Sir John Soane's Museum,
domo central / *dome area.*
Fuente / *Source*: Sir John
Soane's Museum, London.

IMPATIENT SEARCH

Following the academic tradition that nothing comes from nothing – and once modern anxiety for originality was overcome – similarities with preexisting formal systems were reinstalled in the contemporary project. John Soane's collection and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas point to opposite strategies that converge in this revival: the former actualizes the notion of 'type,' while the latter suggests a free association strategy proper to the modern world.

ALBERTO SATO

Profesor titular, Universidad
Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile

R emains of architectural modernity arise suspicions against the usage of referential images as instruments for the architectural project. This modern assumption, questions the role that similarities play in design's creative processes, taking into account the ineffable and chaotic irruption of the idea. As a result of modern despair – or as continuity of the architectural institution interrupted by modernity's interregnum – creativity has been recognized in preexistences as avowed by Enlightenment writers and reinstalled by postwar Italian intellectuals (represented by Ernesto Rogers, 1953; Giulio Carlo Argan, 1965; and Aldo Rossi, 1966). Thus, part of the architectural institution recovered its procedures, and the reservoir of images accumulated in a room or in memory itself became a reference that conveyed design processes. However, just as it is yet unknown when do ideas arise, how these references work is also still a mystery (although where they emerge can be suspected).

Nonetheless, these are not the concerns of this essay, but instead, the role played by accumulation in architectural creation and how it emerges; hence, to review the notions of 'type' and 'imaginary' on which it is based becomes essential. By accepting the fact that, in the name of creation in architecture, imitation was fundamental, Francesco Milizia observed in 1781:

> And where are houses built by nature, those that architects can take as an example to imitate? A monarch's palace is not modeled on the palace of the Universe, just as harmony is not modeled on the music of celestial bodies, whose sound has not – at least until – reached an ear. Architecture lacks, truly, a model provided by nature; but there is another model, provided by men, by following natural manufacturing when building their first dwellings. The primitive hut is natural architecture; the primitive hut is the origin of beauty for civil architecture (Milizia, 1823:50).

Neoclassicism – which characterized architecture during the late eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth-century – recalled the initial stages of the classical ideas of imitation and Aristotelian mimesis, establishing the distinction: "to imitate in the fine arts is to produce the resemblance of one thing but in another, which becomes its image" (Quatremère de Quincy, 1980:3). Quatremère himself, in his *Historical*
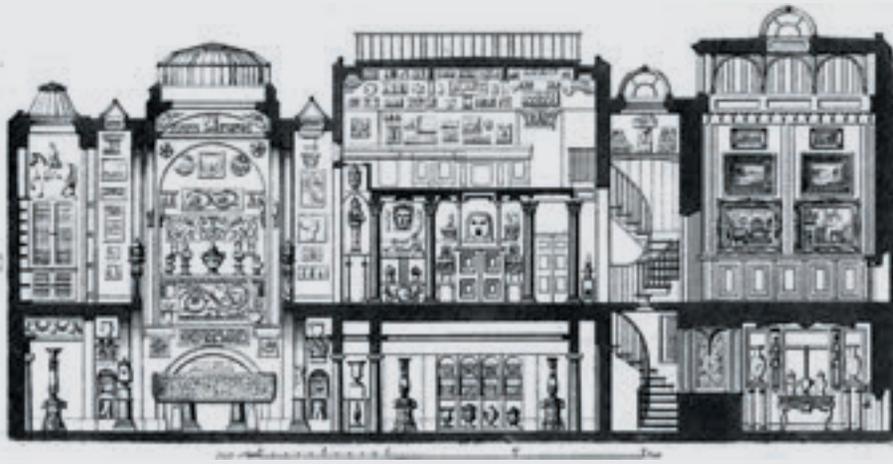
FIG 1 Sir John Soane's Museum, Corte / *Section*.

Dictionary written between 1788 and 1825, defined 'type' as follows:

> The word 'type' represents not so much the image of a thing to be copied or perfectly imitated as the idea of an element that must itself serve as a rule for the model. [...] type, on the contrary, is an object according to which one can conceive works that do not resemble one another at all (Cit., Argan, 1969:58 - Rossi, 1966:67).

Quatremère's almost simultaneous double citation by two Italian theorists updated this notion in the 1960s, although was preceded by the controversial irruption of an editorial article written by Ernesto Rogers in the 1953 *Casabella-continuitá*, where he valued the history of architectural artifacts, urban preexistences and building traditions especially popular in Italian towns. The article unleashed a strong controversy with the English historian and critic Reyner Banham who, from the magazine *Architectural Review*, attacked 'Neoliberty' (as baptized by Paolo Portoghesi) which represented the most visible and perhaps ridiculous aspect of Italian architecture; Banham concluded his text with the sentence: "The only conceivable justification for reviving anything in the arts is that the reviver finds himself culturally in a position analogous to that of the time he seeks to revive" (Banham, 1959:235). In this respect, and within the first modern debates, Ernesto Rogers challenged from the demoted Italian trench the new avant-garde embodied by the architects gathered around the so-called Team X:

> Novelty lies above all in changing the point of view from which data are considered and in placing oneself where unexplored horizons can be discovered, that is, at a point that embraces particular visions in relation to the original historical conditions in which we are induced to act (Rogers, cit. in López-Reus, 2002:82).

These unexplored horizons were, in addition to history and the city, what comprised the nineteenth-century

engineering tradition. In the debate, the British Reyner Banham, the *Architectural Review* magazine's publisher JM Richards, the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, and the Dutch Aldo van Eyck, among others, advocated for the possibility of developing architectural creativity from the analysis of social structures in order to preserve that modern project which – in its deepest sense – was described by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas as "...a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism" (1983:13).

Nevertheless, the impatient search for invention and absolute novelty continued to generate tensions within design processes, because the frontier that separated preexisting from new was fragile and shifting. Le Corbusier's well-known use of the *objets à réaction poétique* as a design stimulus, composed of natural elements – snails, branches worn by water, pebbles – diverts the attention from the architect's relation with its

historicity in a suspicious stratagem for inventing the new. In fact, and beyond his adherence to nineteenth-century engineering, as revealed in his work *Vers une architecture*, these *objets trouvés* do not speak of architecture but of new and unforeseen, unplaced sources. This 'surreal' dimension of Le Corbusier confirms that modern design strategies focused on the new, as well as a creative equation – derived from architectural preexistence – consisting of consciously accumulating images, including what has happened or what is extremely dear.

However, preexistences not only refer to the normed and in a way cataloged 'type,' but also to the imaginary. In fact, an interesting component in the creative equation emerging from preexistences is the accumulation of images that accompany knowledge, something like experience:

FIG 2 Sir John Soane's Museum. Fotografía / *Photograph* Acroterion, ©Creative Commons.

The idea of experience as separate from knowledge has become so alien to us that we have forgotten that until the birth of modern science experience and science each had their own place [...] The subject of experience was common sense, something existing in every individual (Agamben, 1993:18).

Such an approach places this accumulation or preexistence outside of knowledge (provided by its modern form of inquiry). In order to avoid its confusion with 'imagination,' – which is a faculty or attribute – the notion of imaginary here tackled is, *magister dixit*: "the set of images and relationships of images which constitute the thought capital of the Homo sapiens [...] in its fragile grandeur." (Durand, 2006:21) Its eidetic character also differentiates it from imagination, as it lacks symbolic character, so that the image appears as the primitive accumulation of that capital. It is an accumulation of existing images, without any order – at least explicit: "the unceasing and essentially undetermined (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of 'something'" (Castoriadis, 1987:3). This undetermined and unqualified accumulation constitutes a repository that awaits, often without use, constituting a true arsenal of experiences – named culture – that lacks operability (as well as historical knowledge). In this respect, one can only speak of accumulation and not of how it operates in the conscience of the one who employs it.

In that context, we can recall Sir John Soane's collections and the Mnemosyne Atlas by Aby Warburg, which are both an accumulation of images – as if suffering from Diogenes syndrome – that follow the creative processes closely. These historical examples were foundational: the former, as a collection, ended up being the first architectural museum; the latter, as a map of memories, revealed the mechanisms of random inspiration or free association that characterized modernity. And both express different views on accumulation and are located at the end of the nineteenth-century: from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, from typified classical ideals to the unpredictable vital impulse of the modern.

The collection

The house that the architect Sir John Soane built in the number 12 of Lincoln's Inn Fields (numbers 13 and 14 were added later), opposite to one of the first urban squares in London and close to the Bank of England – likely his most important work – is the enclosure of accumulation or collection. Soane's relevance, along with the architects John Nash and Robert Smirke, was stated by the construction of the British Empire's institutions, consolidating the Industrial Revolution: the Parliament, an art gallery, a bank, bourgeois urban residences, a hospital, a museum, a summer palace, and so on. In turn, in 1806, Soane was appointed professor of the Royal Academy and architect appointed by the Crown in the Office of Works, which is why his house is important since his collection was part of his design process. In fact,

FIG 3 Joseph Michael Gandy, Selección de partes de edificios públicos y privados erigidos según los proyectos del Señor John Soane R.A. F.S.A. para la metrópolis y para otros lugares del Reino Unido entre los años 1780 y 1815 / *Selection of public and private buildings' parts according to Sir John Soane's projects R.A. F.S.A., for the metropolis and other places of the United Kingdom between 1780 and 1815*, 1818.

the rooms were crammed with paintings, engravings and drawings from Hogarth, Turner, Watteau, Füssli, Canaleto, Campanella and Piranesi, copies, original sculptures, models, fragments of ruins and reproductions of classical columns, and he had also bought the sarcophagus of Seti I (son of Rameses II) made in alabaster (FIG.1). Some rooms were decorated with tapestries and Renaissance or neoclassical furniture, as well as Pompeian paintings that were to the liking of Soane – a taste he acquired during the Grand Tour realized between 1778 and 1780 on a scholarship by the Royal Academy.

Soane's accumulation or collection – which started when he moved to Lincoln's Inn Fields together with his wife Elisa and his two children – turned his house into a sort of private museum that in 1833 obtained the Parliament's official declaration. Amongst the various rooms of the large residence-museum stands the studio [dome area], its walls lined with fragments of ruins, marbles, plaster and reproductions (FIG.2), creating a three-dimensional surface with a logic that responds to an apparent systematized thematic collection, but was really a formal composition:

> Far from contemporary expository theories, Soane orders this collection departing not from detail but from the beauty of the ensemble that must be admired in its sum, from formal aesthetics to the variety of sculpted pieces (López-Fanjul, 2007:x).[1]

To supplement the Royal Academy lessons at his studio-house, Soane taught Classical and Renaissance art using his own repertoire of images. But the purpose and pride of the assemblage was not teaching or culture, neither the power of display – typical of collecting – but instead, while developing his projects surrounded by this abundant and variegated set of images, the collection gained significance for design. This statement cannot be easily demonstrated, as no explicit statement in this sense has ever been found, neither from Soane nor from his colleagues. However, an interesting sign was the work undertaken by the artist Joseph Gandy, who painted a watercolor for his teacher entitled "Selection of public and private buildings' parts according to Sir John Soane's projects RA. F.S.A., for the metropolis and other places of the United Kingdom between 1780 and 1815" (FIG.3), showing one hundred and seven references along an anthology of models, views, perspectives and plans of the buildings designed until 1815, the year of his acutest personal crisis given the death of his wife Elisa and the serious conflicts with his son George.

This watercolor by Gandy – *Vanitas*, according to Moleón (2013:23) – works as the other side of the coin, an anti-museum that shows the results of Soane's work in an imaginary gallery and which suggests that the house-museum was the one that nurtured his work. This set of mirrors where the real – his oeuvre, the buildings – lies in Gandy's picture, while the images and fragments are in the house, turns this accumulation into a design-oriented universe of reference, archetypes that allow to assemble

FIG 4 Aby M. Warburg,
Atlas Mnemosyne /
Mnemosyne Atlas 1924-
1929. Tablero / *Board*
N° 32.

the general piece. In this procedure, models were
fundamental for Soane, since they not only served to
show and persuade his clients, but to three-dimensionally
'compose' the parts integrating the building, as specified
by Neoclassic rules and manuals (Wilton-Ely, 2006).

These models were fused with his collection in such
a way that some scaled details seemed to have its origins
somewhere other than in design. For this reason, it
could be argued that the collection of pieces, fragments,
colors and pictures placed on walls, ceilings, tables and
pedestals was intended for design.

The Mnemosyne Atlas

Warburg, father of the artistic iconography, asked
himself in a lecture: "To what extent are we to view
the onset of a stylistic shift in the representation of the
human figure in Italian art as an intentionally conditioned
disengagement from the surviving pictorial conception
of the pagan culture of the eastern Mediterranean
people?"[2] The question resulted from his research on
the mythological, astrological, and allegorical imagery of
ancient gods and their relation to secular iconography.
This came as a breakthrough for Renaissance art history:
"...that the humanistic restoration of Antiquity was a
restoration not of classical Antiquity but that of the
culture of late Antiquity, in particular of Neoplatonism
and Hermeticism" (Agamben, 2015:20). Exiled gods
returned to history thanks to the investigations on
the imagery that modern science had once excluded.
However, in Warburg, these dimensions were not only
subject of knowledge, but part of Warburg himself.

His Mnemosyne Atlas – which had begun in 1924
and was left unfinished at the time of his death in
1929 – consisted of a collection of 40 panels bearing
un-ordered photographs of pictorial images, shot on a
black background and placed on a table in a way that

only Warburg comprehended (FIG. 4-5). This device – understood as a Foucauldian network – was organized according to a specific purpose and its order was a changing one, arranged as a machine of indices and stimuli that accompanied Warburg in his works on iconography, following the procedure where: "he pinned the relevant photographs on [several] screens and frequently arranged their composition, as one or the other of the themes gained dominance in his mind." (Gombrich, 1992:263). In spite of the recognition of Warburg's cosmological vision, in his intellectual biography Gombrich tries to give coherence to the Atlas as if it were an act of creation comparable with Beethoven's *Heroic* (267), something done with "private languages and neologisms of own coinage," incomprehensible, but whose results trigger empathy: "the Mnemosyne shifts the emphasis to the spiritualizing influences through which these original primitive impulses undergo a process of sublimation, a process of 'inversion' by which motifs and symbols of pagan savagery are assimilated to the Christian tradition" (Gombrich, 1992:274). This interest guided Warburg's reflections since his hospitalization at the Bellevue psychiatric clinic in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, in 1921. His four-year stay at the facility may have influenced – or split – his worldview; which would also explain the coexistence of the well-known project for an art library of over 60,000 titles, rigorously ordered and cataloged, parallel to the incomprehensible and mysterious Mnemosyne Atlas. Warburg himself seemed to have clear awareness of this condition: "Sometimes it seems to me as if, in my role as psychohistorian, I tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of Western civilization from its images in an autobiographical reflex" (Warburg, in Gombrich, 1992:280).

Warburg's heterotopia – as a result from photographing paintings, people, and situations of all kinds, mounted on wood panels lined with black cloth –

FIG 5 Aby M. Warburg, Atlas Mnemosyne / *Mnemosyne Atlas* 1924-1929. Tablero / *Board* N° 77.

seems to reinstall the divorce between knowledge and experience. Warburg became famous for his asymmetrical reflection of rigorous order: his library understood as the other side of the corner of the Mnemosyne Atlas. On the one hand, art, history, and related subjects books, systematically cataloged and grouped; on the other, reference images build upon assorted photographs, displayed on panels without any apparent rule. Order and disorder; knowledge and experience.

The iconographic method that Aby Warburg applied in art research could be transferred to the architectural project as the accumulation of images – this sort of virtual Diogenes syndrome – which may guide an idea in time, without having any kind of order or logic, as the Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Emporio celestial de conocimientos benévolos* [Celestial emporium of benevolent knowledge] that Jorge Luis Borges recalls:

> In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. [...] The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what thing the universe is (Borges, 1974:708)

The quote shook Michel Foucault with laughter in *The order of things*, where he mentioned in the preface: "In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking 'that'" (Foucault, 1981:1).

Two referents

Thus, the difference between Sir John Soane's collection and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas is one of conceptual and historical order; today, however, it is presented as characteristic of a postmodernity that has managed to reconcile enlightened reason with the romantic outbursts of Modern society. Theoretically, the collection is an ordered set of regular elements, while the Mnemosyne Atlas is an 'imaging laboratory,' as Martin Warnke, its editor, pointed out (Warburg, 2010). Fritz Saxl, art historian and guardian of Warburg's library, believed that the images in the Atlas were meant for "studying the role of Antiquity's expressive values, established in the representation of active life in European Renaissance art" (Warburg, 2010:XVI). Although these premises define Warburg's concerns, his own logic – as opposed to Sophrosyne's soothing reason – is the ecstasy and orgiastic submission preserved in the memory, which appears in various images sometimes extracted from his own daily life.

Historically, the notion of collection was part of the Neoclassic academic system at the end of the eighteenth-century – the century of reason – founded on manuals

and the invariant features of 'type,' but already showing in architecture the first signs of Romanticism – especially in its interest for ruins. The unfinished Mnemosyne Atlas, on the other hand, began on 1924, once the twentieth-century avant-gardes were already installed in the artistic imagination and the Neo-Kantian iconography was established in art history. In other words, both cases occur at the culmination of the nineteenth-century and act as its prologue. Therefore – as mentioned earlier – they are different visions, processes and methods, but they become key references, perhaps because of the clear manner in which their traits are identified: the first by the primacy of reason and the second by the Dionysian character of the Modern. **ARQ**

Notas / *Notes*

1 María López-Fanjul (2007:122-127). The author presents a detailed description of the Soane collection. See: "Sir John Soane, architect of collections. His House-Museum."
2 Aby Warburg's lecture at the Tenth International Congress of Art History, Rome, 1912. "Italian art and international astrology at the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara."

Alberto Sato
alberto.sato@udp.cl

Architect, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina, 1972. Magister Scientarum, Historia de la Arquitectura, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1996. Doctor in Architecture, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2006. He has taught in several Latin American universities and was director of the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas y Estéticas at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, and dean of the Universidad Andres Bello in Chile. He recently published the book *Heads / Tails* (Ediciones ARQ, 2015). He is currently professor in the Facultad de Arquitectura, Arte y Diseño at the Universidad Diego Portales and in the Escuela de Arquitectura at the Universidad Católica de Chile.

Bibliografía / *Bibliography*

AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Infancy and history: the destruction of experience.* London; New York: Verso, 1993.

AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Infancia e historia.* Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo editora, 2015.

ARGAN, Giulio Carlo. *Proyecto y destino.* Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1969.

BANHAM, Reyner. «Neoliberty. The italian retreat from modern architecture». *Architectural Review* 747 (1959): 231-235.

BORGES, Jorge Luis. *Obras completas.* Buenos Aires: Emecé editores, 1974.

CASTORIADIS, Cornelius. *The imaginary institution of society.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

DURAND, Gilbert. *Las estructuras antropológicas del imaginario.* México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Las palabras y las cosas.* México: Siglo veintiuno, 1981.

GOMBRICH, Ernst. *Aby Warburg. Una biografía intelectual.* Madrid: Alianza Forma, 1992.

HABERMAS, Jürgen. «Modernity. An Incomplete Project.» En: Hal Foster. *The Anti-aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture.* Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983.

LÓPEZ-FANJUL, María. «Sir John Soane, arquitecto de colecciones. Su Casa-museo». *Revista de la Subdirección General de Museos Estatales* 3 (2007): 122-129.

LOPEZ REUS, Eugenia. *Ernesto Rogers y la arquitectura de la Continuità.* Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 2002.

MILIZIA, Francesco. *Principi di Architettura Civile.* Bassano: Tipogr. Giuseppe Remondini, 1785.

MOLEÓN GAVILANES, Pedro. «El sueño del caballero. El retrato de John Soane por Joseph Gandy como Vanitas». *Teatro Marittimo* 3 (Junio, 2013): 9-25.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *El destino de las imágenes.* Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2011.

ROGERS, Ernesto. «Continuitá». *Casabella-Continuitá* 199 (1953): 9.

ROGERS, Ernesto. *Experiencia en la arquitectura.* Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1965.

ROSSI, Aldo. *L'architettura della città.* Padova: Marsilio, 1966.

WARBURG, Aby. *Atlas Mnemosyne.* Madrid: Akal, 2010.

WILTON-ELY, John. «Los modelos arquitectónicos de Sir John Soane: un catálogo». *DC revista de crítica arquitectónica* 15-16 (2006): 41-51.