Seminar: Housing Typology

We are bombarded with a huge range of images of housing in the media. The mass media obsess on opulent or striking houses (in what one critic has termed “shelter porn”), while the professional architectural media feature projects which appeal to the rarified tastes of architects, but usually bear little relationship to how most people do, or even want, to live. Obscured by this frenzy of glitz, styling and seemingly endless inventiveness, is the essential sameness: when you strip away the arcane materials, exquisite detailing and spatial gymnastics, you discover the underlying paucity of types that are built, many of which are ill-suited to their residents and their sites.

The systematic study of existing housing types can, paradoxically, lead to greater innovation in housing design, through refocusing upon the essential differences in housing form, rather than simply the design development of a few rudimentary types. Considering the fundamental qualities of dwelling unit and building types can help us select types which meet our criteria for the specific projects we undertake. Understanding the advantages and limitations of basic types can free us from having to reinvent the wheel with every project, and from repeating errors in housing design which are all too common.

Course Content

This course will look at housing typology and its practical application in design. The emphasis will be upon understanding the essential organizational strategies that underlie a type and how one clear type may lead to a very large number of excellent designs. Examples and case studies will be used, but mainly as illustrations of variations within a type, and not for the particular design elements (good or bad) which distinguish them. Topics to be covered include:

- What is typology? How does it apply to housing?
- Dwelling unit types
- Residential building types
- Housing site typology
- How unit, building and site types interact
- Comparative qualities for different types
- Factors for the selection of appropriate types.

Course Format and Requirements

This course will meet once a week. Approximately half the meetings will involve presentations by the instructor, with class discussion. The other meetings will comprise presentations of student research, which will be conducted in small groups:

1. Midterm: research to find housing projects and classify them in a typology matrix (not detailed case studies).
2. Final: subject matter to be determined by student research teams in consultation with instructor.

Texts:

Reading excerpts on reserve and course Blackboard site

Curricular connections:

This course works well for those pursuing the concentration in Housing, and is different from Michael Fifield’s 4/538 Housing Prototypes course. It would be an excellent background for those who might be in my Comprehensive (formerly known as Terminal) housing studio next year, although it is not required. The required course next fall leading in to that studio, Housing Design, will repeat about 20% of the material in this course. For those who are interested in pursuing housing studies abroad, I will probably be teaching a housing studio at the DIS in Copenhagen the summer of 2011, which will build upon the analytical structure set out in this course.