

City morphologies: between the ideal and the real

Morfologias da cidade: entre o ideal e o real

Morfologias urbanas: entre lo ideal y lo real

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Abstract

Giulio Carlo Argan's concern with the Ideal City surprises those who are accustomed to thinking about the urban dynamics of the modern city. This is due to the fact that he understood the importance of the ideal scheme in the visual conception of the city. In this sense, based on Argan's work, we aim to understand the role of the ideal, both in the morphology and transformation of cities, and in correspondences with the notion of typology and, therefore, with the thought of the Beaux Arts. In addition, we aim to compare the bibliography, first to follow his steps and argue that the ideal scheme always accompanies the real city, even admitting its sensitive possibility, a trait that



brings us closer to the study of Poetics. Secondly, to complexify some of the notions already mentioned, and seek their historical meanings, decomposing concepts implicit in the author's argument. Finally, to problematize the notion of city at the end of the 20th century, and thus expose the relationship between it and its ideal scheme, in order to question its relationship with history. In general terms, the relevance of this article relies on elements that are being worked on in ongoing research, which affect the construction of theoretical architectural thought.

Keywords: Theory of Architecture and Urbanism; Type; Argan; ideal; real.

Resumo

A preocupação de Giulio Carlo Argan com a “Cidade Ideal” surpreende aqueles que se acostumaram a pensar a dinâmicas urbanas da cidade moderna. A isto, se deve o fato dele ter compreendido a importância do esquema ideal na concepção imagética da cidade. Nesse sentido, a partir da obra de Argan, visamos compreender o papel do ideal, tanto na morfologia e na transformação das cidades, quanto em correspondências com a noção de tipologia e, logo, com o pensamento das Beaux Arts. Além disso, visamos comparar a bibliografia, primeiro para seguir seus passos e sustentar que o esquema ideal sempre acompanha a cidade real, admitindo-lhe até mesmo a sua possibilidade sensível, traço que nos aproxima do estudo de uma Poética. Em segundo lugar, para complexificar algumas das noções já citadas e procurar historicamente seus sentidos, decompondo conceitos implícitos na argumentação do autor. Por último, para problematizarmos a noção de cidade no fim do século XX, e assim expor a relação entre ela e seu esquema ideal, de maneira a questionar sua relação com a história. Em âmbito geral, a pertinência deste artigo recorre de elementos que estão sendo trabalhados em pesquisas em andamento, que incidem uma construção do pensamento teórico da arquitetura.

Palavras-chave: Teoria da Arquitetura e Urbanismo; Tipo; Argan; ideal; real.

Resumen

La preocupación de Giulio Carlo Argan por la ciudad ideal sorprende a quienes están acostumbrados a pensar en la dinámica urbana de la ciudad moderna. Esto se debe a que comprendió la importancia del esquema ideal en la concepción visual de la ciudad. En este sentido, a partir de la obra de Argan, nos proponemos comprender el papel del ideal, tanto en la morfología y transformación de las ciudades, como en las correspondencias con la noción de tipología y, por tanto, con el pensamiento de las Bellas Artes. Además, nos proponemos comparar la bibliografía, primero para seguir sus huellas y sostener que el esquema ideal acompaña siempre a la ciudad real, admitiendo incluso su posibilidad sensible, rasgo que nos acerca al estudio de la Poética. En segundo lugar, complejizar algunas de las nociones ya mencionadas y buscar históricamente sus significados, descomponiendo conceptos implícitos en el argumento del autor. Finalmente, problematizar la noción de ciudad a finales del siglo XX, y así exponer la relación entre ella y su esquema ideal, para interrogar su



relación con la historia. En términos generales, la relevancia de este artículo radica en elementos que se están trabajando en investigaciones en curso, que inciden en la construcción del pensamiento teórico arquitectónico.

Palabras clave: Teoría de la Arquitectura y Urbanismo; Tipo; Argan; ideal; real.

THE IDEAL ACCORDING TO G.C. ARGAN

The relationship between the real city and the ideal city plays a crucial role in the thinking about the transformation of cities in the work of Giulio Carlo Argan, especially in the book entitled “History of Art as History of the City” (2010)¹. This relationship is important because it evokes, within it, other fundamental oppositions, which serve to help us think about the historical dialectic of cities in their evolution, such as: formal schematism – which allows us to generate and at the same time produce order and organization – and the so-called “informal” or spontaneous construction of urban development. Within this opposition, there are still others, namely, the difference between the model and its modification, which Argan also compares to the philosophical metaphor of substance and its modes, and to the metaphysical city and the earthly city. In this context, we know that the most decisive contrast for Argan, when thinking urbanistically about the contrast between ideal and real, is the relationship between quality and quantity, the former being a constitution of practically immutable values and the latter the mutability of the quantity of these same qualities, as can happen in the growth of cities.

The urban evolution procedure, in these cases where the ideal city remains an essential quality, would be achieved through addition, in which a module generates its multiples that increase or decrease within the same scheme, such as Rosseti’s addition in Ferrara, cited by Argan. This is summarized as follows:

“Besides being a model of form, the city is a model of development, within the limits in which this can happen without contradicting some postulated premises, according to its own logic and evolutionary rhythm. The ideal city, more than a model per se, is a module for which it is always possible to find multiples or submultiples that modify its measure” (Argan, 2010, p. 74)

The model, in this 1979 speech, encompassed the sense of module, that is, an essentiality of values that maintained constancy even in the face of the occurrence of modifications. Argan cites some forms of this constancy in urban processes of “artisanal civilizations” – those that maintained a relationship of production with the ideal plan through the representation of one in the other – such as, for

¹ This is a speech given at the closing of the Bologna art history congress in 1979, entitled *Città ideale e città reale*, later published in 1983, which is now translated into the set of writings selected and grouped in the aforementioned book.



example, in the expressions of technique. Technique brings together rationality and temporality, that is, it carries different ways of uniting the act of building to the attributes of life, whether to create the structure of work or life – rural or urban – given their own spatialities and temporalities. Thus, we have that the repetition of technique, in time and space, consolidates, along with the repetition of the mental process of building, what we can call art.

In this sense, Argan denies the hypothesis that there would simply be a principle of constructibility prior to the scheme of form and, therefore, we could not think that technique would, in principle, generate formal reality, since it would already be conditioned by a scheme and the repetition of the mental process. On the contrary, he shows that it is a relationship between technical production and the visible reality established in the city – in which one enters and consolidates the other – that shows the competition between form and its generation, and between quality and quantity in a dialectical process.

This dual process of constituting form – marked by phenomenological concepts – is corroborated by the following statement: “The hypothesis of the ideal city implies the concept that the city is representative or visualizing of concepts or values, and that the urban order not only reflects the social order, but the metaphysical or divine reason of the urban institution” (Argan, 2010, p. 74).

This representation is, as Argan states later, a distribution of technical and formal values in the economy and social structure. What is particular about the schematization of historical cities is that it produces a movement that “[...] never occurs like a fossil, but as a reality that developed a long time ago according to evaluation and selection processes that would not be difficult to identify and describe” (Argan, 2010, p. 76). This selection process, which is both technical-constructive and formal, is fundamental to understanding how the transformative movement occurs in historical cities.

The City and Imitation

Our hypothesis here—that the sense of the distribution and selection of values comes from a philosophical culture of Aristotelian poetics—even resized by its philosophical receptions throughout the centuries, does not seem absurd, given that it provides us with a basis for understanding the capture of the movement of human actions, as well as their arrangement in a circuit of values embedded in the forms of art. Furthermore, it will appear in readings of Argan, which we will see later.

As a representation of human action, poetic mimesis—the representation of human actions arranging them in an appropriate form— allows the distribution of the ideal in the real, as in the case of the selection of high and low values, schematized in the manner of tragedy and comedy. In this sense, we can compare



the model of imitation in tragedy to Argan's scheme, as that which determines and selects a quality of the ideal and presents it in the sensible. According to Aristotle, Tragedy is:

"[...] the mimesis of an action of high character, complete and of a certain extent, in ornate language, with each of the kinds of ornament distinctly distributed in its parts; mimesis that is effected by means of dramatized actions and not by means of narration, and which, by virtue of compassion and fear, achieves the catharsis of such emotions" (Aristotle, 2020, p. 72).

The focus, stated from the beginning of Poetics, is to imitate the human being. The human being is posited as an object of imitation of movements and actions according to rules and a categorization. The rules of urban development involving evaluation and selection indicate the human presence embedded in the materiality of cities based on moral intentions. The aspect of these categories refers to Argan's assertion about cities which, as we have seen, are based on the identification of processes of evaluation and selection that already appear to us as schematized transformations. That this qualitative selection is always moral, stated from the conception of imitation in poetics, whose objects are virtuous men, their actions and their movements. In other words, poetics dealt with the modes of apprehension and capture of the mutable reality of men, according to a categorization of these actions, which is not done without an immediate moral step.

Here, we understand that imitating and representing reality means distributing principles of fundamental distinctions, formatted in systems of moral categories expressed in form and matter. Given the dimension of human nature, the imitative process is present from the beginning of life. To imitate:

"[...] is natural in men from childhood and in this they differ from other animals, for man is the one who has the greatest capacity to imitate and it is through imitation that he acquires his first knowledge; the other is that everyone feels pleasure in imitations" (Aristotle, 2020, p. 57 – §1448b).

In a temporal sense, it is at the beginning of men's primary life that this imitative process occurs, in a way, spontaneously. The imitative character becomes, first, a fundamental production of moral, aesthetic, scientific, and fruitive qualities. It is only in a second moment that they can be more or less elevated, tragic or comic, crystallizing the principles of value that are already distributed on their own in human action during life, the latter being what could be imitated.

At the same time, paradoxically in a non-temporal way, imitation is the instantaneous creation of the high and the low, immediately configuring the possibilities of human perception of moral reality and, therefore, becoming a part of education. In tragedy, the distribution was as follows: "[...] the elocution and



the music are the means of imitation; the plot, the character and the thought, its object; and the spectacle, the way tragedy imitates" (MACHADO, 2006, p. 26).

In general, this description allows us to understand that there are means of imitation, there is a thought that is put into this imitation, and there is a particular way of this imitation. There is, therefore, a technical classification, a quality, and a way of distributing each value.

This reminds us that Argan could have based the concepts of ideal cities on the relationship between image and copy in his diachronic process. This hypothesis about poetics in Argan – about its marks and incidence in the distribution of ideal schemes – as we mentioned earlier, is due to the fact that it has remained alive within the treatises and texts of Beaux Arts authors such as Charles Batteux and Quatremère de Quincy, who were not indifferent to the Italian author's conceptualization of "type," but we will see this later, when we get to that notion. For now, it is worth remembering the critical context surrounding the evocation of ideal and selective schemes in the morphological configuration of historical cities.

Historicity and the Ideal Scheme

Still in Argan's 1979 speech, the purpose of evoking a schematic ideality was to problematize the transition that occurred in the historical Renaissance city to the modern industrial city, since what allowed historicity in the former was precisely the dialectic between the module and the value of the quality of art techniques.

It is worth remembering that this dialectic, which allowed the historicity of the Renaissance city, served to criticize a certain loss of historical value – already as a party – of the constitution of the city as a qualification and quantitative distribution of values, due to the "non-historical" mutation of modern cities. In this sense, we can understand the relationship between history – as a result of a set of contingencies – and ideal scheme, shifting our attention from imitation – as a categorization of the sensible – to the construction of the object of art through the concept of history.

"[...] it is this rupture of continuity or the impossibility of development that generates the artificial concentration of the city's intrinsic historicity in the old core, thus accepting that this is, by definition, historic, in the same way that the modern – and Maltese already emphasized this – in its reality and actuality, would by definition be non-historical or even anti-historical" (ARGAN, 2010, p.74).

In other words, the problem of a new period of historical construction called "modernity," which is not identical to the end of history, implies only the loss



(or gradual elimination) of historical referents as an object of study of the self-transformation process. This loss:

"[...] reflects the concept of a city that, not having a charismatic institution, can continue to change without a providential order and that, therefore, precisely its continuous change is representative, so that what remains of the old is interpreted, yes, as belonging to history, but to a historical cycle that has already ended" (ARGAN, 2010, p.75)."

It is therefore worthwhile to revisit what Argan understands by the historicity of the city, in order to complicate the relationship between ideality and reality in the study of the object, which to a certain extent differs from the mimetic model of poetics, since it appropriates phenomenological concepts for its conception of this concept, but which suggests other forms of schematization that are added to the author's thought.

In the text called "The History of Art"², Argan presents both a methodology and the outlines of his research object. He states that art is an object that can only be described in terms of historicity, or in his words: "Art history is done not only because it is thought that one has to preserve and transmit the memory of artistic facts, but because it is judged that the only way to objectify and explain them [sic] is to historicize them" (ARGAN. 2010, p. 14).

City and artwork are brought together in an object that makes possible the assertion that the history of art is the only possible science of art, and that art, as a principle of artisanal society, produces a city such as its technical modes and social division, which established a presence of the past and a prediction of the future simultaneously. Thus, this aspect of the productive/technical and manifest/visible whole must be at the basis of the phenomenological perception of cities in their current relationship with historical centers. Argan does not deny the possibility of the "artisticity" of the modern city, but he directs his criticism at the current mode of this which only aestheticizes and occupies a history that is already finished: a utopia unrelated to the present.

Therefore, to base his phenomenological research, the art historian's method uses a "[...] procedure that allows framing artistic phenomena within the context of civilization is the history of art" (ARGAN, 2010, p.14). It is necessary that the relationship between these terms be historical, that is, that it links phenomena and the context of civilization. History, therefore – as a schematic model distinct from mimesis – is the way to sustain an artistic continuity, in which the scheme is the mode of perception proper to framing phenomena and producing this continuity.

Returning to the specific problem of art, which relates to that of historical centers, it can be stated that the different arts form a system insofar as all together, with

2 This is the first chapter, written in 1969, of "The History of Art as the History of the City".



their diversity of categories, procedures, and quantitative and qualitative levels, constitute the city, which, therefore, can be considered the field “où tout se tient” (ARGAN, 2010, p.76).

The art objects, studied right at the beginning of “The Story of Art”, show the author’s approach, which critically revisits the Schelerian distinction of the art object through its value (ARGAN, 2010, p.13). In other words, differentiating art made for the artist, and art for the philosopher of art – Wertdinge and Dingwert, thing of value and value of the thing – is insufficient for the art historian, who will encompass both the context and the phenomenon in their descriptions. The relationship between quality and quantity is revisited in this sense:

“[...] different types of social aggregation place the relationship between quality and quantity in a different way and that not only the history of the ideology of power, but also the entire experience of society and individuals constitute the mutable, but always eloquent image of the city” (ARGAN, 2010, p.75).

This eloquence, which the image of the city requires, is recalled by Argan in another text from the same book called “The Visual Space of the City”³: the urbanism of the city image can be metaphorized by a linguistic theory, such as Saussure’s. The metaphor is valid in such a way that Argan compares a unit – which provides a sense of association of language – to a sign, which allows an association of place, being the semiotic homology of the notion of association that allows, to the description of the city as a phenomenon, the production of memory (ARGAN, 2010, p. 239).

The same can occur with enunciation in the form of constitutive monemes; in other words, to enunciate a place is to constitute its existence within a category: a museum, a cinema, etc. If the schematization of the object of art as history and as city—this object of study that is a set—gains depth in Argan’s thought, it is because it serves to problematize the role of the architect in historical intentionality, from his training in Italian universities.

In this way, Argan intended to introduce the “vital processes of the city” into the consciousness of those who study, incorporating a method that did not repudiate the sense of historicity that we have seen. In other words, he was interested in proposing a historical object as a set of vital processes, so that he could then think about city projects.

For this reason, the Husserlian phenomenological concept of “intentionality” was so dear to him; after all, a consciousness is always “of something else” that is not itself; that is, it is a movement of consciousness towards that other thing. Such consciousness is, therefore, identity with the “outside of itself” (which in the case

3 Text from the same collection, written in 1971.



of Argan's object is the city and its transformation) or, in other words, with the productive and vital processes of the city⁴.

TPOLOGY, MORPHOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION

After this brief explanation of the concept of historicity, we can return to the problem of the ideal scheme, which had already been formalized in a text by Argan in 1966, called "On Typology in Architecture". Although the object here is no longer morphology, it is through it that the problem of "composition" arose, both within typological design processes and their relations in the modern city, and in the production of the ideal that accompanies them.

Based on the commentary directed at Quatremère de Quincy's notion of "type," and therefore directed at the Beaux Arts scheme in the 19th century amidst the problems of conservation and heritage in post-revolutionary France, Argan makes the following comment:

"Quatremère de Quincy gave a precise definition of the architectural type in his historical dictionary. The word type, he says, indicates less the image of something to be copied or imitated perfectly than the idea of an element that should serve as a rule for the model." (Argan, as cited in Nesbitt, 2006, p. 269).

In other words, it is a rule without an image, but which allows for a variation of abstract order. The openness of the meaning of this abstraction becomes clearer when Quatremère distinguishes Model from Type:

"The model, understood as an integral part of the practical validation of an art, is an object to be imitated for what it is; the type, on the other hand, is something with respect to which different people can imagine works that do not have an obvious resemblance to each other. Everything is perfect and well-defined in the model; in the type everything is more or less vague. Therefore, there is nothing in the imitation of types that defies the influence of feeling and intelligence [...]" (ARGAN, in: NESBITT, 2006, p. 269).

Here, it is important to reconstruct aspects of what generated interest, from the art historian, in the distinction between the model and the type. While the former is made for an imitation of itself, the latter is an opening for the participation of the present, which makes imitation a process of non-identical resemblance, open to influences of feeling and intelligence, that is, an opening of the relationship

⁴ We owe this explanation to a comment made by Jean Paul Sartre called "A fundamental idea of Husserl's phenomenology: Intentionality", present in the work "Situations 1 – Literary Criticism" published by CosacNaify, 2006 edition.



between similarities that, in the model, were fixed. Next, he shows how the constitution or genesis of the type occurs:

"It is never formulated a priori; it is always a deduction from a series of illustrative cases. Therefore, it is never possible to associate the type of a circular temple with this or that temple in the same way (even though a particular temple, in this case, the Pantheon, has had and continues to have special importance), but it is always the result of the comparison and fusion of all circular temples" (ARGAN, in: Nesbitt, 2006, p. 269).

The abstraction of type, therefore, by distancing itself from the a priori purism of form, is content with an associative deduction not by form, but by comparison of examples already seen in which aspects of form may or may not end up serving as a criterion. Therefore, the type must be the result of analogies of the historically determined function:

"The creation of a type depends on the existence of a series of constructions that have a clear formal and functional analogy among themselves. In other words, when a type is defined by the practice or theory of architecture, it already existed in reality as a response to a complex of ideological, religious, or practical demands linked to a specific historical situation in any culture." (ARGAN, in: Nesbitt, 2006, p. 269).

Thus, the notion of type, which Argan takes from Quincy, already exists as a backdrop to the project, since it is inherent in the forms of the present. In other words, what the type does is represent the analogies (formal and functional) of its time. At the same time, as a form of perception, the representation of analogy appears as a general similarity, not only of form or part, but in the integral comparative scope between buildings of such a form and/or function.

We have seen, then, that Argan shows that it is through formal and functional analogy that the type is created, and that it is naturally constituted, from the demands of architecture, without the need for a treatise or even a dictionary. Inside, creation is something: "continuous and interconnected – the inventive aspect being merely a response to the demands of the present historical situation through criticism and overcoming of past solutions deposited and synthesized schematically in the type" (IBIDEM).

Argan, reading Quatremère, insists on the relationship between history, synthesis, and openness, through the concept of "type," as a response to the configurations of constructions, where their meaning prevails or not depending on the demands of time. In other words, it means that the meaning of memory and the projection of the future is based on this open scheme, which incorporates modifications without losing its schematizing and historical function.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

If in typology there is a natural constitution based on needs and demands that require the ideal to reconfigure both the elements of the composition and the relationships that the composition provides, the same process does not occur in morphology. In it, the tension of its parts alters a visuality in its global sense, or in other words, the ideal quality could be reconfigured from concrete quantities. If we return to the discourse of 1979, the relationship between type and model complicates our understanding of historical cities in their morphology that is established between the ideal and the real.

For if the notion of type allows for greater openness to modification, will it still be latent in the Bologna discourse, when Argan uses the term “module” to show the qualitative aspect of Renaissance ideal cities? In any case, the art historian’s argument seems to revolve around the assertion that there would always be a scheme being reassembled or reconditioned, consciously or not, based on the material, technical, and intellectual modifications of each era.

The loss of historicity would perhaps involve this loss of awareness of the scheme, or at least the loss of the whole that it provided. This whole would allow history to have a present as an intentionality. Such considerations lead us to perceive the importance of ideality in the processes of city construction, since through the scheme, the possibility of concrete modification of quality is acquired – whether through unity, the whole, or the system – in which there is a diachronic process of transformation based on non-identical similarities, providing the opening of the present to the past and to the future.

This conclusion was thus the result of a conceptual confrontation between the model in architecture and the history of the French Beaux Arts of the 19th century, and a phenomenological methodology in the 20th century, which allowed for a more complex debate around Giulio Carlo Argan.

From the point of view of interest to the contemporary world – in which there is an extensive mutational aspect, which impedes both memory and intentionality – it is important to highlight how thinking about cities, when it neglects their ideal aspects, contributes to the loss of their meaning, both mnemonic and transformative. In other words, the importance of perceiving the loss of ideality – which has generated only discontinuous transformations in cities, as it has resulted in the loss of the past and the future – motivated the reconstruction of the arguments, still pertinent, through the thought of the Italian architect.



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