

## Chapter 5

### The First Roof: Interpreting a Spatial Pattern



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Much of the wonder of a great building comes from the form of its roof.<sup>1</sup> From the domes and vaults of monumental architecture to the timber frames of barns and peasant huts, there is something about the experience of roof forms—both inside and out—that goes to the heart of people's deepest feelings of place and shelter. Perhaps this is because the roof is the most primitive element of architecture. Many of the first buildings were nothing more than a roof on the ground, and a strong roof form inevitably strikes deep chords of meaning.

In the symbolic languages of nearly every culture, one finds instances of simple roof form with profound associative meaning. In

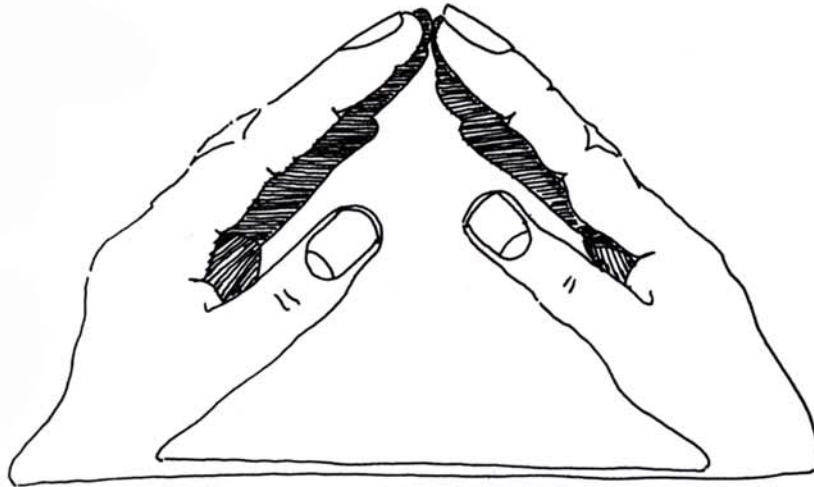


Figure 5.1. Beginning the sign for home in American Sign Language.

American Sign Language, for example, the sign for “home” begins with the sign for “roof”: two hands leaning together touching at the fingertips to form a gable (figure 5.1). Similarly, the Chinese ideogram series for dwelling starts with a simple gable roof. By adding various symbols underneath, ‘roof’ is transformed into ‘family’, ‘peace’, ‘resting-place’ and ‘ancestral altar’. The ideogram for ‘cold’ shows a roof sheltering a man on a mat with firewood (figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2. The Chinese ideogram for ‘cold’.

In the built language of architecture, the classical Western tradition begins with a celebration of the form and symbolic content of the primitive roof. Perhaps the primary pattern of the Greek temple is the pediment, the sacred gable, raised up on its columns, establishing a home for the gods, as in the Temple of Concord, Akragas (figure 5.3). Many examples of this sort can be collected. The point is that the very concept of “roof” seems to be consistently associated with values that are at the center of each culture’s image of a good life. But not only is the idea of the roof commonly associated with the things people value. The form itself—the spatial pattern called ‘roof’—has for centuries been stable and persistent. It seems as if there is an archetype of roof form that lies at the core of each person’s sense of being at home in the world. This archetype I shall call “the First Roof.” This article examines the underlying dimensions of the First Roof pattern, and describes its expression in two examples—the Jewish huppah and a house recently designed by our firm, Jacobson Silverstein Winslow Architects, in Berkeley, California. The article concludes that the First Roof pattern is one of the building blocks of architecture and can provide a valuable focus for sensitizing people to both the experiential and symbolic significance of buildings.