

Philip Steadman (2014), *Building Types and Built Forms*

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Reviewed by:
Tania Oramas Dorta



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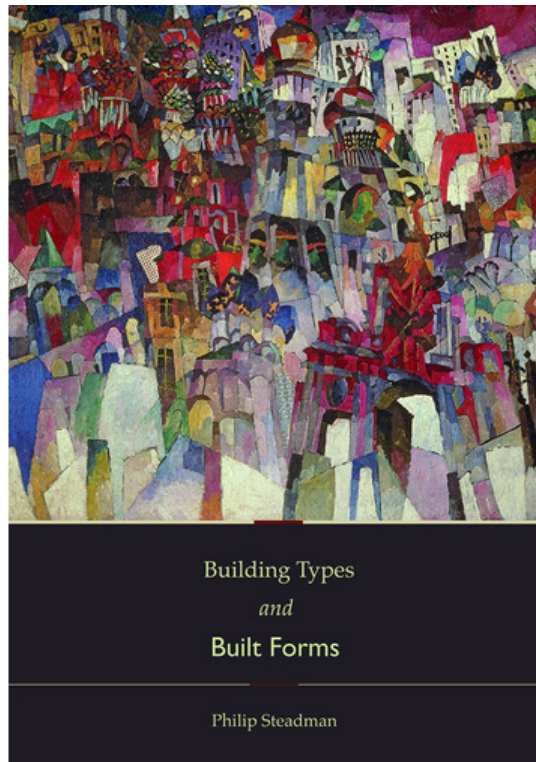
Tania Oramas Dorta

The notions of building 'type' and 'form' have been recurrent in architectural studies and practice historically - from the first formal introduction of the idea of 'type' in architectural discourse by Quatremere de Quincy (1825) or the introduction of the concept of 'built form' in architectural research by Lionel March (1972), to the recent and renewed interest in 'type' and 'building morphology' studies as an alternative to the pure formalist architectural model which has driven the development of architectural practice in the past few decades.

In some instances the ideas of 'type' and 'built form' have been studied as two independent dimensions, on occasions they have been wrongly interchanged, but most commonly they have been theorised according to different nuances.

By using the idea of 'building type' in its most straightforward of meanings - that is, as a classificatory unit by which similar buildings can be grouped and enumerated - Philip Steadman's new book *Building Types and Built Forms* provides insights into the processes of evolution of building types in space and time, from a historical standpoint.

As Steadman explains, the most common similarities between buildings throughout history may be classified into two types: similarities of use or activity (i.e. 'building types'); and morphological similarities (i.e. 'built forms'). From this perspective, it is not surprising the decision was taken to fundamentally lay the book out as a combination of alternating chapters, each building on ideas relating to these two topics. Although these two dimensions come together at different points within the book,



Building Types and Built Forms

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keeping this clear distinction highlights the idea that buildings are the result of two interrelated dynamics: on the one hand, how universal functions such as ventilation, bringing light into the building, providing access to different spaces, etc., shape the overall form of the building; and on the other, how cultural, social or technological forces play a key role in the evolution of building types.

Overall, the book is organised into 12 chapters. The odd chapters explain the history of selected institutions and their associated activities in France, the United States and Britain, over a period of time approximately between 1800 and 1930. Examples of these include residences (Chapter 1), hospitals (Chapter 3), schools (Chapter 5), tall office buildings (Chapter 7) and prisons (Chapter 9). Amongst the most significant case studies are 'the pavilion hospitals' associated with hygienist ideas developed by Florence Nightingale in 1859, tall office buildings in Chicago and New York whose development was driven by new construction technologies and legislative and economic pressures, and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon.

Concurrently, the even chapters approach the question of 'built forms'. The focus is placed on the overall disposition and mass of the building, and how those are constrained by generic functions such as lighting, ventilation, oversight and access to rooms.

It could be argued that one of the most interesting aspects of the book is its rigorous and systematic methodological approach to studying the selected collection of built forms. Steadman introduces what he coins the 'archetypal building' for this purpose. Steadman considers the 'archetypal building' as 'an explanatory tool through which many possible built forms may be generated' (p.107), defined by a plan consisting of an array of three-by-three courtyards and a number of daylight and artificially-lit spaces. Through this comprehensive methodology the author shows how, by subtracting certain parts from the original mass of the primitive object, a wide collection of simpler built forms can be generated. Then, the author assigns a unique binary code to each simple form and plots them in a (x, y) coordinate system of all possible built forms, which he refers to as 'morphospace'.

Although some of the concepts developed by the author throughout the book might initially be difficult to grasp, the range of pictures, footnotes, and explanatory text the book offers is remarkable, making the discourse accessible to a wide range of audiences, from historians to anyone interested in the general study of the built environment. The axonometric drawings deserve special mention. These are simplified representations of selected case studies drawn by the author himself, whereby minor architectural and stylistic details are omitted in a manner that lucidly brings the concept of 'built form' to the forefront of the discussion. In these, it is worth noting the enormous efforts of the author in synthesising the original drawings of the buildings. Nevertheless it could be suggested that overall, the book may be more appealing to scholars than to practitioners, since the ideas of the 'archetypal building' and 'morphospace' are presented as devices by which to study historical built forms and their relationship with building types, rather than as a 'generative devices' to trigger the development of new built forms or generate a discussion on how old and new morphologies could accommodate emergent building types.

From the perspective of readers interested in space syntax approaches, the book is stimulating since it provides complementary insights into the relationship between form and function drawn by Hillier (1996), as well as into his understanding of 'generic function'. Despite both authors enumerating some common 'generic filters' imposed by function to restrain what is spatially possible (e.g. oversight, moving between spaces, etc.), Steadman adds a number of important topics to consider in the study of built form and its relationship with building types (i.e. those already enumerated above: daylight, ventilation, constraints imposed by the physical site, etc.). Additionally, while Hillier places the focus on how general functions limit the range of possible relationships between spaces

(i.e. spatial configuration), Steadman concentrates on how those constrain the overall built form, and further adds a diachronic view of building typologies where issues such as the introduction of new technologies, economic matters, political and design decisions, etc., all play an important role in understanding the relationship between topology, geometry, typology and function.

Finally and to summarise, *Building Types and Built Forms* offers readers a comprehensive framework underpinned by interdisciplinary knowledge. Such a framework allows understanding and exploration of fundamental questions concerning the generation of possible built forms, and how these might change over time according not only to generic formal constraints, but also to changes in the institutions they house and relevant social, political, technological or cultural processes.

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