

Notes on Collective Form

1. A Communal Turn

In the years since the global financial crisis of 2007–08 – marked by economic austerity, political unrest, and deepening inequality – the field of architecture has increasingly turned its attention toward the everyday conditions of contemporary society. In the United States, these have included the growth of the sharing and gig economies, the mediation of all forms of activities through digital platforms, and the continued collapse of work-life distinctions, as well as the failure of the public and private sectors to provide adequate access to housing. The private market has produced new coworking and coliving programs, brands like WeWork, WeLive, the Collective, and Common, which extract value from a mobile class of “creative” laborers – including architects – while promising heightened individual freedoms (*do what you love*) and communal experiences (*be more together*). Municipal governments have begun to accept new forms of density and collective living, such as micro-apartments, small lot subdivisions, accessory dwelling units, tiny houses, and the intensification of public housing campuses. And the discipline of architecture has engaged in a critique of the economic precarity and social atomization of contemporary life through renewed attention to explicitly political architectural forms, drawing on communitarian models such as 19th-century utopian phalansteries, 1920s Soviet social condensers, British social housing, and Peruvian community kitchens. Everywhere, there are proposals to frame collectives, communities, and commons.

2. Collective Form, Again

In 1964, Fumihiko Maki coined the term *collective form* to describe the architectural problem of organizing increasingly dynamic urban programs and infrastructural systems. Maki’s short book, *Investigations in Collective Form*, draws heavily on the work of Team X and the Metabolists, groups that he collaborated with. These architects attempted to reconcile the inherited formal and theoretical language of modern architecture with the complex urban situations and unfulfilled promises of postwar life. The work of this period was

simultaneously grandiose and mundane, derivative and inventive, oscillating between optimism and cynicism, sincerity and irony. Architecture today appears to be in a similar position.

This historical resonance is not coincidental. The events and phenomena of the postwar decades – the anticolonial, civil rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements; burgeoning environmental consciousness; the transition from an industrial to a service economy and the emergence of modern consumer society; the rapid proliferation of communication and transportation technologies – set the stage for the political conflicts of the present. Architecture is again caught between the utopian promises of new technologies and individual freedoms and the increasingly dystopian realities of life in contemporary capitalism.

Maki's term remains compelling because it succinctly conjoins a programmatic ambition – the desire to frame new ways of living together – and an architectural quality – the aggregation of elements into new configurations suited to this task. Today, it might be appropriated to describe the work of a loose affiliation of architects spanning two generations, X and Y, for whom both the programmatic ambition – forming collectives – and the architectural quality – collecting forms – are of central concern. In addition to discussions of collective life, collections of things – legible figures, found objects, archetypal plans, primary shapes, weird materials, bright colors – predominate. This work tends to be both more sober and more playful than that of the “digital” period that preceded it, more economical in its expression, open in its use, and, at its best, lucid in its political relationship to society at large.

While Maki suspends discussion of politics in his text, analyzing collective form in morphological terms – varied combinations of fixed and changeable architectural elements and interrelationships of infrastructure, building, and open space – the architectural project of collective form that animated the postwar period was tied to the postwar expansion of the welfare state. In the United States, community opposition to urban renewal revealed the at times deleterious effects of this project, and state disinvestment in public housing and the political entrenchment of neoliberalism ensured its widespread failure. These political conditions were manifest in architecture's turn toward community design, on the one hand, and, on the other, the theoretical critiques of postmodernism and their practical analogues: privatized new urbanist developments and grand one-off commissions for cultural and commercial institutions.

Over the past decade, speculation on collective form at a mass scale has been resurgent in the discipline – evident in the influence of the explicitly leftist work of Dogma, for instance, or in the more ideologically amorphous proposals to transform American suburbs and cities commissioned for the Museum of Modern Art’s 2012 exhibition “Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream” and the US Pavilion at the 2016 Venice Biennale, “The Architectural Imagination.” While much of this work could be parsed according to Maki’s analytic framework for urban form – compositional form, megastructure, and group form – a set of related archetypes that cut across scales, addressing urban projects as well as individual buildings, may be more relevant. Indeed, even at the scale of the private house, architects today, echoing Alberti’s dictum, seem to be aiming for collective form: the house as a small city for an indeterminate set of occupants. There is architecture as an aggregation of building forms that produces unconventional figure-ground relationships, programmatic adjacencies, or shared interstices (architecture as objects); architecture as a field of generic spaces and infrastructure that promises to accommodate different configurations of users over time (architecture as field); architecture as a frame of densely packed, standardized elements counterposed to open, flexible, or communal spaces (architecture as frame). At times, these archetypes are combined – say objects contained within a frame, or objects arrayed to create a frame – with echoes of a now familiar lexicon of formal references – say Louis Kahn’s Dominican Motherhouse or James Stirling and Michael Wilford’s Wissenschaftszentrum. Elements are organized by simple means, literally expressed: one thing after (or next to, or on top of) another. There are circles and squares and crosses, there is repetition and superposition, there are stacks and piles, there are orthogonal grids and random scatterings of things. There are Aldo van Eyck’s playgrounds and the Smithsons’ Golden Lane urbanism, Aldo Rossi’s Locomotiva and Archizoom’s No-Stop City. The work of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, which bridges the formal and critical ambitions of the postwar period and the present, and which presents a seemingly inexhaustible catalogue of bluntly aggregated architectural forms and programs – the ZKM stack of free plans, the Parc de la Villette barcode of landscapes, the hyper-building pile of midcentury office towers, the Agadir Convention Centre sandwich of plan typologies, etc. – casts a long shadow over this contemporary scene, particularly as its alumni, and, in turn, their alumni, climb the ranks of the American academy.

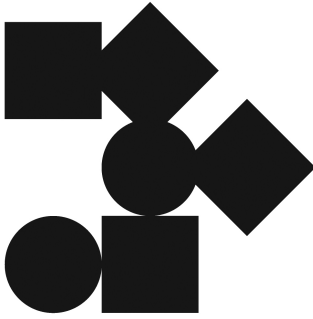
Privileging spatial and material legibility, much of this contemporary work is relatively easy to competently execute in both representation and construction. It is also often hard to distinguish and therefore suggests a collective project that has been largely absent from the American scene. Though the precise cause and effect may be difficult to disentangle, image saturation and a disciplinary repudiation of formal complexity have rendered the desire to achieve an individual aesthetic increasingly retrograde and increasingly impossible. If, as appears evident, the discipline no longer places high value on individual expression, then attention can shift to evaluating the precision and conceptual clarity with which common techniques are directed toward given programs.

At its most banal, recent work on collective form produces something like *AirSpace*, a term coined to describe the aesthetics of the sharing economy – minimal interiors tastefully populated with photogenic tropical plants and mid-century furniture, “raw” materials as a signifier of “creative” environments, and the superficial presentation of ever smaller, more expensive units of space that promise flexibility and access to private “common” amenities and exclusive communities. At its best, it questions the normative family structures and lifestyles that condition the design of housing, the social hierarchies of productive, affective, and reproductive labor, and the property boundaries of the individual unit – broadly speaking, the ideologies and social relations embedded in architectural form. And yet, while the transparent failures of neoliberalism raise the possibility of a renewed social project of collective architecture (in the form of a Green New Deal or a housing guarantee), the investigation of collective forms remains largely internal to the discipline, detached from political constituencies that might support it.

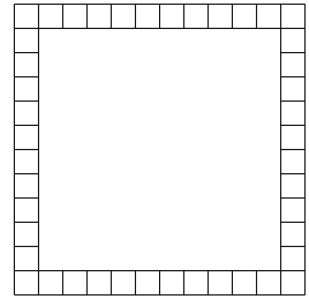
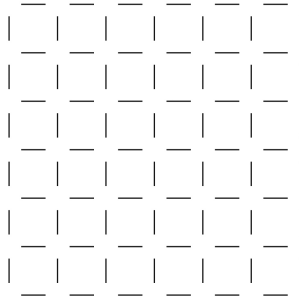
3. An Unexpected Experiment

In the United States, the political response to the coronavirus has accelerated the precarious economic and social conditions of capitalism. The pandemic provides glimpses of possible futures, which have heretofore only been imagined and theorized. Emptied urban spaces, the flight of those with means to second homes or vacation rentals, and the outsize effects of both the virus and the economic crisis on poor and minority communities are all evidence of a disaster, while simultaneously prefiguring the inequities of the climate crisis.

The behavior of the virus itself has made architectural questions of collective form tangible to all. In order to minimize



Archetypes of collective form: architecture as objects; architecture as field; architecture as frame. Drawing courtesy the author.



its transmission, much of society has retreated to individuated and private spaces (houses, apartments, even single rooms). The spaces of paid work, domestic labor, and leisure have collapsed, at least for those fortunate enough to be employed from home. The pressure on collective forms is intense, both on longstanding archetypes like the hospital, the prison, the ocean liner, and the residential college, and on contemporary models of living and working together, including in micro-units, open-concept plans, and shared amenity spaces. The pandemic spurs renewed American dreams of flight into the expansive property of the suburban house or the rural homestead. But it also makes it possible to imagine transforming cultural expectations of what architecture provides and overcoming a half-century of privatization and deregulation through massive public investments and the communal reclamation of commercialized public space and vacant commercial space.

To date, discussions of the architectural potential to be found in the current situation have largely focused on the notion of tactical urbanism – street closures, bike lanes, pop-up amenities – all improvements that have proven to be merely palliative in the face of systemic failings such as increasingly unaffordable housing and persistent urban segregation. Architecture’s expertise – its unique function in society – is not in addressing acute crises through ad hoc solutions, the shuffling of office furniture notwithstanding. Rather, it is in the much slower process of imagining and realizing buildings and the urban form of the cities they constitute. The pandemic is not a problem for architecture to solve. It is an opportunity to evaluate architecture’s fundamental concerns and relationship to society at large.

Society is suspended, temporarily, indeterminately, in a spatial experiment, in which its use of architecture has been warped. Some spaces are suddenly empty, while others are continuously occupied. This is an unexpected vantage from which to assess both the material reality of the architecture that frames life today and the efficacy of recent proposals for

alternatives. It offers architects the possibility of strategically sharpening their desires for collective forms in preparation for the collective needs to come, as the social and economic damages of the pandemic compound in the future.

4. The Collective Form of Architecture

Architecture is a financially precarious field, particularly that subset of architectural practice called the discipline. Many small practices live client to client, if they make money at all. Many adjunct faculty live from one semester's contract to the next. The costs of education, and of life, increase faster than salaries and fees. Many architects have no access to benefits or collective bargaining rights. Unpaid competitions and internships are still commonplace. Discursive work – publishing, exhibiting, speaking – is rarely compensated. In the absence of state support, architects seeking to produce innovative work often rely on proximity to private wealth. But no commercial market exists for the texts, images, and objects that these architects produce to advance the disciplinary art – that work must always be supported by some other work. These economic conditions and the norms that sustain them are profound barriers to entry, entrenching inequality in a discipline that prides itself on its capacity for radical imagination and critique.

Perhaps this economic crisis will provoke the discipline to shed the last of its noblesse oblige airs: the adoption of upper-class appearances when architecture, for the most part, provides only a tenuous middle-class existence; the obfuscation of the fact that, while it may be intellectually enriching or serve an often abstract notion of social good, architecture must provide a living; the careful avoidance of impolite subjects and tangible political acts, such as frank discussion of the social and economic circumstances in which so many work, and the power imbalances between those who do the work and those they work for, whether clients, firms, or institutions. The field of architecture has pioneered the now commonplace ways in which precarious, exploitative, and often isolating “creative” labor is internalized and represented as something other than what it is. In reality, many architects do not belong to the same class as their wealthy clients, nor should they aspire to if the work of the discipline is to be more than a luxury good, produced by, and for, only those who can afford it.

As architects continue the work of imagining new collective forms for society at large, they must also continue the work of constructing new collective forms for the field, if they are to play a meaningful role in shaping the collective life to come.

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