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## Transversing Formalisms

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## Introduction

# Transversing Formalisms

Stavros Kousoulas and Jorge Mejía Hernández, editors

Daughter: Daddy, why do things have outlines?

Father: Do they? I don't know. What sort of things you mean?

D: I mean when I draw things, why do they have outlines?

F: Well, what about other sorts of things – a flock of sheep? Or a conversation? Do they have outlines?

D: Don't be silly. I can't draw a conversation. I mean things.

F: Yes – I was trying to find out just what you meant. Do you mean 'why do we give things outlines when we draw them?' or do you mean that the things have outlines whether we draw them or not?

D: I don't know, Daddy. You tell me. Which do I mean? (Bateson, 1972)<sup>1</sup>

This is how anthropologist Gregory Bateson opens one of the dialogues – or, as he calls them, 'meta-logues' – in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Extracted from the metalogue 'Why do Things Have Outlines?' the above conversation between Bateson and his daughter suggests that an outline can be understood 'as a threshold between disciplines; between things; between organisms and their environments, and importantly, how this threshold always needs to be tested.'<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, father and daughter cannot decide whether outlines are constructed or come in advance, whether they actually define the shape of a thing, or appear to do so only to our senses. Instead, Bateson invites us to assume that the shape of things comes out of

a 'negotiation across the threshold of an outline'.<sup>3</sup> Despite the specificity of any shape or figure, outline or boundary, Bateson's metalogue indicates that form can be taken for something that is essentially unattainable. In this sense, to ask 'what is form?' implies a generalisation, which necessarily dismisses or neglects certain often important aspects.

This sort of generalisation is quite common among architects, as architectural historian Adrian Forty reveals in his critical dictionary of architectural modernism. Forty argues that the Western notion of form in architecture 'appears to have outlived its usefulness' and claims that the term 'has become frozen, no longer in active development, and with little curiosity as to what purposes it might serve'.<sup>4</sup> Forty further suggests that its ambiguity (at least in the English language) is at least partially to blame.<sup>5</sup> Form, he notes, stands for shape, but it also stands for the idea or essence behind that shape. These two different interpretations alternate between form understood as a mental construct, and form understood as the way an object or substance is perceived by the senses.<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, what we know as the form-function paradigm, or the modernist belief that a univocal relation exists between the materialised shape of a building and the idealised human actions meant to take place within it, benefitted from (or fell victim to) this ambiguity.<sup>7</sup>

Granted that most functionalist propositions have been broadly rejected, Forty points out that

we should be suspicious of the apparent normalcy with which we continue talking about architectural form these days. Instead, he says, we must remain aware that form, as any other word, is always and only a device for thought.<sup>8</sup> His argument seems almost self-evident. As media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell mentions in a somewhat playful tone, *everyone* knows that the concept of form has outlived its usefulness.<sup>9</sup> Much more interesting, though, is the fact that this assumption (of the triteness or the banality of form) says much more about the epistemologies that developed around a very limited understanding of form, than about form itself. In other words, if we follow Mitchell's interpretation, we can only conclude that Forty's thoughts are not really focused on form, but on formalism.

Architectural theorist Sanford Kwinter has elaborated on this distinction between form and formalism, concluding that there is not really one, unitary and universal kind of formalism, but several different formalisms.<sup>10</sup> Common among these formalisms – he says – are what he describes as poor and true formalisms. In Kwinter's opinion, the poverty of 'what is today collectively referred to by the misnomer formalism is more than anything else the result of a sloppy conflation of the notion of form with that of object'.<sup>11</sup> While this so-called poor formalism deals with the examination of fixed objects, Kwinter describes another kind of formalism – which he dubs 'true' – in relation to processes of formation, understanding form as an ordering action.<sup>12</sup> This means that rather than providing a *generic* account of objects (as typologies, classifications, and so on), Kwinter aims for a *genetic* account of how those objects come into being in the way that they do.

As editors of this issue of *Footprint*, we share both Forty's position regarding the paucity of modernist definitions of form, and Kwinter's urge to radically update our epistemologies. However, it is also clear to us that disregarding form as an obsolete concept

based on a modernist definition, or disqualifying a particular kind of formalism as 'poor', is simply throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, we believe that a syncretic approach to formalism – one that is able to account simultaneously for architecture and for its effects by establishing transversal relations among several formalisms – should effectively improve on modernist dichotomies, as well as on postmodern claims for the autonomy of form.

It was based on this belief that we set out to explore current formal studies in architecture in the first place, echoing Mitchell's plea for an understanding of form as something that 'is not made but found, not constructed voluntarily but discovered as something we were already committed to without being aware of it'.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the reflections collected in this issue elaborate on that commitment, and reveal that the study of architectural form is – contrary to Forty's interpretation – everything but frozen, evolving quite actively, and serving an important purpose.

It is clear to us that the following contributions proliferate beyond the aforementioned elemental question 'what is form?' with a host of additional questions, such as 'how is form? when or where is form? for whom, why and for what purpose?' This multiplication of the variables involved in the study of form suggests a shared attempt to provide us with an updated and valuable knowledge of not just one generalising aspect of form, but instead of the many variables that make architectural form and its studies subject to change.

Furthermore, this shared attempt appears to be aligned with our original decision as editors to follow a tripartite trajectory regarding formal studies, which included at least three different and rather popular perspectives. On the one hand, we invited architects to reflect on the way built form is produced, how it comes into being. On the other, we encouraged the study of the ways in which architectural

form appears in discursive or communicative terms. Finally, we embraced inquiries into the different relations that can be established between human actions, understood in the broadest possible terms, and the shape of the built environment. By interrelating these three approaches, we aimed to embrace and braid object-based approaches to form, approaches that examine the reciprocity of formal emergence, and studies dealing with in-formation. Emulating Joseph Kosuth's well-known triptychs, our aim was to situate the question of architectural form between these three topical interpretations, which we referred to as architecture's configurative triad.

Still, we set out to survey this configurative triad departing from a concrete historical landmark that surpasses the form-function paradigm that Forty found so problematic. This landmark – not without its own problems – was the emergence of neo-rationalism in the early 1960s, as a direct reaction to modernist functionalism.<sup>14</sup> Our aim with this choice was to recognise the weight of form-centred theories in postmodern architectural research; and although we felt that that landmark was meant to be superseded, we did not foresee the nature of that supersession, much less realise the extent to which it appears to be consummated.

Giovanni Corbellini's review article – the only that actually addressed the neo-rationalist tradition – does so tangentially, by focusing on an important though lesser known figure among the architects of the well-known 'Tendenza' group. Based on the work of Gianugo Polesello, Corbellini describes the complex exchanges that characterised the group's activity, rather than focusing on the specificity of their theories. In this sense, his approach to one of the centres of neo-rationalist architectural thinking somehow sets the tone for the whole issue: a tone of negotiation and nuance, acting on what Bateson would describe as the 'threshold of the outline' of architectural communication.

Along this threshold, it is clear to us that the following contributions tend to transverse several kinds of formalisms based on a common denominator. The reflections collected here coincide in understanding contemporary culture and architecture as reciprocally constitutive, and therefore complex, intense and heterogeneous. The prevalence of this understanding, and the subsequent belief that the process of determining, producing or appropriating built form must necessarily reflect these traits, has two interesting consequences.

First, it is clear that some of the following approaches to form aim for complexity in abstract terms.<sup>15</sup> The radical break with the more generic strains of formalism suggested by this abstraction implies an intentional dismissal of a specific, object-centred, formalist tradition – if we are to follow Kwinter's suggestion. In addition, it resonates with Mitchell's plea that a commitment to form 'will require not simply returning to the concepts of form and formalism of yester-year or restarting old commitments. It will necessitate a rethinking of both terms and of the relation between them.'<sup>16</sup>

A second consequence of this understanding – also connected with Mitchell's plea – is clear in another set of texts, which still try to establish transversal connections between the more generic formalisms, and other kinds of formalism. These transversal connections explain why these contemporary studies on architectural form seem able to leave unproductive dichotomies – such as poor and true formalisms, or generic and genetic formalisms – behind.

We would like to underscore the importance of this supersession, convinced as we are that it is beyond these binaries where form mostly lies: active, full of potentials and agency, not to be approached in terms of *what it is* but in terms of *what it can do*. Said differently, we strongly believe that the crucial issue when it comes to architectural form is not to properly

define it, but rather to determine the effects and the limits of its actions. Such an endeavour, necessarily syncretic and transversal relies on a myriad minor questions.

Among these minor questions, Peter Bertram's paper focuses on what he terms an architectural diagrammatic inquiry, meant to negotiate the specificity and heterogeneity of analogue and digital diagrams. Bertram's reflections on the relations that exist between the instruments and methods we use to communicate our ideas, and the way those instruments and methods determine architectural form, are shared by Jack Rees and Duygu Tüntaş alike. Together, these papers confront the question 'how is form?' and further problematise it. While Rees advocates for a pedagogy of architecture that transcends our perspectival understanding of form, Tüntaş discusses organisational network diagrams as valuable instruments for the appraisal of intentionality in the production of form. Jointly – although to different degrees – these contributions suggest a radical revision of both the ontology of architecture and of the role of the architect.

Following a different approach, Armando Rabaça and Carlos Moura Martins explore the relation between urban and architectural form based on a rigorous study of big and complex buildings. While their study remains focused on well-known examples of twentieth century European architecture and urban planning, Johan Nielsen, Kris Scheerlinck and Yves Schoonjans develop a case-study that also negotiates contemporary urban and architectural form, but contemplates the possibility of that negotiation taking place between several contexts. A sociology of engagement – these authors claim – is a valuable instrument to describe the remote production of relatively equipotent architectural forms. Both of these contributions, despite their differences, wish to examine the questions 'when and where is (urban) form?' thus complementing and enhancing the previous morphogenetic accounts.

Introducing yet another line of thought, Stylianos Giamarellos discusses the possibility of revising the formalist bases of Colin Rowe's analytical theory. His aim is to make that theory operative in an age where – as Luca Di Lorenzo makes clear in his review article – our current understanding of form is best explained in relation to computing systems' software, interfaces, and hardware, as well as their interaction. In other words, both Giamarellos and Di Lorenzo address a timely contemporary concern: 'for whom is architectural form nowadays?'

Embracing most of the questions above, Lars Spuybroek suggests that, historically, form has always been able to account for the complexity, intensity, and heterogeneity we appear to be so eager to capture. More than software and hardware, more than any type of formalism, more than an historic account of any built form, Spuybroek notes that our relation to form can be understood as the interrelation between an object and the acts of giving, receiving and returning that object.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Spuybroek asks us, 'why is form?' – if not for a play of limits, a threshold between objects and events, a machine of grace and a machine for grace, that we both share and shares us back to the world.

In retrospect, as editors of this issue of *Footprint*, we may conclude by returning to one of Adrian Forty's main arguments: the claim that form is merely a conceptual device. What we think becomes evident throughout this issue is that such an approach to form fails to productively address the very complexity that form entails. In other words, by reducing form to just another concept, another word, we lose the potential to examine the actual effects that form had, has, and can have in both architectural theories and practices. Much more than simply a concept, we are convinced that form – in its ambiguity and in the heterogeneity of all the attempts to approach it – stands as a shared question, one that brings together disciplines, schools of thought and

variant methodological practices. Consequently, the contribution of this issue of *Footprint* to current formal studies in architecture is to problematise the question of form, by offering a transversal view among several different formalisms.

This view, we hope, should afford the production of theoretical, methodological and conceptual innovations in the field of formal studies. Furthermore, it seems to already explore novel trajectories that try to bind different kinds of formalisms, rather than separating them. Finally, we are inclined to believe that the shared view of architectural form which we provide here does not obey to the constraints of any given formalism but, on the contrary, turns those constraints into productive chances for a formalism *yet-to-come*. In this sense, Bateson's contradictory response to his daughter might start to become clearer.

D: I don't know, Daddy. You tell me. Which do I mean?

F: I don't know, my dear. There was a very angry artist once who scribbled all sorts of things down, and after he was dead they looked in his books and in one place they found he'd written "Wise men see outlines and therefore they draw them" but in another place he'd written "Mad men see outlines and therefore they draw them."<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000 [1972]), 37.
2. Hélène Frichot, 'Daddy, Why Do Things Have Outlines? Constructing the Architectural Body', *Inflexions*, no. 6 (2013): 119.
3. Frichot, 'Outlines', 120.
4. Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
5. Ibid., 172.
6. Ibid., 149.
7. Ibid., 172.
8. Ibid., 150.
9. W.J.T. Mitchell, 'The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years', *PMLA* 118, no. 2 (2003): 321.
10. Sanford Kwinter, 'Who's Afraid of Formalism?' in *Form Work: Colin Rowe*, ed. Robert Somol (New York: Anyone Corporation, 1994), 65–69.
11. Kwinter, 'Formalism', 65.
12. Ibid.
13. Mitchell, 'Commitment to Form', 323.
14. Mario Gandelsonas, 'Neo-Functionalism', *Oppositions* 5 (Summer 1976): i-ii.
15. As Gilles Deleuze reminds us, the true opposite of the concrete is not the abstract but the discrete. The concrete abstractness of experience is indeed a trajectory that we have examined before in *Footprint* when focusing on the relation between architecture and the recent Affective Turn. For more see Deborah Hauptmann and Andrej Radman, 'Asignifying Semiotics as Proto-Theory of Singularity: Drawing is Not Writing and Architecture does Not Speak', *Footprint* 14 (2014): 1–12.
16. Mitchell, 'Commitment to Form', 323.
17. There is a remarkable similarity between this proposition and Carlos Martí Arís's attempt to apply Karl Popper's theory of the three worlds in order to account for object, action, and communication in formalist studies of architecture. For more see Carlos Martí Arís, *Las Variaciones de la Identidad* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 1993), 33–43.
18. Bateson, *Ecology of Mind*, 37.

**Biographies**

Stavros Kousoulas studied Architecture at the National Technical University of Athens and at TU Delft. Since 2012, as a researcher and lecturer, he has been involved in several academic activities at the Theory Section of the Faculty of Architecture of TU Delft. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at IUAV Venice participating in the Villard d' Honnecourt International Research Doctorate. He has published and lectured in Europe and abroad. He has been a member of the editorial board of *Footprint* since 2014.

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