



New Pathways into the Past

Nuevos caminos por el pasado

Novos caminhos até o passado

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When Georgia Tech retooled its architecture school for modernism after World War II, a zealous new Harvard-educated professor argued that every history book in their library “should be taken out and burned”.¹ The match was never struck, but most design programs have been on problematic terms with architectural history since that time. With their new book, *Architectural Type and Character: A Practical Guide to a History of Architecture* (Routledge 2022, 272 pages), Samir Younés and Carroll William Westfall seek to rehabilitate this relationship.

They start by attacking the treatment of architectural history as an evolutionary progression of historical styles that each embody the spirit of their period – culminating, predictably, in technology’s steely dominion over modernity and its architecture. Such *Zeitgeist* theory, they argue, obscures the ways that buildings serve fundamental, timeless needs, such

as humanity’s yearning for immersion in nature. Few classicists will dissent, but if the authors were wooing new converts they might have engaged with recent scholarship critiquing modernism’s techno-evolutionary determinism for other reasons, especially its Euro-centrism. After flogging the *Zeitgeist*, Younés and Westfall present their alternative method: locating basic building typologies that have proliferated across many periods and places and can thus serve as enduring, even ahistorical, design models. They argue that essential types such as the *tholos* and the dwelling accommodate primary human behaviors such as devotional circumambulation and domestic retreat. Only sporadically do the authors venture beyond the Western canon to show how, for example, China produced similar typologies. More of a global, humanistic approach would have been welcome, together with more focused prose, particularly when the authors summon weighty matters like *Natura naturans* and “the moral order of the universe” (27). The typologies themselves occasionally seem either too complex to be truly universal or too simple to serve present needs. Overall, however, the book does offer new ways to imagine architectural history serving a living, breathing, contemporary, traditional design program.

¹ Bush-Brown, Harold. 1976. *Beaux Arts to Bauhaus and Beyond*. New York: Whitney Library of Design.

Samir Younés, Carroll William Westfall

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