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THE VULGAR TOWNSCAPE A PROPOSAL FOR A CARTOGRAPHY OF STYLE

TOMMY KAJ LINDGREN

Abstract

Style is a problematic concept in contemporary discourses on the urban environment and architecture. Its relevance has declined from an essential tool for debate into a labelling of specific architectural signatures. In this text, a reassessment of style as a concept is proposed, as style is seen as having the possibility of depicting the varied forces involved in the production of our environment and of contributing to discourses bridging disciplines and communities. Style is defined by delineating its current contradictions and considering their settlement using an approach based on Actor-network theory and Assemblage theory. On this basis, a method of mapping of the built urban environment through style is articulated, and a definition of style as the Virtual Diagram of a careful mapping of the assemblage of the urban environment is proposed. Initial guidelines for producing mappings are drawn and a sketch of one contemporary style outlined as a demonstration, and the ramifications of this demonstration are discussed.

Keywords:
Architectural style, Actor-network
theory, Assemblage theory

Introduction

Why discuss style in architecture today?

The multifaceted and problematic nature of urban environments as objects of study has been clear from the first seminal texts dealing with the metropolis and its study (e.g., the kaleidoscope of Benjamin's *Convolutes*, Benjamin, 1999, p. 27–826), but the discourses concerning the design of the urban have demonstrated more streamlined stances – simplifying the task of urban form, giving into a question of the embodiment of values (e.g., Ruskin, 1851; Burnham & Bennett, 1909), and with Modernism's turn towards rational management of urbanization, to an exercise in logistics, hygiene and plot allocation and development (e.g., Le Corbusier, 1973; 1987; Hilberseimer, 2012). These realms of Urban Studies and Urban Design have their own, often separate, pedigrees. It can be argued that meaningful discourse and effective intervention in our built urban environment requires both – analytical understanding of the nature of the territory and the tools of its mapping and alteration. The disciplinary discourses stay mostly within their own spheres, circumscribed by academic or professional vocabulary and specific epistemic practices.

Yet, public critical and political discourse about our urban environment crosses over these boundaries with ease, describing the hybrids that are our built environments, in their social, political, material and architectural qualities (e.g., Isitt, 2022 on the implications of modernist suburbs in Sweden; Moore, 2022 on the future of brutalist New Town centres in Britain; Wainwright, 2022 on urban and architectural answers to the heat-island effect in cities). However, this public and political discourse is often lacking the conceptual tools that could bridge and connect questions of urban phenomena and experiences, practices of design and contingencies of construction. Henceforth, any possibility of reaching a holistic understanding of the phenomena of our environment and the effective means of changing the way it is produced are also out of reach.

In this article, the concept of style is reconsidered as a tool for such a discourse, which could provide insight into the formation of our environment and open up possibilities for intervention. As style is the rare concept that crosses the limits of popular and specialized discourses, it is seen as more suitable for this task than, for example, concepts like morphology or tectonic logics that can also be used to describe the built environment in its visible and structural aspects, but that are limited to circumscribed spheres. For this reconsideration of style, first, style as a concept is situated historically and its position concerning the production of our built environment is elaborated. The changing role and relevance of the term is sketched out, with the early modernist period of architecture seen as the hinge point in the decline of the concept's relevance to professional discourse about our common urban environment. A current definition of style, which is seen as suitable for further elaboration, is taken as a premise for development, with a number of caveats.

The inherent problems in the use of the concept of style are then laid out as a set of three contradictions: the contradiction of description and prescription; the contradiction of surface and structure; and the contradiction of agency and contingency. These contradictions describe the challenges in using style as an explanatory or operative concept when discussing the production of the built environment, but they also act as the basis for a new definition.

In the main part of the article, a redefinition is essayed by applying an actor-network approach and borrowing concepts from speculative realist thinkers. Namely the solutions to the contradictions are based on the concepts of Flat ontology (Latour, 1993b; 2005) and Assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2016). The new definition is based on describing style as a virtual diagram of similar urban built environments: a style encompasses a set of different “virtual” potentialities that can manifest themselves as specific concrete environments.

After this proposal for a redefinition, some initial guidelines for describing a style according to these principles are stated, and a sketch of a contemporary style, “the Honeycomb”, is provided as a demonstration. The ramifications of the demonstration are discussed and it is used for highlighting the relations between style as Virtual Diagram and as concrete manifestation(s).

The object of the present article is twofold: (1) defining style anew, as a dynamic entity in a broad network of mediators and their relations; and (2) bringing style back to the public and political discourse on cities, as we have proved ourselves to be poor conversationalists without such a concept.

The concept and relevance of style

Style as a concept does not have much currency in contemporary academic discourse around cities, architecture and urban design. The idea of style as describing a hegemonic way of conceiving and building the urban environment (the definition of Semper (2010, p. 265) from the 19th century summarizes well this epochal idea: “[art always reflects] the prevailing social, political and religious systems”) had already become fraught in the late 19th century – the number of competing or coexisting styles testified to a fragmented landscape (described in Kostof, 2010, p. 571-594). The question whether to imitate or innovate in the art of building remained unresolved, with the most sustained debate happening in Germany, centred around the question: “In what style should we build?” (Hübsch et al., 1992, p. 3-4), and by the first years of the 20th century, the historian Hermann Muthesius aimed at concluding this tumult by banishing “style-architecture” altogether – “Architecture, like all other artworks, must seek its essence in content to which the external

appearance must adapt” (1902, p. 79). Nevertheless, style as a topic was still central in some debates, cantered on the issues of progress and national identity, like the controversy around the competition for the Helsinki railway station in Finland, a hinge moment pitting the forces of a slightly anachronistic national romanticism against demands for timely architectural expressions – for a style of “brains and iron” in the words of Strengell & Frosterus (1904).

The modern movement built on Muthesius’ credo and explicitly disavowed style as a meaningful concept in lieu of the rational description of the modern mode of building, which eschewed visual systems, preferring diagnosis and technical solutions to dwelling and urbanism in the face of the challenges of the 20th century. The pre-eminent scholar of the early years of the modern movement, Sigfried Giedion, articulated the turn as simultaneously an abandonment of historical styles as well as a redirection towards fitness as a criterion (1954, p. 291). Concerning the urban environment, the Athens Charter laid down the problems and the remedies for cities, without explicit recourse to issues of style, type or aesthetic description, but relying on ideas of hygiene of the body and mind and a “science of urbanism” (Le Corbusier, 1973, p. 51-89, 98).

The developed and dominant form of modern architecture, which defined the production of the built environment in Western metropolises in the first half of the 20th century, also got its own stylistic description with the seminal exhibition and publication *The International Style*. It was described as: volumetric, regular and against ornament (Hitchcock & Johnson, 1932, p. 36) – but style was to become further diminished as a description during the advance of the 20th century – it went from a description of a dominant way of conceiving and forming the built environment to a description of formal qualities of specific buildings and the signatures of architects (compare the MoMA catalogues of the international style from 1932 and the catalogue showcasing one of the latest “styles”, Deconstructivism, from 1988). One of the central theorists of Post-Modern architectural styles, Charles Jencks, has playfully visualized this fragmentation of a major paradigm into minor styles in his *Evolutionary Trees* (1977). The idea of an epochal style is today a chimera, pursued only by a few advocates of specific methods (e.g., the promotion of parametricism by Schumacher, 2015).

A premise for a definition

A further splintering and problematization of style has been articulated by the architect and educator Farshid Moussavi in her *The Function of Style* (2015a, and in a lecture on the same publication, 2015b) where the function is seen as unrelated to time, nationality, authorship or unity; and style is defined as “the agency given to the elements of a building through their specific arrangement. It manifests itself as a cluster of

effects that spread directly from the building and influence the kind of assemblage that people will form with it as they take part in their everyday activities...” (2015b). This definition describes style within the bounds of a single, unique building, concluding the fragmentation of style to its limit.

In this article, this description is taken as a proof of the use of style for discourse, and as a premise for developing a Cartography of Style. Also, Moussavi’s implicit reliance on the concept of assemblage is adopted. This description is developed with a wider remit, and Moussavi’s contention of style as a concept that should be deployed in the pursuit of novelty and surprise is not shared. Moussavi prioritizes the agency of the architect as the actor that can change or challenge conventions and in this way create novel situations – situations where passive habit gives way to active participation – and where the agency of the building comes to the fore in taking a decisive role in the assemblage that people form with it.

Furthermore, Moussavi’s examples are tightly framed to exceptional projects – object buildings, where the leeway given to the architect creates opportunities far from the confines of convention, instead of dealing with the description(s) of the visual qualities of our quotidian urban environment. Hence, here in the text we opt for the expression *townscape* as a more useful tool for describing the mundane built environment and its experience. Townscape (coined by Gordon Cullen, 1971) condenses the experience of the built environment as an assemblage of the environment and the subject, without focus on the objects of design as objects of art, but as participants in the environment.

Witnessing the majority of our built environments, whether by our own daily experience, or through the lenses of artists and designers like Michael Wolf (2010) or Luca Picardi (2016), we can see the urban surface, the Townscape, as defined by repetitions and variations on visual themes. For describing these scenes through the concept of style, we will here deploy and develop the definition of style articulated by Moussavi but applied to the urban environment instead of specific stand-out buildings, further eschewing the idea of style as a signature (as in most discourse on Post-Modern architecture and style) and seeing it instead as a function of its elements, but without the normative stance on disrupting habit or challenging convention. These concerns, even as they may be central to the progressive designer’s studio, are superfluous for the general definition of style, and not relevant for the task at hand – of adequately giving an operative account of the urban surfaces that surround us and that are strongly conditioned by regulated programs, restrictive economic considerations and design practices often operating as enabling services, not as sources of disruption. This kind of a style, one that brings together the visible surfaces that are often the focus of

public debate, and the processes that realize them, in a manner that opens a way for their transformation, is our goal in this article.

The contradictions of style

Style is an inherently problematic concept when discussing the attributes of the built environment, but it is also a necessary one, as it brings together the superficial, that which catches the eye, as well as the substructure, which establishes the basis for this effect. Style at its best, can bridge the gap between public experience and professional expertise and analysis.

The main problems of style as a usable concept, in light of the way it has been used in discourse, can be summed up as three different contradictions.

First, while it can be used as shorthand for the architecture of a certain period, a geographic area or a specific condition of the production of the built environment, it is hard to see it as a proper tool for design outside strictly circumscribed milieus. Second, discourse on style in the urban environment focuses on the seen – the surface – but the surface always rests on a material and immaterial structure and the balance of these terms is rarely resolved, as the concept typically is inclined towards one or the other. Third, as something can be said to be built in a certain style, we can get the impression, that artistic agency and choice dictate the outcome of a building project – simultaneously, we know, that our urban fabric is built within a strict regulatory and economic framework, where choice can seem illusory, and the resulting Townscape predetermined.

What meaning can style have as a useful tool, accounting for these contradictions? Below we discuss each instance and consider the requirements of a new definition that could settle the contradictions.

The contradiction of description and prescription

Style is used in typical accounts of pre-modernist architectural history as a shorthand for a specific set of architectural features, appearing in a certain time period and within a geographical area, for example the Shingle Style of New England of the late 19th century (Scully, 1955). Even though the contingencies of history and geography do not form monolithic wholes – we find everywhere examples of different sets of conditions side by side in the Townscape, e.g., the incursion of Roman classicism and *inventio* deployed by patrician families against the background of the traditional *mediocritas* of the city state, described in the study of *Renaissance Venice* by Tafuri (1995, p. 1-13); or the islands of steel and glass defined by the tenets of the International Style within regions of vernacular environments today, as described in the case of Special

Economic Zones by Easterling (2016, p. 25-70) – style supposes always a certain spatio-temporal environment, and accounts of it are always written from a contemporary position evaluating circumstances that have passed.

As style is historically and geographically situated, the use of style as prescription is inherently ruled out – as the definition carries the whole context with it and refers to a past (another) time and place. Considering the speed of processes of planning, design and construction of buildings, as well as the building of discourse, the definition of style is always late from the current moment of planning, therefore using style as a prescription is not possible in a strict sense.

The contradiction of surface and structure

Even though style is typically described through visual cues, the relation between surface and structure has often been fraught, whether we are discussing the Beaux-Arts, the International Style or other traditions. In many cases, a clear set of visual attributes form the hallmarks of a style, without necessarily any explicit connection to its enabling structure, whether material or immaterial, and vice versa. Especially Modernism took almost anything *but* the visible surface as the locus of design, with the famous dictum of Sullivan “form ever follows function” (1896, p. 408) further articulated by Le Corbusier in reformulating the architect’s tasks in the language of the engineer, and stating that a building is “like a soap bubble... The exterior is the result of an interior” (1986, p. 81).

This dissonance, which can be stated as one between form and content, or between surface and structure, is an unresolved tension in the formulation of what should drive the design of our built environment. Even when resorting to the clear idiom of an engineer’s purposeful process, a will towards certain types of compositions often bear more weight that could be admitted, as can be read in the letters of complaints to Le Corbusier about design flaws in the Villa Savoye from the 1930s (Sbriglio, 1999), where formal considerations trumped functional ones. While style often is described as founded either on form or function, a fruitful discourse can’t do without either, as the surface is what is accessible to all – the professional, as well as the layperson, and thus the basis of public debate – and it is simultaneously and indivisibly integrated with structure.

The contradiction of agency and contingency

The oft repeated question “in what style should we build?” (also raised by de Botton in his popular book on the built environment (2006, p. 27-73), presupposes that there is a clear choice to be made and an actor that can make this choice. This presupposition is at the root of several acrimonious disputes about the built environment, the issuing of the

executive order “On Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture” by then-president Trump (2020) of the United States, and the following debate and eventual overturning of the order being one of the most high profile ones. The order enumerated styles that were seen as unsuitable, the criticism couched in a language blaming elites and elitism for uninspiring federal buildings and called for the use of “classical and traditional architecture” that have proved their ability to “uplift and beautify, [as well as] command respect from the general public”. Notwithstanding the confused stylistic avenues explored in the Executive Order (distilling modernity into Brutalism and Deconstructivism, classifying Art Deco with classical and traditional, etc.), the will to decide on a style for our built environment, and the belief that it can be achieved through making a choice, has been shared widely, especially within the ranks of historicist architects and planners (e.g., Léon and Rob Krier, Andrés Duany and the New Urbanist movement).

However, architecture – the designing of buildings and our wider built environment – is supremely contingent. As the architect and theorist Jeremy Till has succinctly put it: Architecture depends. Or: “Architecture ... is shaped more by external conditions than by the internal processes of the architect. Architecture is defined by its very contingency, by its very uncertainty in the face of these outside forces” (Till, 2013, p. 1). The question of agency is similar in the case of style in the urban environment, even though the issue is not couched in the language of authorship or the possibility of autonomy (as is typical with architecture, e.g., the work of Aureli, the projects of Peter Eisenman, etc.). “In what style should we build?” can only be asked in a vacuum, shorn off from the dependencies inherent in the processes of the production of the built environment – but even when dismissing the question as naïve or impossible, we still need to engage with the issues of agency and influence.

Theory and method

If we wish to be profound, we have to follow forces in their conspiracies and translations. We have to follow them, wherever they may go, and list their allies, however numerous and vulgar these may be (Latour, 1993b, p. 188).

These partially overlapping contradictions concerning a definition of style and its use need for their settlement a framework that can address these questions – how can style be defined so that we can use it also prescriptively, and not only as a description; what is the relation between surface and structure that allows us to consider both according to their relevance; where is agency found and how can choices be made concerning the visual nature of our built environment?

The matter of how to accurately describe and meaningfully discuss the appearance of our built environment is properly a hybrid matter – as Latour would describe it (Latour, 1993a, p. 10-12), a combination of issues ranging from what could be called social, to what could be called natural. The matter combines issues from art-historical and professional discourses, the considerations of investors and the practices of architects and engineers, the political vagaries of regulations and economic instruments, the experiences of the dwellers in and visitors to a certain area, to issues like load calculations, the effects of acid rain on stone and steel, the changes of qualities in glazing solutions in accordance with needs in insulation and effects of microbial life in an ever more volatile environment of different moistures and temperatures.

An adequate description of style can be based on an Actor-network theory (ANT) approach, where the matter at hand is described through following the actors that make up the phenomena, whether they are human or non-human (Latour, 2005, p. 68) and give an account of how they participate in its formation (Latour, 2005, p. 70-74). An ANT approach is not foreign to architectural and urban questions (examples in urban studies, Farías & Bender, 2010; in architecture, Yaneva, 2022; a review of use in architectural studies, Dilaveroglu et al., 2021) but underutilized in the case of style. In this text, an approach is built on the basis of a Flat ontology of actors and networks; a description of style benefits also from the conceptual tools of Assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2016).

Flat Ontology

The basis for this approach is in restricting our description to the plane of a Flat Ontology, which treats our objects of study as topological networks on an even plane, instead of examples of global or local effects (Latour, 1993a, p. 117-120; 2005, p. 173-190), i.e., instead of considering a global *zeitgeist* as explaining local choices of design, we trace the connections of these choices along the networks that can account for the influences the choices exemplify. This Flat Ontology also requires us to accept the entities we follow as they are, looking for no explanations “above” or “below” them, “nothing is reducible or irreducible to anything” (Latour, 1993b, p. 158).

Assemblage theory

The urban built environment is an assemblage, in the sense of the concept used by DeLanda (2016) and compatible with Latour (2005): it is an individual entity (an irreducible entity with emergent, immanent properties); composed of heterogeneous other entities (other assemblages are its components); it can be nested (be the component of other assemblages); as its components affect it, it affects its components (upward and downward causality) – assemblages can be territorialized or deterritorialized.

torialized and coded or decoded to different degrees (DeLanda, 2016, p. 19-22), that is, their boundary conditions can alter, as well as the fixity of their structure.

Assemblage theory allows us to describe the style or styles of the urban built environment beyond its immediate manifestations – style is the Virtual Diagram of similar urban built environments: “...in addition to properties, assemblages also possess dispositions, tendencies and capacities that are virtual (real but not actual) when not being currently manifested or exercised” (DeLanda, 2016, p. 108). The Virtual Diagram of a style, describes its field of possibilities, all the different ways it can be manifested, this is what is meant by it being real (implicated by manifest assemblages), but not actual (not manifest as such). In other words, the Virtual Diagram of a style encompasses a set of different potentialities, which can then manifest themselves as specific concrete environments.

Settling the contradictions with a Cartography of Style

The question of why we should discuss style in architecture today and include it once again in our discourse can be now answered. Style as a concept that can describe how and why our urban built environments, our Townscapes, are produced, and how they can be changed, is by this definition a valuable addition to the lexicon of urban design and discussion. Below propositions on how to settle the three contradictions of style, relying on the tools described above.

Description allows for prescription – the Territory and Incremental change

A Cartography of Style presents us with a tool for describing a style that outlines all the relevant aspects of a certain process of production of our urban environment. As the specific production of any urban environment is highly conditioned, the mapping as such cannot be used as a prescription; but for us to propose a change, we need to take into account all the contingencies of the existent process – our proposal has to focus on the aspects that are seen as subject to change according to our mapping. A well described style therefore is always the starting point for a new proposal or prescription, and thus avoids the risk of an atomized discourse, where rival prescriptions, which are not mapped and based on existent styles generate contentious debate (often amplifying a futile nostalgia or pointless futurism) and that foreclose any real possibility of change.

As prescription is always reliant on the existing territory that has been mapped, instead of a wholesale revolution, where an (existing) Style 1. is challenged by a proposal for an (other) Style 2., changes in style have

to take the paths of piecemeal change, Style 1. developing into Style 1.1. This does not necessarily mean incremental change in the experienced Townscape – a topologically small change can create major shifts when the style is examined from another viewpoint – for example, a small shift in the regulatory framework may result in a radically different visual surface.

Surface is Structure – the Moment

The charged opposition between surface and structure can be bypassed with a mapping that does not make assumptions beforehand about the relative importance of the entities that make up an environment. A careful account of the entities and their relations allows for describing the urban built environment without favouring a certain reading in advance, and the relational strength of the entities will present us with a description that contains elements of the surface (the visual, accessible part of any built urban environment) and structure (what makes it possible).

A significant contribution of a Cartography of Style is its avoidance of idealism or the accounting for entities that are not explicitly connected to each other. What this means is that we cannot fall back on concepts that are just assumed to guide or structure design choices or the production of the built environment and its visible surface – for example, the statements “form ever follows function” (Sullivan, 1896, p. 408) or Loos’ essay “ornament and crime” (in Conrads, 1970, p. 19-24) do not in these mappings exemplify truths that have their own staying power, but statements that need their connections, mediators and means of circulation to be effective and carry influence (see the essay on Loos’ influence in Banham, 1996, p. 16-23).

In what style should we build? – Heterogeneous Agencies

[A] Latourian approach also offers a powerful way of resolving the dichotomy between technological determinism (that technology shapes society) and social constructivism (that society shapes technology) (Yaneva, 2022, p. 5-6).

Mapping the built urban environment allows us also to answer the question of agency – not the naïve question “Who chooses?” – often a question in search of a villain or a liberating hero – but the question “What are the decisive points in a network of several choices?” All mediators in the actor-networks that we can map are events in chains of action, and the more they connect, are attached, the stronger they are (Latour, 2005, p. 216-217). These chains result in built environments, and they represent a distributed agency, which problematizes the assigning of guilt to one

specific actor (well described by Bennett, 2010, p. 20-38). A view of the built environment as a result of a network frees us to uncover how the urban built environment is actually put together and enables the finding of the levers of change. Without an accurate mapping, the discussion is easily simplistic and misdirected.

The worth of a flat ontology, which is central to this type of mapping, lies in the lack of *a priori* categories or concepts, or classes or regimes – we can find decisive gravitational pull being exerted by things far different than many of the usual suspects in debates over our built environment. Instead of crowning an individual, a CEO, an architect, as a decider, or an abstract notion or an ideology as the crucial factor, we may find for example a legal paragraph in the tax code, a book of forms in the pocket of the contractor, the swinging radius of a construction crane or a certain selection of balcony glazing options in a catalogue as the most decisive points in the constellations of distributed agency.

A developed description

A description of Style can now be essayed, on the basis of Moussavi (2015b), further elaborated by considerations of ANT and Assemblage theory.

Style is the whole network of entities with their capacities participating in the formation of a built environment – it is the Virtual Diagram of a set of environments. The distributed agency residing in the chains of entities result in specific manifest arrangements of structure and surface. These material manifestations of style produce clusters of effects that spread directly from the surface and influence the further assemblages that people will form with the built environment as they take part in their everyday activities in the urban realm.

A mapping of style can be produced by examining a built urban environment as a network of entities, their attachments and capacities.

Producing Descriptions of Style – a Vulgar Townscape

The above description of mapping is here argued to produce an analytical understanding of the nature of the territory – the urban built environment in all its facets, and to provide the tools of its description and eventual alteration.

What is a successful mapping of a Style? One that: makes legible the networked processes and results of the production of our built urban environment; brings together everyone around the surface of style, while providing a view of the structure making it possible; and empowers us

by showing the possibilities and limits of change. Below a set of initial guidelines for producing mappings and a tentative sketch of a contemporary style.

The Centrality of the Surface

The need for a “vulgar” description and mapping is essential – participation in the construction of a description can’t be limited to niches of practice or vocabularies of specialists. Here the role of surface is central to discourse, even if the entities of greatest gravity in the assemblage are elsewhere. If a public discourse that can claim political legitimacy is to be attained, some parts of the description may and will reach into areas requiring professional and technical descriptions, but the articulation of the seen, the surface, needs to retain its centrality and accessibility, however far the networks of actors and effects is mapped into the hinterland of the surface.

Where to start

Mapping of a Style can start wherever within a network – defining the surface, linking the relevant entities, writing descriptions of building processes, etc. The experience of the everyday is as good a starting point as any – the guidance of “Just describe the state of affairs at hand” (Latour, 2005, p. 144) gives the clearest object to the mapping. Within the flatland of a Flat Ontology, taking up a clue of our built environment and following it will inevitably lead to further connections, entities, networks.

Fragments waiting to be joined

Several maps are already existing, if not mappings, per se. Our urban built environments are described in a myriad of ways, and while most are lopsided, partial or even fractions of what we are looking for, several can easily be joined and attached to a more comprehensive mapping: planning, designing and construction procedures already describe quite large and varied networks relevant to style; photographic surveys of our Townscape by professionals or amateurs dot social media platforms; studies on urban development and research papers on specific qualities of our urban environments are published daily; accounts of urban experiences where the environment plays a decisive role can be found in several media. The different existing map fragments present us with fruitful starting points for describing the qualities of our built environments through style, and so opening up a public discourse on the built urban environment by joining readymade publics – all the entities already attached to the map fragments – to our discussion.



Sketching a style – the Honeycombs of southern Finland in the last decade

The developments being built along new rail connections in the greater metropolitan region in Finland have elicited discussions about their urban and architectural qualities (e.g., Hämäläinen, 2023; Bäckgren, 2023; photo essay in Vaattovaara et al., 2021, p. 190-194), and the resulting townscapes can be argued to present recurring characteristics in some of their parts, which make them suitable for the kind of stylistic definition that is outlined in this article.

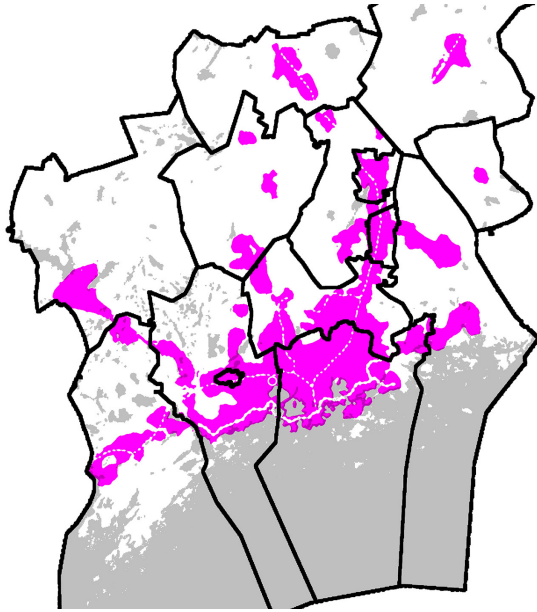
The following sketch presents a tentative description of the style of these environments – as a description it is not definitive, but a hypothesis about a set of networked processes, resulting in identifiable surfaces, whose underlying structures we can bring to light and by so doing give this style a name – and by naming it providing a basis for engagement and discussion around it.

Directed growth

As stated, a description can be started from wherever, a point may be picked and then the connections followed. Here the above mentioned public discussion on the environmental and architectural quality of several new, and existing but densified, urban environments acts as the starting point – and a recent quantitative study concerning housing development in the Helsinki region and Tampere (Vaattovaara & Vuori, 2023) provides our first fragment in our effort of tying together connections

Figure 1
Vernomniitty in 2023.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIMO HÄMÄLÄINEN, ALTERATIONS BY THE AUTHOR (STRAIGHTENING AND CROPPING).



between relevant actors. The cluster of buildings shown in Figure 1: In Vermonniitty, Espoo, is a good example of the type of project that is seen in the study as exemplifying some key qualities of the developments of the last decade: 1. it is in an area of planned dense growth; 2. it is unresponsive to its urban environment; 3. the development is characterized by its size and the type of flats it provides (rentals, mainly studios and small one bedroom flats). The effects of these qualities on the style that this type of development produces are discussed below.

Vermonniitty (an area within the Leppävaara district in the city of Espoo) is situated in an area of planned dense growth, a so-called MAL area (Figure 2: Vermonniitty is shown with a circle, close to the border of Helsinki. MAL is a type of strategic land use, housing and transport plan for the Helsinki region), and this is one key factor in providing direction for the eventual surfaces that are created. In a MAL area, targets for housing development are tied together with infrastructure investment, and the municipalities involved enable the densification of existing and the building of new dense areas through land use planning. This directed growth takes mainly the form of master and city plan zoning goals, which are reflected then in detail plans for high density multistorey housing, located within the catchment areas of public transport routes (HSL Helsinki Region Transport, 2019).

The urban context

The new dense areas have been criticized for their lack of urban qualities, as observed by, for example, Hämäläinen (2023), who provides a description of Vermonniitty directly at odds with several of the current paradigmatic attributes of good urban environments (articulated for example by Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2010; etc.) – the area is characterized by

Figure 2 (left)
Map of forces. 2019 MAL areas in magenta, municipal boundaries in black, Vermonniitty is marked with a circle.

IMAGE BY AUTHOR, ON THE BASIS OF MAP DATA: HSY, 2023 AND HSL HELSINKI REGION TRANSPORT (2019).

Figure 3
Ragged urban realm. Aerial image of Vermonniitty.

MAP DATA: © 2023 GOOGLE.

disconnection, monotony in use and an absence of articulated urban spaces (Hämäläinen, 2023). Vaattovaara et al. have tied these and similar qualities specifically to recent developments within the MAL areas (2021, p. 168-170) and highlight the disconnect of stated and reached goals: between efficient housing developments within good public transport connections and the poor urban quality of the realized areas, in light of walkability and the cityscape.

The urban design for the area is based on initial idea plans by the office Harris Kjisik (2012) that explore the possibility of variable typologies and buildings in different scales making up a coherent urban realm, balanced with green areas. However, the initial plan was superseded by plans made by the major landowners, and the finished detail plan (Espoon kaupunki, 2015) exhibits a smaller variety of scales and types, as well as two central blocks (51002 and 51346) that contribute with their ragged edges and parking facilities to the lack of defined urban spaces, while the buildings comprising the blocks are the most visible feature of the whole area, as they are unusually high in the urban context – sixteen floors (Figure 3).

The patterns of small apartments

The buildings of the central blocks of the area (seven buildings of similar massing, sixteen floors each) are almost all comprised of rentals and owned by some of the largest property investors in Finland, like SATO and Kojamo (KTI Finland, 2022, p. 47). They are in effect primarily investment instruments. A state of matters mirroring the rise of investment in the Finnish property market, with most rapid recent growth between 2015-2018, with fluctuation of residential property investment within this trend (KTI Finland, 2022, p. 27, 50). Most of the buildings in the blocks were started close to the peak and were finished between 2018-2022, with the exception of Runoratsunkatu 15. In general, the number of rental residential dwellings under construction or completed has risen rapidly until the last years (KTI Finland, 2022, p. 47). The pressure of investments, spurred by low interest rates and the national strategic guidance in the form of MAL-agreements for high efficiencies in specific locations create the climate for the kind of environments that can be seen in Vermonniitty.

Vaattovaara & Vuori (2023) make a distinction in their analysis of housing production of the last decade: the city of Helsinki has been able to regulate the production according to some of their goals concerning segregation and resilience in the housing stock (a more balanced amount of rentals in relation to owner-occupied apartments), while Espoo and Vantaa have seen a more lopsided development (p. 12). We can speculate that the city of Helsinki has the resources and the willingness to regulate, e.g., through more specific detail plans, Hitas-development (price regulated owner-occupied housing production) and through the power

conferred by landownership (Helsinki owns more of its land than Espoo or Vantaa). The specific style of built environment we are here studying may therefore be found within the MAL-areas, but mostly outside the boundaries of Helsinki.

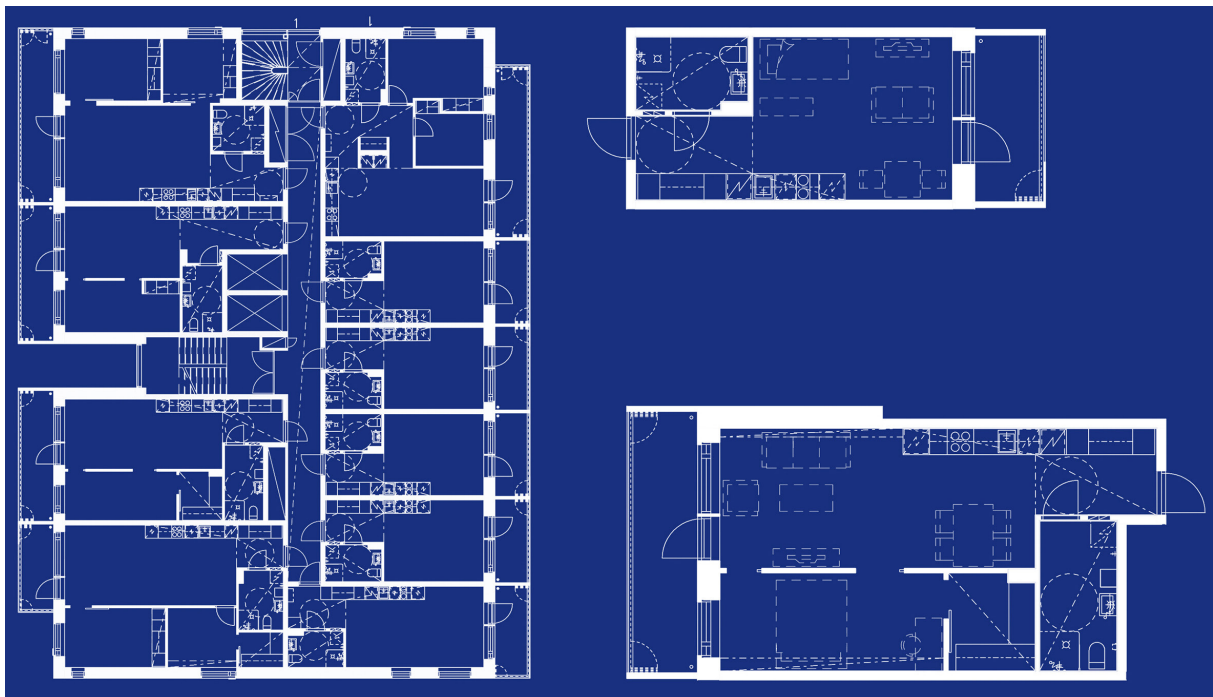
Surfaces

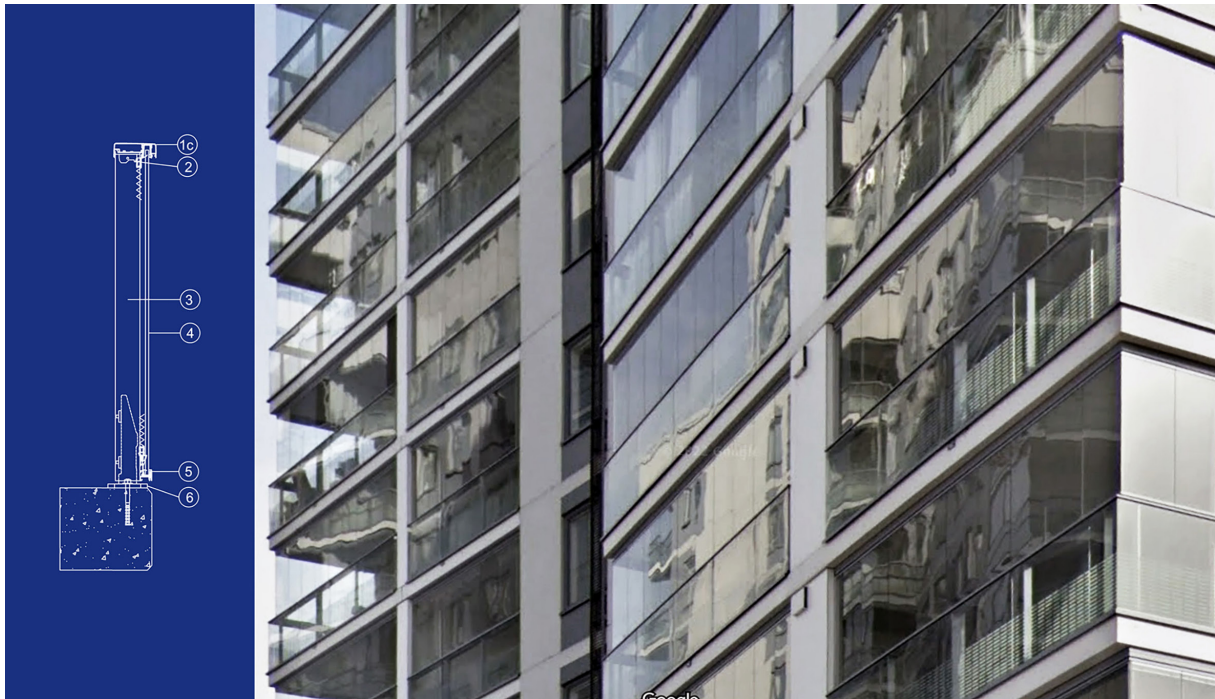
The visible surfaces of this built environment carries the traces of this deep structure – large units suitable for investment, though their scale is often problematic in their context; floors filled with batteries of small rental apartments, dictated by optimized profits – and the resulting facades mirror this state of affairs.

The predominance of small apartments in large numbers, with tight dimensions and often under par spatial qualities (we can arrive at this assessment of quality when we apply the analysis of Nisonen, et al, 2023; or the guidelines for spatial quality in Finnish housing design, Rakenustieto, 2023) form the main contents of these buildings, and plan configurations subsequently have to rely on the most efficient ways of providing access to the large number of apartments per landing – usually double-loaded corridors that generate building volumes with exteriors either mute or glazed (Figure 4). This general change (increased use of double-loaded corridors) in the qualities of high-rise housing developments and their correlation with increased efficiency and urban densification has been noted also by Vainio et al. (2021, p. 21, 74).

Figure 4
Components of a surface. Apartment typology of Runoratsunkatu 15.

IMAGE BASED ON DRAWINGS FROM SATO (2022).





The main facades are often matrices of repetitive solutions dominated by glazing details, resulting from the typical apartment facing only one direction, having few windows and a glazed balcony often the width of the whole apartment (Figure 5). The role of the architect in developments like these is often more the role of an enabler than designer (most of the *Vermanniitty* buildings under discussion have been designed by the firm *Jaakkola*) – the distinct visual character of the buildings emerging from the massing provided by the detail plan, the principles of apartment unit size and number and the expression produced by the selection of glazing solutions from the fairly limited number of providers. In this example, the role of Lumon, the industry leader in glazing products in Finland, can be said to be central when considering the actors providing the surfaces of the townscape. These are the aspects that comprise the visible surfaces of this contemporary style that we might provocatively name as “Honeycomb” by virtue of the simple repetitive patterns of apartments in the buildings in this style, and their role mainly as value-generators, rather than as homes.

Figure 5
Components of a surface. Façade typology.

IMAGE: AUTHOR, BASED ON LUMON (2023) AND MAP
DATA: © 2023 GOOGLE.

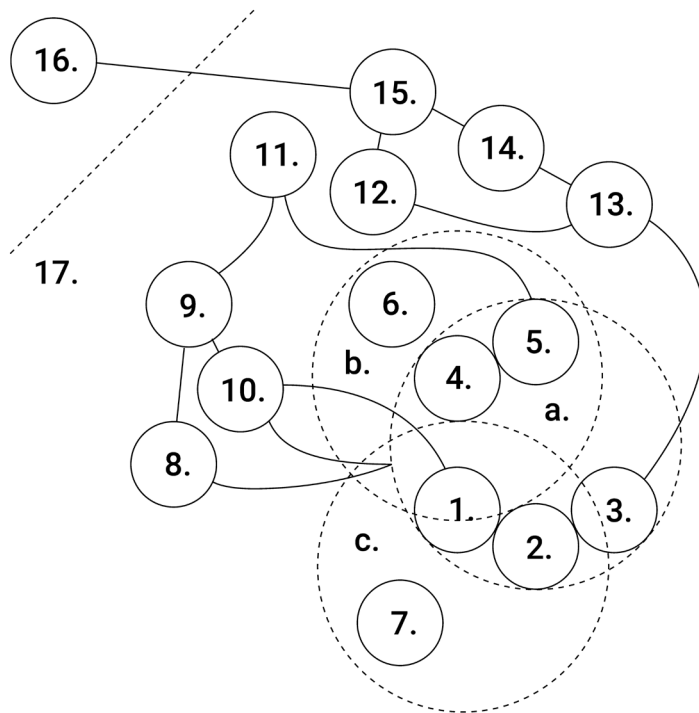


Figure 6
A diagram of the Honeycombs.
Legend: a. Building assemblage: 1. Glazing details, 2. Facade matrix, 3. Building massing, 4. Double loaded corridors, 5. Small apartment typologies; b. Occupant assemblage: 6. Occupant; c. Spectator assemblage: 7. Spectator. Other actors: 8. Contractor(s), 9. Developer, 10. Architect, 11. Investor, 12. Landowners, 13. Detail plan, 14. City plan, 15. The City, 16. MAL agreement, 17. Municipal regulatory landscape.

The beginnings of a Virtual Diagram

Now as we have made an initial sketch, we can consider the form and limits of the virtual diagram that encompasses all the examples falling under this proposal for a style. This produces the start for the actual mapping of a style – providing insight into the relative agency or gravity of the different actors that have been considered in the description. The virtual diagram for the Honeycombs of southern Finland in the last decade would have to include at least such heterogeneous entities as the investors, national MAL-agreements, balcony glazing solutions, the municipal regulatory landscape, the different levels of planning tools of the city and so on.

Figure 6 approximates some of the actors (1.–17.) and assemblages (a.–c.) relevant to the style. The assemblage of the building produced within the framework of the style (a.) contains the key elements that make the building: the glazing details of the sets of balconies, the small apartment typologies producing the matrix of the facades, the way the apartments are organized around double loaded corridors and, finally, the overall massing of the building. The assemblage of the building is an example of a durable or long-term assemblage that is produced within this style, and the other two assemblages presented in the figure are the more fleeting assemblages, between some aspects of the building, a spectator and an occupant. These are examples of the assemblages that people will form with the built environment, and they are at the core of experiencing an environment produced in a certain style – and the triggering assemblages for the discussion on this specific style (exemplified by the contributions Hämäläinen, 2023; Bäckgren, 2023). These fleeting assemblages can

change swiftly, with a visitor (who has a relation to the outside massing of the building) transforming into an occupant and thus forming a new set of relations with the different aspects of the building.

This map can be thought of as representative of the style: presenting chains of actors, combining structure with surface – the chains provide us with a sense of the relative importance of the actors – which ones exert the greatest gravity, which are less central. In essence, at the core of the Virtual Diagram of the Style of these Honeycombs are the glazing details, a facade matrix, a specific type of building massing, double loaded corridors and small apartment typologies.

From this mapping, we also get a sense of the points that may be key for effecting change and altering the style in question. In our example, the pressure exerted by the MAL-agreements, gearing municipal planning towards quantities while ignoring qualitative aspects, is a central actor when combined with weak regulation in planning and building, resulting in the matrices of small spatially compromised apartments in oversized buildings defined by the façade products of their repetitive surfaces. The question of agency and the role of architects in the forming of the environment remains still elusive without further study, as the detail plan developed with the lead of the land owners as well as the priorities of investors seem to dictate the key aspects of this style.

In conclusion

This proposal for rearticulating the concept of style has attempted to provide a general description of what a useful definition of style can be, with the aim of invoking the townscapes that surround us, through outlining the networks that produce the built environment. This method for mappings, a cartography of style, encompasses the surfaces as well as the structures; a flat ontology helps us in avoiding discrimination amongst the actors, and assemblage theory helps us with ascertaining the compositions of environments and the experiences of them.

By mapping, naming and making visible the styles that can describe the townscapes of our environments, we can re-establish style as a meaningful concept in contemporary discourse and broaden the discussion on the formation of the urban environment towards the public, without leaving any crucial actors behind.

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