

Typology and Place in Modern Architectural Production:

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The residential house, as the site of everyday life, offers a vital type through which to explore the awkward relationships between “precedent and invention” in the contemporary production of architectural place. The modern city is often thought of as “placeless” with its increasing focus on abstraction and virtuality. The general sense of being lost and uncertain in the modern city, amidst our diverse civilization, is an increasingly common experience due to the fact that most of our cultural means of locating ourselves have been destroyed or cast into doubt. Whereas cultures in the past relied upon established ideas and values to define themselves and the world around them, such as those offered by Christianity, the use of rhetorical and dialectical reason has allowed our civilization to free itself from religion and tradition, but also increasingly from science and an idea of progress which previously located and defined our place in the modern world.

The house is one of the last places where typology should be applied as it begins to standardize living and individual life in moving towards a level ideal for private spaces. Most directly, by the standardization of programme and forms typology also unavoidably defines possibilities of living and life, further distancing and displacing us from a sense of our own lives and an intensifying our sense of being lost. In response, the contemporary house can instead provide a clear and empty space, or a void, to allow people to step away from the artificial and abstract images which are component to our everyday lives. The “precedent” of the past has become disengaged and its abstractions have become mistaken for reality. The experience of place requires, instead, a re-engagement of “invention” of the world as it is found, and even of established types, ideas and values.

The contemporary loss of engagement is identified by Jose Ortega y Gasset as originating and founded within modernity itself. Gasset employs the idea of *historical crisis*¹ to elucidate a recurrent pattern of cultural development up to an inevitable disconnection from itself. Within modernity one of the defining perspectives is described by science and the associated views from technology. Galileo is positioned by Gasset as the first modern man who founds the modern perspective by originating physics and employing empirical science to verify understanding. A crucial impulse within modernity is clearly seen here as a supposedly objective reality is posited and made real by sciences, in opposition to the then reigning world views of Christianity. The omnipotent God had for centuries defined an unknowable world, situating reality solely within the mysterious and unreachable creator and subsequently leaving the world without change. Development was limited to increasing the articulation of static places in society defined by guilds, monarchic hierarchies, or church scripture all of which appeared to be permanent. In large part, this medieval stasis prompted the impulses of society towards the origins of modernity in rational logic which finally provided a means to break free from a religious understanding of the world.

Ortega y Gasset's tracing of human impulses through history is seen to show that modernity itself is again approaching an historical crisis today. Similarly to the medieval Christian world, the modern city is defined by ideas and values that have become overwrought and over-developed, in our contemporary case, by unending layers of articulation and laws defining science, technology, government and even the "free" market economy of capitalism. The very volume of articulation prevents people from engagement and resultantly contemporary culture tends towards cynicism and apathy as seen in advertising and the many medias ranging from television to print, and even in architectural theory from the perspective of Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School which sees architecture hopelessly trapped between economic and cultural forces. Even though it does not produce action, cynicism acts as a key force within crisis by indicating a

general cultural impulse towards something fundamentally new, both terminating the existing order as a means to place and instigating a sense for change and action in individuals.

Rational logic has allowed the exponential development of the world, especially in providing the basic foundations for scientific and technological production and research. The contemporary city offers more diversity and freedoms than ever. However, even the newfound freedom of rational logic also shows several underlying problems which are increasingly evident today. Science provides one of the abstract foundations of modernity which relies upon an exclusion of individual experience in order to render a type of clarity. Empirical experiments, with the scientific method of hypothesis, experiment, observation and etc., are essentially tools to remove individual emotion or judgment, and render instead an abstract and universal, or objective, idea such as the laws of physics. Although science and technology have undoubtedly allowed many diverse advances and richness in the modern city, the very plenitude which science has provided, somewhat ironically, allows people to shed any obligation to understand or engage them. Gasset notes particularly, that the modern forces of science, specialization and mechanization each relies largely upon distanced and disinterested technicians and therefore continues to move towards the removal of individual experience and actual engagement.² It is not at all necessary in the modern city to understand, or even to consider science or our culture in order to survive. Instead, people are able to consume its products without need for reflection, meaning or understanding and find a culture continuing to advance hollowed ideas, either locating individuals in a mechanized assembly line or as specialists who have no unified context to develop within. This is exemplified in contemporary science as the many various fields continue to produce remarkable discoveries and developments but with each science having been specialized to the point of incompatibility with the others. Even within physics, the modern perspective on how the world works, research has become so specialized that competing and incompatible theories abound and

cause confusion and doubt rather than defining a place in the universe. The previously orienting idea of Hegelian dialectical progress is today replaced by doubt over the consequences and uncertainties of directionless scientific advance, although it inexorably continues. Further, the very complexity and diversity of contemporary culture defies individual understanding. The modern tools of classification or even experimentation appear futile in the face of the breadth and width of the modern city. There is too much to take into account or verify and as a result the choice to become resigned and comfortable with the modern condition of displacement is felt by many to be inevitable or unavoidable.

The sense of displacement can be seen to be almost an historic norm, as essential world shaping human impulses for meaning and their resultant perspectives take tremendous time to find appropriate architectural expression. Christianity produces a transcendent sense of space in its High Gothic cathedrals after well over a thousand years since the inception of Christian impulses and thought. The ideal churches emerged only after a long period of struggle in which people constantly sought to directly make the world, through architecture, as they saw and understood it. Architectural displacement generally reigns in the world, as the ideal forms are incrementally approached and achieved only in a moment at which society has already begun moving away towards something else. The Gothic Cathedrals iconic of Christian place was built as Christianity was already under attack through rational thought. Similarly, modernity finds its ideal architectural articulation in Le Corbusier several hundred years after Galileo began articulating a modern perspective. As Le Corbusier was creating the canonic forms of his early work, his contemporaries, such as Georg Simmel, were already theorizing against the modern city and modernity itself.

Each of these modern omissions is equally evident in the idea of typology as a ground for new architectural works. Typology suffers from the same basic neglect, or devaluation, of individual experience and the essential necessity of subjectivity and the unconscious in place. The consequences of modernity are

evident in the everyday life of individuals as the basic abstraction of language has even distanced relationships between two individuals with colloquial greetings and sayings displacing a direct use of language to convey a consideration. Inter-personal gestures of concern or caring, such as the colloquial “how are you?” are as much dismissals as actual greetings and have lost their authenticity as people today find their reactions and thoughts predefined by culturally accepted norms. Language is seen here to distance people from their own thoughts and lives as much as it allows communication. Abstraction in combination with natural human impulses, such as laziness, inevitably creates a disengagement from the real world. This basic everyday experience casts a powerful illumination upon typology as it can be seen to potentially allow “empty” gestures devoid of actual intention or meaning and instead playing only upon itself as an accepted image. In providing a standard set of forms and programmes, typology provides a tool that allows disengagement from the act of production to a sterile and placeless act of reproduction.

Within everyday life, the scale addressed in housing, people are increasingly detached from culture, society and, ultimately, ourselves. Abstract perspectives have both allowed and forced a gradual disconnection from the real world they describe and basic individual experience. Today, this is perhaps most clearly evident in television and other medias that have long defined a reality which largely references itself and its own abstracted and idealized images of life. Marketing is popularly understood as an artificial creation of impulses and desires, but clearly influences architectural production today. One of the dominant images within popular culture and the production of housing is conveyed as “the good life.” This image of place achieved through happy and carefree consumption and prosperity is already popularly understood as a product of marketing as much as it is a personal impulse or goal. The repeated bright images of life remain constantly out of reach and unsatisfying even when they are achieved, as contemporary society realizes the essential selfishness and distorted perspective of capitalism and consumer society. Plenitude is no

longer perceived to be a fulfilling end in itself, but instead casts a shadow by the misfortune that it causes others. Even consumption today is no longer unbridled and shows instead a concern for how the products were made, by whom, and under what conditions for example environmentally, in green products, or socially, as in the awareness and rejection of unfair labor practices.

A vital disjunction occurs within modernity as abstraction and language slides away from an engaged use towards a disengaged reproduction. The study of “works of the past” offers a possibility of identifying spaces and programmes that are exemplary statements of individual place in the world, but, at the same time, classifications such as typology do not provide a foundation for architectural production as the scientific process of classification unavoidably removes experience from its consideration of the buildings. This is exemplified within typology in its neutralization of the specificities of site and its basic connection of the landscape to the body and experience.

In fact, the malaise from which architecture suffers today can be traced to the collusion between architecture and its use of geometry and number as it developed in the early modern period.

The lively discussions over the possibility of applying typological or morphological strategies in design also betray the same illusion. Before 1800 the architect was never concerned with type or integrity of a formal language as a source of meaning. Form was the embodiment of a style of life, immediately expressive of culture and perhaps more analogous to a system of gesture than to articulated language.

Introduction to *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*. Alberto Perez-Gomez. 1983.

Alberto Perez-Gomez identifies the architectural crisis as originating at the moment in which geometry lost its “mystical” side and proceeded to become a technical tool³ which delimits choices in plan, section and elevation. Today, it can be seen that geometry has almost become a typology for its own sake. New geometries engender new architectures including “cyber” types of non-Euclidian shapes and forms. The meanings of these new forms to individual life and unconscious have not been considered beyond their apparent newness and avant-guard character and have little connection to human impulses or desires and basic place. Rather than providing tools for understanding the world, the abstractions replace basic reality and people begin to compare the world against reproduced and abstract images of it as we see and feel it to be.

Typical housing today focuses more upon abstract measures like maximizing square footage and jamming in all the programmatic elements featured in the media as components of the “good life” and subsequently demanded by the marketplace. The maximization of footage corresponds to the abstract perspective of an economic view towards the landscape. Typology suffers from the same omissions as other scientific perspectives in purposefully

and unavoidably removing individual experience from its perspective on place. While typology aims at a supposedly objective perspective, architecture, and place in particular, remains an inherently individual engagement with the subjectivity of experience providing a foundation for a sense of place. The use of typology largely presents a technological tool for production.

The removal of personal experience and engagement is perhaps most clear in the typological disregard for site. A basic step in the process of classification is a displacement from the immediate site of the project and its specificities. Loss of site and bodily engagement in typology accordingly removes the possibility of place rather than its intent of clarifying it through an objective measure. Typology, in this light, is thereby revealed as a language without meaning.

Although, this type of architecture has grown from and corresponds to the disengaged modern life, it remains a possibility for, and responsibility of, the architect to ensure that spaces are good and hold the potential of conveying meaning, understanding and place. This is particularly evident in smaller homes and condominium apartments which eschew a clean and simple plan in order to fit in “luxurious” dens, studies and multiple bedrooms. The images of the “good life” shape market demands, and thereby define programme and form only abstractly and disconnectedly as an image without context. Even at the scale of the kitchen, proper functionality is paradoxically lost in favor of “functional” accoutrements, like island counters and all the latest machines which only clutter and confuse its basic use for cooking. As a result, the sense of place is naturally as confused as the layouts and the house as a whole does not provide any sense of location for the individual inhabitants, but instead forces them back into the confusing diversity of the city.

The hearth is rarely built at the center of contemporary housing, especially in developer projects, and instead is included as a feature which is often

marginalized or hidden in a corner. The archaic sense of warmth and light emanating from fire provides a solid experience that can only be tangentially retained in typology. The scientific study of types may identify the hearth as a central element in homes but it only does so as a programmatic feature or is lost when combined with other housing ideals which do not share the same experience of fire and its grounding warmth. The hearth as a foundation of the home loses its experiential aspect in typology and thereby neutralizes the fireplace as an anchor for place. In the end, typology typifies a modern perspective of objective classification and lends itself to reproduction instead of engaged production. The house as a type offers a potent example of the pitfalls of the modern perspective as everyday life can be seen as disengaged and displaced, not in the least, by its idealization through typology.

Although typology does not provide a solid foundation for making place, the “works of the past” undeniably shape our possibilities of architectural production. The past, in effect, provides a language for architecture “whether or not we care to admit it.” This is manifest explicitly in the study of tectonics which provides a language of connections for the articulation of place.

In the last analysis, everything turns as much on exactly how something is realized as on an overt manifestation of its form. This is not to deny spatial ingenuity but rather to heighten its character through its precise realization. Thus the presencing of a work is inseparable from the manner of its foundation in the ground and the ascendancy of its structure through the interplay of support, span, seam, and joint – the rhythm of its revetment and the modulation of its fenestration.

Pg. 26. *Studies in Tectonic Culture*. Kenneth Frampton

Tectonics provides means to articulate the sense of a space, as much so as a building’s form. As stated by Kenneth Frampton⁴, the way in which something is connected and put together is inherently imbued with meaning and

accordingly place is inflected by tectonics whether intentionally or unconsciously. The manner of physical construction is always physically perceived and engaged by the body to convey a “presencing” or a sense of place.

Conveying a type of inherent meaning, tectonics presents a language inseparable from a technical tool so that the methods of “the past” can be re-employed and re-configured to convey current place. This is in stark contrast to typology which delimits the possibilities of form and programme for each particular type and moves towards their unification into standard categories and an ideal form for each. The basic shift of focus away from “what” back towards “how” allows tectonics to provide means of engaging architecture rather than cutting off the possibilities for the re-imagination and making of place. Rather than delimiting subjective engagement, tectonics provides a compendium of connections that allows the articulation and clarification of form and the meanings or understandings that it embodies. The past provides a series of examples of how things are put together which must necessarily be reproduced because they are physical, and thereby finite, techniques of construction. The fundamental aspect of tectonics is its physical nature, by virtue of which it engages the body and a bodily understanding of place.

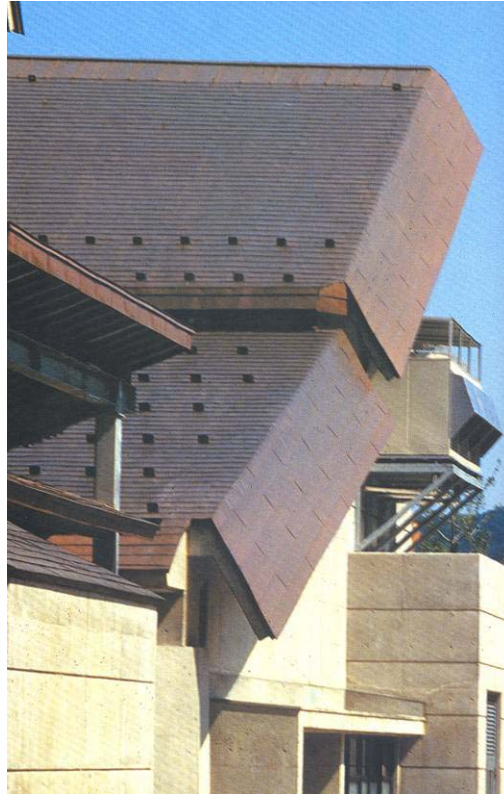
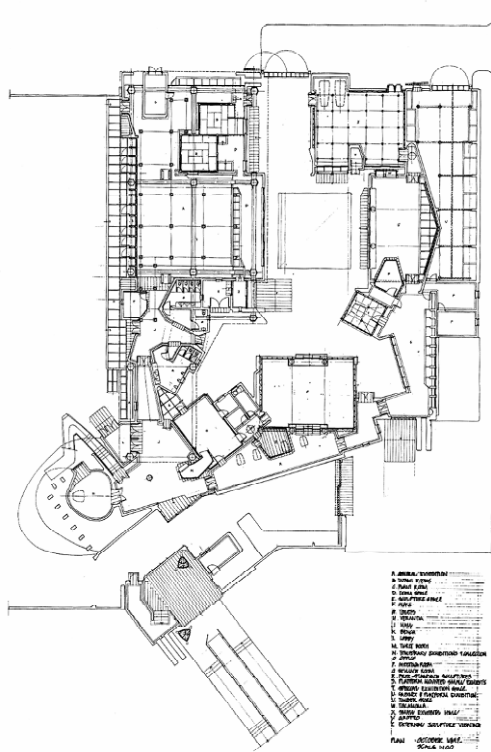
Rules are made to govern the definition of space through the accuracy of construction detail. In the reading of such detail the spatial emphasis of the room can be understood to be mute or otherwise, giving it a kind of legibility...This is explored through a number of recurrent strategies:

To make ever finer territories in order to relieve the burden of scale upon the architectural piece

To look for possible scale differences – architecture as furniture – as a way of offering emphasis within a sequence of rooms.

To work with an additive architectural programme rather than a conglomerate form.

Pgs 63 + 96. 4+1 *Peter Salter: Building Projects*. Peter Salter.



Plan and Roof Detail of the Inami Woodcarving Museum. Peter Salter.

The approach to architectural production and place making defined by Peter Salter⁵ demonstrates some marked differences to typology as a foundation for new work. Tectonics are approached as a way to make a space clearer and more legible but aggregately rather than originating as an ideal and moving from the top down. Counter to typology, Salter pursues “conglomerate form” choosing to allow a sense of place to emerge rather than imposing a fixed and finished ideal form with attached preconceived meanings and values. Spaces are made to suit particular parts of programme and the whole generates a particular sense of place rather than attempting to fit an ideal into a specific condition. This is furthered in Salter’s deliberate shift of focus by tectonics details away from the whole “architectural piece” which is the central concern of typology. Tectonics are used by Salter to create an incremental connection to site, thereby establishing a bodily connection to the landscape and one of the foundations of place.



Photo of Pavilion of the Nordic Nations in the Gardens of the Biennale, Sverre Fehn, 1958.

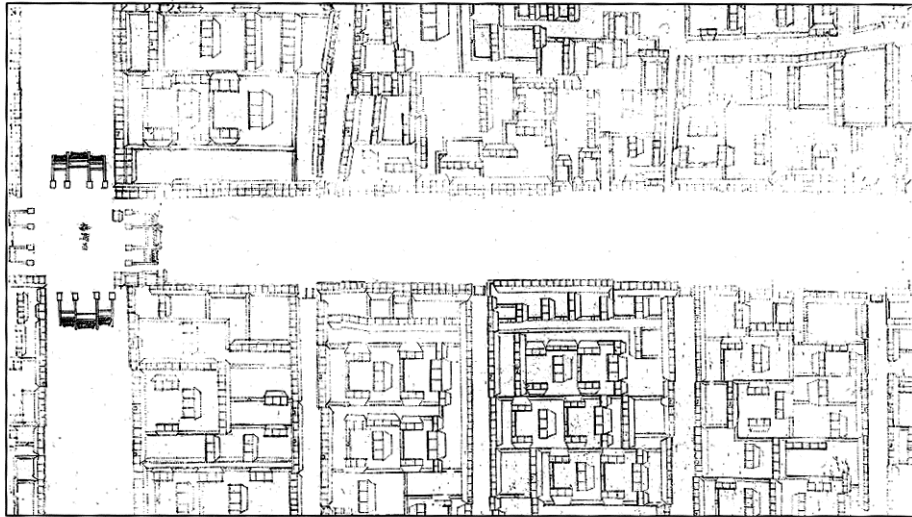
The work of Sverre Fehn⁶ creates a sense of place directly through a focus on singular tectonic gestures, making them inseparable from the architectural form and meaning. At the Pavilion of the Nordic Nations in the Gardens of the Biennale the generation of a sense of place, almost tangibly even in the still photos, is achieved by Fehn largely through a maximization and focus on the tectonic gesture of the roof beams. The pavilion roof utilizes slender but massive concrete beams as a device for filtering light and resulting in a sense of place which provides a warm quietude. The beams allow a broad space that is clear of columns but even further, are employed to reflect and filter light to recall Nordic conditions. Richness is generated in the specifics of how light interacts with the simple structural element that spans over 20 meters from outside through the interior. The making of architectural place is approached solely through a tectonic gesture.

To return to typology, rather than the established types of classification by programme an additional layer of complexity and place can be reached by identifying types of experience. The modern situation, as related by Gasset and Perez-Gomez, lacks a type which can allow re-orientation and re-placement within our alienating and confused culture.

Contemporary society can, alternately, be seen as precariously built around an absence of meaning as expressed by existential writers such as Sartre or Camus who saw tremendously empty and meaningless voids at the heart of modern civilization. Rather than a pessimistic and cynical perspective, these writers posited the nothingness as a powerful foundation for the rest of life as a foundation for phenomenology, ethics or other systems. In each case, the experience of nothing provides an essentially necessary moment in order to reach a sense of place, or to re-engage our city and ourselves.

Existentialism, although it can act as a foundation for place problematically does not easily or comfortably fit back into everyday life. The systems of ethics which Sartre derives in response to the absurdity of the human condition, does not define a universal truth as individuals today not only find, but mix and redefine their understandings from the diversity we inhabit. However, the basic empty sense of place, remains a crucial experience for contemporary architecture and holds powerful potential for the individual re-establishment of place, to the point where it can be explored as a sort of type of experience.

The location of a void at the center of the home is perhaps more familiar to Eastern architectures whose foundation in Eastern cultures has defined an acceptance and appreciation of nothing at the center of life, as exemplified in Zen Buddhism and alternately in traditional Chinese, Japanese and Korean dwellings⁷. An historical map of Beijing, shows a city composed of structures organized by voids.



Beijing ca. 1750. Detail from the Complete Map of the Capital City During the Qianlong Era. Pg. 103. The Structure of the Ordinary. N.J. Habraken

The competition project aims towards a materially felt empty space, not mechanically empty, cold and sterile, but an architectural and material void that can be felt as warm and engaged as source of grounding. The emptiness is directly focused on the removal of habitual images and values in order to allow an engagement of actual lived life. Rather than inserting components of the good life, the center of the home can be emptied to allow individual refocusing of values and ideals. The design project of a house for interstitial lots being developed in Portland, under the Portland Open House Project, attempts to create a place for reading in the center of the house, replacing the hearth with a clear nothing. The basic, almost archaic, tectonic form of barrel vaults is utilized to frame a still exterior space with a rainwater collection pool to reflect the sky.

The narrow building lot of 25 feet is maximized by the simple separation of service and living spaces. The design here employs a typology which more closely resembles a factory or industrial buildings than that of a typical residential house, but is thereby able to produce clean and usable spaces. The narrow lots explored in the competition simply do not allow for conventional housing types or organizations. The kitchen, storage, washrooms, circulation and stairs are

contained in a functional 6 foot wide service volume built from traditional residential stud wall construction. The living space is centered around an open courtyard that is framed and stilled by smooth barrel vaults massively containing the living spaces and bedrooms. The market requirement of a garage is re-made as a clear volume with operable garage doors at both ends thereby allowing the private courtyard to open up and become semi-public, connecting to the street.

The courtyard anchors back into the landscape by means of water collection and usage. The large coverage of the building is used to create a connection to the landscape by collecting rainwater towards the reflecting pool in the courtyard. The water provides a reflection of the sky to establish a vertical axis and anchor for the space while at the same time reflecting a varied and rippling light to illuminate the interior spaces. Other water filtering technologies are located below the rest of the deck to allow its use in cooling and possibly as a grey water system. At a detailed level, the eaves trough is exaggerated to 30cmx50cm in order to articulate the collection of water and also perforated to allow a screen of rain to fall in front of the narrow band of living space on the second floor and kitchen at the ground. The central courtyard is further oriented towards the sun and seasons with the south facing windows of the second bedroom flush to the edge of the vaulting and the north facing master bedroom having a balcony, to not only provide a more private exterior space, but also to shade the interior during summer months and preventing unnecessary heat gain. In fair weather, the temperate climate of Portland allows the expansion of the living space, kitchen and garage onto the courtyard for eating, sitting, conversation or reading by the use of operable doors, garage doors and windows. These tectonics devices allow the house to provide a sense of clean and clear location in the void of a central courtyard, but also provides the possibility of opening a direct view and connection through the entire house and courtyard back to the sidewalk, street and neighborhood.

Architecture, today, requires a typology of nothing which can allow individual re-orientation or simple rest from the abstractions of modern life. The process of re-grounding individual experience can be effectively approached at the scale of the everyday, or architecturally, in housing. Rather than attempting to achieve richness by providing all the amenities and features of other contemporary houses, the home can move back towards place by simply providing a void, not as an ironic gesture but as a quiet space with light and water, a place without narrative, in which the individual can sit, read and re-balance themselves.

End Notes

- ¹ Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *Man and Crisis*. Trans. Mildred Adams. London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1958.
- ² Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *The Revolt of the Masses*. Trans. Anon. London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1932.
- ³ Perez-Gomez, Alberto. *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983.
- ⁴ Frampton, Kenneth. *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. London: The MIT Press, 1995.
- ⁵ Salter, Peter. *4+1 Peter Salter: Building Projects*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.
- ⁶ Fehn, Sverre. *Works, Projects, Writings, 1949-1996*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997.
- ⁷ Habraken, N.J. *The Structure of the Ordinary: Form and Control in the Built Environment*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.