Housing Many

A study of housing blocks, in between the homogeneous and the different

The word common originates in the Latin *communis*, 'shared by all.' Through a complex etymology via the Old English word *gemæne* it also refers to the mean. Any contemporary dictionary thus specifies the common as the ordinary, the normal and the general, and at the same time as the shared (by all), the collectively used, owned or managed. By simple logic it is clear that for the sharing to be by all (inherently different) individuals, an acceptance and inclusion of difference is necessary. This apparent contradiction between the ordinary and the differentiated, the general and the specific, indicates an inherent paradox of the commons. Current shifts in the very meaning of the term "by all" and of being an individual, a subject and a singularity suggest we should pay critical attention to this paradoxical and potentially contradicting relationship of the common as the "shared by all – differentiated – individuals."

Architecture as a discipline is always already situated within an ongoing fluctuation between generalization and differentiation. This is particularly true with regard to that most essential architectural program housing; the act of creating a home for the fellow human being, houses for the many. When many homes are built together in housing projects, the architecture – just like the common – is a collage of sometimes contradicting conditions of standardization and differentiation. Whether designed and built in the age of artisanal, mechanical or differential production,[1] a combination of technologies, economies, policies, life forms and cultures all influence the architecture of a housing project and its particular composition of standardization and differentiation. This of course applies to all architectural programs, but the direct 1:1 relationship between housing unit and inhabitant(s) implied by "housing" entail a corresponding emblematic relationship between architecture and individual. At all times, the architecture of housing is the epitome of a continuously shifting balance between the rational accumulation of houses (or storage of people, to use a coarse expression) and the specialized articulation of personalized homes. At once generic and specific, the architecture of housing represents a rich field for inquiries into the commons as a physical, contextual manifestation of form and space.

The architecture of housing is a vast category. For obvious reasons, I have focused on urban housing, and furthermore I have chosen to concentrate on the housing block as a type. They are, Antonio Negri and Francois Roche's words "powerful things" in which people were able to "imagine something", "heterotopical spaces where people could paradoxically protect and hide themselves (…) generated lines of defense at the very heart of control systems"[2] However, the potentially paradoxical relationship between solitude of the singular living unit in the close proximity of others, strangers, is also true: "the architecture of insularity, in the

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[1] Mario Carpo, The Alphabet and the Algorithm (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011).
[2] Roche, Negri, Log 25, p.115

sense that the contemporary abode, and not just the residential estate, produces a lock-down that generates solitude … dedicated to the single, open window, which is every bit as alienating as the television."[3]

The generic fabric of singularities in close proximity interests Aureli and his partner in Dogma, Martino Tattara as well. Paradoxically the increasing uncertainty and instability of our lives is met with an excess of complex and individualized design, spreading the mentality that "our final defense against the impoverishment of the dwelling experience is the differentiation of style and image. And yet in troubled economic times any overly artificial image of diversity becomes a source of anguish".[4] The excess of complex and individualized design does not comply with the forms of life it is housing, and this type of complexity is often only superficial. They suggest that "If we are to rethink housing, then we have to see whether we can dismantle the current cliché of domesticity and reclaim the generic ethos of contemporary forms of life, not as a condition but as a possibility" [5]

The generic cube and the architecture of housing

> It is not a question of our liking or disliking a cube: it is a question of our accepting its existence and recognizing its inherent properties[6]
>
> Peter Eisenman

The models represented in this exhibition attempt to understand the common as an architectural condition, in the field in between the homogenous and the different. They seek to make sharing possible not only programmatically, but also as a means of expression. They attempt to define the architectural fabric – representing architecturally the generic condition of contemporary forms of life –, in which voids and differences are instilled.

Architecture, being an artistic discipline, is the communication of an original idea from its author, through a means of expression, to a receiver. To transmit the intention as clearly and fully as possible, this means of expression must have a syntactic order.[7]

Eisenman considers buildings as structures of logical discourse and in his 1963 PhD thesis he uses this insight to distinguish a systemic order for a language of architecture.[8] Clarifying the relationship of form to architecture, he, in his endeavor to articulate such a language, distinguishes between the generic and the specific. The generic form is worth our attention, because it goes beyond utilitarian specificities and symbolic meaning and simply

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[3] Roche, Log 25, p.116
[4] Aureli, Tattara,"Barbarism Begins at Home" in Dogma, 11 Projects, p.89
[5] Ibid.
[6] Peter Eisenman, the Formal Basis of Modern Architecture, 1963, p37
[7] Ibid p 25
[8] Ibid p 17

objectively generates clarity of the intent and function. The specific and contextual architectural form – the analysis as well as the production of it – is dependent on our comprehension of the generic form. The generic form, then, even though never directly represented in the built or imaginary architectural form, is something valid in itself, both a method to analyze and generate specific form.[9]

The cube, being such a generic form, has inherent properties beyond utilitarian specificities, symbolic meaning and aesthetic judgment. In recognizing its inherent properties – it is singular and it evolves equally in vertical and horizontal direction from a defined center – architects can make use of it to generate clarity of intention and function. It has indeed been used by Eisenman and many others to create specific architectural form. Accepting Eisenman's premise that architecture must be comprehended beyond the utilitarian and the symbolic, the function and intention of interest to me, housing of many, of contemporary forms of life, need also be articulated within a systemic order, and the inherent properties of the cube is not foreign to it. Cubicles, of course, is a term for working, not living units, but the generic form cube nevertheless has an inherent connection to the specific program architecture of housing. While apartments in housing projects are never perfect cubes, they may in some sense, as the stackable DNA of the larger project, be reminiscent of and be comprehended as the singular cubic container – one family or one person, one cube. My point is, of course, not to suggest that the cube is the secret recipe for achieving a perfect articulation of the architecture of housing, but rather to explore this idea of a relationship between generic form – cube - and the legibility it offers. The generic, then, is simultaneously an underlying principle behind the specific, but also represents a particular ethos of contemporary forms of life. By associating the generic qualities of the cube with housing in my models, I intend to suggest a separation and privacy, to be sure, but also remind us that we share the space with others, comparable to ourselves.[10]

### The housing block as a wall of rooms

Kazuyo Sejima's Kitagata Apartment Building in Gifu, central Japan, (planned and built between 1994-2000) has been the inspiration for associating the generic cube with specific architecture of housing. We have no account of whether Sejima likes the cube or not (it is only one of many generic forms at play in her work), but I will argue that in her Kitigata project – in section: a wall of cubes – she surely, as recommended by Eisenman, acknowledges and takes advantage of the inherent properties of this generic form. By associating the generic

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[9] Ibid p33

[10] Stavros Stavrides, Greek architect and educator introduces his idea of comparability in a public lecture, at the conference ''Commoning the City'', the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm 2013
''It is not enough to talk about differences that emerge. It is not even enough to talk about differences that pre-exist, but were not allowed to reveal themselves. It is not enough to talk about differences that simply tolerate each other. It is important to talk about differences that attempt to enter a common field through which they can be compared.'' The practice of constructing a commons requires an understanding of the other as someone different, yet fundamentally comparable to oneself. Comparability creates an awareness of having something in common with people with whom one might never have imagined to have anything in common. Differences thus have the potential to create new, common forms of coexistence.

form cube with the specific program room, she articulates a clear architecture of housing. Furthermore Sejima overcomes the apparent contradiction, also described by Eisenman, between the static concept of generic form and the "concept of a future pattern, which is capable of continual growth."[11] Continual growth is necessary, inherent, in the housing of lives, whom are inherently different and changes over time. Sejima overcomes the contradiction between the singular cube and the necessary seriality of a housing project by utilizing the additive and reproductive quality of generic form, which allows it to regenerate and multiply.

The models in this study paraphrases Sejima's Kitagata project in using the cube to articulate the one of many inhabitants in a housing project. Facing the street, a wall of rooms houses the individuals as singularities, one person one room. These singularities may form groups – families of various sizes and kinds – and as such, the rooms form constellations which adjoin a shared living room. This living room offers access to the circulation spaces of the housing block, which also acts as a shared space. It sometimes bulges out into larger, communal areas. The intent is to make corridors and service spaces disappear into shares spaces where you meet others. The communal areas then, in turn, protrudes through the wall of individual rooms, offering a view from the street into the common areas of the housing block.
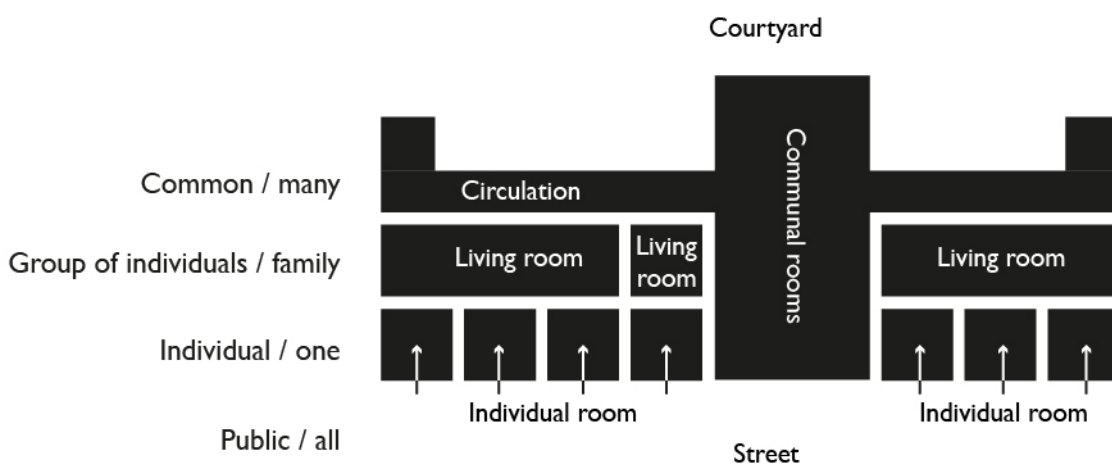
Plan diagram, scale n/a

These years many housing projects in cities – built to accommodate the population growth of many cities – are built on tabula rasa-like site conditions. The only neighbors are other new-built housing projects with no public institutions or other shared facilities in between. The models in this project do not cherish this practice, but discuss it. They are indeed built without any context in mind, but they suggest that a shared, semi-public network of programs and larger rooms are woven into the block itself. By letting a number of housing blocks

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[11] Peter Eisenman, the Formal Basis of Modern Architecture, 1963, p37

form a perimeter which encloses a common space, they also suggest a difference in themselves. The enclosed courtyard space forms a common space, which many people negotiate and share, unlike the public street, which is shared by all.

The works presented in the exhibition discusses double role played by all housing blocks, that is the combination of providing the most personal, subjective – one's own, private room – and the most generic, objective – indifferently housing the many. It contains within it homogeneity and difference like no other architectural program. The works suggest that this condition is made legible by letting generic architectural elements represent inhabitant entities yet blurring the boundaries between the traditional dichotomy private-public.

The works also suggest that architecture of housing, rather than being based on purchasing power, reflects our common, fundamental human need for a private room pulled back from direct exposure and, simultaneously, our aspirations to take part in communities, gradually expanding in size, as we live in the city. As such, the models articulate a housing block in which the singular is woven together with the communal.