

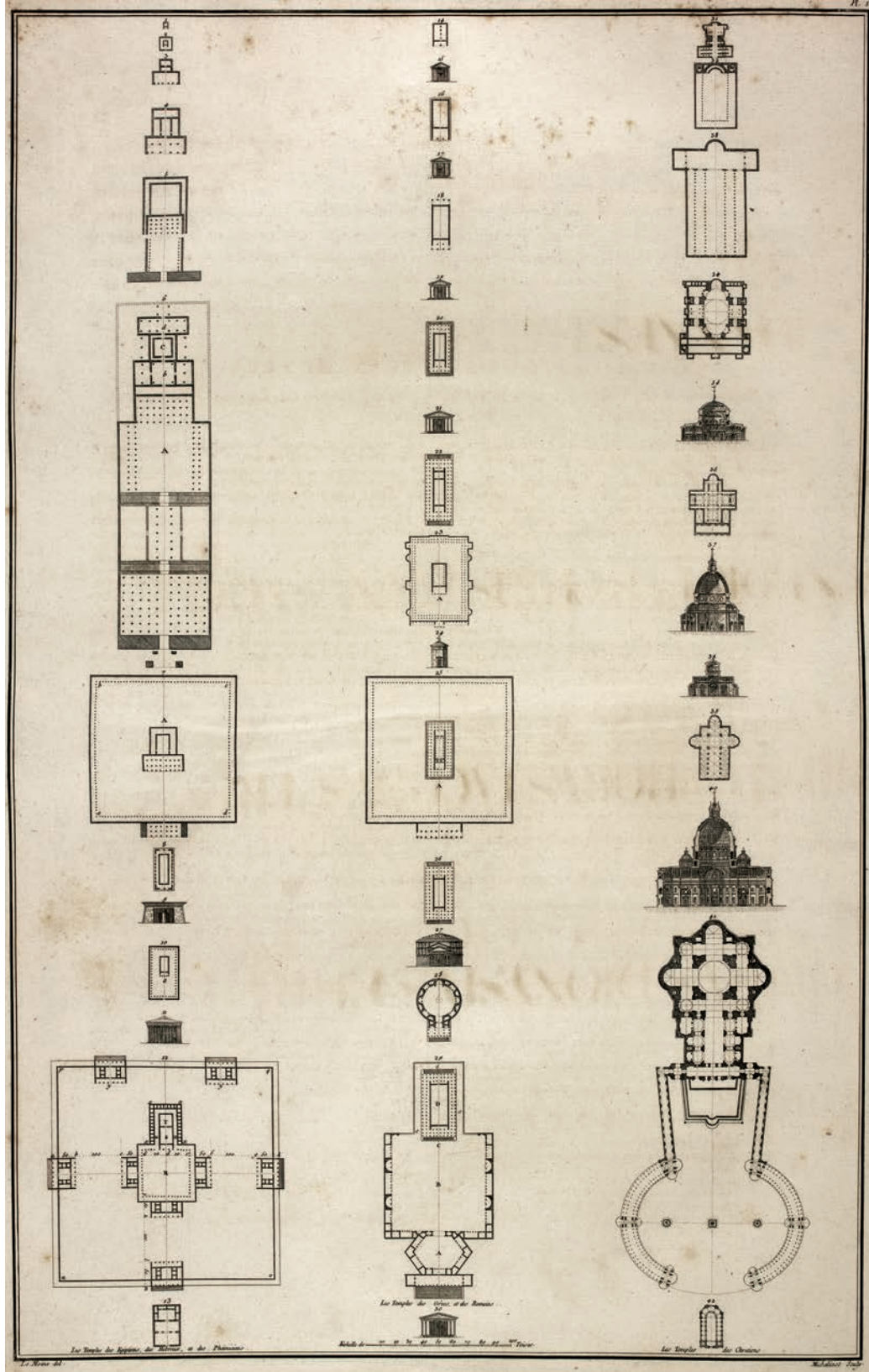
# 61 ANNALS

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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 1B 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 also misleading – 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

*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

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 the first modern philosopher to account for it systematically was Arthur Schopenhauer.

In constructing his philosophy of *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer drew extensively on the observation of animal's behaviour, suggesting that the consistency of certain patterns in their behaviour was evidence of a

*Previous: Julien-David Le Roy, Plate 1, The Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece, 2nd edition, 1770*

sympathetic bond that ties the animal to its world. But Schopenhauer also used the example of architecture as a means of demonstrating what he meant by sympathy. When Schopenhauer thought about architecture he had in mind many of the buildings that Le Roy used to compile Plate 1, especially those constructed from stone. As a result, many of his descriptions tend to evoke the image of a trabeated architecture of doric and ionic porticoes and colonnades set against a clear blue Athenian sky. Schopenhauer argued that the reason why we still derive pleasure from these archaic structures is that we are able to engage with them, not as observers, but as sympathisers. According to him the agents of architectural sympathy are the paired concepts of tension and compression, light and shade, which are experienced as a mutual feeling, simultaneously embodied in the building and in the person who is looking. 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

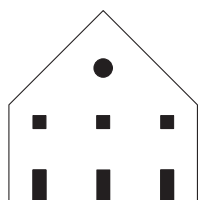
and he tried to use it as an alternative way of thinking about the forms of urban artefacts – an alternative, that is, to the 'vague notions', 'second-hand sociology', 'political deception' and 'suspect aestheticism' typical of the discourse of his day. However, in attempting to pursue the logic of the 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,



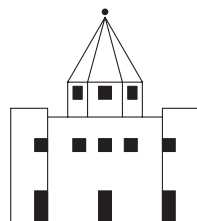
the Mycenaean culture which had collapsed 400 years previously. The *megaron* is therefore an idea that is both axiomatic (a single-cell structure with a porch) and mnemonic (triggering ideas beyond its formal silhouette).

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 lord – Odysseus, in this sense, is the archetypal *megaron* man – and the life of the hall was ruled by the will of its heroic king. At Chieti, by contrast, there is no single personality determining the operations of the space – it was designed for a community of anonymous individuals who, even if the process is institutionally mediated, ultimately govern themselves. The question begged by Rossi's twentieth-century *megaron*, then is this: who are these individuals, and in what way, if at all, does their presence characterise the architecture?



The beginnings of an answer can be found in the rows of terraced structures that surround the hall to the sides and to the rear, articulated as ranks of individual houses,

each with its own gable and front door. Each is a replica of its neighbour, so that taken together they line up and fuse together into a single linear block. Seen individually each house conforms to the prototype at Tiryns, but the simple fact that there are so many of them, and that they are all identical, cancels out the idea of any single dominant occupant. And so if there is an idea of personality at play in the Chieti houses, then it is of a very different kind to the occupant at Tiryns. The personality who lives at Chieti 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 individual 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, *theasthai*, 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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*Niall Hobhouse* is a collector of architectural drawings.

*Pamela Johnston* is the AA's publications editor. 'A Theatre of Insects' is a compressed version of her MA dissertation in the History of Ideas at Birkbeck, University of London.

*Mark Lyon* is a photographer and educator based in Paris. He studied at Yale's School of Art and participated in Richard Avedon's last master class in New York, and has since received awards for his work from PDN/Nikon and the Society for Publication Design and Communication Arts. In the field of architecture and design, he has received commissions to survey the work of Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier in Chandigarh, and to document the restoration and travels of Jean Prouvé's Maison Tropicale and the refurbishment of Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre. With Inderbir Singh Riar he recently received a grant from the Graham Foundation to research the current living conditions and architectural legacy of Toulouse-Le Mirail.

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*Alessandra Ponte* is professor of architecture at the University of Montreal. She has written articles and essays on landscape in numerous international publications, published a volume on *Richard Payne Knight and the Eighteenth-Century Picturesque* (2000) and co-edited, with Antoine Picon, a collection of papers on *Architecture and the Sciences* (2003). For the last four years she has been responsible for the conception and organisation of the Phyllis Lambert Seminar at the CCA in Montreal, a series of colloquia on contemporary architectural topics. She organised the exhibition 'Total Environment: Montreal 1965–1975' (2009), also at the CCA, and recently co-curated and co-edited the AA exhibition and catalogue, *GOD & CO: François Dallegret Beyond the Bubble* (2011). She is currently completing a series of investigations on North American landscapes for her forthcoming book, *Maps and Territories*, published in the AA's Architecture Words series.

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*Steven Spier* is professor of architecture and head of the School of Architecture and Design at the University of Ulster in Belfast. Previously, he was the founding vice-chancellor of the HafenCity University Hamburg, a University of the Built Environment and Metropolitan Development. He is the author of numerous articles on Swiss architecture, including the book *Swiss Made* (2003), and also writes on choreography, editing the first English-language book on William Forsythe, *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography* (2011).

*Laurent Stalder* 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 kulturgeschichtlicher Entwurf* (2008), *Valerio Olgiati* (2008), *Der Schwellenaltas* (2009, with Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Kim Förster) and *GOD & CO: François Dallegret Beyond the Bubble* (2011, with Alessandra Ponte and Thomas Weaver).

*Victoria Watson* teaches architecture at the University of Westminster. In 2010 she received the British Academy's Sargent Fellowship in Architecture for her work on the Air Grid, a living system of forms derived from, but going beyond, the structural logic of architecture. Her first book, *Utopian Adventure: The Corviale Void*, is due for publication in 2012. Her work has been exhibited in a number of venues in London and Europe, and its theoretical premise has been explored in texts published in various books and journals.

*John Winter* is an architect, currently specialising in the restoration of modernist buildings from the 1930s. He was trained as an arted pupil, and then at the AA and Yale University, and later taught at the AA, 1960–65, as well as acting as a visiting professor at the universities of Toronto, Syracuse and Yale, and teaching in the schools of architecture at Cambridge, Canterbury and UCL. He is the author and co-author of numerous books on architecture and construction, while the buildings designed by his practice have been widely published and exhibited.

*Tao Zhu* is an assistant professor in the department of architecture at the University of Hong Kong and a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University. As co-founder of the design firm ZL Architecture he practises in China while also writing on contemporary Chinese architecture and urbanism. His most recent texts include a chapter – 'Architecture in China in the Reform Era 1978–2010' – in *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture 1960–2010* (2012).