

the **ten most influential**
buildings in history

ARCHITECTURE'S ARCHETYPES

SIMON UNWIN

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ARCHITECTURE'S ARCHETYPES

Even the most inventive and revolutionary architects of today owe debts to the past, often to the distant past when architecture really was being invented for the first time. Architects depend on their own imaginations for personal insights and originality but their ideas may be stimulated (consciously or subliminally) by particularly powerful buildings from history. *The Ten Most Influential Buildings in History: Architecture's Archetypes* identifies ten architectural archetypes that have been sources of inspiration for architects through the centuries. Each archetype is analysed through distinctive examples, following the methodology established by the author in his previous books. The variety of 'lines of enquiry' each archetype has provoked in latter-day architects is then explored by analysing their work to reveal ideas inspired by those earlier buildings. Archetypes have a timeless relevance. In adopting this approach, *The Ten Most Influential Buildings in History* is as pertinent to contemporary practice as it is to understanding buildings from antiquity, and offers insights into the bridges of influence that can operate between the two.

Simon Unwin has helped students learn to think as architects for over three decades. He is Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University of Dundee, Scotland, and teaches at the Welsh School of Architecture in Cardiff University, Wales. He has lived in the UK and Australia, and taught or lectured on his work in China, Israel, India, Sweden, Turkey and the United States as well as at other schools in the UK and Europe. Simon Unwin's books are used in schools of architecture around the world, and have been translated into Arabic, Farsi, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Spanish and Korean.

Some reviews of *Twenty Buildings Every Architect Should Understand*:

'I read this on a Kindle and found that it was a pleasure to read... Although all the buildings are post 1900, Simon Unwin presents a wide selection of architectural styles and strategies. Some of the buildings are more famous than others. They are not presented chronologically, it seems they have been ordered to introduce the recurring themes in a clear way. Even a few unbuilt (but celebrated) projects are discussed and explained. The chapters are very short and readable. Unwin seems to be particularly well informed about Mies Van Der Rohe, and this book gave me some new insights into the Barcelona Pavilion and Mies's influences. Unwin also seems to have a preoccupation with ideal geometry and composition, he analyses many of the buildings in this way acknowledging the varying success along the way. A great book for students of architecture (of all ages and stages). I'll be looking out for "Twenty More Buildings..."'

C. Mckenna, Amazon.co.uk website

'What a wonderful book. I received this book as a gift for Christmas, and I must say it is a delight. The line drawings are clear and interesting, and the way the author moves through each building explaining design choices, such as the setting, form/shape etc. is wonderful. Recommended.'

Mike, Amazon.co.uk website

'This book is a systematic study of basic architectural styles. It's well organized and well written... I'd recommend to any architecture student.'

sojourner, Amazon.com website

'A very interesting read indeed... really opens the mind about thinking of how space can work.'

Strider, Amazon.com website

'This book is really a good work, and even if you are an architect you can surely find some details you missed or forgot about these masterpieces. Simple, clear, but not an easy book...'

matteo f., Amazon.com website

Twenty-Five Buildings Every Architect Should Understand, a revised and expanded edition of *Twenty Buildings Every Architect Should Understand*, was published in 2015.

Some reviews of *Analysing Architecture*:

'The most lucid and readable introduction to architecture I have read.'

Professor Roger Stonehouse, Manchester School of Architecture

'What is striking about the book is the thoughtfulness and consideration which is present in each phrase, each sentence, each plan, each section and each view, all contributing to an overarching quality which makes the book particularly applicable and appropriate to students in their efforts to make sense of the complex and diverse aspects of architecture... Unwin writes with an architect's sensibility and draws with an accomplished architect's hand.'

Susan Rice, Rice and Ewald Architects, *Architectural Science Review*

'Simply the best! I have just gone through the first three chapters of this book and find myself compelled to write this review. I can simply say it is the best and a MUST to everyone in the field of architecture. Students, teachers, and practitioners alike will all find inspirations from this book.'

Depsis, Amazon.com website

'The text has been carefully written to avoid the use of jargon and it introduces architectural ideas in a straightforward fashion. This, I suspect, will give it a well-deserved market beyond that of architects and architectural students.'

Barry Russell, *Environments BY DESIGN*

'Probably the best introductory book on architecture.'

Andrew Higgott, Lecturer in Architecture, University of East London, UK

'Analysing Architecture by Simon Unwin is one of the finest introductions in print to architecture and its technique.'

thecoolist.com/architecture-books-10-must-read-books-for-the-amateur-archophile/ (January 2013)

*'Simon Unwin's *Analysing Architecture* is required reading – a primary textbook... Beautifully illustrated with drawings from the author's own notebooks, it also manages to balance legibility with depth: this is a superbly lucid primer on the fundamental principles of architecture. I recommend this book wholeheartedly, for readers both new to architecture, and experienced architects as well. A joy to read, a thing of beauty.'*

G.B. Piranesi, Amazon.com website

*'One would have no hesitation in recommending this book to new students: it introduces many ideas and references central to the study of architecture. The case studies are particularly informative. A student would find this a useful aid to identifying the many important issues seriously engaged with in *Architecture*.'*

Lorraine Farrelly, *Architectural Design*

Books by Simon Unwin

Analysing Architecture

An Architecture Notebook: Wall

Doorway

Exercises in Architecture – Learning to Think as an Architect

Twenty-Five Buildings Every Architect Should Understand

ebooks (available from the iBooks Store)

Skara Brae

The Entrance Notebook

Villa Le Lac

The Time Notebook

Simon Unwin's website is at

simonunwin.com

(some of Simon Unwin's personal notebooks, used in researching and preparing this and his other books, are available for free download from his website)

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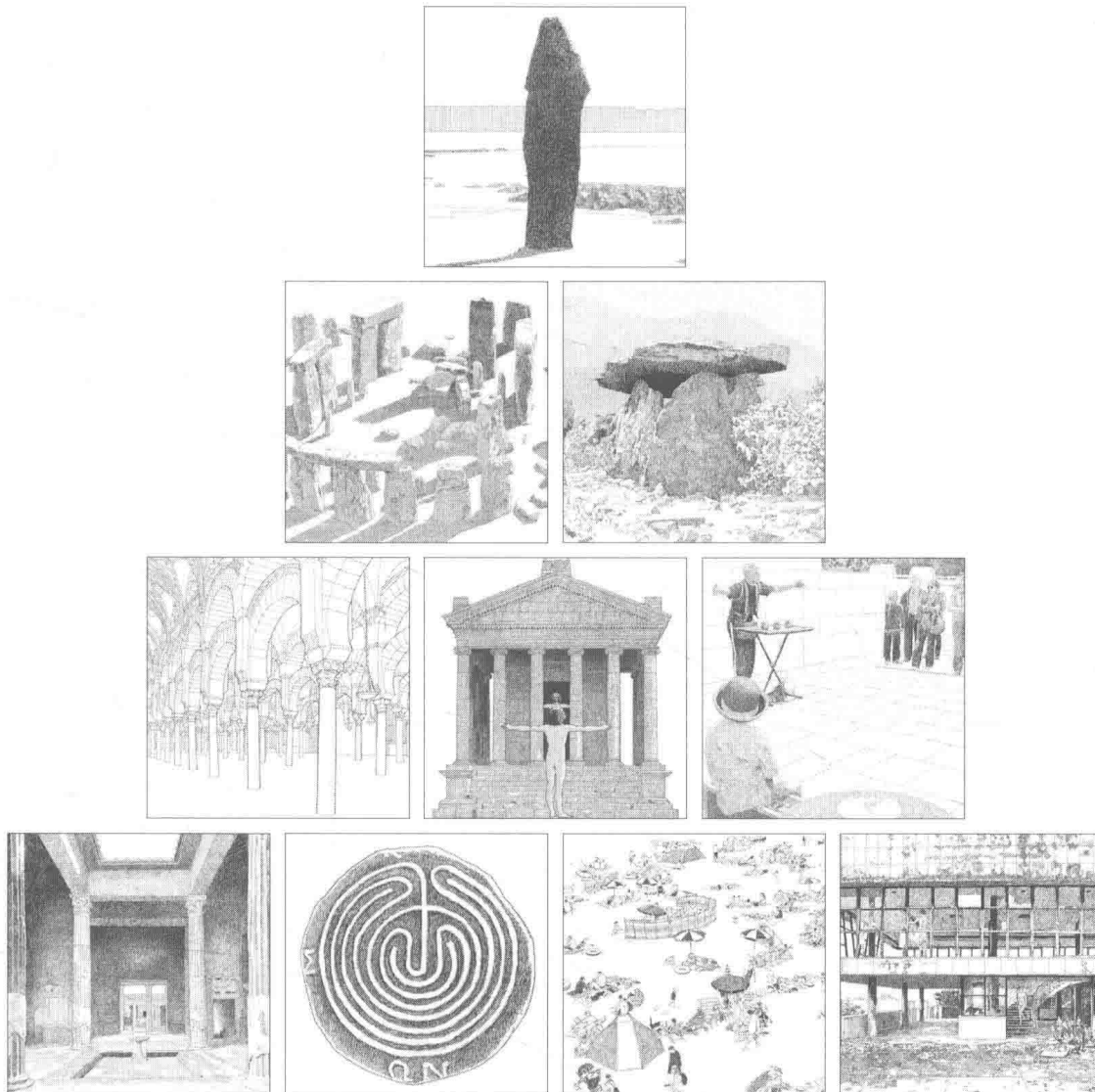


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dedicated to
my mother and father

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'The most important assignment
of life: to begin each day afresh,
as if it were the first day – and yet
to assemble and have at one's
disposal the entire past with all its
results and forgotten lessons.'

George Simmel – *Posthumous
Fragments and Essays* (1923)

INTRODUCTION

Those familiar with my previous books – especially *Analysing Architecture* and *Twenty-Five Buildings Every Architect Should Understand* – will be aware that in analysing buildings by various twentieth- and twenty-first-century architects I have often found it revealing to draw out the influence on them of particular works of architecture from hundreds and even thousands of years ago. Mies van der Rohe, for example, was influenced by the Greek temple when designing the Farnsworth House (1950). And when Le Corbusier was designing the Villa Savoye (1929) he remembered ideas from the Parthenon as well as from the Roman town houses he had visited in Pompeii some years earlier on the return leg of his *Journey to the East* in 1911.

In this book I look at the influence of ancient architecture on modern architects from the opposite direction. Each of its chapters focuses on a particular archetype and traces ways it has influenced the work of latter day architects. The temple, for instance, has influenced many more architects than Mies van der Rohe (including Le Corbusier). And the archetype ‘courtyard’, embodied in the Roman town house as well as much earlier buildings, continues to be used as an organising principle by architects in the twenty-first century.

The basic plots of architecture

The present book identifies ten powerful archetypes whose influence stretches through architecture’s history. Archetypes, in this context, may be considered as similar to Platonic essences. They are consistent (timeless) ideas (though not necessarily ideals) that may present in a promiscuity of different appearances. For example, the courtyard (as its simple single-word name implies) is an architectural idea that everyone recognises and understands. But, given a little thought and remembering the many courtyards we might have experienced, we would realise that ‘courtyard’, though a single archetype, is one that has multifarious presentations.

A comparison might be made between the present book and Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. In his book (published by Continuum in 2004) Booker argues that all the stories in literature, through history and around the world, can be rendered down to seven basic plots (e.g. ‘Overcoming the Monster’, ‘Rags to Riches’, ‘Voyage and Return’...). If a plot constitutes the architecture (intellectual structure) of a story then the present book illustrates the most influential basic plots of architecture and examines how they have been retold, over and over, by storyteller architects, not in words but with the elements of architecture.

It is not necessarily the case that the influence of past archetypes on the present is direct and acknowledged. It may be, as Booker remarks in regard to authors and stories, that architects in different circumstances (times and places) might come up with similar architectural forms independent of each other. Nevertheless, maybe because of the way in which an archetype addresses a common human need or aesthetic sensibility, it retains its claim to be an archetype even if it appears to have been invented a number of times in different places. Links of influence between more recent work and ancient archetypes can also remain unacknowledged because of a tendency amongst some architects to believe and suggest that their designs are always invented *ab ovo*. But often the egg from which their design developed can be found to have been laid many years, centuries, even millennia ago.

Booker observes that stories are ubiquitous in our lives; they constitute narratives by which we make sense of the world in which we find ourselves and the ways in which it appears to operate. The products of architecture are equally if not more ubiquitous. They too, as I have argued elsewhere, weave the spatial narratives (expressed in non-verbal ways) by which we make sense of our world, responding to conditions and launching propositions for living. Architects are the philosopher-storytellers; and the basic plots they use are, as Booker argues is the case in verbal storytelling, remarkably few.

Chapters and analytical approach

Each of the following chapters identifies and explores the influence of a particular archetype. Each archetype is first identified using ancient examples and maybe some of the precursors that contributed to its resolved or generic form. The archetypes are then analysed, using the broad and inclusive methodology outlined in *Analysing Architecture* (fourth edition, 2014), to draw out their key characteristics, elements, compositional ideas and strategies...

Each of the identified archetypes provides later architects with a powerful model for emulation or strategy to be exploited in tackling the challenges of a brief (program). Having analysed each archetype and its genesis, I trace how later architects have interpreted and developed its characteristics and embodied its ideas and strategies in their own work. In each case these explorations could fill their own book. I have selected examples that I see as pertinent, and tried to come right up to date, in full awareness that many more could have been included to illustrate a finer grain of variation and possibility than has been possible in this book.

The analyses explore the culture and operation of reference, influence and precedent in architecture across the ages. The approach is comparable to the ways other creative disciplines – such as literature, music and law – recognise the multivalent roles these factors play in creative movements and individual achievements through time. All creative people draw ideas consciously, and sometimes subconsciously, from what has been done by previous practitioners. The past informs and inspires the present's vision of the future. In adopting this approach the present book is intended to be as pertinent to contemporary practice as it is to understanding buildings from antiquity, and to offer insights into the bridges of influence that can operate between the two.

In addition to this Introduction there are two other introductory chapters. The first offers a reminder of the Basic Elements of Architecture – as an expansion of their description in the early pages of *Analysing Architecture* (2014, pages 35–46). These are the elements that inform all archetypes. The second provides a short introduction to the first three archetypes, all of which fall into the category Megalithic Architecture.

Architects and archetypes

There is a complex relationship between architects and archetypes. It is this relationship that the present book explores.

Architects do not necessarily choose, and certainly cannot invent, archetypes consciously; archetypes are part of the common firmament of architecture. But that is not to say that architects are unthinking cogs in some bigger machine. Writing one hundred years ago, the art critic Geoffrey Scott, in *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914), complained about the tendency of architectural historians to present individual architects as pawns in the grand plays of historical movements and trends, which were themselves presented (with historian's hindsight) as evolutionary; i.e. operating less according to human will and more according to historical trend and some overarching progressive system. He called this tendency 'The Biological Fallacy'. By exploring the influences latter-day architects have drawn from ancient precedents I am not contradicting Scott. The relationship between a conscious creative mind and what has gone before is a great deal more complex than constituting a mindless evolutionary process. We are not talking here about a natural process of evolution but a process by which creative minds, facing challenges and needful of ideas, are inspired by and learn from what they see in the work of others. Sometimes something that itself can be identified as an archetype emerges from this process. This then becomes available either as an authority influencing what subsequent architects do in particular circumstances, or provokes a fascination that leads architects to reinterpret, develop and maybe even contradict the fundamental ideas they encounter.

Each archetype is like the trunk of a tree, with its own roots and branches. The branches are the later developments of ideas drawn from the archetype. The roots are precedents and prototypes, the partially developed or unrefined precursors of the archetype. Underpinning the archetypes and their precursors there is that fundamental gamut of formal compositional elements – the basic elements of architecture. These basic elements have their platonic forms too, which is the way they were illustrated in *Analysing Architecture*. But they may also be illustrated by representative primeval examples playing their part in the development of archetypes. The introductory chapter just mentioned provides a reminder of these with more precise examples than in the previous book and with expanded description.

By drawing archetypes out of a range of diverse examples from different periods of history and different cultures in different parts of the world, those archetypes then become available for conscious consideration and open to inventive modification. I look at buildings of the past not as a historian seeking truth about history but as an architect and design

teacher looking for ideas that might inform and inspire architectural creativity. This book is about the architecture of archetypes, and the influence of archetypes on architecture in what has been called the 'eternal present'. Archetypes stand and exist in our imaginations as components in our repertoire of design, as inspiration and supporting forms for whatever we might do as architects. They are also open to challenge.

This book aims to help student architects by exploring the origins of architecture not through the bifocals of historiography – which tend to make things seem remote and are at the same time reductive, consigning examples to classifications and labels that generalise and simplify general complexity – but as if those origins are always with us, as if we were engaged in them ourselves. Historical accuracy is of course essential in writing history; historians, though often thwarted in their efforts and distorted by their own partialities, seek truth about and complete accounts of what happened in the past. They say that the past is a foreign country where things are done differently. But the past is with us today and part of our world and those of us who take on the responsibility of designing parts of the future – architects – seek inspiration, ideas for ways of doing things... rather than to lend the past a restrictive authority over the present. Those who do not learn lessons from the mistakes of history may be doomed to repeat them. But if history assumes authority, it can limit as well as inspire what we do in the present.

Architecture is so ubiquitous, so omnipresent in framing our lives, that we tend to treat it as part of what we call nature, as if it were provided without conscious input of a mind... when obviously it was not. In everyday life we tend to deal with works of architecture subliminally, not thinking about what they are doing for us and to us, nor about the thought processes and decisions that went into their design. Whether we are studying biology or history, literature or music, so many of the ways in which these things are discussed present them as things to be received, consumed, experienced... i.e. as separate from our own agency, creativity, decision-making imagination and open only to our perception. To appreciate works of architecture from a conceptual point of view (and see how we might appropriate their powers to use ourselves to affect others) we have to awaken a sense of what might be called existential awe – an impressed awareness of the achievement of what we do, the ingenuity and effort involved and the powers exerted. We need to become amazed at what we contribute to our world, how ideas born in our heads resonate and amend the physical world around us. This need is particularly acute in considering megalithic monuments

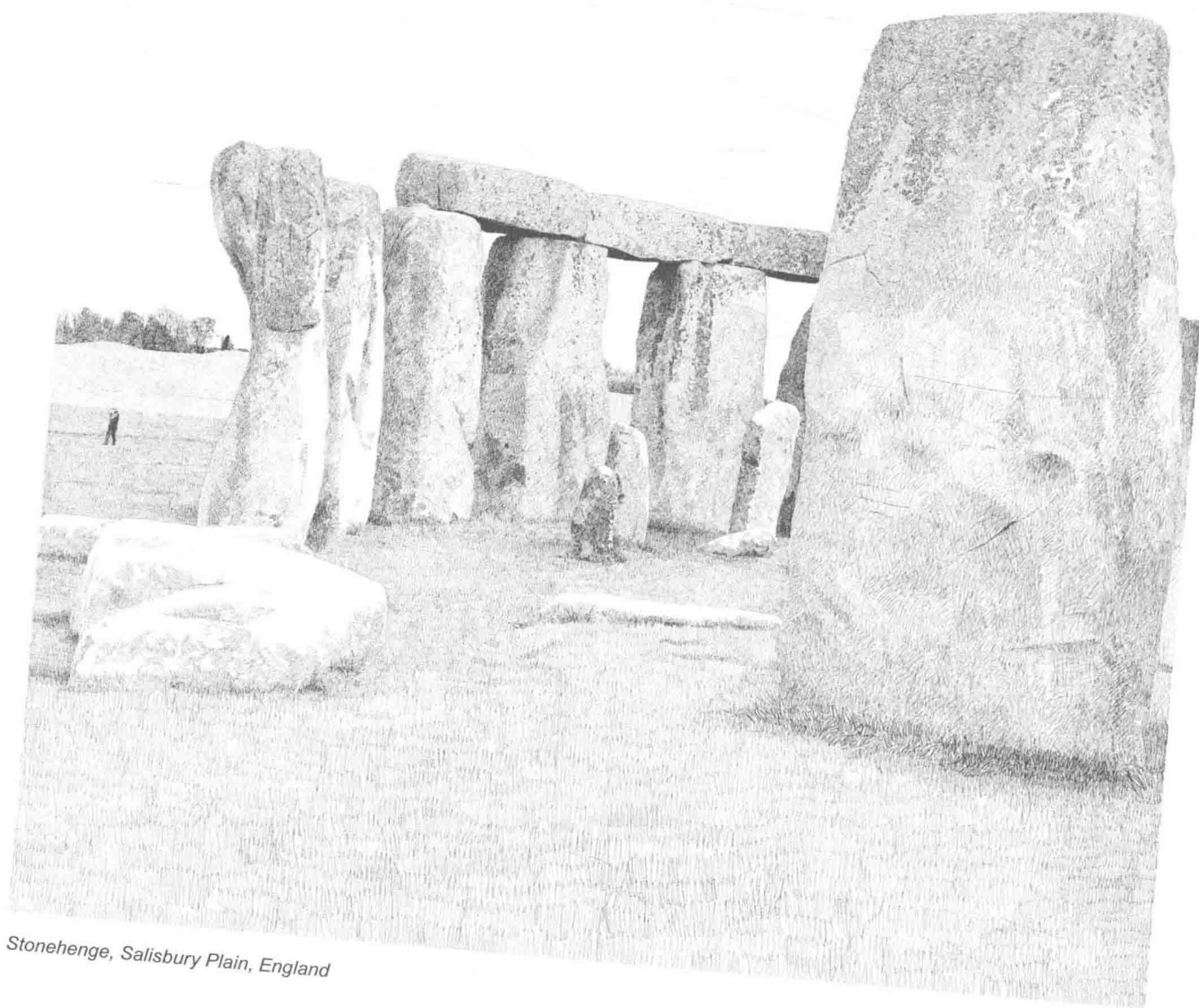
built so long ago when we were just discovering some of the powers that architecture brings into the world. To appreciate the concepts that emerge in the following analyses of some of the archetypal buildings of human history you will need to awaken from within yourself that existential awe. Briefly, this means to allow yourself to be aware of the wonder of things; as William Blake suggested, 'to see a world in a grain of sand and infinity in an hour'. There are many powerful things that, because they are everyday and all around us, we take for granted as if they are part of nature (and nature itself is powerful enough). Works of architecture – the built environment and the places we human beings have made for our activities – fall into this category. Yet every one of the archetypes illustrated in this book emerged from a human mind. Every one has a powerful effect on how we relate to the world. Every one of them affects and conditions the sense we make of the world around us.

Architecture is the mother of all the arts. All arts have their architecture and their archetypes. The architecture of a meal, for example, consists of the recipes followed for the dishes and the structure of courses by which the dishes are served and eaten. As an event in human social behaviour 'the meal' is an archetype. The place where a meal happens is a version of an archetype too. The table – a place around which people sit and eat – identifies the place of and frames the event of the meal. (See the chapter on the archetype Courtyard.)

Together with its older siblings, this book offers a way of understanding architecture that is close to everyone's experience of its products. In drawing out the immediacy of architecture to our lives, the following accounts of ten architectural archetypes reveal fundamental powers and possibilities that might be overlooked when architecture is thought of as being primarily a matter of appearance. This book is about architecture's ancient underpinnings and their foundation in our attempts to take control of and make sense of the world in which we find ourselves. It is also about how ideas with ancient lineage still underpin architecture produced now. The book brings the past (in some cases the very ancient past) into the present to find ideas that have influenced architects through history and explore how those archetypal ideas remain relevant now.

NOTE on the locations of examples cited

Throughout the following pages I have tried to provide grid references for all the works of architecture mentioned. These may be input into the 'search' field of Google Earth, which will take you to the work mentioned.



Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England

BASIC ELEMENTS OF ARCHITECTURE

a reminder

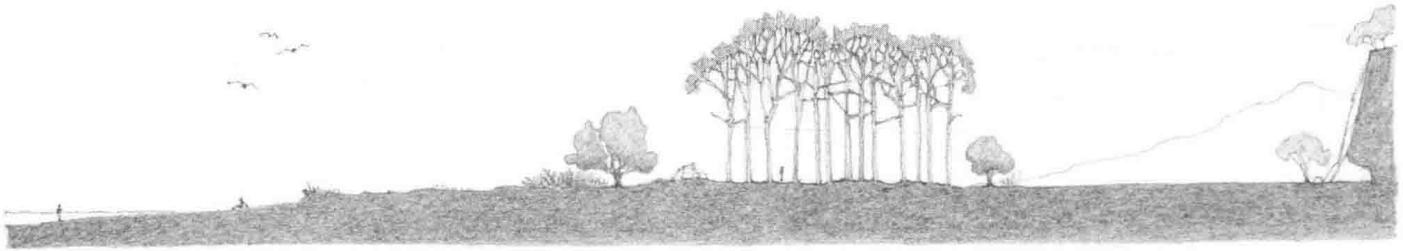
'So that the house does not become a prison to man, it needs openings into the world, which link the interior of the house in an appropriate way with the outside world. They open the house to dealings with the world. This task is fulfilled in the house by the door and the window. Both are connecting parts that place the world of inside to the world of outside.'

O.F. Bollnow, translated by Shuttleworth – *Human Space* (1963), Hyphen Press, London, 2011, p. 147

All architecture, whenever built and however sophisticated, is composed of basic elements – wall, doorway, focus, roof, defined area of ground, etc. (see *Analysing Architecture*, fourth edition, 2014, pages 35–46). These basic elements are ideas that can be realised (built) in many (perhaps infinite) different forms; just think of the huge variety of doorways – from a drawbridge across a castle moat, to the propylaea of the sacred precincts of ancient Greek temples, to the simple rectangular opening of an ordinary house. The basic elements of architecture are instruments for organising space – parts of the spatial language we use to make sense of our world and amend it to our needs and desires. As a reminder, and as a foundation for the archetype analyses that make up the bulk of this book, the following pages illustrate some primeval examples of each.

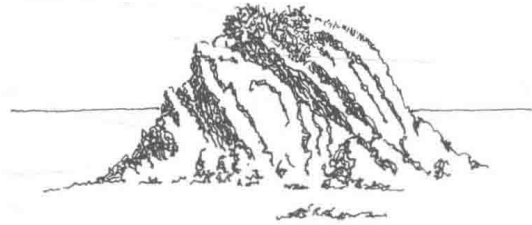
I have tried to illustrate the purest, the most primitive examples I can think of or find for each of the basic elements. It would be good for you to think of your own too. Mine are all examples that you (perhaps with the help of some strong collaborators) could make for yourself, as if you were a person living many thousands of years ago before the sophistications and technological paraphernalia of contemporary life. This is not intended as a romantic indulgence, a wistful reflection on how things were simpler, nobler, more truthful in those long gone times. It is more to make the point that basic elements and the places they help make are both ancient and eternally contemporary; though old, they remain and will always be available as powerful ideas for organising space.

To the list of basic elements illustrated in *Analysing Architecture*, I have added one – realising it is the most important element of all – the person. As I have said elsewhere (in a number of places), the person is the essential participant/ingredient/subject – as well as architect – of architecture, and its crucial basic element. Everyone is involved and affected; we are all architects of the world in which we live. Through architecture we make sense of our world just as powerfully as we do with verbal language, if not more so. Architecture's products may act on our lives subliminally and generally without acknowledgement but they set the spatial frame for just about everything we do.

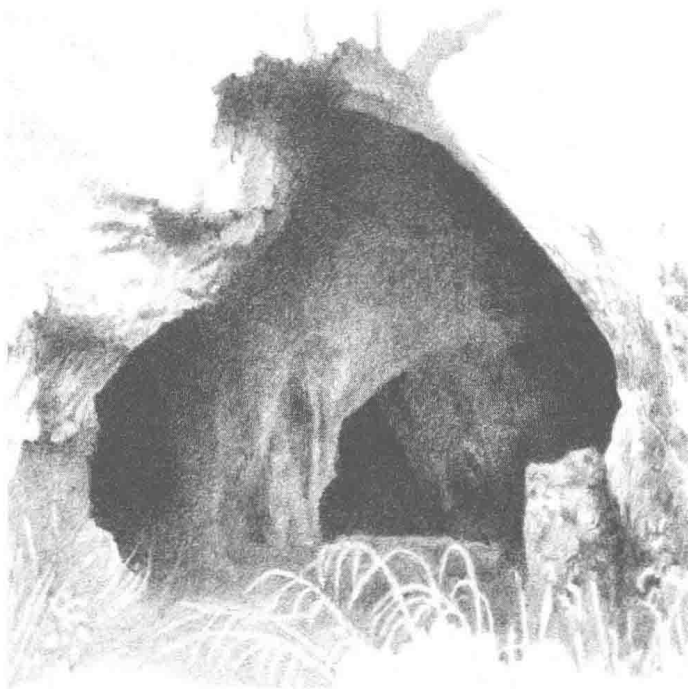


Setting

The first and (for all terrestrial architecture) prerequisite element of architecture is the setting, the local topography, the lie of the land. When traversed, experienced, inhabited... by a person (or other creature for that matter), topography becomes replete with possibilities. It offers (presents to the mind): places to settle; places to position things; places – pathways – to move along; and so on. Usually these are the first decisions of architecture: where shall we establish a place; why shall we establish it here rather than there; how do prevailing conditions and the lie of the land affect our choice? All architecture derives from this place-recognising interaction between the conscious, sense-informed, seeking mind and the setting in which it finds itself.



A crag protruding from a beach offers a variety of places. There is the highest point: which you can attain by effort; from which you have the best panoramic view; where you are on display to a wide area; and where, perhaps, you feel closer to 'the gods' of the sky. This is where you might plant a flag, build a fortress or establish an altar. But there are places around the base of the rock too: sunny places and shady; sheltered places and breezy; crevices in which you might hide. Here you might rest leaning your back against the sloping rock, gazing out to sea.



The world offers a variety of types of place to which we can relate. In some parts there is wide open prairie which gives us little to latch on to; in other regions there are multiple possibilities. The cave, for example, is the precursor of all rooms. When we choose it as a place (to hide, to live, for storage...) it becomes a work of architecture. But there are other, more subtle types of place to recognise in the landscape.



The land around us is replete with possible places. Choosing this dell as a natural room – maybe to light a campfire and cook a meal – is a primal architectural decision.

As we shall see in the following analyses, setting contributes much to architecture, and in many different ways. Architecture involves recognising and taking advantage of the opportunities setting offers.