

PERIPHERAL MONUMENTS: BOOK REVIEW OF *THINKING DESIGN: BLUEPRINT FOR AN ARCHITECTURE OF TYPOLOGY* BY ANDREAS LECHNER

Cameron MCEWAN *

Department of Architecture, Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK

Andreas Lechner. (2021). *Thinking Design: Blueprint for an Architecture of Typology*. Park Books.

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In *Thinking Design: Blueprint for an Architecture of Typology* Andreas Lechner reassesses the question of architectural typology in relation to design research, practice, and theory. The book is organised into three extended chapters, entitled: Tectonics, Type, and Topos. In dialogue with the text are drawings of 144 important buildings from ancient times to the twenty-first century, focused on civic typologies. Each of those typologies incorporates a suite of 12 examples drawn in neat line drawings at a consistent scale. An enclosed booklet features design theses extracts by twelve students of TU Graz that illustrate Lechner's approach to teaching and design. I reflect on each chapter and argue that *Thinking Design* offers an original theoretical reflection on the status of the urban periphery and opens compelling questions about architecture and architectural design research as a practice of critical inquiry.

Introduction

In *Thinking Design: Blueprint for an Architecture of Typology* Andreas Lechner (2021) reassesses the question of architectural typology in relation to design research, practice, and theory¹ (Figure 1). The book is organised into three extended chapters, entitled: Tectonics, Type, and Topos. In dialogue with the text are drawings of 144 important buildings from ancient times to the twenty-first century, focused on civic typologies encompassing: theater, museum, library, state, office, recreation, religion, retail, factory, education, surveillance, and hospital. Each of those typologies incorporates a suite of 12 examples drawn in neat line drawings at a consistent scale in axonometric, plan, and section. (Figures 2, 3) Occasionally a key elevation either replaces or supplements the section. An enclosed booklet features design theses extracts by twelve students of TU Graz that illustrate Lechner's approach to teaching and design (Figures 4, 5). The book is large format, which allows more careful examination of the drawings and projects. It is a beautifully produced artefact.

Lechner is an architect who combines practice, research, and teaching. He founded his design studio in Graz, in 2009, and is an associate professor at TU Graz

Faculty of Architecture, where the material of the book was initially developed as a lecture series entitled “Counterintuitive Typologies.” After formative study in Los Angeles, Lechner trained as an architect in Berlin, Tokyo and Vienna, obtaining a doctorate in 2009, and was a visiting researcher at the IUAV in Venice. He is an editor of *GAM*, the annually published Graz Architecture Magazine, which in recent years has tackled compelling themes including architecture and the commons, the housing question, territory, density, and landscape urbanism.

Lechner's work is compelling and stimulating. He draws on the analytical and typological processes associated with Aldo Rossi's (1966/1982) reading of cities as a composition of monuments, “permanent traces,” and collective memory; but Lechner applies those approaches to interpret city edges, commercial vernacular, and the urban periphery. There is an identifiable allegiance to Rossi mixed with Venturi and Scott Brown (1972/1991), and John Hejduk (1985) as reference points. What seems significant and admirable in Lechner's writing, projects, and teaching is that intellectual culture and creative intuitive approaches are kept in close proximity to the critical rational tradition.

¹ Page numbers in the following refer to those in Andreas Lechner's *Thinking Design*.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: c.mcewan@northumbria.ac.uk

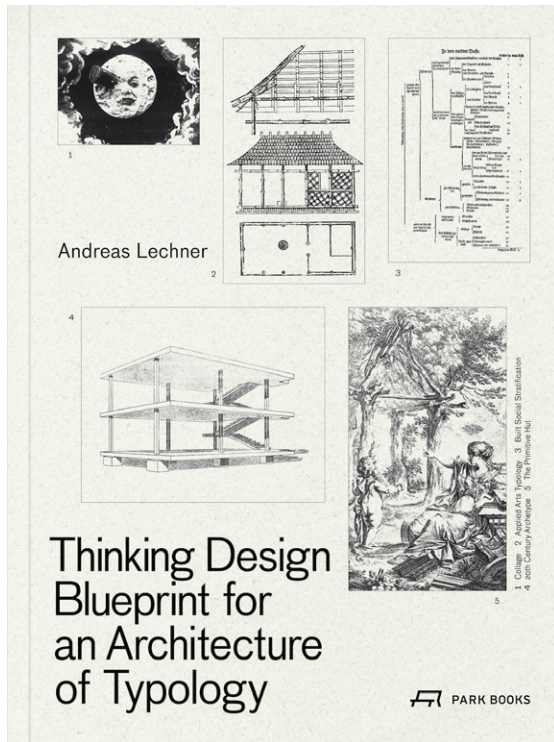


Figure 1. Front cover of *Thinking Design: Blueprint for an Architecture of Typology*. Acknowledgement: Park Books and Andreas Lechner

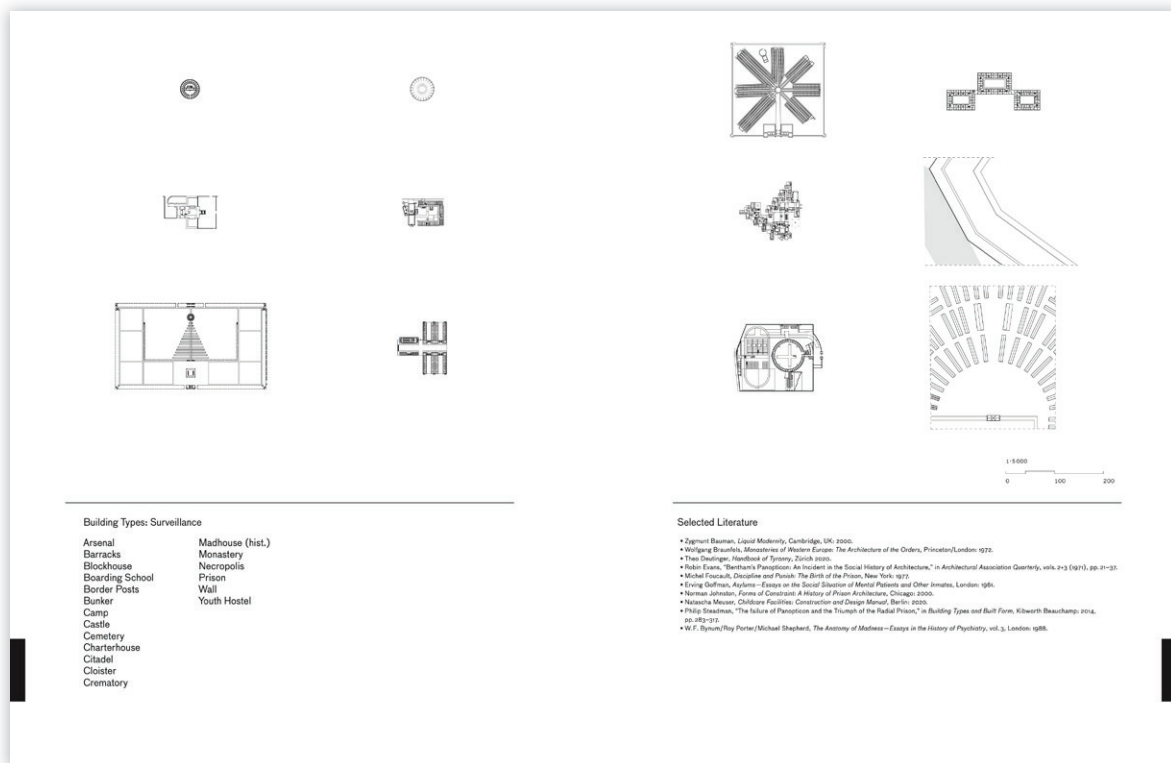


Figure 2. Page spread for "Surveillance" typologies. Acknowledgement: Park Books and Andreas Lechner

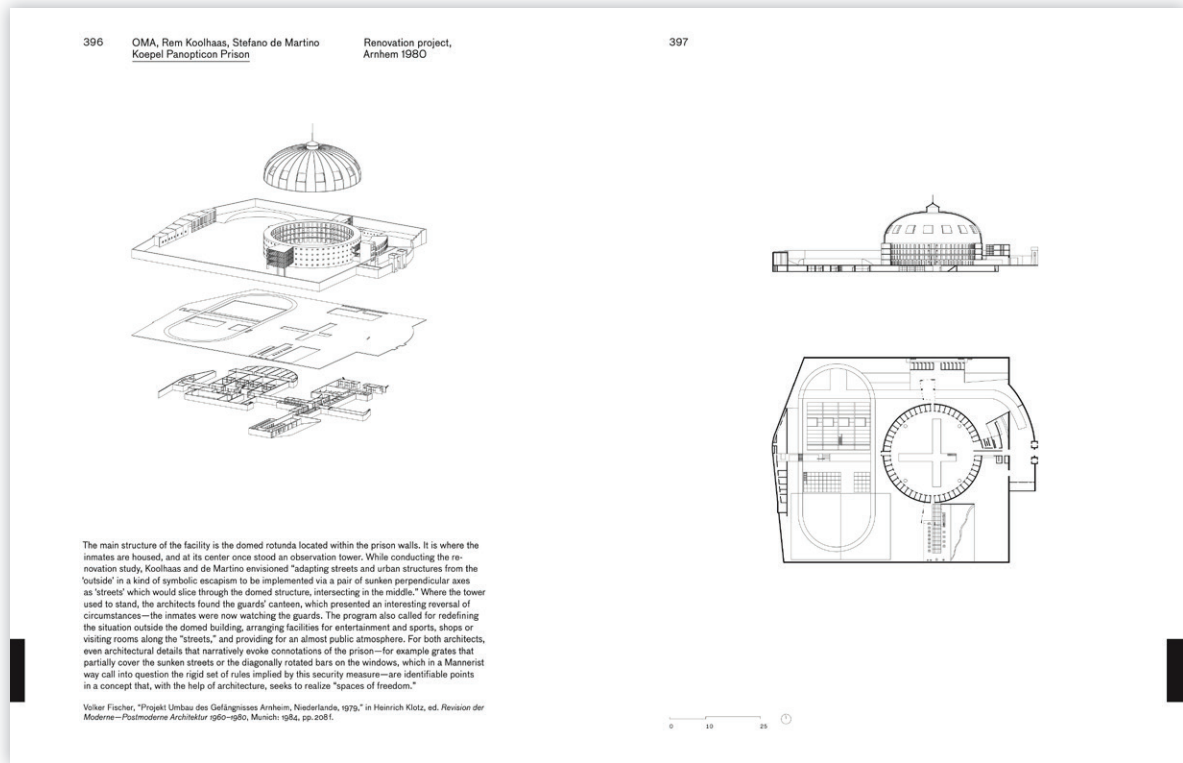


Figure 3. Page spread for OMA Koeppel project. Acknowledgement: Park Books and Andreas Lechner

Typology

Lechner wants to reclaim the idea of typology, or "type," in architecture. He argues that type is a core analytical and generative tool to structure and articulate architectural knowledge. Typology is a framework that pushes back against prevalent quests for novelty. Instead type links architecture to history and intellectual culture. Lechner quotes Alvaro Siza: "Architects don't invent anything; they transform reality. They work continuously with models which they transform in response to the problems which they encounter" (p. 156). In *Thinking Design* Lechner breaks down the notion of typology into three elements—tectonics, type, and topos—which are the title of each chapter.

One way to think about those elements is that they correspond to spatial scales. Tectonics tends to emphasise the room scale. It is the interplay of tactile qualities with the nearness of inside and outside relationships. It may be what is close, can be touched, and sensed. Lechner calls it "experiential and perceptual... related to the human body" (p. 17). Type corresponds to the building scale, a social program, and formal organisation. Topos stretches from the city, to territory, to planet. Its emphasis is on the material and immaterial forces that situate the architecture of the city. There is a part to whole relationship to the organisation of the book and a sliding scale. It is not necessary to read in sequence; and to a certain extent the book is richer when entered out of sequence—the chapters do not have a numerical order, so the point of entry is

seemingly intentionally open. Ideas circulate and interact in different orders across the chapters and in relation to the accompanying drawings and example projects. I will briefly reflect on each chapter.

In the chapter on tectonics, Lechner introduces the organisation of the book, the selection process for the inclusion of examples, and he reflects on the question of design research. Lechner quotes Stan Allen's reflections on working by example: "To conceive this work as a practice is to work from examples and not principles. It necessitates a continual reference to specific instances of buildings, cities, drawings or texts" (p. 55). That method animates Lechner's approach where he focuses on specific instances of typology in particular texts, cities, and projects.

The example typologies that are summarised in the tectonics chapter, but cut across each of the chapters, are concerned with civic programs and reflect an attention to public building. They are generally organised by a functional classification—theater, museum, library, etc.—except for state, recreation, and surveillance. For Lechner, these three latter categories offer a more explicit social and political dimension, ideas which are developed more fully in the final chapter. What is interesting about the inclusion of these categories is that they begin to disrupt the logic of the more straightforward classification; exposing new complexities, and articulating potentially unseen relationships. It is about destabilizing the rationalism of the functional categories to open onto something a little more transgressive. The subtle change of classification has the further effect of opening the voice of the author, which is reflective and discursive.

In the chapter on type, Lechner explores alternative definitions of type including archetype, prototype, stereotype, model, and diagram. For Lechner, type affords analytical, formal, and generative possibilities. He argues that precisely because the term typology has been so “hazy, nebulous, and nascent,” it offers rich levels of meaning to incorporate into the discourse of form in architectural teaching, becoming a central “disciplinary memory” – an alluring form of words (p. 156). Lechner follows with concise commentaries on the key figures in the debates on type including from the Enlightenment, Claude Perrault, Jacques-François Blondel, Marc-Antoine Laugier; an extensive reflection on the “matter-of-factness” of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand; then Quatremère de Quincy, Le Corbusier’s dom-ino; the writings on type by Rafael Moneo, Anthony Vidler, and Alan Colquhoun; and more recently those of Sam Jacoby and Christopher Lee.

Lechner explores how type is a way to think about what constitutes collectivity. He argues that in architecture the search for what is common and shared is not necessarily a concern for a common formal language, a zeitgeist, or a universal style, but a search for a common idea that invests architecture with social agency. While Lechner is exploring the possibility of a collective vision for architecture in his chapter on type, the challenge to that aim is set out in the final chapter on topos.

The concluding chapter addresses what Lechner calls “the rhetoric of the city and thus of society” (p. 296). It takes a more polemical tone than elsewhere in the book. The fundamental reference points in this chapter are close readings of Rossi’s (1966/1982) *The Architecture of the City* and Robert Venturi’s (1966/2002) *Complexity and Contradiction*, and Venturi and Scott Brown’s (1972/1991) *Learning from Las Vegas*. They are followed by insightful analyses of Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter’s (1978/1983) *Collage City*, OM Ungers et al. (1977/2012) *Berlin Archipelago City*, Rem Koolhaas’ (1978/1994) *Delirious New York*, the Los Angeles of Mike Davis’s (1990/2021) *City of Quartz* and Reyner Banham’s (1971/2009) *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies*, amongst other key texts and projects. Lechner notes that in each of these cases, specific cities are addressed: Milan, Las Vegas, Rome, Berlin, New York, Los Angeles. In each city, a particular urban condition or typology is examined: historic centre, commercial strip, urban texture, superblock, grid, infrastructure. Lechner comments: “They study the territory of the city to find, think, articulate, and test any hints of design strategies” (p. 413). Here again, the method of working by example is articulated.

Lechner focuses on public buildings and leaves out two key typologies: the single-family home and its infrastructural connection. In the concluding section of the book, Lechner presents a critique of these typologies and their typical site, the periphery as a global “commonplace.” He begins by noting that the periphery is neither rural nor urban, but “in between” and tends to be the area where most of the population lives (p. 443). It is a place where

the single-family home embodies the contradiction of singular commodity and global product. It is a place of private transport, shopping malls, airports, and lifestyles. It is a space of suburbs created by an “extension of urbanization zones around cities and former villages by throwing together, in random order and succession, facilities for commerce, industry, retail, production, logistics, service, leisure and health care in such a way as to not compete significantly on a cultural level with the older centres” (p. 446).

Peripheral monuments

Lechner asks: what future monuments will the periphery leave behind? He argues that airports, container terminals, industrial sites, data hubs, server farms, and shopping centres, have become the large-scale periphery-defining typologies that influence their surroundings while failing to take account of their environment. Yet Lechner takes an ambivalent view of these “automonuments.” He describes them on one hand as “erratic blocks in the landscape” and on the other hand as “conceptual, minimal, or land art” because of their typical appearance, completely clad as they often are in corrugated metal (p. 450).

For Lechner, the periphery is a “meaningless backdrop;” and yet: “This is precisely what makes suburbia interesting from an architectural point of view, because juxtaposed with the Renaissance of the city, with its central guiding functions of creativity and culture, is the actual everyday framework for the vast majority of us consisting of spaces for living, working, production, transportation, and leisure. That is by no means what one might call a meaningless tabula rasa, rather, it represents the design challenge of also bringing aesthetic standards to the public space of the urbanized landscape” (p. 450). The task for an architecture of typology is to intervene in these “commonplaces” with rigour, clarity, and coherence. It would be to press against the tendency for haphazard uniqueness and a society of singularities; to instead show that there is an alternative collective vision of the periphery and thus of society.

Thinking Design provides an important critical overview for theories and projects of typology and will offer a useful compendium for the student and teacher of architecture as well as the critical practitioner. Yet *Thinking Design* also offers an original theoretical reflection on the status of the urban periphery and opens questions about architecture and architectural design research as a practice of critical inquiry. In the face of the capitalist debris and the uneven space that is the hallmark of urban peripheries as a global condition, we might return to some of the 144 typologies that Lechner presents as inspiring examples; or study the striking suite of projects by students under Lechner’s supervision, which are compiled in the appended booklet. Lechner offers inspiring reflections, strong examples, and useful models for what may become the peripheral monuments of tomorrow.

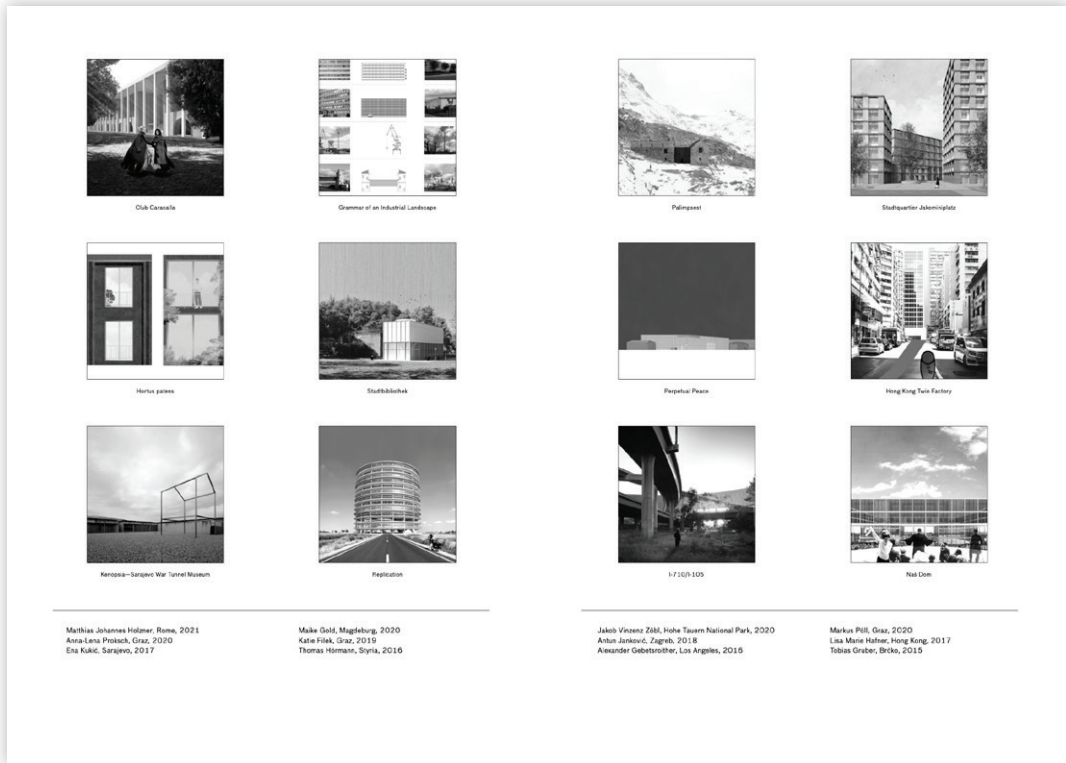


Figure 4. Index of Masters Theses examples in *Thinking Design* appened booklet. Acknowledgement: Park Books and Andreas Lechner

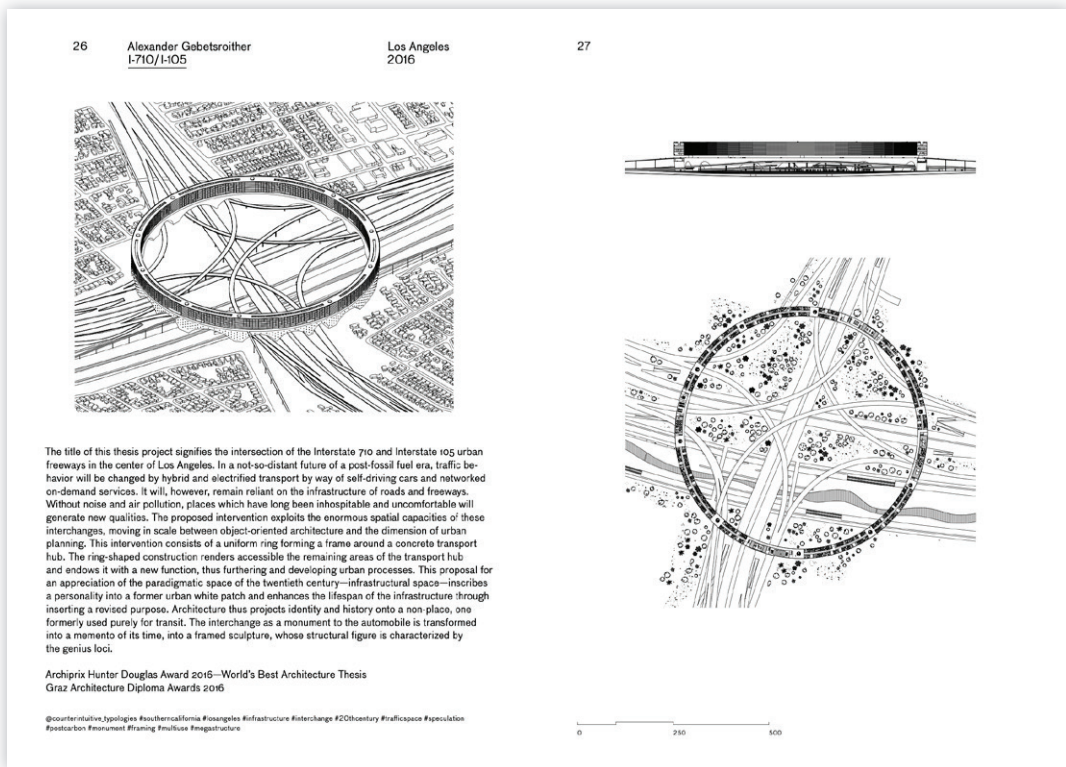


Figure 5. Page spread from Masters Theses booklet in *Thinking Design*. Acknowledgement: Park Books and Andreas Lechner

Disclosure statement

The author declares no competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties.

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