Andrew Clancy

The casual buttress



'What interests me is not so much what structures hold in common as what differentiates them'

Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created – nothing.
'The Rich Boy', F. Scott Fitzgerald

During the Second World War, the architecture students of University College, Dublin (UCD) were unable to travel to Europe for the measured drawing study that had traditionally been set for them during the summer months. In its place, for three years, the students were sent to survey a different village in Ireland each summer. The collected drawings and photographs resultant from these studies are now housed in the archives of the Museum of Country Life in Mayo. Among the measured plans and picturesque watercolours is a photograph taken by Robin Walker, then a student studying the village of Curragh in County Waterford and later a partner in the distinguished practice of Scott Tallon Walker. It shows the gable of a cottage, with two buttresses and a trapped relieving arch propping the wall slightly off centre.

At first glance there is nothing remarkable about the image. The cottage is slightly run-down and the ground about it a mess of nettles and brambles. The buttresses appear as though they were later additions, a reaction to some failing of the gable, one caused perhaps by the fireplace against the wall behind. Similarly sized, their simple tapering forms engage with the figure of the gable.

Without seeing the plan of the cottage it is possible to make an educated guess about its make-up. Constructed in predominantly mud wall with a thatched roof, it would possess a simple plan of rooms spanning the full width of the building, and arranged in series. Indeed when the survey drawing is examined it shows that it is a relatively unremarkable direct-entry cottage type and conforms with the broad characteristics of its classification. At the time Walker took the photograph, however, these classifications were nascent and unclear.

The students were effectively carrying on from the work of Åke Campbell and Albert Nilsson, both experts in Swedish Traditional Architecture, who had been invited to Ireland by the Irish Folklore Commission to study the vernacular houses of Ireland in the early 1930s. Whereas the Swedes had travelled widely and carried out detailed studies of individual houses across the south and west of Ireland, the students' survey entailed more specific and in-depth examination of specific communities.

The grounding of the study in the Folklore Commission and the Museum speaks of the unstated position that there exists a well of knowledge embedded in these structures, one that exists beyond their direct qualities as buildings per se, and rather as structures which enable us to understand a society. The cottage is part of the rural vernacular: these buildings evolve in an unselfconscious manner, arising from the daily patterns of living developed over a lengthy period of time, and linked to available skills and materials. The recognition of commonalities – of sorts of buildings which occur frequently,

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The casual buttress: a photograph taken by Robin Walker as a student studying the village of Curragh. National Museum of Ireland

'the buttresses appear as though they were later additions, a reaction to some failing'

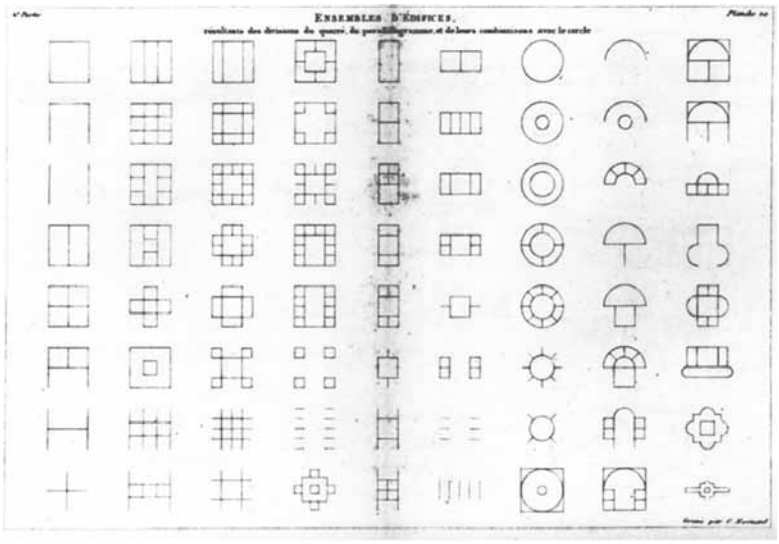


Two buttresses: a contingent but anticipated appearance. Stable, County Meath, Ireland

or in a discernible chronology or distribution – allows for a reading of changes otherwise imperceptible. These groupings, or types, are frequently classified by plan arrangement, and emerge from multiple studies and surveys from which the predominant similarities can be recognised. The titles of these types are evocative in themselves – 'bed-outshot', 'direct-entry' or 'jamb wall'. Simplified, abstracted drawings showing only the predominant similarities of the type frequently are made to assist in communicating the primary characteristics used in the classification. The folklorist or historian concerned with understanding across a wide swathe of time and space gains much from this work. In architecture the same studies are also used to understand and sift knowledge from the vernacular architectures of a given place, but here there are limits to this process. These types and their associated descriptions are a shorthand, and while this process offers great utility there is also much that it precludes from consideration. The distilled reading of type can obscure readings available from a direct engagement with the building. It is this contradiction and its consequences that come to mind when I consider Walker's photograph.

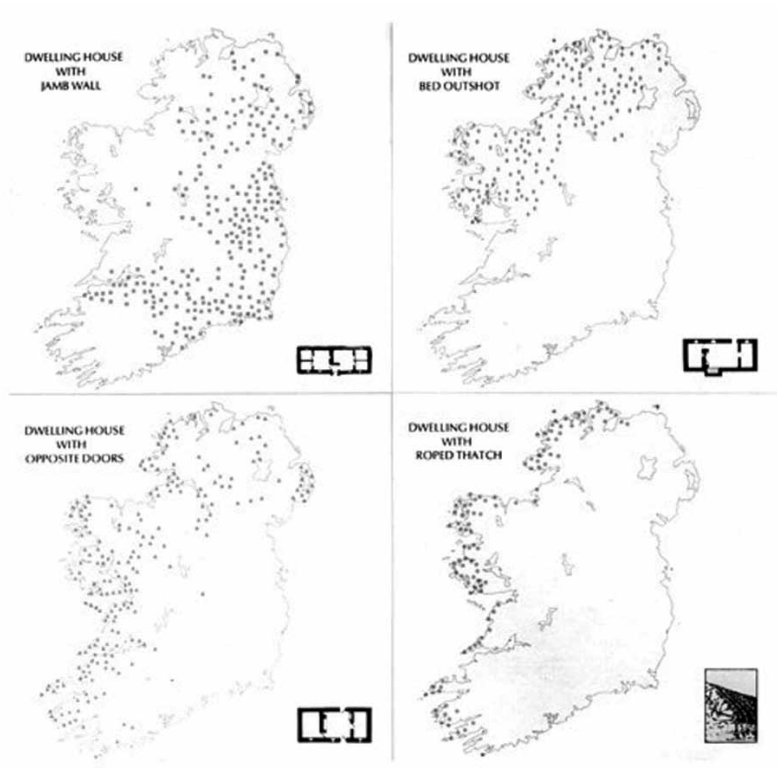
The use of type in architecture initially had two divergent readings, but both were concerned with discerning meaning from an examination of the history of architecture. These ideas emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At this time the systematisation of knowledge emerging from the Enlightenment was being confronted by architecture in a holistic manner for the first time. Although the word was first used by Quatremère de Quincy, it was the work of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand which gained most traction and which still defines much of what we understand by the word type today. Durand sought to systematise architectural thought in a mechanistic fashion to produce a taxonomy of building much in the fashion that Carl Linnaeus had classified the biological world. His approach was not holistic, but rather to edit back to a distilled essence. Two publications summated the work. The first, from 1800 – the *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes* (Collection and Parallel of Every Building Type, Ancient and Modern) – included highly abstracted drawn diagrams of plan types of various buildings distilled to show structure and order only, while the second, slightly later works – the *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École royale polytechnique* – used these diagrams

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Types: a page from J.-N.-L. Durand, *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes*

'the narrow coupling of precedent to abstracted form is problematic'



Commonalities: a page from the Royal Irish Academy's *Atlas of Ireland* (1979)

and compositional devices to produce models for a wide variety of buildings. His goal was to produce a manual for architects engaging both with familiar buildings as well as programmes never before encountered, and his works were instrumental in the establishment of systems for architectural education. Although this first work has been termed (by Hanno-Walter Kruft) a 'typological atlas of architecture', Durand himself never used the word *type* in relation to these classes, preferring the term 'genre'; this meaning grew from his work over time. His goal was to produce a manual for architects engaging both with familiar buildings as well as programmes never before encountered. Type here is distilled from the plan organisation of precedents to produce models for architecture independent of style. While Modernism rejected the historical grounding of type, many of the ideas embedded in Durand's hypothesis, primarily that of an interest in the formal qualities of type, the abstracted plan-based classification of type and a direct read between type and prototype informed many of its practitioners and projects. (Le Corbusier's work on *espace minimum* linked to proposals for mass housing, or indeed his Maison Dom-Ino proposal are examples.)

While type as understood on an urban level has received much attention since then (by Aldo Rossi and Anthony Vidler, for example), the use of the term for individual buildings remains relatively unchanged. The word is applied equally in manuals of plans of contemporary buildings to be used as models (such as Peter Ebner's *Topology+)* and in the study of past structures. In the study of the vernacular, type correlates with the diagrams described earlier. These represent an implied and unbuilt perfection that is the model or prototype to the variants studied and surveyed in the field. Frequently these diagrams are used in the stead of drawings of actual structures in the examination of vernacular buildings. But this narrow coupling of precedent to abstracted form is problematic. In the light of contemporary pressures of brief and construction, these diagrams present little of value to build on. Here style is paradoxically the central element, played with a belief in communication of image over more embedded connections

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with the lineage of architecture. Style guides for rural development produced by planning authorities are the most current, barely recognisable, end points of this school of thought.

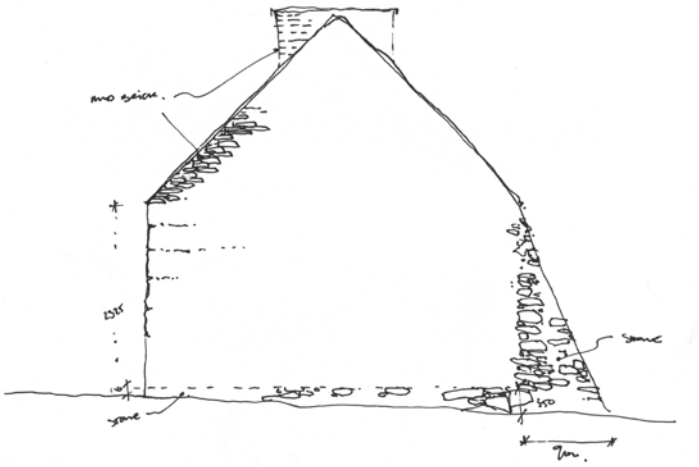
In the context of an ever-reduced reading of precedent there was little left other than a pale facsimile of some formal device. With regard to the vernacular, the aspiration for continuity becomes little more than the *image of a gable,* disconnected both from the tradition of building whence it was extracted, and from the sensibilities it represents.

In the face of this, it is worthwhile to speculate on the other reading of type, proposed by Quatremère de Quincy just before publication of Durand's first book. Building on Laugier's image of the primitive hut, Quatremère sought to establish links to nature to inform architecture. Type here was a way to describe an abstracted idea that arises from the first (and repeated) confrontations between form and use throughout architectural history. As Samir Younés comments in *Quatremère de Quincy's Historical Dictionary of Architecture*, the meaning of the word 'type' was not to be confused with the idea of a 'model'.

> *The model, understood in the sense of practical execution, is an object that should be repeated as it is; contrariwise, the 'type' is an object after which each artist can conceive works that bear no resemblance to each other. All is precise and given when it comes to the model, while all is more or less vague when it comes to the 'type'.*

This call to vagueness and the tie to Laugier's primitive hut opens up a different reading of type, far removed from reductive formal categorisations. Type to Quatremère is a metaphor, and as such allows for connection with an essence of thought while not precluding variation and evolution by different authors and at different times. Quatremère's linking of architecture and language has received much attention, particularly in the late twentieth century. Sylvia Lavin, for example, in her *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture* (MIT Press, 1992), argues that terms such as 'vernacular' or 'vocabulary' in architecture owe much to Quatremère's positioning of architecture as a language. Moreover, he is cited as the originator of the words 'type' and 'typology' in architecture – although it is Durand's reductive diagrams that came to define the word, in a way entirely at variance with Quatremère's nuanced take.

This offering of a metaphorical reading as a means to engage with a tradition of building bears consideration. Impromptu accretions such as the buttresses in Walker's photograph are moments that are familiar in the architecture of the everyday. Indeed the buttress is a very common occurrence with these cottages in particular, their mud walls being poor at resisting concentrated lateral loading. While not always required, the buttress emerges when requirements to create spaces to support inhabitation are at odds with the external form and construction of the buildings. These points of disjunction are resolved in an additive fashion, externally. The location varies from structure to structure; occasionally the buttress is used as a point of connection for further structures, becoming subsumed in outbuildings or walls. This preponderance to variety means that it is omitted from the reductive drawings of type that



Surveys by the author: part of a cottage at Derrinraw, Portadown ...

'the capacity for variety within a defined range allows buildings to speak at once of broader social structures and of specific place and person'



... and Teacosy Cottage, County Wexford

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The casual buttress revisited: a gable drawing by Andrew Clancy

classify these buildings and yet it occurs enough for it to have a fundamental and transformative relationship to the generality of cottages. What interests me therefore in Walker's photograph is not so much what these structures hold in common, but rather what differentiates them: it is their capacity for variety within a defined range which allows them to speak at once of broader social structures and of a specific place and person.

While I continue to cite the buttresses in Walker's photograph, I have in mind any number of similar incidents in other buildings, other types. A slightly different example occurs in a seventeenth-century stable at Parsonstown Manor, County Meath, a two-storey structure with a brick-vaulted ground floor which contains four stalls and a large storage area. The upper floor, under a pitched roof, contained storage areas for straw and animal feed. Here there are two such incidents. The first is readily identifiable: two large buttresses sit either side of the entrance door. Their scale is such that their discoloured forms dominate the elevation. These buttresses occur because the first-floor structure of brick vaulting is not resolved internally. Due to a disconnect between the internal quadripartite division as it meets a tripartite external division of door and two flanking windows, the forces are not guided evenly to the front elevation but arise erratically and at the weak point between the door and attendant windows. With a high loading from the first floor bearing on this wall, it would be overloaded at these points, and the buttresses resolve the issue. Then, in the same structure, there is a separate store area at the ground floor which spans the full width of the site. In contrast to the stable area, this is achieved in a single span vault from front to rear. In this area, the span is such that the natural geometry of the structure is flattened to the point that the central area is almost flat, and in this area, right along the centre, a single beam runs from side to side, propping the vault. What is remarkable about both the buttress and the beam is that on examining the construction it appears that both were not constructed post-completion on the observance of a fault, but rather were placed at the time of construction as part of the intended form of the structure. Rather than amending the design to allow the wall to be quadripartite or the store to have a different form to allow the vault to operate as a pure structure, the decision was made to augment the structure in an additive fashion to allow the original, 'flawed' structure to operate. Of course in this context the flaw is not a flaw: the vault was always intended to bear on the beam, the front wall always had the buttresses in mind. In this knowledge, when I re-examine Robin Walker's photograph of the cottage, the same thought arises – the buttresses and the arch could quite feasibly have been placed there at the outset, part of a planned strengthening to support the gather, crane and other attendant features of the fireplace. The internal spaces of the structure of the stable and the cottage are not contained by the external form of the building but are resolved externally. The structure reached is additive, contingent – even if it was constructed all at once.

The buttress is casual in the sense that it is not concerned with a formality of composition. It resists abstraction, being rejected by the drawing when the type is edited to its essence. And so it forces us to examine specific structures as they are and to be aware of the reductive impulse of the drawing; it does not seek to resolve emergent problems into a coherent whole, but to modify by addition; and in its inflection to problems emergent from site or making, it implies ownership, and the collective making of a place through the acts of many individuals over time.

The type speaks of the social structure in which this building was situated. The buttress speaks of the individual who placed it there, and the site it stands on. To borrow an idea of Roland Barthes (in *Camera Lucida*, 1980), the buttress acts as a *punctum* to the *studium* of type: it is the moment that the type is broken and a direct relationship is made between specificity and generality.

Andrew Clancy is a Senior Lecturer at the Queen's University, Belfast, an Adapt-r research fellow at Århus University, Denmark, and a founding partner of Clancy Moore Architects, Dublin. The practice won the 2011 Kevin Kieran Award, a research grant offered by the Irish Arts Council in partnership with the Office of Public Works; Clancy Moore's research has been concerned with seeking sensibilities and techniques of value today within technologies of the vernacular.

Author photograph by Alice Clancy

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