

Defining Paradigm

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What is a paradigm? More than a dictionary description is needed to make the word useful for current architectural pursuits. The words “paradigm” and “archetype” have similar meanings and are sometimes used interchangeably, but there are differences that are worth strengthening. By definition, a paradigm is a pattern, a model, an example; its Greek roots make the literal meaning “to show side by side.” A paradigmatic work of architecture is an exemplary model. It is important to note that a paradigm is not only exemplary but also typical. That is, it is the ideal and standard specimen.

The etymology of the word “archetype” comes from the impression of a seal-mold. An archetype is the original model from which a family of forms develops. To me, paradigm represents a goal – I could even say an unachievable goal – while an archetype represents the original root. That is, today we can call the Parthenon an archetypal temple, although for Phidias, Ictinus, and their contemporaries, the Parthenon could not have served that function.

Paradigm is the future toward which I am striving, and archetype is the origin, that which affects my understanding of what I am doing. Because both can be considered ideal manifestations, paradigms and archetypes have an ideal existence outside the physical world. Specific pieces of architecture can be seen as manifestations of an archetype that exists only in an ideal, Platonic world, or as unachieved paradigms.