Typological Urbanism

Imi Knoebel, Raum 19 III, 1968-2006, Haus Konstruktiv Zürich

Studio DOSCRE

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Architecture versus Urbanism

The term Typological Urbanism refers to a design method situated at the overlap of architecture and urbanism. In our understanding, urbanism is neither the outcome of engineered masterplans—where form is determined and filled with program —nor the product of a loose collection of autonomous architectural objects. Instead, we believe in a strong interdependency between architecture and urbanism. We recognize a conceptual gap in practice between these two disciplines. Typological Urbanism allows us to respond with precision to the multiple dimensions of the urban condition—context, program, and existing fabric—without relying on idealistic projections. Instead, it operates through inherent rules: robust yet flexible enough to be reassembled in every moment. This assemblage relies in a fluent state, like the work of Imi Knoebel it can feel assembled and disassembled at the same time. This ambiguity and open-endedness enable appropriation and identification.

A Dual Approach

Typological Urbanism can be approached from two complementary directions:

- From within: architectural typologies (such as housing) generate spatial organization and in turn shape urban form.
- From without: predefined or emergent urban types constitute our built environment, including aspects such as public space, program, ownership, and accessibility.

This duality reflects the legacy of modernist thought—its search for rationality—and its postmodern revision, which reintroduced context, memory, and multiplicity into design. Synthesizing these principles enables us to resist both dogmatism and nostalgia.

Working Across Scales

This duality is not contradictory; on the contrary, it becomes our design method. To investigate it, we will work simultaneously on two scales: the individual unit and the urban figure. By studying how these two levels interact, we aim to reveal deeper spatial relationships. Our starting point will be specific housing typologies, through which we will analyse spatial logics and organizational principles. From there, we will scale outward—investigating how abstract volumes relate to one another within a larger spatial composition. The central question becomes: can the relationships and conditions identified at the architectural scale be translated into, or discovered within, the urban dimension?

Sites of Urban Reassembly

In the Swiss context, urban development is no longer driven by expansion into open land, but by the densification and transformation of existing environments. Within these already-defined boundaries, most areas transitioning from industrial or infrastructural uses to residential, commercial, services or public functions have now been developed. Yet some questions remain. Our investigations extend beyond these specific zones and apply equally to the mixed-use city, to urban areas growing across municipal lines, to agglomerations evolving into coherent urban forms, and to housing settlements striving for greater density and urban character.

Urban Ensemble or Urban Composite

Over the course of the academic year, each semester will prioritize one aspect of this duality within a design project:

- Semester 1: The Urban Ensemble (Zurich): Focused on how urban form emerges from the interaction of typologies in a loose arrangement of buildings.
- Semester 2: The Urban Composite (Lausanne): Investigates the idea of a hybrid building—a type in itself that incorporates multiple typologies.

Challenging outdated zoning laws, we will apply a consistent programmatic set in each context—a mix of uses tailored to local conditions, yet designed to ensure that a piece of city can emerge and evolve.

Three Phases of Engagement

The semester will center on a single project, progressing through three distinct phases, each shaped by a different teaching format:

- **Phase 1: Impromptus:** A series of short, intuitive weekly design exercises. Each ends with a provisional result—a drawing, a model, a photo and a text—which will serve as as starting points moving forward.
- **Phase 2: Synthesis Workshops:** Together, we bring our findings into the urban landscape, developing the typological, structural, and spatial coherence of individual projects
- **Phase 3: Refinement:** Focused on developing personal expression and spatial character. Students will refine their projects into articulated proposals, responding to both typological structure and urban context.

Students will work in pairs, establishing a dialogue to bring their personal engagement together. A study trip to Zurich will be organized during the fall semester for on-site analysis and work, with a second trip planned for the spring semester, destination to be determined.

Theoretical Framework

Design explorations throughout the semester will be grounded in theoretical inputs, delivered by the teaching team and invited guests. These contributions will align with weekly themes and provide a conceptual backbone for the design work, situating it within broader architectural, historical, political, and urban discourse. The semester engages with typology as a cross-disciplinary concept, addressing questions such as: How have architectural typologies evolved over time? (history); How does urban planning function in contemporary practice? (planning and policy); and what are the spatial interdependencies between built form and open space when approached typologically? (landscape architecture).

Learning Objectives

The semester aims to equip students with the tools to conceive and develop projects across multiple scales—from architectural typologies to urban ensembles. A key focus lies in developing an in-depth understanding of what constitutes a typology: its spatial logic, structure, circulation, composition, and formal articulation. Students will learn how these principles can be deployed strategically within the urban fabric. Through close observation of the built environment, students will learn to read the city—identifying the interplay of typologies—and begin to imagine new potentials for their transformation.

Methodology

The working method is firmly rooted in architecture, yet inherently reflective, transdisciplinary, and open to dialogue with related fields. It fosters a seamless integration of theory and practice, enabling a design process that is both conceptually rigorous and adaptable to diverse urban programs and contexts. This scalable methodology applies across varied urban conditions and supports collaborative design—encouraging teamwork while valuing individual contribution. Ultimately, we aim to think urbanism as architects and architecture as urbanists.

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