
Typology: an architecture of limits

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Limits are essential to freedom. Physical limits can liberate and constrain us at the same time: traveling on skis or bicycle frees us to move with much greater speed than on foot, but it severely limits the ability to turn sharply, not to mention the ability to operate, say, a lawn mower. Other examples are not so obvious: being trapped in a snow-bound airport may at first seem imprisoning. If there is the slightest hope of flying, the situation can be one of high anxiety. But if there is absolutely no chance of flying, there can be a reassuring calm as social barriers fall and a free camaraderie settles in—a rare moment of freedom, community, and equality. This irony also applies to mental activities, especially cognitive ones such as sorting sensory data and classifying information. Epistemological limits, i.e., ones that limit our ways of knowing the world, are essential. Likewise, site and programmatic constraints actually make the design process easier. Unconstrained freedom is anathema to designers, who need limits as much as civilization itself needs rules, traditions, and conventions. A blank piece of paper may be welcome to an artist, but it can be intimidating to a designer.

The deeper question is whether these limits are primarily intellectual fences that we erect as boundaries to make cognition of, and in, a complex world manageable. Do limits simply act as navigational devices as we negotiate and construct reality? Or do limits in themselves embody essential truths about the world? Although the point may be unprovable, this chapter contends that limits are more than a pragmatic necessity and do embody basic truths about life, as well as offer lasting insights into the world. They are fundamental to the human condition in general and to design in particular. The categories vary from time to

time and culture to culture, but limits per se seem to be more than transitory and superficial constructs. Like the sensory screens and mental templates through which our world rushes in every day, they help make the complex data and stimuli of life understandable.

Limits are part of a classical, zero-sum conception of reality. This is a world view in which we can't have it all, in which there is tragedy as well as happiness, in which there are finite resources and a limited number of times to get it right. It acknowledges that we all have within us the capacity to be cruel, perverse, and stupid, as well as kind, generous, and wise. This limited view of the human condition, with its full recognition of the dark as well as the bright side of human nature, is fundamentally different from the progressive and open-ended optimism of Modernism (which to a large extent grew out of logical positivism). The classical point of view emphasizes harmony and balance, rather than originality and freedom. Convention takes on as much or more importance as invention. Tradition is valued as much or more than innovation.

Classicism, which has seen balance and harmony as an ideal since early Antiquity, recognizes that it is possible to take an idea too far. It would argue that many Modernist buildings are too single-minded, that they sometimes pursue a single concept to exhaustion in the name of internal consistency and purity. High-tech architects, for example, are driven to make structures ever more lightweight and articulated. They can lose their sense of balance in their drive to defy physical forces and achieve elegance. It is a matter of time before one of their tensile roofs, trussed walls, or delicate handrails dramatically fails,