LOBBY

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Un/Spectacle

Urbanism as a Product of Repetition

Fast architecture, fast becoming a problem

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"You know something? If I'm copied well, I don't mind. Unfortunately, most of the time I seem to be copied badly."
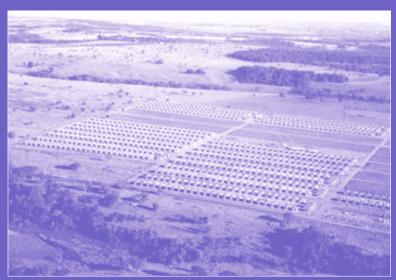Rem Koolhaas

What if the last personal pronoun "I" in Koolhaas' quote was substituted by words like 'buildings'? Single elements that are copied either well or badly, form entire homogeneous blocks, neighbourhoods, districts or regions. A mass production of repeated built environments leading to vast territories with identical bird's eye views. Wouldn't that be close to whatever happened to Architecture after the Industrial Revolution? Some of the most known ideas and projects from the end of nineteenth century until today have followed repetitive patterns: high-rise tower buildings inspired by the Unité d' Habitation, simple standardised concrete skeletons following the symbolic Domino prototype or strict urban grid patterns as Manhattan or Barcelona's example.

It began with the dramatic population increase and the great demand for housing and sanitary urban conditions after World War I and II, in the United States and in Europe. These urgencies together with the technological advancements of the time, transformed architecture and urban planning into a product of repetition by regulating it massively in favour of political agendas and economic interests. Land was previously subdivided and sold to individuals who developed it on their own establishing a certain degree of diversity. As soon as private developers, local governments and housing associations became the owners of the land and financed large-scale residential developments, repetitive built environments emerged.

On one hand, repetition could ensure some order in the ever-growing complexity of urban systems that architects were struggling to grasp as a whole.

On the other hand, architectural design could not escape the automatisation imputed by the industries. First was the assembly line of production initially applied in the Ford factories in 1914; an aftereffect of a deliberate political decision to increase efficiency and speed of production. One year later and due to a housing deficit in Belgium, Le Corbusier came up with the idea of a standard two storey concrete structure that could be repeated endlessly in a possible housing assembly line. This proposal was never realised but it was extremely influential to all mass housing projects realised ever since. In fact, often utopias proposed by the avant-garde intellectuals such as Hilberseimer's proposal for a vertical city or Jefferson's early plan for Washington, conditioned architecture even more towards repetitive patterns. Gradually, architectural production became more standardised with the aid of technology and computer-aided programs. Repetition now became possible in a single copy-paste move resolving any dilemmas of critical reflection and choice making, leaving room for a *fast architecture* of the twenty-first century to grow.

It should be stressed here that repetition is not the problem per se, but a reckless product of urbanism driven by factors that exclude architectural qualities from the design. When repetition in design is used as an instrument to satisfy real estate interests and political agendas, the danger of a fast architecture arises, a rapid architectural production with unforeseeable consequences. American suburbia, British New Towns and Shanghai's 'One City, Nine Towns' plan are such examples. Worse than that, mass housing projects such as the Bijlmermeer (Amsterdam), the 'Alliance for Progress' (USA), the Sarcelles (France), the Sun Chui Estate development (Hong Kong) or the 'Two Million Homes for Mexico' (Mexico) highlight the consequences of a universally spread, reckless and blatant repetitive design:

Minha Casa Minha Vida Settlement with 800 unites named 'Buena Vista' in Goiás, Brazil

a condemned future for the prospective residents as a result of thoughtless planning which fails to respond to the local conditions.

It seems that repetition can very well be a means to an end. The question is how? The Brazilian mass housing programme 'Minha Casa Minha Vida' was initiated in 2009 amidst the financial crisis in order to face a 5.8 million housing deficit and to boost the construction industry. One million homes were constructed for the low-income population during the first phase and in 2011 and a second phase was launched during which another 2.4 million houses will be built.

Interestingly enough, real estate industry and construction companies were the first to benefit by this programme and repetition was not only an optimisation tool but also a militarized means to overcome the perceived risks. Since houses and new settlements are considered high-risk investments due to the uncertainties and the consequences involved —new location, new friends, new neighbours— repetition is used to minimize their influence. In this sense, Brazilian private companies presented similar profit-based housing typologies sticking to the program's minimum regulations. Then by repeating them without much wisdom on the territory, they implicitly proposed equal standards of living to all the residents relieving their uncertainties and creating what economists would call a homogeneous product—a low risk investment.

Unfortunately, despite its initial noble cause, the MCMV program has already been detected as being defective only just three years after its launch. Local residents look dissatisfied, private investors have either lost interest or focus solely on housing for higher incomes within the subsidy scheme and severe demonstrations against the social, economic and political reality of the country like those of June 2013 take place. It has been argued that the responsibility lies on its realisation, which is of poor quality, inflexible and unsuccessful in generating life in the long run. Its mass repetitive design erases any urban life qualities, ignoring the given cultural patterns and failing to create well-used spaces that promote interactions among those who live there. Therefore, we need to understand that such repetitive urban projects—without essential architectural and urban qualities—are doomed to fail and if not done otherwise, they will fail again. With or without copying, it is time to again create mass housing that succeeds. ♟