Architectural Type and the Discourse of Urbanism
Introduction to the JoA special edition Architectural Type and the Discourse of Urbanism

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Architecture’s relationship to the city is one of the key tropes in both architectural and urban theory and practice. This relationship bears upon questions of architecture’s disciplinary autonomy, its agency in the change and transformation of the city, and the possibility of its politics. Recent years have seen a plethora of publications addressing architecture’s relationship to the city, seeking to understand seemingly uncontrollable urban growth, either as a network of flows and infrastructures, or as an aggregation where architecture and the urban form an unquestioned continuity. Indeed, ever since Learning from Las Vegas, many of these publications go as far as suggesting that if this explosion of urban density, and its associated commercial aspirations, cannot be prevented, then it should be taken as an ineluctable point of departure, itself the source of a new abstract beauty. However, neither these descriptions of the complexities and expansion of the city, nor the insistence on architecture’s absolute formal autonomy – as some sort of language – articulate architecture’s precise relationship to the urban. Given architecture’s drive for experimentation, and the city as its dominant field of application, the vagueness about architecture’s disciplinary potentials, limits and agencies within the urban is surprising.

This special issue, titled Architectural Type and the Discourse of Urbanism, seeks to probe the questions raised above. It is premised on the conjecture that architecture is a domain of knowledge and action: What we will call a discipline, with its own immanent – as opposed to transcendental – depth. Architectural typology is the principal intelligence through which this material and conceptual body of disciplinary knowledge can be both analyzed and deployed. The primary advantage of this perspective is that it endows architecture a relative
autonomy, one that is robust enough to enable the formalization of a critical mass of materials, protocols and traditions, but which is nonetheless interlaced with and co-dependent upon other fields. Formulated differently, architecture – like any and every other field of knowledge and action – is premised on a stability of objects, concepts, themes and procedures, which are, at the same time, prone to mutation and reinterpretation. Secondly, we understand the urban as a differentiated spatial field that is also a domain of knowledge and praxis. In other words, the urban here is not understood as architecture at a larger scale, nor is it a static collection of three-dimensional architectural objects, with a lesser or greater effectiveness in the socio-political registers of reality. Instead, the urban is a dynamic and evolving domain of intervention, change and transformation, characterized by a a regularity of concepts and the persistence of strategies. Following Michel Foucault’s The Archaeology of Knowledge, i this is another way of claiming that the urban is conceived as a discursive formation, or discourse. ii

Foucault’s challenge in probing the notion of discourse was to circumvent both teleology and anachronism by expanding and reorienting it as an always already given order within the domain of thought and action. Thus, his quest was not universal knowledge – as is often the case with histories of ideas or science – or its representation in language, but temporarily accrued formalisations of knowledges, practices, institutional frameworks and settings, and so on. In this, a whole array of concepts that persist in the history of ideas – such as, author, book, oeuvre, school, etc. – are deemed to unproblematically unify distinct materials. The issue here is not necessarily to reject these concepts, but to momentarily suspend them – in order to identify the regularities with which objects, concepts or themes appear.

In so doing, Foucault revealed a certain terrain of investigation, which while being thoroughly extensive, is not unlimited. It is constituted by a vast population of discursive
events – i.e. those occurrences that have acted as meaningful differences. For Foucault, a discourse resides in an immanent regularity, which is not entrenched in trans-historical and/or trans-cultural essences, but upon a pattern of order within the knowable, the thinkable, the say-able and the doable. The structure and organisation of this pattern is neither homogeneous nor arbitrary, but presents a regulated dispersal of historically contingent materials.

One way to clarify this, as well as to bring the discussion back to our substantive area, is via an example. In today’s architectural and urban deliberations, there is no single or simple answer of what public spaces are, how we could be thinking of them, what our expectations should be when they are deployed, or when they are appropriate. Yet, while there is a lack of a strict agreement, the discussions on public spaces seem to delimit a vast dispersion with its own pattern and regularities. By extension and contrast, neither the discipline of architecture or the discourse of urbanism are governed by a single issue, subject, interest or question. Moreover, and precisely because they are not coextensive, architecture and urbanism are neither collapsible into one another (via a shift in scale) nor exhibit a point-by-point mirroring.

Instead, from the turn of the twentieth century, architecture – alongside other domains concerned with urban reform and city building – has attempted to understand and revitalise the promise of the city, in the same way that the urban has systematically attempted to harness architecture’s capacities to channel urban processes. Since architecture and urbanism present a dynamic and complex interaction, it means that they are not simply caught up in some predefined hierarchy – often assumed to take the guise of a responsive and considerate architecture escaping the strictures and finitude of urban plans. In other words, it is architecture’s ceaseless problematisation of the urban which renders the urban thinkable and practicable to spatial reconsideration. This perspective positions typology in a mode of spatial reasoning responding to and mobilising discursive problem fields.iii While typology’s role in urbanism as a discourse is not explicitly dealt with in any of the papers in this special issue,
explaining the discursive role of type helps to clarify the various terrains of typology’s contribution within and across the papers – its role in architecture’s relative autonomy, as well as its agency in urban change. In what follows, each of these points will be explicated in turn.

It is only in the past decade that typology has received renewed scholarly attention, the last sustained debate in the 1960s and 1970s being partly responsible for its stigmatization as a conservative – if not debilitating – tendency of architectural thought. At the moment of the modern movement’s perceived urban failure, the ‘Neo-Rationalists’ sought to retrieve architecture’s disciplinary contribution to the city; and proposed typology as a mode of classifying and ordering architecture’s material and capacities. Antony Vidler, for example, described how the Neo-Rationalists focused on ‘the nature of the city itself, emptied of specific social content from any particular time and allowed to speak simply of its own formal tradition.’ While typology in this context was understood as generative of the city, it was also proposed as the basis for its formal and structural continuity: ‘Columns, houses and urban spaces, while linked in an unbreakable chain of continuity, refer only to their own nature as architectural elements, and their geometries are neither naturalistic nor technical but essentially architectural.’ Given architecture’s impetus for experiment in tandem with the dynamism of the city, strict formal continuity (with its implied limited variation and visual cohesion) have ended up – not unreasonably – appearing to many as an inadequate means to pursue proper innovation.

Some of those who understood this limitation – such as, Rafael Moneo and Alan Colquhoun – turned their attention to the transactional relation between typology and the design process. Moneo, for instance, in his influential 1978 paper, argues that type is a notion that inheres in the grouping and seriality of shared architectural concerns, allowing both analysis and decision making within the design process. As such, he argues that architecture can not only be described by type, but that it is also produced through type. Similarly, Colquhoun in his equally celebrated ‘Typology and Design Method’, argues that typology is
ineluctable in the design process, as the latter entails a mode of formal and spatial reasoning with and upon the materials of architecture – seen as previous solutions to similar problems. While the above short statements cannot capture the full breadth, variations and complexity of the numerous deliberations on typology, they serve to highlight that central to the resurgence of typology at this time was a focus on the description, analysis and the potentials of architecture and the city themselves, retrieving a sense of disciplinary autonomy within architecture, as well as recognizing the city as its field of application. At the same time, it could be said that in the 1960s and 70s an indecision was manifest as to the parameters type ought to be reasoning against – with the three dominant ways being geometry, signification and function.

Aldo Rossi, in his seminal *The Architecture of the City*, attributes typology a dynamic agency in the articulation of the city. Writing in the mid-1960s, Rossi saw the predominant sociological and functional interpretations of architecture and the city as preventing an understanding of urban richness and its spatial complexity, as well as an obstacle to the way in which architecture and the city themselves present an immanent field of analysis and intervention for architectural practice. Typology, the domain of reasoning on types and the principal intelligence of architecture, was seen as prior to and constitutive of form, thereby interlinking the analysis of precedents and previous solutions to projective practices in design. Here typology emerges as a domain of reasoning about the formal and organizational capacities of architecture, in a way that responds to, but is not reducible to ‘external’ factors – such as, technique, politics or function. Hence, Rossi argues that ‘the question of typology occurs naturally whenever urban problems are confronted’. While these present the general lineaments of the discussion on typology at the time, Rossi foregrounds its role in the dynamism of the city and in propelling the agency of architecture to engender urban change and transformation.
Rossi proposed to conceive the city as being composed of parts and components, each subject to their own processes of formation and differentiation, which are nonetheless underpinned by general forces engendering urban dynamics. (Pavlos Philippou’s paper situates Rossi’s conception of ‘study areas’ in more detail). Here, the importance of the urban past is not seen as intrinsic to or determinant of the present and future, in any essentialist way. Instead, it provides a rich resource of the way in which architectural and urban elements persist through or propel urban change and transformation. Thus, typology, as the analytic moment of architecture, is concerned less with the forms of the past (or their integral meaning), and more with their catalytic agency in urban transformation. This is another way of suggesting that typology is the immanent resource internal to architecture that enables the latter’s contribution to the evolutionary tendency of the city; that is, architecture’s capacity for spatial organization supports the process of formation and differentiation of urban parts and components, themselves subject to the city’s evolutionary tendency. While this describes a clear objective for typology as diagnosing and projecting architecture’s agency in the city, it is less clear on how this is to be pursued.

Alan Colquhoun’s incisive architectural criticism, particularly his close reading of Le Corbusier’s works, is a key resource both for identifying significant design moves that accelerate the field of architecture forward on its own terrain, as well as propelling urban change and transformation. Colquhoun’s notion of the ‘displacement of concepts’ refers to typological innovation which is based on a reinterpretation of previous architectural solutions, not so much through a sterile and stagnant understanding of mimesis, but through proper experimentation and extended modulation. This is very much along the lines Jeffrey Kipins has argued regarding Le Corbusier’s deployment of the Five Points (of architecture) at Villa Savoye, which problematized architecture’s conventional grounding – with all the political, theological and social norms the notion of the ground entails. Indeed, the customary grounding, evident throughout most architectural history, is premised upon a conception of
the ground as land – i.e. as the primary datum of inhabitation upon which the norms of socio-political life are physically accrued. In the deployment of the Five Points there is an attempt to disestablish the ground as the authoritative terrain upon which power relations conventionally operate, thus transforming it into one of many datums in pursuit of an equipotential socio-political field.

The key lesson here, as Colquhoun explains, is not exhausted in how this displacement of the concept of grounding innovates through reinterpretation, but that it is further transposed into many other projects by multiple authors – including a number of large urban projects, where the displaced concept propels new urban patterns, thereby effecting a transformation at a metropolitan scale. From the above, we can begin to extract a potential efficacy of type. Opposed to being a sterile grid for the retrospective classification of tradition, or tied to a design method that has retrograde impulses, typology both enables and propels innovation. Rather than ‘completing’ an urban context in the manner of minor variation and predefined organization, type can trigger urban transformation. From this perspective the urban past and previous architectures are not so much intrinsically valuable as ends; rather, they are a resource for identifying the regularities of previous solutions and via their interrogation they unleash a pattern of transformation in the dynamism of the city. Type is thus both an object and a process of formal and spatial reasoning, its logic inhering both in a series of architectural objects, as well as actualized in the single case. As such, typology can be understood to be both analytic of and projective in the deployment of architecture’s material and capacities.

**Type, the Diagram and the Urban**

While the above registers the ‘internal’ agency of type for architecture – specifically, its capacity to propel organisational transformation, we argue that its effect is also registered within the discursive realm of the urban; that is, in the broad terrain of dispute and negotiation
concerned with the building and governing of the city. We might call this the ‘terrain of the urban’, following Foucault’s concept of discourse as a vast yet organised dispersion with its own immanent laws and regularities. While Foucault himself never took urban space as a distinct object of study, his approach potentially allows for a comprehension of the city, not directly via its spaces, nor through its social, political or economic processes, but as a field of negotiation in which the very emergence of these spaces and processes is linked in discourse. From this point of view, the very beginning of the concepts of what the city is or what housing is, for example, can be seen as having been established upon this discursive terrain. In what follows, we propose that typology’s strategic agency lies in the productive intersection between the discipline of architecture and the discursive terrain of the urban.

The terrain of the urban came to rise in parallel with the advent of the modern metropolis, linking patterns of growth and spatial organisation with the emergence of the urban population as both subjects and objects of knowledge and government. The city’s spatial structure served as much as a grid of specification to identify urban patterning, as well as offering domains of intervention, with the graphic component of architectural and urban plans propelling the correlation of the city’s spatiality with the liberal government of the urban population. Foucault understood liberalism not as a doctrine of political and economic theory, but as a mode of thinking concerned with the ‘art of governing’. In this perspective, liberalism is understood as a critique of state reason that examines the limitations of and possibilities internal to government. Liberalism seeks to identify how government is possible, what it needs to know and what it cannot know: “government consists of the various instruments and rationalities assembled to link the power of the state, the regulation of populations, and a ‘pastoral’ power which addressed itself to the conduct of those who recognized themselves as subjects. This raises the genealogical question of an art of government directed toward the conduct of all and each, in their individuality and uniformity, and which furthermore emphasizes the freedom of the subject as a central part of that art.”
It follows that what is at stake in the rise of the urban is the very possibility of liberal democracy itself, the possibility of an urban reason to secure the functioning of the city, to balance its health, welfare and prosperity, but to do so without stifling the inherent dynamism of the urban. Thus, the practices of intervention, of normalisation and control, are tactical and limited, seeking to regulate the spaces and subjects of the metropolis as little as possible – without overextending the domain of state law, and always drawing upon the capacity and willingness of the subject to problematize itself in relation to broad and strategic political goals. While this is a very rudimentary sketch of a discursive understanding of the urban, it opens up another level of typology’s agency. Typology as object and process of spatial reasoning can be understood to actively participate, respond to and mobilise particular urban problem fields. The term given to the dynamism inherent within these specific problem fields is the diagram, and it is the more recent understanding of the linkage between typology and the diagram we seek to continue.

Barth suggests that diagrams ‘…work to constitute and organise decision making fields… (They) are the collective name given to the patterning of material and functions that cluster around reasoned reflection in a domain of action and experiment.’ As Philippou has argued elsewhere, diagrams in this context do not coincide with those schematic graphic abstractions that are too easily being ascribed the label in architecture today. Here, the diagram is understood as:

- problematising an always already emergent (human) subjectivity; one that is generated at the shifting intersection of the object of the human sciences and the subject of a governmental reason that cultivates the aptitude for political and moral action. Thus, we might think of the diagram as an abstracted strategic tension that operates through a plurality of media (including, but not limited to, drawings, texts, schedules, tabular arrangements, institutional settings, implemented buildings, etc.), sifting and structuring a series of potentialities for the subject in accordance with a promise of the latter’s reformation. As a socio-political machine, the
diagram can be oriented towards our intellectual development and moral improvement through
techniques of discipline, as in the case of panopticism, but also towards other ends.\textsuperscript{xix}

To be clear, the aim here is not a redefinition of typology in the context of its extended
literature, nor to suggest that typological reasoning intentionally or exclusively addresses
problems of government. Instead, the underlying ambition of the preceding discussion was to
open up the ways in which typological problems intersect with a series of concerns that are
inherently diagrammatic. As such, the linkage between type and diagram can be seen at a
number of levels of concreteness and generality. Formulated differently, the aim of this
special issue is to begin to clarify the terrain of architecture’s contribution to the urban on a
number of levels, as well as to demonstrate that the interactive testing between typological
experimentation and the diagram is perhaps the most difficult to grasp, but also perhaps the
most fundamental, of problems confronted by urban architecture and architectural urbanism.
To explain the potential of the intersection between type and diagram in more detail, we can
draw upon two independent yet interrelated examples of diagrams – namely those of the
\textit{domestic} and the \textit{neighbourhood}, both distinctive discursive constellations implicitly at work
in many of the papers in this issue.

\textit{The Domestic and Neighbourhood Diagrams}

The diagram of the domestic and that of the neighbourhood are key discursive constellations
in our politics and our urban reason. According to Michel Foucault and Jacques Donzelot, the
modern domestic, or nuclear, family – as an elemental social unit – rose as a solution to
liberal government in the city in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{xx} Donzelot demonstrates that the
bonds of marriage and parental care were reconstructed in order to put into place a differential
set of relations that simultaneously set up responsibilities between family members, while at
the same time promoting the autonomy of each individual. He describes the strategy that
operated on the family as one that replaced relations of pure dependence, with relations of promotion and responsibility. The family’s privacy and unity became a strategy in the technology of government, the effectiveness of which consisted in addressing the individual on the level of subjectivity itself. Here the spatiality of the home links the government’s need for the control and normalization of familial behaviour to individuals’ desire for autonomy. What results is that the relationship between the constitution of the family as a norm on the one hand, and the continual critique of that norm on the other, is inherent to the family’s mechanism as an institution. A similarly ambivalent and dynamic problem field emerged through the rise of the scale of the neighbourhood, linked to the rise of a form of government through groups of the urban population around the turn of the twentieth century, as writers such as Nikolas Rose, Giovanna Procacci and Paul Rabinow have noted. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the neighbourhood is constituted as a relatively distinct domain of typological reasoning about how to house and group the urban population, as well as providing a domain of dispute and negotiation across disciplines and stakeholders – evident in issues such as the health and welfare of the urban population, the right size and constitution of groups of the urban population, as well as the fulfilment of their needs and aspirations.

These specific problem fields, or diagrams, emerged upon a trajectory of typological reasoning that continuously responded to and propelled questions of government. Elsewhere, both Borsi and Finney have argued that the rise of the self-contained dwelling of the modern domestic family, and the emergence of the scale of the neighbourhood at the beginning of the twentieth century were based as much on their formal, spatial and material process of formation, as on a response to the demands of urban reform. Since then, architecture’s impetus for experimentation could be said to continue to ‘activate’ the diagrams of the domestic and that of the neighbourhood, mobilising the negotiation across disciplines and stakeholders as much as serving the inherent dynamism of our continual problematisation of the self, the family, and other groups of the urban population.
This is not to suggest that the work of architecture is solely in the service of the diagram. We will come to see in the discussion of the individual papers that typological reasoning always already drives the evolution of architecture on its own terrain. However, it brings the materials, concepts and strategies of architecture into the dispute about how to build for and govern the urban population. In this discursive realm, the graphic component plays a key role as the surface upon which architecture’s capacities encounter, address and enfold the various issues regarding how to house and group the urban population. In turn, and more specifically, the political mechanism of the family and the concept of community need to be made thinkable and practicable; formulated differently, in its linkage between questions of space and government, the diagram engenders spatialisation. And yet, it is precisely the need of the diagram to be synthesised by type, and architecture’s relative autonomy and irreducibility to its outside, that allows the testing and propelling of typological experimentation. This is another way of suggesting that the papers in this special issue will clarify different levels of typology’s contribution. In other words, the papers here cover only some – yet salient instances – of the ways typology contributes in the discourse of urbanism.

Four of the papers in this issue focus, directly or indirectly, on housing. Collectively, the papers chart the rise of architecture’s mobilisation of the diagram of modern domesticity and that of the neighbourhood at the beginning of the twentieth century through to current experiments that seek to flex and dispel the forces of these diagrams: from the rise of architecture’s focus on domesticity and housing in the Berlin modernist Siedlungen planned by Hans Scharoun in 1920s and 1950s Berlin (Borsi); to O.M. Ungers typological and morphological exploration of housing projects in Cologne, Berlin and Enschede between the 1960s and the 1980s (Jacoby); to contemporary experimentations with dissolving the spatial hierarchies in the dwelling plan through examples from Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Japan (Giudici). This perspective from ‘inside’ architecture is complemented by an analysis of how spatial experimentation at the scale of the neighbourhood in 19th and 20th century
New York and via the discourse around blight, drives jurisprudential testing and the transformation of concepts such as public use within constitutional law (Finney).

Together, these papers chart a trajectory of architectural experimentation with how to house and group the urban population, how to orchestrate adjacencies and groupings, as well as how to articulate togetherness and degrees of separations. And yet, despite their typological variations and design approaches, and notwithstanding the varying degrees of ambition for social transformation, the trajectory also shows the rarity of discursive transformation. Borsi argues that the modernist Siedlungen signal not so much the rise of the self-contained dwelling for all, as they indicate the moment in which architecture is taken into the service of the diagrammatic condition of housing. The experimentations around the Siedlungen by Scharoun (Borsi) and Ungers (Jacoby) probe the constitution, size and coherence of large segments of the urban population, yet they mobilise and reinstate the diagram of the domestic and the neighbourhood by spatially and socially reworking the scale of the neighbourhood. Seemingly we are only now at a threshold at which the work of typology is instrumental in disbanding the interiorisation of the modern domestic family (Giudici), yet always based on typological innovations.

Two more papers focus on the agency of type in urban areas. One draws upon cultural buildings (Philippou), the other on projects concerned with the production and dissemination of knowledge (Borsi & Schulte). They complement the papers above in a demonstration of architecture’s potential to operate on and rework its own terrain, underscoring its relative autonomy from an outside, as well as demonstrating the capacity of architectural concepts and strategies to effect transformation within its own field and on the spatial terrain of the city.

This special issue of The Journal of Architecture is based on the symposium Architectural Type and the Discourse of Urbanism, organised by the Department of Architecture and Built Environment, University of Nottingham, in collaboration with the
School of Architecture, University of Technology, Sydney, and hosted by the School of Architecture, Royal College of Art, London, on 14th December 2015. Excerpts of the discussions at the symposium seek to complement the papers, while the two book reviews further extend the urgency of conceptualising type’s agency in the discourse of urbanism, even when it is presented only in lateral, ‘between the lines’, readings.

One of the key underlying ambitions of this special issue is to bring into relief the instrumentality of type for both architecture and urbanism. However, we should mark out that there is no single, universal, register from which to conduct typological investigations. In this sense, the present aim is an analytics of type, rather than a (general) theory of type. This approach is, not incidentally, analogous to Foucault’s approach in handling the question of power, in a series of writings and seminars starting around the time he embarked on the research that yielded Discipline and Punish onwards. Rather than attempting to resolve the essentialist question ‘what is power?’, Foucault probed the various ways and the different modalities through which power is exercised in specific situations within particular historical conditions. In this sense, his diverse investigations in this direction do not constitute (or even aspire to constitute) a grand theory of power, but an analytics of power – mapping, as it were, a series of salient nexuses in the present network of power relations.

In a similar disposition, rather than attempting to provide a definitive reply to the question ‘what is type?’, this issue strives to provide an analytics of type for a number of discursive problem fields. Ultimately, it is the inelectubility and the agency of type – as a mode of reasoning embedded within architecture’s cumulative intelligence, while operating in and upon the discourse of urbanism – that this special issue seeks to make a
contribution to. We understand this collection of papers as an invitation to persist in querying architecture's relative autonomy and contribution to the terrain of urbanism, as much as in its diagrammatic condition and its discursive transformation.

Ultimately, if we agree with the statement that what is at stake in the rise of the urban is the very possibility of liberal democracy itself, what matters to us as architects, and what this special edition is directed toward, is clarifying where architecture's disciplinary agency resides in supporting that process through change.

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i M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972) [originally *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969)]. In some of the essays that follow, the phrase ‘terrain of the urban’ is deployed, as opposed to the ‘discourse of urbanism’, in order to emphasize this discursive formation’s vast dispersal and engagement with many different domains.

ii Many of the arguments underlying this introduction were developed in a doctoral research seminar at the Architectural Association, under the lead of Lawrence Barth.

iii The general approach presented here implies a conceptualization of the urban as constituting specific problem fields, i.e. domains of negotiation and dispute that draw both spaces and urban subjects into discursive relationships.


v Ibid. p. 291. Here we recognize a predilection for architecture ‘completing’ a predefined urban context, a preference for a ‘continuous fabric’ as opposed to modernism’s ‘isolated building set in an undifferentiated park.’ Aspects of this perspective still prevail in much of today’s planning guidance; for example, ‘place-making’ shares the preference for a spatially bounded fabric, well-defined open spaces, as well as a spatial continuity between architecture and the city. However, its dual focus on visual coherence and the primacy of the subject fail to register the true potentials inherent in architecture’s intelligence.


ix Ibid. p. 40


xii Rose and Osborne argued that from the nineteenth century, the government of the city becomes inseparable from the continuous activity of generating truths about the city that have spatial character. E.F. Isin, T. Osborne, and N. Rose, ‘Governing Cities: Liberalism, Neoliberalism and Advanced Liberalism’. Urban Studies Programme, Working Paper No. 19 (Toronto: York University, 1998).

xv For a more extended discussion of this see L. Barth, Drawing, Dispersal, Region. 2003
xvi For example, see The Journal of Architecture, Special Issue: Type versus typology. Guest Editor: Sam Jacoby (Volume 20, Number 6. December 2015).
xix Ibid. p. 1136.