arose in the 18th century. At this time the issue of “program” and managerial control of space became a pressing issue for governments. As Michel Foucault has shown in his studies of governmental power, the main goal of politics became the administration of populations, and thus the governing of life itself. It is at this point that the architecture of domestic space becomes a crucial and urgent “project” and thus a realm susceptible to be defined in terms of its program.
Of course there have always been programs in architecture, but before the 18th century these programs existed in the form of liturgies, public rituals, which demanded specific spaces for their enactment such as temples, squares, markets and houses. After all, the house itself was the first place where life acquired a ritualized form against the unpredictability of the open-ended land. Within liturgies there is an explicit relationship between form and its use: the form of Basilica, a Synagogue or a Mosque, for example, adhered to a specific form of worship like the concave adhere to the convex. Within spaces for rituals one has to immediately discern what is possible and what is impossible, what is allowed and what is not allowed. With the rise of capitalism and its ubiquitous forms of control and governance, architecture disciplined its inhabitants in a subtler but no less powerful way. This is evident in the architecture of housing that arose in the 16th century. Until that moment the space of the house was shaped by habits; interior space was defined by a specific layout only in the case of wealthy houses. Yet even in these cases, with the exception of a few symbolic spaces, the rooms of the house did not have specific functions: they could host a multiplicity of uses. When the state started to govern its populace by governing the reproduction of their life, the architecture of the house began to be conceived in terms of a pre-defined composition of specific spaces: kitchen, bedroom, living room. Since then the house has addressed a specific subject—the nuclear family—and ensures its micromanaging by clearly individualizing the family components: mother, father, siblings, husband wife, servant. Moreover, the house became an apparatus that linked the family to specific economic conditions such as homeownership, and this was reflected in the idea that the house had to be (or at least appear to be) “private space;” a refuge from the burden of social life. The house thus becomes not just a domestic space in its own right, but a process of domestication of society itself. In this process architectural knowledge played an important role in providing models for the domestication of the household. As early as the 16th century, architects such as Sebastiano Serlio started to focus on the issue of houses for all classes from the King to the poor peasant. The urge to reinforce class difference as the main rationale of capitalistic society produced an infinite variety of housing types and thus typology became a main locus of architectural knowledge. The importance of typology percolated through architectural education, state policy and finally the housing market; how to build houses and how dwell in them became accepted as common
sense. Housing types became the inevitable blueprint for domestic architecture, and rarely have architects questioned the typology they were commissioned to translate into specific buildings. For this reason it is possible to argue that the function of typology was instrumental, not only for the transmission of architectural knowledge, but also for the normalization of what domestic space was meant to contain and organize efficiently: domestic labor.

The idea of the house as a separate domain from the workplace became the main ideological setting for the naturalization of unpaid domestic labor, one of the fundamental forms of exploitation engineered by capitalistic power. In the colonization and urbanization of North America, typological knowledge played a fundamental role in domesticating society. The idea itself of the “American Dream” was embodied in the possession of the house as a form of democratic “real estate.” The history of housing in the United States—and indeed perhaps all housing—is a history of class and race discrimination, enforced by the slow and often imperceptible violence of pre-defined forms of dwelling such as the single-family house and the tenant apartment. As Dolores Hayden has argued in several of her books, subsidized housing was often engineered in order to empower the middle-class (white) breadwinner, thus enforcing inequality both inside and outside the household. Yet the history of housing in the United States is also a history of struggle within and against domestic space. For example, between the 19th century and early 20th centuries, women questioned the appropriation of domestic labor and proposed a reform of domestic space that would question the patriarchal organization of the house. This challenge to the tradition of domestic space was developed further in many housing experiments in both the United States and the Soviet Union in which the traditional family structure (of the house) was questioned by proposing new forms of communal dwelling. It is interesting to note that many of these challenges consisted in questioning established domestic typologies and proposing new ways of conceiving the space of dwelling. Within the studio we would like to re-start this tradition by defining the possibility for housing typologies capable of both proposing new forms of life and questioning established domestic arrangements in terms of space and economic rationale. In short, the studio will be about inventing or subverting typologies towards the possibility of an (un)domestic space.
Studio Work

The first month of studio prior to the field-trip week will be devoted to an in-depth research on domestic typologies in San Francisco. We will select the most exemplary domestic typologies such as the Mission, the Townhouse, the Single Room Occupancy (SRO), Public Housing, the “Live/Work,” the Microflat, and the Commune. We will look at both purpose-built and emergent / adaptive forms of these living arrangements. We will try to understand their architectural form through analytical drawings that uncover their social and political history. The goal of this research is to allow the students to question the obvious: how the most mundane and familiar aspects of housing typologies become instrumental in making homes “factories of subjectivity” in which dwelling is captured by forms of economic exploitation. Each group of students will work on a specific type by tracing its historical development within and outside San Francisco, uncovering its origins and emphasizing its social and economic role in the development of the city’s urban form. Students will be encouraged to develop this research in the form of a thesis in which a specific architectural typology is used to highlight class, racial, and gender conflicts within the home and in the city. Inevitably each typology will address a specific geographical understanding of the city and will help us to understand how specific social conflicts shaped the urban form of San Francisco at large. In short, typological research will help us to understand the city’s form and its politics from within its basic units: houses.

This analysis will be further deepened during the field-trip in which we will carefully study San Francisco’s urban history from the vantage point of conflicts and plans that have shaped its characteristic urban form. Both the reading of existing typologies in San Francisco and the field-trip will allow us to define a set of problems that will be the basis for individual designs. The field-trip will include extensive walking tours to study the city’s form and architectures, focusing on defining areas as potential sites. We will meet with leaders and experts working on the problem of housing in the city, we will tour various housing types, and we will study art, architecture, and organizations specific to the city and region’s history and culture: the Missions, political murals, tech company workplaces, etc.
The studio will provide students with examples of projects that have significantly challenged existing domestic models, thus questioning the very ideological core of domestic space. Moreover, each student will be asked to address, with her/his project, a specific subject as the imagined inhabitant. We will develop architectural projects for new living spaces; the scale, scope and nature of the interventions will vary depending on the chosen problem and typology and will respond to the brief and the subject put forward, as well as site. The proposals will be conceived as new archetypes for living and will try to go beyond known solutions exploring in particular the possibility to insert shared spaces and different ownership models to break the mold of the standard family apartment.

Finally we will focus on the life that can take place in the proposal from two points of view: the representation of inhabitation, and the design of the interior. We will address the limit between that which architecture can forecast and what on the other hand needs to be left to the inhabitant.

The project of housing implies a project of life; giving a form to housing implicitly means to imagine a form of life. The studio encourages students to carefully construct their brief and thinking their project as an opportunity for argument. For this reason we will give relevance to both research and representation.