

BUILDING PLANS AS NATURAL SYMBOLS

RAFAEL DE CLERCO

At present, there are no hotly debated topics in the philosophy of architecture. One could take this as evidence of the dreariness of the discipline, but one could equally see it as a sign that the discipline has not been caught up in its own internal dialectic and thereby lost touch with issues that matter outside of philosophy. After all, when a (philosophical) discipline lacks a compelling internal dialectic, there is every reason for researchers in the field to look beyond its boundaries, to other, neighboring fields. In the case of the philosophy of architecture, these neighbors include architectural history, architectural theory, architectural criticism, and, last but not least, the practice of architecture itself. It should come as no surprise, then, that the topic of my paper is an entirely self-selected one from the field of architectural history and theory. More specifically, I will focus on a claim about building plans that can be found in the work of architectural historian Carroll William Westfall. The claim has received little attention, perhaps because it is considered implausible, or because it is made by someone whose taste in philosophy (Aristotle) and architecture (Jefferson) seems all too classical. Whatever the case may be, in what follows I will try to argue that the claim is not implausible. I will, however, give my own interpretation to it, one that may not match entirely what Westfall had in mind.¹ Still, the claim is supposed to remain sufficiently strong under the proposed interpretation to make it far from trivially true.

“ THERE ARE BUILDINGS BELONGING TO DISPARATE FUNCTIONAL KINDS (E.G., 'TEMPLE', 'DWELLING', 'SHOP') WHOSE PLANS ARE NATURAL SYMBOLS OF THE ACTIVITIES ACCOMMODATED BY THOSE BUILDINGS ”

I.

Westfall advanced his thesis about building plans in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*, a book co-authored with Robert Jan van Pelt in 1991.² Here are some relevant quotations from Westfall's chapter on building types:³

Here it is argued that a building imitates a type which is timeless. The type provides a symbol of the purpose which the building embodies... The particular building is a conventional sign within which is embedded the natural symbolism of the type (van Pelt & Westfall 1991, p. 156).

In this sense, [the type] is a natural symbol of the political purpose it accommodates. In both the most simple and most complex way, then, the type's character is embodied in its plan diagram, and that plan diagram is about a purpose... (Ibid., p. 160)

Each purpose has a corresponding building type with a characteristic plan diagram. The type embodies the continuity between the present and the past. It is that which endures because it is true. Because it is true, it exists outside the time marked by history, and it has symbolic value—it symbolizes some particular political purpose (Ibid., p. 166).

The claim I wish to extract from the above quotations can be stated as follows: there are buildings belonging to disparate functional kinds (e.g., 'temple', 'dwelling', 'shop') whose plans are natural symbols of the activities accommodated by those buildings. It may not be immediately clear why this claim is extracted from the quotations. First of all, in the quoted passages, Westfall is not saying that activities are symbolized; he says that purposes are symbolized. However, activities and purposes are not clearly distinguished in van Pelt & Westfall 1991 (e.g., on pp. 156, 161-2). Moreover, as we will see in section III, the explanation of the symbolic relation may be roughly the same regardless of whether purposes or activities are symbolized. In other words, the plausibility of the central claim does not depend on which of the two interpretations is preferred.⁴

Another interpretative issue arises from the fact that Westfall does not say that building plans are symbols; he tends to say that building types are symbols. However, since, according to the second quotation, "the type's character is embodied in its plan diagram" it does not seem too extravagant to take him as claiming that building plans are symbols or, if one prefers, that buildings symbolize by virtue of their plan. Indeed, more recently, Westfall writes that (particular) buildings "based on" building types are

natural symbols (unpublished, p. 14).

In any case, my interpretation of the claim will henceforth focus on two expressions: ‘plan’ and ‘natural symbol’. My discussion of the claim’s significance—in particular, how it differs from similar claims—will have to wait until the conclusion, when a clear interpretation has been provided.

II.

The plans that are supposed to serve as natural symbols are not diagrammatic representations of horizontal sections (these are “conventional signs”), but the horizontal sections themselves. Moreover, they are the horizontal sections of particular buildings, for example, a horizontal section of the ground floor of the Houses of Parliament in London. However, if we follow Westfall, these plans or sections are able to serve as natural symbols only because they exemplify a certain abstract shape; in other words, because they are tokens of a certain type. Westfall identifies six basic types: the tholos, the temple, the theatre, the regia, the dwelling, and the shop. (For our purposes, we can regard a basic type as one whose symbolic significance does not derive entirely from its being an instance of another, more general type.) The activities symbolized by the tokens of these types are, respectively, venerating, celebrating, imagining (or “aspiring”), governing (or “exercising authority”), dwelling, and sustaining (or “trading”). The diagrams in figure 1 represent the abstract shapes the tokens have in common in virtue of being tokens of the same type.

When introduced in this way, the list may strike one as somewhat arbitrary, and indeed Westfall does not explain in detail how he arrived at it. He says little more than the list is based on, “[e]xperience with historical building and reflection about the historic within that experience as well as the knowledge available to us through our life in the present” (p.

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156). Nonetheless, it seems to me that the list cannot be rejected out of hand as based on someone's parochial (say, Western) experience. This may be evident in the case of the dwelling and the shop, but even the peculiar-looking tholos is exemplified by religious structures around the world such as mosques and Chinese altars and pagodas. The apparent universality of the types is of course due to the fact that they are very general and leave many features undetermined, for example, dimensions of rooms, the placing of windows and doors, etcetera.⁶ However, such indeterminacy does not empty Westfall's list of significance as long as the shapes, and the corresponding activities, are recognizable and recognizably different from one another.⁷ That is enough for Westfall's list to be refutable. Moreover, Westfall leaves open the possibility that a different (and presumably, equally correct) list can be produced on the basis of a "different understanding of the way political life is given conventional form in constitutions and a different interpretation of the activities that constitute political life" (p. 157). However, in what follows, I do not want to defend even the thesis that Westfall's list is a correct enumeration of basic types. All I want to argue is that some such list (perhaps a much longer one) may be correct. That is enough for the claim under investigation to be plausible or at least worthy of further investigation.

The claim extracted from Westfall's chapter makes reference only to horizontal sections. In principle, one could also take vertical sections into account. The word 'plans' in my formulation of the main thesis would then have to be replaced by something like 'horizontal and/or vertical sections'. This should not affect (what I take to be) the substance of the claim, although it may make it more plausible. In what follows, however, I will largely ignore vertical sections; in part to remain as close as possible to Westfall's text, in part to keep things as simple as possible.⁸ For the same reasons, I will ignore complexities arising from the fact that part of a building may exemplify a type without the building itself exemplifying that type.

III.

The expression that is bound to cause most puzzlement is 'natural symbol'. In the sense that is relevant here, a symbol is an object (or an action or an event) that stands for something valued within a community such as a deity or the nation.⁹ Two additional clarifications may make this definition a bit more helpful. Firstly, an object stands for something valued only if it (i) has the capacity to call it to mind and (ii) in virtue of that capacity, is the object of attitudes normally directed towards the

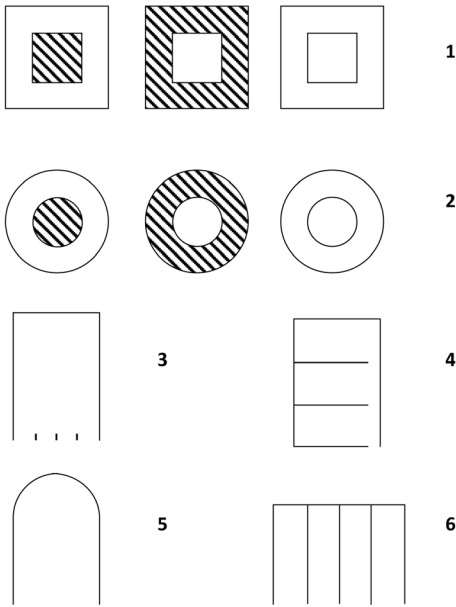


FIGURE 1: WESTFALL'S ALPHABET OF BUILDING (P. 160): (1) REGIA (2) THOLOS (3) TEMPLE (4) DWELLING (5) THEATRE (6) SHOP. HATCHED AREAS REPRESENT SOLID FORMS.⁵

valued thing (for example, reverence and respect). Secondly, what a symbol stands for usually is not itself an object or at least not an object of sensory experience: it can be a past event, a supernatural being, a non-perceptual property, a disposition, and so on. In the present case, it is (the purpose served by) an activity of a very general kind such as venerating, celebrating and dwelling. What distinguishes natural from non-natural symbols is the way the connection is established between the symbol and what it stands for. In the case of a non-natural symbol, the connection is established by a convention such as the convention that x is a monument for y or that x is the flag of y. In such cases, the connection is arbitrary in the sense that a different convention would have resulted in a different connection. In the case of a natural symbol such as an icon or a relic, the connection is not the result of a convention, but of something

outside our will such as striking resemblance and/or spatiotemporal contiguity (contact). Note that the difference lies in how the connection is established – by convention or not – not in how it is maintained. Even if the connection between a symbol and what it symbolizes was established by convention, a change of convention may not result in a change of connection. For example, a country may adopt a new flag without the old flag thereby losing its symbolic significance.

Evidently, this raises the question how the ‘natural’ connection is established between building plans of a given type on the one hand and kinds of activities on the other hand. Westfall does not explicitly address this question, but, as we will see, there is an answer that is compatible with what he says and which seems defensible.

One may think that spatiotemporal contiguity can explain the symbolic connection between building plans and activities. After all, the symbolized activities (for example, dwelling) may take place in close proximity to the horizontal sections of buildings. However, on the face of it, this cannot be the whole explanation. The reason is that spatial contiguity can establish a connection only between items that have a location in space and time, for example, between a particular – locatable – building and a particular – dateable – activity that has taken place within it. But the connection that Westfall needs is one between building plans of a given type and certain kinds of activities. Because types and kinds are abstract objects, which do not have a location in space, they cannot stand in a relation of spatiotemporal contiguity to one another.

One might think that it is enough to have spatiotemporal contiguity between tokens and instances in order to have a connection between the corresponding types and kinds. In other words, if activities of a certain kind always take place in buildings of a certain type, or vice versa, if buildings of a certain type always accommodate activities of a certain kind, then will this not be enough to establish a symbolic connection between the two? To be sure, this seems closer to the truth. It certainly is true that the actual use of a plan may enhance its symbolic value. By having a certain history of use, a plan may be better able to call to mind what is symbolized, for example, through recollection. However, it does not follow that such constant association can create symbolic value or that it creates it in every case. At least in our present case, it seems that other factors may be involved. In fact, in order to find out whether there are other factors, it may be worth investigating why certain types of plan have come to be associated with certain kinds of activity. For example, it may be worth asking why veneration often takes place in tholos-like forms.

An obvious answer is that this type is experienced as suitable or appropriate. This then suggests the following answer to our initial question: a building plan of type x can be a natural symbol of a kind of activity y because x is (especially) appropriate for the accommodation of y. Or, if one prefers the interpretation under which purposes rather than activities are symbolized: a building plan of type x can be a natural symbol of purpose y because x is especially appropriate for the accommodation of an activity that serves y.

One may ask what is more important, whether a building plan is experienced as appropriate or whether it really is appropriate? I think the latter relation is more fundamental, and in any case, in greater need of clarification (to be provided soon). Nonetheless, it is obvious that appropriateness alone does not suffice to confer symbolic significance on a building plan. The appropriateness has to be recognized if it is to make the building plan stand for a particular purpose or a particular kind of activity. In other words, only manifest appropriateness explains symbolic significance. Similarly, a piece of clothing cannot function as a relic unless it is believed to have belonged to a particular person.

The idea that certain types of plan are appropriate for certain kinds of activity is one that occasionally shows up in the literature, for example, when it is said that variations on a plan and/or section occur in the history of building types until the ‘appropriate’ form has been found. To quote just two examples:

In a healthy building culture, tradition and innovation are not contradictory but complementary concepts. In both cases, [a] building type is allowed to take on the most appropriate form (Davis 2006, p. 153; italics omitted).

A type represents the organizational structure of a building in plan and section. A type evolves until it

achieves its basic (i.e. its rational and logical) form... [T]he fact that airport terminals are everywhere in a state of permanent reconstruction demonstrates the fact that shelter and function have not yet found a suitable type. (Krier 2007, p. 42)

Although ‘suitable’ and ‘appropriate’ seem to be used here in their everyday meaning (of ‘right’), it may be useful to spell out the idea a little bit more.

Echoing Nelson Goodman’s theory of rightness (see, for example, Goodman & Elgin 1988, p. 158), one might say that a type of plan is appropriate for an activity if and only if using it for the accommodation of that activity works; in other words, if using the type for that purpose helps to create a successful building, where ‘helps to create’ can be understood as designating a causal relation. Nothing much hinges here on a particular view of what a successful building is, but it seems reasonable to demand – in addition to the Vitruvian criteria of firmness, commodity, and delight – that a building be adaptable and in harmony with the existing environment.¹⁰

If using a type for the accommodation of a particular activity works, then at least part of the explanation must be that the use of the type fits into a larger building culture which itself works.¹¹ As Goodman and Elgin say, “working tests fitting” (Ibid., p. 159). For example, architects and building users unfamiliar with a type of plan may have no clue as to how a building based on it can accommodate the activity it is supposed to accommodate, and they may find it difficult to fit it into an existing context. In the building culture to which they belong, using the type may not work.¹² When confronted with such a case, one should not jump to the conclusion that there is something wrong with either the type or the culture. One may just be confronted with a lack of fit between the two. Nonetheless, the possibility of a deficient building culture should be borne in mind, especially when criticisms of the culture are widespread and persistent. This seems to be the case with our present building culture, whose shortcomings have been foregrounded by an ever-growing number of critics, including architects (e.g., Bruce Allsop, Léon Krier, Paul Rudolph), engineers (e.g., Malcolm Millais), architectural critics (e.g., Peter Blake), architectural theorists (e.g., Brent C. Brolin, Howard Davis), architectural historians (e.g., David Watkin), philosophers (e.g., Roger Scruton), sociologists (e.g., Nathan Glazer), writers (e.g., Jane Jacobs, Tom Wolfe), and the Prince of Wales (Charles).¹³ According to these critics, our present building culture is not very good at producing successful buildings in the sense that has just been made half-precise; in other words, it does not work very well.

The notion of a successful building, then, turns out to be essential to spelling out the relation of appropriateness between building plan and activity (which relation is essential to explaining the symbolic significance of certain types of building plan). Of course, this makes the relation partly normative. From a hermeneutic point of view, this is a desirable consequence, since Westfall often calls his types ‘normative’. However, Westfall’s types are normative in a stronger sense: they are not just appropriate forms, they “provide the basic character of what the plan of the finished building must be if it is to serve its purpose” (p. 161; my italics). Moreover, it seems that, in Westfall’s view, the only condition that can get one exempted from the requirement of using the form for a particular activity is one in which it is (practically) impossible to use the form for that activity: “while the building types suggest how certain purposes ought to be accommodated by a building, circumstances do not always allow it to be so” (p. 161; italics in original). This may be overly strict. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, according to Westfall, the requirement to use a certain building plan applies only to certain kinds of building. For example, he claims that it does not apply to farms and libraries, and for reasons to be given soon, one may suppose that it does not apply to factories either. Moreover, the issue of whether the types are normative in a strong or in a weak sense (i.e., whether they are mandatory or merely appropriate) has little bearing on the main issue, that is, how building plans can function as natural symbols of certain purposes or activities. After all, if a building plan is required in a given context – if one “must” use it – then, a fortiori, it is appropriate to use it in that context.

The normativity imparted by the notion of a successful building may seem to be incompatible with the claim that building plans are ‘natural’ symbols. However, the distinction between natural and non-natural symbols is not supposed to be an

instance of the metaphysically puzzling distinction between the descriptive and evaluative, causes and reasons, and so on. Rather, the distinction was supposed to be a metaphysically innocent one between items whose symbolic significance is based on a convention and items whose symbolic significance has a different basis. (By ‘symbolic significance’ I mean an item’s standing for something valued.) In sum, ‘natural’ has to be understood as ‘non-conventional’.

Even if an item’s symbolic significance is not the result of a convention, there is still a potential for cultural variability. To see this, consider that, according to the explanation given above, appropriateness is a matter of working, and that working is a matter of fitting within a culture of building. As a result, instances of the same type of building plan may not stand for the same thing, or even anything, in every culture. It does not follow (from the fact that working is a matter of “fitting within a culture of building”) that there is no fact of the matter as to what is a working building plan or even a working building culture. Compare: from the fact that different types of medicine work for different kinds of people, it does not follow that there are no absolute standards for therapeutic effectiveness. Moreover, although I have again departed from what Westfall suggests – like Jungian archetypes, his basic building types seem to have universal symbolic significance – our disagreement (again) has no implications for the main thesis.

As said, there is room for variability across cultures with respect to what a building plan stands for. However, within a culture, a building plan cannot stand for a completely heterogeneous collection of activities, even if those activities happen to be all instances of the same kind of action. In other words, there have to be constancies in the form the activities take (p. 158). Otherwise there cannot be a type of plan that suits them all, and which can therefore serve as a symbol of the kind. If this line of reasoning is correct, it may explain why the activities of production and transportation do not seem to have associated types of building plan: there is just too much variation in the form that such activities can take. In other words, even if there is a type suitable to railway stations (cf. Krier 2007, p. 51), there is no type suitable to all of the following: railway stations, bus stations, ferry piers, airports, rocket launchers, and so on.

Of course, this raises the question of when certain activities are too heterogeneous to be appropriately accommodated and hence symbolized by a particular building type.¹⁴ It seems to me that this question is best answered a posteriori, by examining the building types that have actually been developed. To be sure, certain expectations are reasonable on a

priori grounds. For example, it seems reasonable to expect that activities which are defined in highly general terms and which, at the same time, are highly reliant on technology (for example, transportation, production, and research) will not find appropriate accommodation in a single type or even in a plurality of types. In such cases, the appropriate form of accommodation is likely to depend on the nature of the technology and the stage of its development. However, it seems that such a priori reflection on the relationship between building types and activities can easily lead one into paradoxes. Consider, for example, the apparently contradictory statements which the prominent art historian James S. Ackerman issued about the villa (on what seem to be a priori grounds). On the one hand, Ackerman writes:

This makes the villa unique: other architectural types—the palace, the place of worship, the factory—have changed in form and purpose as the role of the ruler, the character of the liturgy, the nature of manufacture have changed, frequently and often radically. But the villa has remained substantially the same because it fills a need that never alters, a need which, because it is not material but psychological and ideological, is not subject to the influences of evolving societies and technologies. The villa accommodates a fantasy which is impervious to reality (Ackerman 1990, p. 9).

On the other hand, he writes:

There is hardly a moment in the history of architecture when villas were less innovative than other architectural types... The villa is less fixed in form than most other architectural types because the requirements of leisure lack clear definition (Ibid., p. 18).

On the face of it, this seems inconsistent. How can the villa, and the activity or “need” it is supposed to serve, simultaneously be more stable and less fixed compared to other building types?¹⁵ One may try to resolve this apparent contradiction by saying that

“ IN THE CASE OF A NATURAL SYMBOL SUCH AS AN ICON OR A RELIC, THE CONNECTION IS NOT THE RESULT OF A CONVENTION, BUT OF SOMETHING OUTSIDE OUR WILL SUCH AS STRIKING RESEMBLANCE AND/OR SPATIOTEMPORAL CONTIGUITY ”

certain elements of the villa remain unchanged while others are subject to change. But how could the villa be “unique” in this respect? Unless reference is made to particular elements, the statement that some of the villa’s elements change, while others do not, borders on triviality. Of course, the only way one could reasonably make reference to particular elements is by investigating the matter empirically (that is, a posteriori). Eventually, this is what Ackerman does by distinguishing two types of villa that have survived from ancient times: the ‘compact-cubic’ type, which is regular (cubical) in shape, and the ‘open-extended’ type, which is irregularly shaped and more integrated with the natural environment (Ibid., pp. 18-26).

IV.

The hypothesis put forward in the previous section is that a building plan of type *x* can be a natural symbol of a kind of activity *y* because *x* is (especially) appropriate for the accommodation of *y*. Alternatively, a building plan of type *x* can be a natural symbol of purpose *y* because *x* is (especially) appropriate for the accommodation of an activity serving *y*. In brief, appropriateness explains symbolic significance. However, it seems that the two factors can be regarded as mutually reinforcing, since the reverse—symbolic significance explains appropriateness—is also true. When a building plan comes to stand for a certain activity, it becomes all the more appropriate to use it for the accommodation of that activity. This is of course most clear in the case of buildings accommodating ‘serious’ activities such as monuments, government buildings and churches. In such cases, it may be found awkward and even desecrating if the building plan calls to mind another, less serious activity; similarly, an ordinary dwelling or shop may be found pompous or pretentious if its plan calls to mind a more serious activity. Furthermore, a configuration of buildings wearing their purposes ‘on their sleeves’ is more likely to constitute a meaningful whole. After all, we do not experience a configuration of buildings as an abstract configuration of shapes and colors any more than we experience an individual building in such a way. Our knowledge of the actual purpose of a building inevitably informs our perception of it. If that purpose does not correspond to its apparent purpose, then this can be easily picked up as an oddity in an individual case, which may even enhance the significance of the whole. However, if such incongruence occurs on a larger scale, then our attention will tend to drift away from the whole to the individual buildings making up the whole. What we are left with, then, is no longer an environment properly speaking, but a sequence of buildings whose true

significance is to be deciphered.

Finally, if a building plan's symbolic significance is somehow local—a possibility mentioned in previous section—then that may make it again more appropriate because it may create the 'sense of place' that is so much desired nowadays.¹⁶

V.

This paper took its starting point in a claim attributed to Carroll William Westfall, namely: there are buildings belonging to disparate functional kinds whose plans are natural symbols of the (purposes served by the) activities accommodated by those buildings. My aim was to give an interpretation to this claim that makes it plausible and yet not trivial. Moreover, the interpretation was supposed to remain close enough to Westfall's text to be able to count as an interpretation. In order to demonstrate the plausibility of the claim under the proposed interpretation, I explored the idea that certain types of building plan are appropriate for certain kinds of activities. My claim was that such appropriateness can explain the natural (i.e. non-conventional) symbolism of building plans, and can also be reinforced by it.

Now that an interpretation of Westfall's claim has been provided, it is possible to say something about its significance. To be sure, Westfall is not the first to ascribe symbolic value to building plans. For example, Rudolf Wittkower (1998[1949]) already argued that the circular plan of certain Renaissance churches symbolized divine attributes and even God himself. In Eastern traditions of architecture, such symbolism seems more entrenched. For example, Indian temple and palace plans were often based on cosmological diagrams called 'mandalas'. Similarly, in the Temple of Heaven Complex in Beijing, circular and square plans were used to allow for the worship of (a round) Heaven and (a square) Earth respectively (Steinhardt 2002). To some extent, Westfall's is a generalization of such claims, since it

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ascribes symbolic value to the plans of buildings belonging to disparate functional kinds: religious structures, but also, for example, houses and shops. Moreover, under the interpretation given in this paper, the significance of Westfall's claim extends beyond the art-historical. After all, on this interpretation, the symbolic significance of building plans does not depend on anything contentious. In particular, it can be reasonably doubted that the circle resembles God or Heaven, but it seems much harder to doubt that certain forms are appropriate for certain activities, let alone that such activities exist. In other words, the circular plan symbolized something for Renaissance architects (if Wittkower's interpretation is correct) and for 15th century Chinese people, but the plans Westfall has in mind can symbolize something for everyone capable of recognizing their appropriateness, which basically means... everyone. In short, Westfall's claim is not so much an interpretation of a particular (historical or regional) architectural practice, as an interpretation of architectural practice tout court. Whether it is a correct interpretation of that practice has not been decided in this paper, but, hopefully, it now looks a little bit more credible.

The previous paragraph may, however, invite an objection. In particular, Westfall's claim may seem to be not just a generalization of earlier claims about the symbolic significance of floor plans; it may seem to be an over-generalization. To understand why, it may be worth recalling two necessary conditions for being a symbol: (i) having the capacity to call to mind something valued (ii) in virtue of that capacity, being the object of attitudes (e.g., reverence, respect) normally directed towards the valued thing. Now it may be obvious how these two conditions can be met when what is symbolized is God or one of his attributes. If we are believers, such 'things' automatically command our respect. But what if the thing symbolized is, as in (one interpretation of) Westfall's theory, something banal like trading or dwelling? My inclination is to say that these, too, command our respect, although it may be less obvious precisely because they are so commonplace. Nonetheless, there are times when the importance we attach to them becomes manifest. Mircea Eliade, for example, reminds us of the rites that accompany "the passing of the domestic threshold" (Eliade 1959, p. 25) and the settling in a new house (Ibid., p. 57). In a similar vein, John Ruskin points to the "sanctity in a good man's house which cannot be renewed in every tenement that rises on its ruin" (Ruskin 1990[1880], p. 179). Such remarks are difficult to understand if dwelling is considered trivial and devoid of intrinsic value.

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“ THE PLANS WESTFALL HAS IN MIND CAN SYMBOLIZE SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE CAPABLE OF RECOGNIZING THEIR APPROPRIATENESS, WHICH BASICALLY MEANS... EVERYONE ”

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ENDNOTES

1. At least occasionally, I will allow myself to deviate from Westfall's terminology and metaphysics. For example, I will not always heed his fine distinction between 'functions' and 'purposes', and I will remain neutral on the ontological status of types.
2. Henceforth, all references will be to this book (van Pelt & Westfall 1991) unless indicated otherwise.
3. The term 'building type' is used ambiguously in the literature, as Quatremère de Quincy's historical dictionary (de Quincy 1999) already makes clear. Although de Quincy did not make the different senses

much clearer (pace Rossi 1982, p. 40, who claims that de Quincy “gave a masterly definition of type”), it seems possible to distinguish at least the following two senses in the current literature. On the one hand (see, for example, Hamlin 1952 and Pevsner 1976), ‘building type’ is used to denote the functional kind to which a building belongs: factory, monument, train station, church, hotel, town hall, concert hall, school, prison, museum, shop, and so on. On the other hand (see, for example, Davis 2006 and Krier 2007), ‘building type’ is used to denote the structural kind to which a building belongs, as determined by its plan and/or section: centralized versus linear, Greek-Cross versus Latin-Cross, single-story versus multi-story, row versus detached, with or without courtyard or loggia, and so on. Westfall seems to use the term in the second sense, and so will I. Of course, it is possible two combine the two senses, for example, when one speaks of the dumbbell tenement or the Danish row house as a type.

4. More recently, Westfall writes that “[t]he presence of the building idea type within the diagram and then the plan allows the building to signify, or better, to express, the activity it serves and therefore to connect it to the purpose that the institution or arrangements serves within the civil, religious, or cultural order” (unpublished, p. 12; my italics). This suggests that building types symbolize certain purposes by symbolizing (“expressing”) activities serving those purposes.
5. In personal communication, Westfall pointed to a minor inaccuracy in the diagrams included in van Pelt & Westfall 1991 (p. 160). The diagrams in this paper should better match his intentions.
6. According to Westfall (personal communication), these specifications “enter with the conventional configuration that the [plan] diagrams have taken within a time and a place and with attention to the actual functions that serve the purposes”.
7. By ‘recognizable’ is meant ‘recognizable in their instances’. In other words, it must be possible to sort particular buildings according to the types. For example, Bramante’s Tempietto in Rome can be classified as an instance of the tholos type, which means that the type is recognizable.
8. Westfall does not ignore the vertical dimension. However, in his view, differences along that dimension (e.g., elevation) do not help to differentiate types of building, but merely regional versions of types (see, for example, pp. 162-7). Westfall does not ascribe natural symbolism to such versions, in part because he seems to equate ‘natural’ and ‘universal’. As will become clear, this is one respect in my reconstruction may differ from the original view.
9. “Signs point to particular meanings such as functions and the relative

- importance of similar things, while symbols embody the larger purposes that enliven the aspiration to live the good life of justice and nobility” (p. 156).
10. For an analysis of architectural harmony, see De Clercq 2011. However, harmony can be understood here in a wider sense, including environmental friendliness.
 11. Building cultures are usefully analyzed in Davis 2006, where the term ‘building culture’ refers to “the coordinated system of knowledge, rules, procedures, and habits that surrounds the building process in a given place and time” (Davis 2006, p. 5). Members of the culture include contractors, clients, architects, building users, bankers, and so on.
 12. Brolin 1976 provides several examples illustrating how the acceptability of a floor plan may depend on social customs and cultural values (e.g., pp. 42-3, 66-7, 99).
 13. References are in the bibliography.
 14. Here ‘building type’ is used in the structural or structural-cum-functional sense. See footnote 3.
 15. Ackerman acknowledges the tension by concluding that the villa “poses a cultural paradox” (p. 34).
 16. The connection between architectural types and local character is stressed in Davis 2006 (several places) and in Thadani 2010 (p. 694).

RAFAEL DE CLERCQ RESPONDS

QUESTION: *If we must admit to some cultural variation for the view of natural kinds to hold plausibility, does then that recognition require us to accept that culture itself is a natural kind to preserve the argument? In other words, if, as many think, culture is significantly dependent on conventions to function at a high level, then haven't conventions crept in through the back door?*

ANSWER: The argument in the article does not imply that building types are natural kinds; only that they are non-conventional symbols. So let me rephrase the question as follows: if building plans symbolize by virtue of their appropriateness, and if their appropriateness depends at least in part on culturally variable elements such as customs, then how can it be claimed that building plans are non-conventional symbols? My short answer is that, although the appropriateness of building plans depends on the presence of conventions, it is not itself a conventional property. Rather, it is a causal property (cf. “one might say that a type of plan is appropriate for an activity

if and only if ... using the type for that purpose helps to create a successful building, where 'helps to create' can be understood as designating a causal relation"). Perhaps the following example can help to understand how a property can depend on conventions without being itself conventional. In Western societies, handshaking is among the conventions for greeting. As a result, refusing to shake hands may cause someone to feel offended. When this happens, the relation between the refusal and the feeling is causal, but it is also dependent on the existence of a particular convention for greeting.

Q: What does an analysis of architecture as captured by symbolism or type do or speak to, within the philosophical or architecture discourse? For example, the Westfall concept you argue for could be seen as a potential support for the traditionalists—Leon Krier, Prince Charles, and their fellows—in their struggles with modernists. Do you agree and is this how these ideas apply?

A: I am inclined to think that the main argument in the text—plans symbolize activities by virtue of being appropriate for these activities—is neutral between modernism and traditionalism. Nonetheless, it is a fact that traditionalists tend to be more concerned with building types, as can be gleaned from my references. Moreover, there is another argument in the text that may provide some support for traditionalism, namely, where it is said that “[w]hen a building plan comes to stand for a certain activity, it becomes all the more appropriate to use it for the accommodation of that activity”. For various reasons, local building traditions tend to contain types with considerable symbolic significance, and this is a reason for drawing on them if the quoted sentence is true.

Q: Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty bears a relationship to what you discuss here. For Kant, the beauty of architecture was decisively dependent on its functioning as intended. Yet ultimately he opted for the idea that it wasn't function per se, but instead a concept of functioning that determined the harmonious play of mental faculties that created an aesthetic experience of architecture. This idea has led

Richard Hill, for example, in his Designs and their Consequences, to argue that “We do not need actually to use a building in order to respond aesthetically to it: it will be enough that we see those aesthetic ideas that are incorporated into its design.” Could you respond to this more indirect, or perhaps once-removed sense of utility as an alternative?

A: I certainly agree that we do not need to use a building in order to experience it aesthetically. But the question probably is how, or to what extent, a building’s aesthetic or architectural value is determined by its symbolizing a certain activity or purpose. It is difficult to answer this question in a general way. For example, in some cases, symbolizing a certain activity may be a function of the building, in other cases, it may not be. Similarly, in some cases, the symbolized activity may be one that the building was designed to accommodate; in other cases, it may be one that the building ended up accommodating; and there are still other possibilities. The notion of function enters here in different ways, and accordingly, there will be different answers to give for the different cases. In another paper (‘Reflections on a Sofa Bed: Functional Beauty and Looking Fit’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 47:2 (2013)), I argue that not all functions are equally important from an aesthetic point of view; for example, I argue that acquired functions are less important than original functions. If this claim is correct, then it has implications for how the above question is to be answered. But in any case, I think there is no doubt that symbolization of activities is aesthetically relevant. This much is already implied by the sentence quoted in response to the second question, namely, “[w]hen a building plan comes to stand for a certain activity, it becomes all the more appropriate to use it for the accommodation of that activity”.