

POLITICAL SPACE IN HETEROGENEOUS CITY

A typological and phenomenological understanding of the political buildings in
Brussels

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I INTRODUCTION

The emergence of research methodology has had an essential impact on the development of architecture. The research on architecture is aimed at knowledge innovation and heuristic thinking. As time goes, the architectural practice has added many unknown areas, while the methodology can scientifically guide the research process. If we want to start research, it is crucial to understand how many methodologies exist and what they contain. These methodologies can help us ask questions, specify an approach, ultimately find a solution, and so on. The correct choice of research methodology is a good starting point in the entire research process.

During the lecture series of research methods, I had a preliminary theoretical knowledge of various methods and their related cases. For example, in the category of praxeology, the emergence of *Fordism* proves the necessity of methodological research. Henry Ford analyzed the problem in the factory and then came up with this theory. Fordism effectively improved economic efficiency, standardized products, and allowed workers to obtain higher wages. This research-methodology approach made me understand the advantages that research methodology can bring. Besides, by reading related books after class, I have a systematic knowledge of methodology.

Usually, before entering the architectural design phase, we need much research to form our design basis. In the past, my research process relied on points of interest. After taking this course, I learned how to choose related analytic tools and follow the methodological guidance in the research process. Besides that, I know that researchers should not have only one research method. In most cases, they use multiple approaches to obtain information.¹

The research question is about the political space of Brussels. How many governmental buildings does this city have? What are the characteristics of these political space? How to classify these legislative buildings? More specifically, the research explores how in Brussels, where political structures are incredibly complex, researchers can sort out a transparent political system background and be able to identify the causes of these political spatial differences. Brussels has one of the most diverse populations on the planet. Its social, political, and material structure reflects both its complex history and its current heterogeneous state, which is the result of an almost ongoing state of negotiation and compromise, including the history of monarchy Power, the legacy of colonialism, the competitive French and Flemish culture of Belgium, and the recently implemented European District.

This thesis explores the epistemology of typology and phenomenology. It shows how the two methodologies complement research questions by using research methods and analytic tools to consider the practical process of methodology. At the end of this article, it critically demonstrates the theoretical limitations of these two methodologies and reflected on the parts that should be improved in the process of the research.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Due to the complexity of Brussels' political space, this topic requires a careful choice of strategy. I used a series of research methods to answer the research question. The methodologies I use are based on context-led research and qualitative research. Architectural typology serves as the primary research theory and collaborates with the episteme of phenomenology. The analytic tools used in the research process include fieldwork, literature research, case studies, interviewing, comparative research methods, and drawing.

As a starting point, I chose the literature research method to study the political system and government institutions in Belgium. By searching on the official website of the Belgian government, we draw an analysis map of Brussels's political system structure. (figure 1) After that, the case study method was used. During the field trip to Brussels, I visited and surveyed these buildings and their surrounding areas to explore the real-life context of these buildings. These buildings include the federal parliament of Belgium, the city hall of Brussels, and the European Union headquarters' office buildings.

After rigorously selecting the cases, I tried to make a qualitative comparative analysis of these buildings' façades, the relationship between the buildings and the city, and the architectural elements (such as doors). In this qualitative research, a series of methods were designed, such as photo recording, fieldwork, and drawing. To gain a better understanding of the political space in Brussels, we interviewed a local activist group. An axonometric drawing was made after collating the content of the interview. The figures show the most important political space of the activist group and the federal parliament of Belgium. (figure 2) The process of interview and draw offer opportunities to analyze the logic of political morphology behind political space.



Figure 1. Political system structure



Figure 2. Left: Political space of the activist group G1000. Right: The political space of the federal government of Belgium.

In terms of methodology, architectural typology mainly emphasizes the classification of architectural or urban spatial morphology, which can also be considered as a graphic classification. In essence, typology is a way of thinking that returns to rationality. It enriches the research horizon by introducing the time dimension and abstracts the prototype characteristics from it to eliminate empirical prejudice and interference. It is worth noting that "classification" in the sense of architecture is not based on a simple division of functions, but means the concept of a particular element. Its research focus includes three aspects of "type selection", "type extraction" and "type and urban form".² The studio guided us through analyzing the western democratic ideal and the building forms, types and spaces in supporting lectures. The precedents under this theme are divided into six categories: processes projections, quasi-Urban Structures, early formations, medieval town halls, nineteenth-century town halls and twentieth-century metropolitan palaces. This taxonomic study of precedents helps determine Brussels political spaces' type selection.

Combining Brussels complex history and its current heterogeneous condition, we conclude three types: EU, Belgium, and Brussels. (figure 3) This classification method is the most targeted type selected based on an analysis of the Belgian political system. In the type extraction, we analyze the spatial form and the particular spatial order, arrange the bird's-eye view, floor plan and section view of these buildings. Finally, from the perspective of the relationship between types and urban forms, the ultimate purpose of selecting and extracting samples is to obtain the information of urban forms through type processing. Buildings and building groups are essential elements in forming urban structures. The shape and space of each building is the reason for the diversity of building types. This urban-architectural-interior approach is also the core research method of the interior studio.

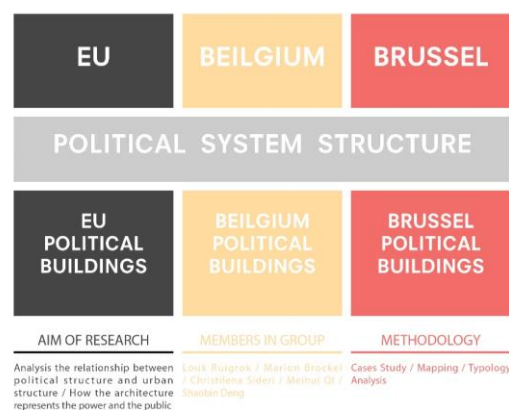


Figure 3. Research Structure.

According to C. Norberg Schultz's theory of architectural phenomenology, one of its primary purposes is to reveal the essence and meaning of the built environment, and this essence and meaning are attributed to the critical concept of place.³ Heidegger regards architecture as the realm to which everything belongs, and the significance of architecture is that buildings provide the place.⁴ Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote "No one lives in this world in general" in the book *Local Knowledge*.⁵ It implies that place is the foothold that enables people to exist in the world, and it connects people to the world in a more precise, stronger and more positive way.

From a phenomenological point of view, the process of interviewing the activist group and drawing out the figure of the political space they used was an analysis of the place's inherent logic. G1000 is an organization of innovating democracy. They try to prove that citizens can engage in complex political processes, and that deliberative democracy can lead to a high-quality result. They use the Tour&taxi to host the citizens 'summit. We compare it with the Federal Parliament of Belgium to explore the unique and recognizable spatial characteristics of the two places—*signs*, and the behavioural procedures that produce interpersonal communication—*behaviour*.⁶

In typology, I select individual parts of neo-regionalism and neo-rationalism. Compared with neo-rationalism, neo-regionalism pays more attention to the dominant forms on the surface and often has more particularity. Phenomenology mentions that the need from space to place is not only the behaviour of people's daily communication but also the *signs* that can serve as the order of life.⁷ The neo-regionalism focuses on the purely architectural signs in regionalism, as well as the connection between signs and environment. It also concentrates on the possible impact on users. For individual buildings, the easiest way to find this type of *signs* is building typology. The *genius loci*⁸ provide a phenomenological explanation for *signs*.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION*

Architectural typology is not limited to classification. It is also a way to recognize and analyze things.⁹ Aldo Rossi, a well-known neo-rationalist architect in Italy, believes that types are the various forms and morphological relationships established historically and conventionally by human beings in their long lives and artistic practices. Because it is the crystallization of wisdom created by humanity, it will always be accepted by people. Rossi also believes that a specific building type is a combination of a lifestyle and a building form. Furthermore, the type is the concept of architecture, which is closest to the essence of architecture. Type represents the idea of an element, which itself is the law of the model. Beyond that, the type should be understood as a formal internal structure.¹⁰

Architectural typology originated in the 15th and 16th centuries and developed after the second industrial revolution at the end of the 19th century. Contemporary architectural typology rose in the 1960s, and evolved from the archetype typology¹¹ to the second typology¹². And then developed to the current third typology¹³. The theories of the archetype typology stage are based on the natural world.¹⁴ From Laugier's *the primitive hut* theory to Durand's *architectural graphic type ideas*, the development of architecture is attributed to the primitive type of architecture. One by one, the design principles based on the prototype, but did not solve the relationship between type and people, and the relationship between type and city while exploring the types of architectural forms. The second typology developed in the early 20th century, represented by Le Corbusier, analyzed architecture and believed that the elements of architecture must be standard and uniform. In this way, the form of architectural elements is limited to a finite concentration. In the 1960s, Aldo Rossi's research expanded the concept of typology to aspects of style and form, details of urban organization and structure, elements of historical and cultural aspects of the city, and even human lifestyles. Rossi's work, Gallarate Apartment, uses a traditional open gallery and a characteristic arcade, which are connected to the urban living experience of the locals and stimulate people's traditional associations and memories. This case is a clear choice for the type of residence. The third typology approach is essentially a structuralism approach, a structural reading of buildings and cities. Typology is based on the foundations of Europe's long history and culture. It is represented by neo-rationalism and marks the formation of contemporary typology.

The contemporary architectural typology is mainly composed of two parts: the neo-rationalist architecture typology that seeks the prototype from history; the neo-regionalist architecture typology that explores the prototype from the region. Neo-rationalism is a root-seeking tendency clinging to cultural traditions, while neo-regionalism is a root-seeking tendency adhering to regional characteristics.¹⁵ The representative of neo-rationalism is the Italian architect Aldo Rossi. In his book *The Architecture of the City*, he proposed a set of neo-rationalism typology theory. The connection between architecture and history is instructive. Mario Botta focused more on the impact of the building environment. He looked for "prototypes" from the local space conditions, the climate, which is called neo-regionalism. In addition to this, representatives of the Venetian school include O. Aymonino, neo-rationalist theorist Giorgio Grassi, Luxembourg architects Creel brothers, Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, American architect Steven Holl, etc.¹⁶ People have contributed their views and practices to the development and improvement of architectural typology.

Architectural phenomenology is derived from phenomenology in philosophy. The founder was Husserl, and his student Heidegger had a profound influence on architecture. Inspired by Heidegger, C. Norberg Schultz wrote the book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, which became an essential work on architectural phenomenology. Architectural phenomenology mainly studies the relationship between people, buildings, and the environment.¹⁷ It advocates directly going from phenomena to phenomena and abandoning all preconceived speculations. As a useful research method, architectural phenomenology promotes spirituality in any place. The architect's role is to guard and continue this spirit.

The essence of place theory is to understand the cultural meaning and human characteristics of the physical space. C. Norberg Schulz's *Existence, Space and Architecture* architected and visualized the ideas in Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. He also claimed that *genius Loci* is the first step towards architectural phenomenology.¹⁸ He believes that the *dwelling* only happens when someone experiences the meaning of place and environment. *Dwelling* means the space in which life takes place. The purpose of the existence of the building is to make the initially abstract, non-characteristic identical and homogeneous *locus*¹⁹ into a situation where real and specific human behaviour occurs.

In my approach, architectural typology and phenomenology are used as a framework for the research process. Even if I devised two methods, they would be used with a critical perspective. I will question their advantages and disadvantages. If multiple cognitive frameworks are needed in one area, I will carefully combine them. Therefore, in the research and analysis stage, architectural typology provides a basic knowledge of governmental buildings' research. To explore the meaning of place and space, I combined Norberg Schultz's theory of *locus*.

From a personal perspective, architectural typology provides an opportunity to think about the commonalities and spatial prototypes of these political spatial patterns. Phenomenology guides how these spaces are formed and how people move through a range of spaces. These analyses can supplement the internal logic of political space. Through historical research, I found that it is not necessary to think about neo-regionalism or neo-rationalism in isolation. I analyze both aspects of cultural tradition and regional characteristics and summarize the research content to obtain more effective research results.

IV POSITIONING

Considering my position, the lectures by Robert Alexander Gorny's typologies and Klaske Havik's spatial narratives proved to be the most inspiring.

Gorny described the difference between type and typology in the lecture and introduced the genesis of the notion of type. These contents stirred the curiosity about typology. So I read more literature and tried to find more information which is close to my position. After reading the books and articles, I think about the potential and limitations of typology.

Aldo Rossi proposed a typological approach to reading cities.²⁰ He believes that typology not only plays a vital role in the history of architecture, but it will also definitely involve typology when studying urban issues. During the research and reading, I found that Rossi's typology has some limitations. His typology based on the historical method and intended to express the sense of history in a form. This methodology is the only way he reveals the essence of all cities and regions. However, his method is challenging to adapt to the city's needs in different stages of the development process. Besides, since his theory originated from European classical architecture, it remains to be considered whether it applies to other continents. There are many regions and countries in the world. Due to the differences in urban environmental conditions and cultural heritage, people's sense of identity with history and traditions is also very different. In those places with a long history and deep cultural accumulation, the theory of typology is more practical. Besides, the population type of each city has changed over time, so different people have distinct memories of the city's history. Fortunately, the city we studied in Brussels. Brussels is famous for its rich history, so the limitations of typology have little effect on the research process.

M. Bandini summarized the meaning of architectural typology into three points.²¹ The first one is the urban reading method, which mainly emphasizes the comprehensive nature of the city, and focuses on the discussion of urban morphology. The second is the method of treating typology as an architectural style in the cultural sense. The third point is to regard typology as a theoretical tool for architectural creation. The first two of M. Bandini's views are directed towards the research process. The last one is about how to translate the research conclusions into architectural design elements. Guided by these contents, the typology theory can help sort out the composition and distribution of political architecture. Besides, the formation characteristics of these buildings can be summarized by comparing the three levels of buildings in Brussels (EU Office Buildings, Federal Buildings, Brussels Region Office Buildings). For example, in front of the entrance to a prominent political building, there is generally an open space. The existence of these squares can offer people the solemnity feeling of the building. In studying the office buildings of various parties in Brussels, we study the *signs* of the building, the door. Doors are an essential element in these buildings. When we put the drawings of the doors together, we can figure out the characteristics of partisan architecture.

I reflected on the research process and found that the way I used typology was superficial. The meaning and strategy of typology in architecture are *abstract to reduction*. However, my research process was limited to *abstract* and did not extract effectively *reduced* elements after integrating information. The ultimate purpose of doing architectural research is to serve architectural design. The *concrete-abstract-concrete* process can help extract architectural type elements. However, in the research process, we only listed the public environment information of various political spaces, but the *reduction* in the operational process of reflective research and design. It leaves room for researchers' involvement. We should extract type elements to explore more possibilities of political space.

Havik's narratives speech emphasized that written documents strengthen the understanding of space. After reading the article, I was more interested in the *locus* and *genius loci* mentioned by Norberg Schultz in phenomenology. The place is a meaningful whole with a combination of natural and human-made environments. The *genius loci* have more extensive and profound content and significance than

the *locus*. When comparing the spatial arrangement of the Belgian federal parliament and the activist group G1000, I found that the political form determines the architectural space. The federal parliament of Brussels is a multi-party political activity under the parliamentary system. It is a semi-circular space arrangement. The G1000's building reflects the equal right of citizens to discuss. So it is a space arrangement with many round tables. An interview with the activist group's coordinator offers more information and details that I could not find on the Internet. By comparing the layout logic of different spaces, I understand the various ways of implementing democracy.

The theory of *locus* in phenomenology also has limitations. Typology has its research line and research methods, but *locus* and *genius loci* emphasize spiritual orientation. It is the product of the architect's keen personal consciousness. Using phenomenology for analysis may cause viewers to have no uniform standard for works, and researchers may fall into a research dilemma of not knowing what standard to use. They can only align with previous successes. The limitations could stifle the creativity of researchers and therefore repeat the vicious cycle of old-fashionedness.

Both typology and phenomenology have particular value in carrying out methodological research. The typology provides methods to figure out the political spatial distribution of the city and to summarize the characteristics of these governmental buildings. The theory of phenomenology shows how to see the essence through phenomena. By using the methods of drawing and interviewing, the reasons for the formation of each political space can be explored. I also feel that as a contemporary architect, I should use every methodology carefully. Each method has limitations and should not be limited to theory. In the process of research, we must take the essence to remove the defects according to the actual situation, and then apply the methodology to our study.

- 1 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), 20
- 2 Yue-wen Cheng, Si-qing Feng, and Yi-han Wang, "A research for the theory and practice of the architectural typology", *Journal of Hefei University of Technology (Social Sciences)* 17, no 5 (October 2003): 80
- 3 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 5
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1971), 157
- 5 Clifford Geertz, *Local knowledge: Further Essays In Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 159
- 6 Yu-tong Ma and Zhao-ning Liu, "Place Making Based on Architecture Typology", *Urbanism and Architecture* 16, no.319(May 2019): 12
- 7 Ibid, 12
- 8 Genius loci: In contemporary use, genius loci usually refer to the unique atmosphere of a location or the "spirit of the place", not necessarily the guardian spirit.
- 9 Li-jun Wang and Ping Shu, "An Analysis of the Architecture of Contemporary Western Architecture Typology" *Architectural Theory* (February 2005): 18
- 10 Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982): 24
- 11 The archetype typology: It refers to the typology which attributes the development of the building to the original type of the architecture, regardless of the type.
- 12 The second typology: The typology based on generics (Vidler calls it the second typology) regards the emergence of new types as the central theme and considers that "people are the root of new types."
- 13 The third typology: The third typology, compared with the first two typologies, makes typology research no longer an external "nature" to make typological elements reasonable and systematic, but as an ideal variant at the city level expand. It shows the characteristics of the original building typology.
- 14 Li-jun Wang, "A Study on the Generalized Architectural Typology" (PhD diss., Tianjin University, 2002), 17
- 15 Li-jun Wang and Ping Shu, "An Analysis of the Architecture of Contemporary Western Architecture Typology" *Architectural Theory* (February 2005): 18
- 16 Li-jun Wang, "A Study on the Generalized Architectural Typology" (PhD diss., Tianjin University, 2002), 47
- 17 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 182
- 18 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 1971): 30
- 19 Locus: The locus, so conceived, emphasizes the conditions and qualities within undifferentiated space which are necessary for understanding an urban artefact.
- 20 Zhou Huang and Xiao Feng, "Architectural Typology Theory of Aldo Rossi" *Tropic Architecture* 5, no.2 (June 2007): 25
- 21 Ying Yang, "Aimed to the Rethinking of Architecture Designs: Criticizing& Rebuilding to Architecture Design Knowledge" (PhD diss., Chongqing University, 2004), 140

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ILLUSTRATION

Fig.01: Edited by Shaobin Deng based on data collected by the author and Shaobin Deng.

Fig.02: Left: Edited by Johan Löwstett. Right: Edited by author

Fig.03: Edited by Shaobin Deng.