

St Jerome in his Study – Type and Typology in Design and Architecture



“In what ways have typologies helped to advance DEGW’s research and design programmes? The first thing that must be said is that DEGW’s use of typologies is neither conventional or academic.” - Kenneth Powell, ‘Design for Change. The Architecture of DEGW’.

Within the complexity of architecture, practitioners and theorists have, since the Enlightenment, used the idea of ‘type’ and typology as a method of classifying buildings; primarily in plan and constitutional form and around ideas of ‘character’.

Over recent years academics have observed that ‘type’ can be a way of revalidating architecture in a time of crisis; when, for instance, the cultural parameters that have legitimized certain formal solutions lose their integrity (1). In looking at type and typology this paper is the first in a series that sets out to explore some of the architectural consequences of rapid socio-economic change and its impact on the workplace. This can be done through an investigation of the research and design methods of DEGW, on this occasion from the period 1983 to 1998.

In the seminal work that defines contemporary social and urban transformation Castells convincingly describes the impact that informational networks are having on urban form. The very ‘fluidity’ of his space of flows (both in its social and urban structures) would seem to make type and typology redundant as an architectural design method – a conclusion perhaps already reached by Castells who views architecture as the ‘failed act’ of society (2) - but the proposition in this research is that we should give vital intellectual space to developing a classification method where architectural typologies are linked to more active typologies of use.

From 1973 to 2012 architecture and research practice DEGW occupied a special pivotal position between theory and architecture. For over three decades the practice was internationally renowned; with its research led knowledge of how organizations use buildings it led the field in developing new and innovative approaches to workplace design. Much that is now accepted as best practice in the design of the workplace building, from offices to learning environments and medical laboratories, emanates from this era and the work of DEGW’s architects, designers and researchers. An innovative and non-academic understanding of typology in architecture was central to their research and design practice.

The Research question

What is the purpose of typological thinking in contemporary workplace design, and what are the methods for organizing building type?

With increasing complexity in building procurement processes architects often frame ‘complexity’ in design as something of a mirror image of the social, political and spatial entanglements inherent across the wider urban setting (3). Whilst this is understandable as a way of perhaps repositioning architectural theory – and validating the design process that is ‘programming’ – we believe it allows architects and urban designers to

side step a more investigative, empirical and measurable approach to building design. In short, much in methods of analysis and classification of 'type' in architecture appears subjective, ill-defined and simply seeks validation in the self-evident.

Typological Discussion – the Context

In the late 1970s and 1980s Typology in Architecture, and the debate around its continued usefulness, implied acceptance of ideas around historical continuity, and transformation in building plan and form that is incremental. In this context the writings of Rossi, Gregotti, Vidler and Lampugnani on typology can be seen as part of a reductive reaffirmation of the ongoing disciplinary autonomy of architecture; “the predominance of the ideal over the contingent”.(4). An alternative approach, again emergent in the 1970s but more attuned to the politically and architecturally disruptive dynamics of technology within western society at that time, was more analytical and discursive: an approach where layers of culture, technology and social practice underpin a more flexible concept of spatial type, and, by extension, the architectural container. In architectural design the typological theory behind this alternative approach - one very much adopted and applied from the outset by DEGW as a practice - sees the concept of type less as an image (or prescriptive method for organization) and more as an 'idea' of an element serving a 'model' that is adaptable. Or, to put it another way 'type' and typology in architecture are not fixed but dynamic and unstable.

DEGW's Building Appraisal – a Typological Approach

The emergence of typological thinking in DEGW's work is clearly expressed through what we might call a 'thought-model' conceived in Frank Duffy's doctoral research and evident in early publications from the practice, such as Planning Office Space in 1976. In the opening pages of Orbit 2 report (1984) Duffy states that “it is extremely dangerous to generalize about office building design....(it) is changing so rapidly that even the definition of the building type should be questioned.”(5) Such a questioning of first principles came from an in-depth understanding that architectural form could and should be linked in a measured way to sociological phenomena, namely in the measurement and analysis of user requirements. In the work of the practice the most advantageous use of typology was to be gained through collecting comparative data on buildings and organizations. (6)

The data underpinning DEGW's Building Appraisal method was gathered through wide-ranging empirical study and categorization of varying office based commercial activity to generate user profiles. From the outset these user profiles, or types, were central in a methodology that looked to better reconcile organizations and architectural container that was the office building.

The publication of the seminal 1985 report 'Eleven Contemporary Office Buildings – A Comparative Study' set clear comparative assessment criteria on the performance of eleven City office buildings under construction in 1985 and in preparation for the deregulation of financial services that would come in 1987. Criteria included: location, accessibility & image; quantity of space; quality of space; level of building services, and land services & amenities. Critically, in a clear understanding of both how the UK commercial real estate market worked, and what organizations wanted from their office space DEGW's evolving Building Appraisal method separated out the assessment criteria for office buildings from the landlord view and criteria for the user's view.

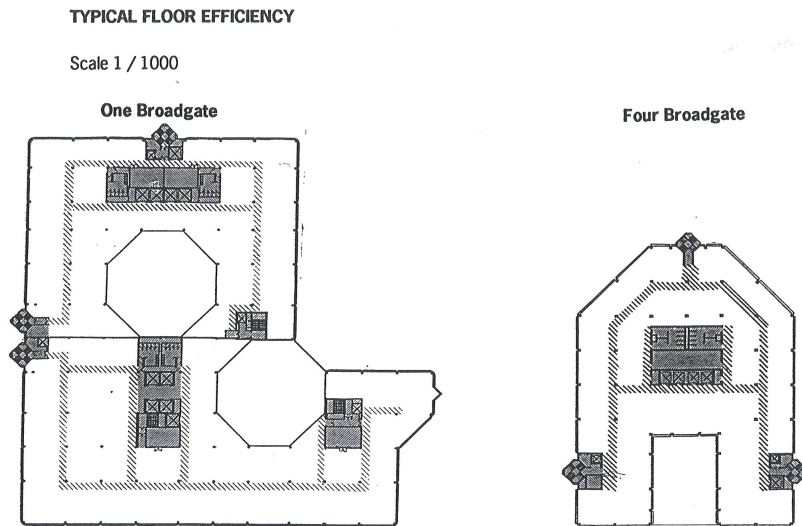


Fig. 1 Comparative Building Appraisal criteria (example) – from 12 City Office Buildings, DEGW 1992

As work patterns evolved in response to changing IT in the 1990s the practice developed new measurement techniques that linked and interrogated time and space use in the office. Here DEGW's architects and designers began to develop an idea of design around more fluid space types, an approach that radically shifted the criteria for what was an efficient and effective workplace environment (Fig. 2). Indeed, taken to its conclusion DEGW's researchers and designers posited the thesis that 'the office was the city and the city was the office' and showing how urban scale is an equally important variable in contemporary workplace design. (7)

Much of the research work developed by the practice through comparative study of office buildings, from 1970s onwards, subsequently found its way into the design guidelines of the British Council of Offices (BCO), although there is much to criticize within conventional architectural design where practitioners take the supply side guidance too literally and fail to recognize the spatial and formal opportunities of the office floor-plate.

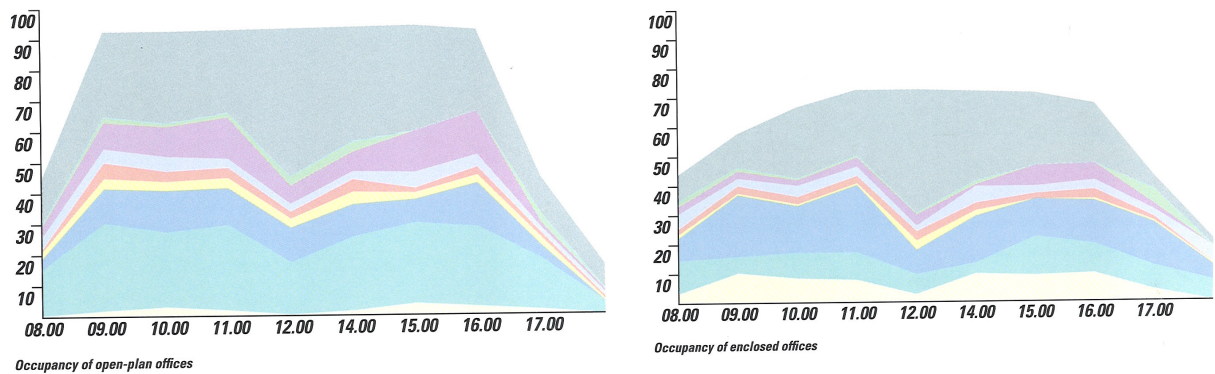


Fig. 2 Time Utilization Studies – understanding time and space use in the workplace. DEGW 1997

Type: metaphor and analogy

What then the relevance of Antonello da Messina's St Jerome in his Study (1475), and its use in the title of this paper? Perhaps one common method used in organizing and communicating architectural knowledge – both within the profession and to the lay public - is through the use of metaphor and analogy (in our hyper-connected world where hypothesis and concepts come and go this method is particularly pertinent).

The Renaissance image of St Jerome in his Study served as an illustration within DEGW's early 1990's analysis of emerging individual and collaborative work patterns, and with reference to what had been classified within their user profile research as the 'cell' office (the painting is rich in other compositional and architectural references). At that time the depth of research behind the classification of new work types, and the work settings to support these, was distilled into four types: the 'cell', 'club', 'den' and 'hive', and this would set the trajectory for a new era of building appraisal, user analysis, space planning and interior design within what was now a global practice (8).

To conclude, a careful investigation of DEGW's use of type, analogy and metaphor in their design approach, as perhaps presented in St Jerome in his Study, shows a practice finely tuned to the constitutional issues of spatial design as it pertains to the workplace. These are: architectural scale, versatility, informality, comfort, aspect, collaboration and perhaps most importantly, a deep understanding of the position of the individual within the collective. They are all hinted at in this image and were central to the values of the practice.

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7. See: *Work and the City*, Frank Duffy, Black Dog. Publ. London 2008
8. 'Innovations in Space Utilization. Developing a Measurement Method'. Workplace Forum. Jan. 1993. DEGW Archive, Univ. Reading. Ref: DEGW A/312/5

Images:

St Jerome in his Study, National Gallery, London

Fig. 1. Comparative Building Appraisal criteria (example), from '12 City Office Buildings', DEGW 1992. DEGW Archive, Univ. Reading. Ref: DEGW A/246/11

Fig. 2. Time Utilization Studies (TUS), 'The New Office', Francis Duffy. Conran Octopus (London) 1997