

Columbia University
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation
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States of Housing

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The Substance of a Global Typology / Robert Marino Studio

The concept of typology, borrowed most significantly from the natural sciences, (see Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, etc.), is, and has been, a powerful method of taxonomy used in the categorization of housing projects. In this critique, the Darwinian evolution and the characterization of common characteristics in biological organisms is deemed to have parallels in the world of housing design and construction. This reductive method allows the critic to summarize multiple hybrid influences into a kind of shorthand by which he or she can understand housing form. The influences that determine a housing typology fall into broad categories. The political and sociological category has to do with the organization of societies into progressively smaller groups, beginning with the city and ending with the individual. A primary need of each of these groups is a spatial one. Conventions and expected norms will play a role in the distribution and organization of space. Rituals at every level dictate progression, security, visibility, and degrees of communality. The concept of land ownership and transfer becomes another politically driven aspect of housing organization. The needs of eastern commune and western family, for example, are quite different. The laws determined by centuries of precedent and the practical issues of managing a population's living conditions are paramount in the development of housing types. Safety and security issues alone drive a majority of local laws written to insure the well-being of citizens. This studio will focus on another aspect of housing typology, namely the physical substance of housing and the techniques used in its transformations. We will focus, of course, on New York City construction. The construction of large scale housing in New York City invariably involves cementitious materials. An unusual confluence of factors, some technical and some sociological, have led to this culturally determined reality. Portland cement, sand, aggregate materials, steel reinforcing rods, modularized brick materials, precast lintels and sills, coping stones: These are the labor-intensive materials of New York City Housing. They are heavy, somewhat crude, and in the case of cast-in-place concrete, require preparation, (formwork), that is very complex and costly. A labor force that knows cementitious materials and techniques is also required. This labor force exists here in New York City. It is the product of several centuries of immigrant worker influx, newly arrived in America with skills already honed in other places. These basic skills then had to be re-considered because of the special adaptations needed for New York City sites, special limitations of New York City transportation, and the vagaries of local union rules and regulations. In all, we can state that housing construction in New York City is at least partially a sociological phenomenon, a unique combination of local practicalities and exigencies. All these conditions for a housing type to exist, of course, in every part of the world. This semester we will have an opportunity to investigate other places with other housing typologies. Is there a concept of a global typology? Is a cementitious architecture a common denominator of type? Are the forces, political, sociological, legal, and material converging? This will be an underlying theme for the semester to be researched, hopefully, in a tactile way.