

Typology and Rafael Moneo's Museum of Roman Art at Merida

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"Architecture...is not only *described* by types, it is also *produced* through them. If this notion can be accepted, it can be understood why and how the architect identifies his work with a precise type. He is initially trapped by the type because it is the way he knows. Later he can act on it; he can destroy it, transform it, respect it. But he starts from the type. *The design process is a way of bringing the elements of a typology -- the idea of a formal structure -- into the precise state that characterizes the single work.*"



Fig. 1 Ruins in Merida. Passageway into Anfiteatro dating from 1C BC.

Type is a device that links the past with the future. Typology, according to Quatremere de Quincy, is "rooted in the nature of the region, in historical notions, and in the monuments of the developed art themselves."² It is something made anew via historical emulations. Typology is a tool, or a framework of history which is manipulated by an injection of one's intuition to solve architectural problems.³ Type, as a theory of architecture, demands a continual dialogue with the past.

Aldo Rossi defines type as the morphology of a structure. For Rossi, form is the *essence* of architecture. Similarly according to Rafael Moneo, typology is a "concept which describes a group of objects characterized by the same formal structure."⁴ I propose to use Moneo's Museum of Roman Art at Merida as a vehicle to discuss the theory of typology in architecture.

Type in architecture is a mechanism for recollection and classification. Type, therefore, can be seen as the faculty for retaining and recalling architectural experience. For Rossi form exists without content and is only matter. It is the metaphysics of experience that separates my definition of type from Rossi's view of type as morphology. Type is necessary as a remembering device for architecture. Its record is the history and the collective human memory of architecture. The essence of architecture transcends its builders time or era. Society demands a historical continuity in architecture for its cultural framework and for the lessons learned in building techniques. The notion of type then, can be seen as a method of historical continuity in architecture.

HISTORICAL DEFINITIONS

"Type...in its literal, original meaning from the Greek, meant "impression" or "figure"..."⁵ Quatremere de Quincy was the first person to describe type in architectural terms in his *Dictionnaire Historique de l'Architecture*. He saw it as the antecedent for an artist to conceive works of art. Type was not an exact likeness, a formal resemblance of that which came before, or a model for those things to be built in the future. It was a metaphysical representation of the ideal vision of history used as a critical and positive instrument in

the present. Type was the spiritual essence of architecture. It was not a mechanical imitation, but "based on need, on use and custom."⁶ Central to this inquiry were the formal aspects of the conditions and the attributes of the object itself.⁷

J.N.L. Durand also defined type, or more precisely described what we define as composition. He "stressed the productive capacity of the rules and elements according to programs inductively defined."⁸ For Durand type was related to need, convenience and economy of the structure. With our modern frame of reference his work can be seen as a "cookbook" for architectural design. Durand tried to codify architecture by several clearly definable relationships. An architect's duty was to combine these associations to generate more complex relations, in the end assembling a building which was viewed as a new building type. Quatremere's approach towards type and form disappeared in favor of a geometric methodology of composition and grid. Durand's definition was seemingly more quantifiable, scientific and objective. Quatremere's definition was more intuitive and subjective. For Durand, "style" was that which could be added after the plan and the structure of the building had been defined through the composition of the program.⁹

The Modern Movement, in its rejection or dissociation of historical references, quickly dismissed Durand's principle of typology (along with the notion of learning from history). Durand's methodological inquiry into typology had become a compositional and schematic device¹⁰ of the design process. Walter Gropius employed the word prototype, which altered both Quatremere's and Durand's intention of the word. Gropius' definition was closer to Quatremere's prescription of a model -- an object that could be repeated verbatim. For Gropius, prototype meant a new language of mechanized reproduction which was to be the basis of a new architecture.¹¹ This definition of type came from the Modern Movement's admiration of industry, mass production, and belief that historical references could not properly equip the architect for the era's new types and uses of buildings. Prototypes, by definition, were devoid of place and history. They were to be adaptable to any site conditions or divergent uses of the building. Modern buildings were meant to be as appropriate in Spain as in the United States, in the city as well as the countryside, or as an office as well as a house (in other words, universal space). With the rejection of a typological prescription, Functionalism (as practiced by Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies, for example) provided the rules for architecture. The Functionalist's critique did not need historical precedents.

Some architects of the era following the Modern Movement have returned to historical precedents. History does have useful lessons to offer a modern architect. For example, Rob and Leon Krier have interpreted typology as a method of unifying cities destroyed by the Modern Movement's urban planning schemes. Type is used to explain the formal and structural continuity that has saturated our present cities with the forms and types from traditional urban areas. Typology is described solely as a mechanism of composi-

tion. The "image" of the design must be recognizable, not its formal structure. They have proposed to rebuild our cities by using their concept of type. The Krier brothers want cities "reproduced" in traditional terms, not developed through the notion of evolution. They believe that architecture reached its typological and morphological perfection during the Classical period, and there is no reason to improve upon "classical" types or forms. Typological reproduction, according to the Kriers, is based solely on classical architectural types, forms and styles. The Kriers have interpreted typology in a manner similar to the definition from Durand. Theirs is, as was Durand's, a "cookbook" method for the design of architecture.

On the other hand, Aldo Rossi has emphasized, in his idea of type, the morphology of the composition. He has reduced typology exclusively to the field of urban analysis. For Rossi, empty form has become the essence of architecture. His form types are developed independent of any specific function. That is to say, form and type have no relationship. Rossi has presumed only one ideal city. This city is filled with his morphological 'types'. It is a city unrecognizable to a specific time or place. The ideologies of the Modern Movement are infused in Rossi's interpretation of typology. He has implied an apparently anti-historicist stance in his form types and pursuance of universal spatial types.

Alan Colquhoun has interpreted typology with a similar attitude to that of Quatremere. Typology can be used as a tool, or a framework of history. It is to be manipulated by an injection of one's intuition to solve architectural problems. Typology has not provided us with an architecture of "ready-made solutions" or mechanistic answers. Any architectural project must be penetrated by intuition, or metaphysics.

Through typology the process of communication in architecture has been possible. Types are colored with ideology and assume meaning within the structural framework in which the architecture is produced. Colquhoun has regarded typology as knowledge of past solutions. This knowledge is used to adapt forms derived from either past needs or past aesthetic ideologies to the needs of the present.¹²

Rafael Moneo has defined type as

... as a concept which describes a group of objects characterized by the same formal structure. It is neither a spatial diagram nor the average of a serial list. It is fundamentally based on the possibility of grouping objects by certain inherent structural similarities. It might even be said that type means the act of thinking in groups.¹³

Moneo has interpreted type as a dialogue between "object" groups and "the act of thinking in groups." Type, in this duality, has become a device that links the past with the future, and with its surrounding context and culture. It was not meant to be a literal device, but the foundation where one may begin the design process. "The design process is a way of bringing the elements of a typology -- the idea of a formal structure -- into the precise state that characterizes the single

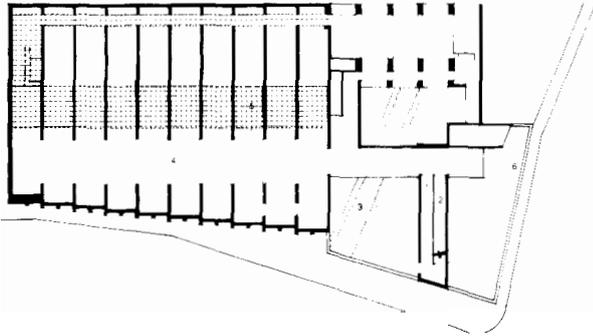


Fig. 2 Ground Level Plan: Central Nave Area

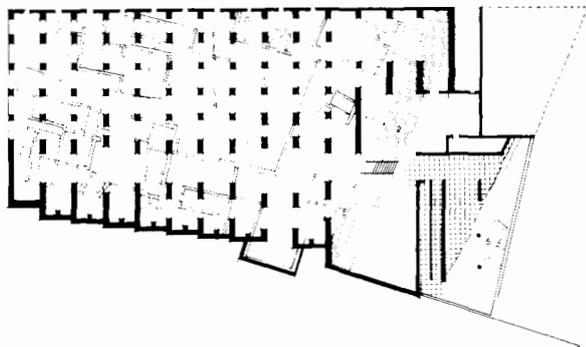


Fig. 3 Basement Plan: Crypt Level

work.”¹⁴ Moneo felt that the architectural object needed to speak about its singleness, its uniqueness, and about its shared features. Type has been the framework that has encouraged change to occur. A continual dialogue with the past and the future has been necessary for type to be successful.

Moneo and Colquhoun have interpreted typology in a similar manner as Quatremere de Quincy. Typology, as demonstrated by Durand, the Modern Movement, Rossi, or the Kriers can be reduced to a method of composition (methodology) or can alter its primary value to that of image (morphology). The importance of typology lies in the formal structure of the object as well as the metaphorical connection of the past with the future. Ultimately, coherent architectural meaning can only exist within an established cultural historical context.

ANALYSIS

Moneo suggests in his writings that the Museum of Roman Art at Merida is the product of **typology**. The fundamental impression of the building is **type** Roman. The building's presence is respectful, but does not overpower the nearby commanding Roman ruins, which are some of the best left on the Iberian peninsula. Merida, once the Roman capital of this Spanish region, is a city striving to revitalize its heritage. The museum, which boasts one of the largest collections of Roman artifacts, does not attempt to compete with the relics it houses. The artifacts dominate one's experience when in the museum. The building's location as a transition between contemporary Merida and the Roman ruins requires a formi-

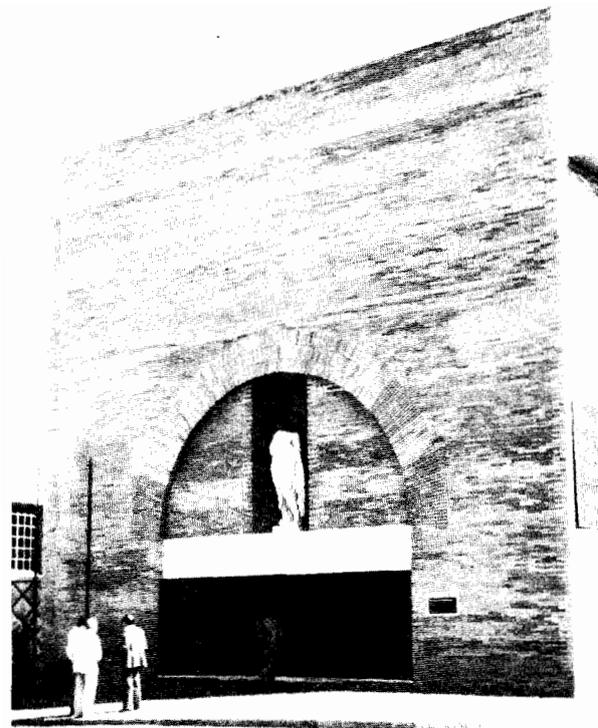


Fig. 4 Main entry for Museo Nacional de Arte Romano (c. 1980 - 1985).

dable presence. The Roman ruins are massive and solid. Moneo wants the building at first glance to appear Roman, but upon further inspection to represent modern construction techniques. The building is meant to arouse a sense of being ancient, yet truly be of its own time. This museum emulates the Roman influence without directly mimicking their forms.

Modern museums are palaces of memories, or the treasures of a collector. The **type** museum is considered an empty stage or warehouse to which one brings works of art. The museum space at Merida generates different types of “stages” to accommodate the artifacts. Some of the exhibition areas are tall flowing spaces while others are small intimate ones. The crypt (a floor below the entry level of the museum) becomes the stage that houses continuing archaeological digs of Roman houses on the site. One perceives this museum as an active palace of memories, its own artifact.

Moneo's museum encapsulates fragments of Roman ruins located on the site. The crypt discloses the cellular Roman houses once prominent throughout the area. These cells are left intact punctuated by the structural walls for the museum. The rhythm of the new structure metaphorically emulates the structure of the cellular plan. The layering of the structural grid of the museum over the ruins calls attention to their respective individuality.

From the entry level one can catch a glimpse of the ruins



Fig. 5 Roman ruins of the cellular houses of historic Merida enclosed in the museum's crypt.

of an ancient Roman road left preserved between the museum and the crypt area. Moneo purposefully forces the museum visitor to venture beneath the entry level of the museum and then outside to see this ancient road. He also uses this exterior bridge as the entry into the crypt area. Moneo employs this forced referential to constantly remind the visitor that the new structure rises above an ancient site of the Romans.

The essence of the space of the main exhibition area was derived from the nave of an ancient Roman basilica. The basilica was originally a house for public use. This building type was approached axially. The main space of nave was surrounded by the structure of the building. The structure was a series of columns that moved down the perimeter walls of the basilica. Moneo's building has reflected these ideals.

For Moneo, the nature of the basilica is expressed through the basic compositional principles of typology. These principles are generated by the repetition of the formal structure and in its relation to previous structural forms. Moneo uses the basilica type for its "Romanness", the publicness of the building, the axially of the approach, and the special essence of the scheme. He has designed equally spaced parallel brick walls that march down the perimeter of the central space that suggests structure for the building. These parallel walls imply a nave and an axially to the main

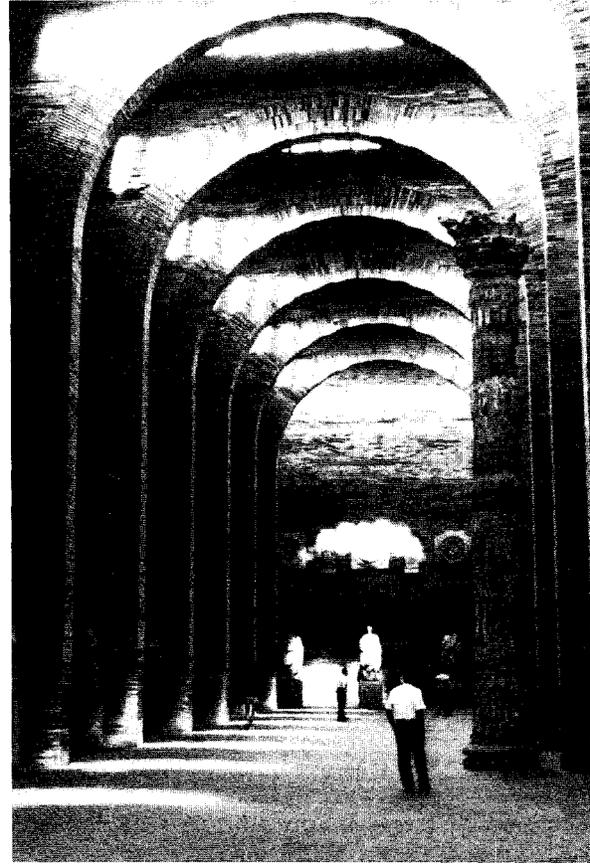


Fig. 6 The central nave and organizing volume are articulated by the skylights which emphasize the planar nature of the structural walls.

space of the museum. Moneo contrasts these walls with the cellular plan of the Romans (as seen in the crypt), and with the columnar structural system of the basilica. The loading of the structure of the basilica type is on its perimeter columns. The loading of Moneo's museum is on the parallel perimeter walls. The structural rhythms (or repetitions) of the basilica and the museum are very similar.

A discrepancy between **type** basilica and Moneo's scheme can be found in the museum's apparently structural walls. These walls are without a stabilizing perpendicular component which is expected in traditional masonry constructed buildings. The walls appear to be of traditional Roman construction but are in fact quite modern, because they are themselves structural. Moneo's concrete-filled masonry walls are used in tandem with a thin, modern reinforced structural slab floor system which is edged by steel railings, and topped with marble flooring. The floors appear to float in the museum spaces. The museum spaces begin to overlap and penetrate one another, becoming quite literally Modern space (in the Modern sense of overlapping volumes.)

Moneo distorts modern construction with the use of traditional Roman elongated bricks. The materiality of the Roman wall construction is abstracted by the apparent lack of joints between the bricks. The wall appears to read as a

massive abstract plane that aspires to Roman construction. Upon closer inspection the wall becomes true to its modern construction techniques. The wall is a plane broken down into many smaller parts, with the brick's mortar joints set back from the face of the wall. The modernity of the structure articulates its own modernity in order to juxtapose the seemingly ancient brick walls. The importance of the solution lies in the fact that Modern space and materials are intersecting with the allusion of the past.

The apparent Romanness of the structure is at once an illusion and reality. It appears to be Roman, but actually its appearance is not as real as it seems. A building of the Imperial Roman times would not expose the masonry, but hide it behind stone or plastered surfaces. The illusion of Roman materiality comes over centuries of neglect and piracy. Only "common" walls exposed their true materiality. Most walls in the Roman structures which we now see as articulated planes were hidden behind the abstract planes of a singular material surface.

In addition to the "Romanness" of the Museum at Merida, Moneo wants the building to express its Spanish heritage. The long tradition of Christianity in Spain is apparent in an actual ruin uncovered in the crypt. One of the ruined houses seems to have once been used as a place for early Christian worship in Merida. Moneo strengthens this cultural tie through his typological use of the essence of what was to become the early Christian basilica type. More important than the obvious tie to Roman culture is Moneo's expression of the building's Spanish heritage through its contextual materiality, details, construction techniques and the restrained minimalism of the building's forms. These cultural concerns are very evident in Moneo's building.

CONCLUSION

*"Every great artist finds his own antiquity."*¹⁵

Typology, according to Moneo, is "a group of objects characterized by the same formal structure".¹⁶ It is a device that links the past with the future. Typology is a framework of history that must be infused by one's intuition to solve architectural problems.¹⁷ According to Quatremere de Quincy, **type** is "rooted in the nature of the region, in the historical notions..."¹⁸

The typological factor that appears to dominate the design of the Museum of Roman Art at Merida is that of its Roman influence. Moneo begins his design process by manipulating structures from the Roman Empire. The design is an abstract diagram of these buildings and not a literal mimetic device. One cannot find a specific building in history from which this building was modeled. The museum speaks of its singleness, its uniqueness, but also speaks of its shared features historic characteristics.

The exterior is not precisely Roman, but gives the initial impression of a structure that might be Roman. The textures of the bricks unify the typological concepts with the past. The massive and imposing building emulates the Roman

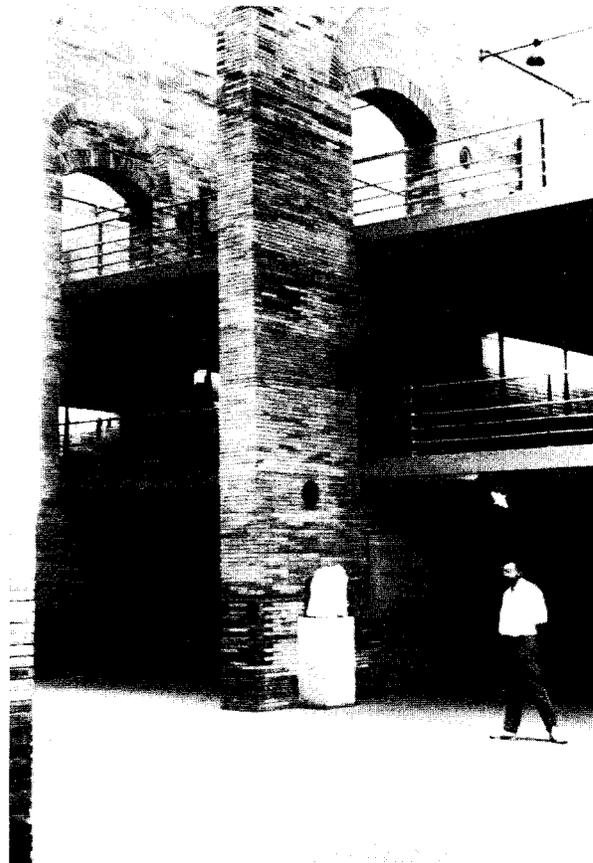


Fig. 7 The floors are thin concrete slabs contrasting the apparently unbraced brick walls.

influence of the area, yet remains contextual to the Spanish countryside in which the museum is built. The historical influence of the Romans to the area, as well as the contextual issues of the building are the essence of the typological part of the Museum of Roman Art at Merida. Moneo succeeds in bringing together form and image into a feeling of authenticity and consistency. It works better than his description.

Moneo celebrates the context and space surrounding the museum as well as the modernity of the space inside the building. He links use, needs and customs of the present with those of the past. The building therefore cannot be said to be a modern style building, even though it is deeply rooted in the Modern Movement for the internal spatiality of the museum.

The museum at Merida summons the metaphysical aspects of a museum. It is a treasure chest for the found archaeological relics of the area. Its form and fabric have a poetic and didactic purpose of their own though. The subtle relationships shared with the past and the future is indeed found in his Museum. These notions are celebrated in the ruins of the road passing through the museum, the building's respectful presence towards the nearby ruins of a Roman amphitheater and circus, and in the artifacts housed in a purely Modern space dressed in Roman form. The building emphasizes Moneo's view of typology as a design philosophy from which one can begin to design. Typology has not



Fig. 8 Typical Roman artifact displayed on the background of an abstract brick plane. The taught surface of the brick is achieved by the use of frogs for the mortar.

been reduced to a false science as one would find in other modern architect's theory of typology. Typology then has value to architect's in our current pluralistic society. Architectural meaning can exist within an already established cultural context in history coming from preestablished types.

NOTES

- ¹ From Rafael Moneo's article "On Typology" in *Oppositions* #13, Summer 1978, p. 23.
- ² From Quatremere de Quincy's republished article on "Type", with an introduction by Anthony Vidler in *Oppositions* #8, Spring 1977, p. 149.
- ³ In reference to Alan Colquhoun's interpretation of typology from his book *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1981.
- ⁴ *op. cit.*, Moneo, p. 23.
- ⁵ *op. cit.*, Vidler, p. 99.
- ⁶ *ibid*, Vidler writing about Quatremere de Quincy, p. 105.
- ⁷ *op. cit.*, Moneo writing about Quatremere de Quincy, p. 28.
- ⁸ *ibid*, about Durand, p. 29.
- ⁹ *ibid*, p. 31.
- ¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 32.
- ¹¹ *ibid*.
- ¹² *ibid*, p. 37, as well as *op. cit.*, Colquhoun.
- ¹³ *op. cit.*, Moneo, p. 23.
- ¹⁴ *ibid*.
- ¹⁵ accredited to James Ackerman, from William J. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, Second Edition, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987, p. 106.
- ¹⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- ¹⁷ *op. cit.*, Colquhoun.
- ¹⁸ *op. cit.*, Vidler, p. 149.