

Thus Spoke the *Über*-Architect: The Architecture of the Heroic Myth

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The Russian émigré Ayn Rand's now-classic novel *The Fountainhead* (1943) began with a lofty dedication: "I offer my profound gratitude to the great profession of architecture and its heroes who have given us some of the highest expressions of man's genius..."¹ The novel ends with an equally triumphant portrayal of its protagonist, architect Howard Roark. After his swashbuckling struggle against the mediocrity of the common man, all manner of collectivism, moral depravation, and corporate capitalism, Rand writes, "there was only the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark." While Rand's broader objective in the novel, as she reiterated many times later, was "the projection of an ideal man," it was hardly coincidental that Rand viewed the architect as a solitary hero, an undaunted idealist who fought a lonely battle against society's ills. Having done extensive research on the architectural culture of the 1920s and '30s, Rand consciously modeled her hero Roark on a real-life architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.² Did this conflation of the imaginary and the real bear any significance for the modernist architectural pedagogy and profession? However we view Rand's homage to the heroic modern architect, it reverberated in uncannily similar rhetorical terms in architect, architectural critic, and long-time editor of the *Architectural Forum* Peter Blake's preface to his 1960 book *The Master Builders*:

This book is a tribute to them by one architect whose generation owes most of what it knows about architecture to Le Corbusier, Mies, and Wright. It is also an affirmation of a fading belief: that the history of art is written by artists, not by "forces." There is no "force"—economic, sociological, techno-

logical—that could have created Ronchamp, the Barcelona Pavilion, or Taliesin West. And there would be no modern architecture as we know it without individual, creative acts of the sort represented by these great buildings.³

Rand brought to light, albeit in a literary medium, and Blake later reiterated a point that has been crucial to the early-twentieth-century conceptualization of Modern architecture: that is, the architect as hero, an embattled messiah who would shoulder the responsibility of remedying a seemingly chaotic world through uplifting design.⁴

This paper inquires into the heroic myth of the architect and how it relates to, and affects, for that matter, the various ways we experience, perceive, evaluate, and teach architecture. If modern architecture flourished in the early twentieth century based in part on the heady promises of social change through the visionary designs of the heroes, how might we assess the broader scope of such promises within the modernist architectural pedagogy? Do modernist architectural curricula perpetuate the heroic myth that somehow favors a facile appreciation of "master" architects and, thereby, spawns a globalizing culture of image-ridden architectural practices? If such consequences signal a failure in education, what can we do about it? Could critical history and theory play an important role in enabling architects to better understand architecture not as a high art of exclusive monument-making, but as a responsive building profession that could both represent and influence society in a wide spectrum of possibilities: from aesthetic avant-gardism to social justice, from ecology to public participation?

In order to address these questions, I would first

like to explore the architect's heroic image within the early-twentieth-century discourse of modern architecture that emerged with a master narrative of cultural renewal.⁵ The underlying assumption was that there was an inherent connection between architecture and the condition of society; between architecture and human behavior and wellbeing; and that architecture could play a transcendental role in making the world a better place. The early twentieth century was ripe for such cultural attitudes. The perceived social tranquility based on Victorian morality was already lost. Western societies were hit by a plethora of disparate stimuli—Freudian psychology, Einstein's relativity, mass media, photography, television, Cubism, Futurism, and unprecedented urban growth. The resulting psychosis created a cultural maelstrom in which it was impossible for architectural theorists, as Colin Rowe would put it, not to see for architecture a grand, redeeming social role.⁶ Clinging to the remnants of 19th-century Romantic individualism, the architect positioned himself as a solo catalyst for cultural regeneration.⁷ A platonic, spartan, and universal architectural idiom devoid of bourgeois decadence would be his vehicle to achieve this goal. Under the hero's tutelage, the phoenix of modern utopia, he imagined, would rise from the ashes of 19th-century cities with their laissez-faire planning and dysfunctional architecture.

The classisizing spirit that pervaded *fin-de-siecle* architectural discourse demanded that the architect divest himself of all sorts of regressive sentimentalism. Instead it exhorted him to be objective, dispassionate, impersonal, and abstractive about his mission. Philosophical materialism allowed him to see reality and social wellbeing through the lens of emerging technologies. Emboldened by the ideologies of progress, Darwinian evolution, and technological determinism, the architect assumed, if rather innocently, a post-Vitruvian role (i.e. a role that goes beyond the regimental aspirations of Vitruvius triad of *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*) in reshaping the world in terms of his own conception of reality. This therapeutic service—enabled by architecture and, more important, the architect's role in its quasi-prophetic deliverance—became a kernel myth of modern architecture, one that provided the fledgling movement with an idealistic gloss and solidified its social foundation.

At the height of his career Frank Lloyd Wright declared, if not so coincidentally, that he "saw

the architect as savior of the culture of modern American society...savior now as for all civilizations heretofore."⁸ Le Corbusier's manifestoes, *Towards a New Architecture* and *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning*, both published during the 1920s, had already advanced similar polemics about the architect's social calling. His famous "hand-into-the-picture-frame" image offers a poignant visual case in point. The symbolic extension of his powerful hand over the paradisiacal mathematics of the *Ville contemporaine* signified not only the literal embodiment of the modernist planner's godlike gaze, but also a magical unveiling of an impending state of infinite progress, harmony, and happiness. In *Space, Time and Architecture*, Sigfried Giedion theorized Modern architecture's social aspirations in millennial terms.⁹ A new era was dawning, Giedion claimed, one that manifested itself through the visual culmination of a functional, socially beneficial, and universal architecture. Lurking behind Giedion's prophecies was none other than the larger-than-life architect, who would wage a protracted aesthetic battle against disorder and effete traditionalism in architecture and city planning, ultimately helping build an ideal world attuned to modern science and technology. Not surprisingly, the heroes of Giedion's space-time conception in architecture were none other than Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Alvar Aalto, figures who have ever since been canonized as high priests of Modern architecture's secular fellowship in survey book after survey book. In one way or another, history survey courses on Modern architecture have often been the narratives of architect-heroes and their spectacular edifices. When William Curtis noted that "[t]he Robie House, the Villa Savoye, the Barcelona Pavilion, the town center at Saynatsalo, the Kimbell Art Museum, the church at Bagsvaerd...are among the buildings in the modern tradition to possess...extraordinary depth," he canonized, if not consciously, modern architecture exclusively in terms of its spectacular high points.

The depiction of the architect as an avant-garde hero was entwined with the Bauhaus flirtation with *der Neue Mensch*, the New Man. Distilled from Social Darwinism, popular utopianism, and, more important, Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*, the New Man, was projected as the harbinger of a recharged Western industrial society.¹⁰ It was hardly surprising that generations of architects—among them, Le Corbusier, Gropius, Ludwig Hilberseimer,

Erich Mendelsohn, and Rohe—hoisted the Nietzschean torch and fancied themselves *Übermenschen* or the New Men. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85)—a book from which I borrow the title of my own paper—was a canonical text for the Expressionists,¹¹ and most avant-garde architects, including Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus masters, in various ways drew on it in order to idealize their own role in transforming the world into a veritable utopia.¹² But if utopia was a state of perfection *ad infinitum*, its shaper—the architect-hero—inhabited a similar atemporal realm, one that remained invulnerable to any historical exigencies.

The problem with such a conceptualization lies, as the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco's analysis of the Superman's immortality reveals, in its paradoxical treatment of time.¹³ The architect-hero, conceived this way, does not belong to any specific time, a condition that leads to the breakdown in the structure of temporality. Like the heroes of ancient mythologies, he inhabits an epistemological vacuum, so to speak, where he does not err or change, thereby giving rise to an archetypal persona. He substitutes his historical development with mythic repetition, implicating his position with an immobile metaphysics, in which his archetypal persona remains impervious to any historical and social scrutiny. Despite his vociferous attack on modern architecture's presumed sterility and false social premises in *Form Follows Fiasco* (1974), Blake's 1996 homage enshrined his "Master Builders" at the high altar of frozen time:

Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright set a standard for the rest of us against which we will be judged in the years to come. I offer no apologies for having paid homage to them in the late 1950s, and, despite certain reservations advanced since then by Jane Jacobs and others—including myself—I offer no apologies for paying additional homage to them in the 1990s. We may not see the likes of them again for some time to come.¹⁴

In significant ways, Blake's tribute to the heroes of modern architecture echoes the atemporal mythos of Eco's redefined Superman.

Seeking to come to terms with the shifts in architectural attitude—from eclecticism and Beaux-Arts academicism to modernism and its new sociology of

utopian dreams—many architecture schools during the 1920s and 1930s embraced this model of the architect-hero.¹⁵ The modernist architectural pedagogy, as the Bauhaus model exemplified, sought to define as well as valorize the architect through an epistemology of ahistorical aesthetic autonomy, a process that encouraged, if not exclusively, mimetic desires among architecture students. Blake noted, "[t]he first decades of the modern movement had their heroes and the habit of hero worship has become deeply ingrained."¹⁶ As architectural practice adjusted to the increasing institutional demands of professionalization, and especially facing the challenges of engineers, modernist architectural curricula in one way or another internalized the heroic myth for self-legitimacy. The Vitruvian architect (described in the oldest extant book on architecture *De Architectura Libri Decem*) exuded authority by commanding encyclopedic knowledge (in geometry, history, philosophy, music, medicine, law, and astronomy); and he later re-emerged as the Renaissance man (in the writings of Alberti, for instance), the figurehead of society who identified strongly with the classical past. Yet within the modernist architectural discourse, the heroic persona of the architect became the crucial index of modernity's collective fantasies about social emancipation. Bearing seductive promises of cultural rebirth, the heroic myth granted the modernist apologists a theoretical framework to look beyond classicism's purported aesthetic autonomy and Ecole des Beaux-Arts' elitist academicism in order to include a grander vision of social justice. Le Corbusier's penultimate declaration in *Towards a New Architecture* concerning the stunning equation between the powers of architecture and revolution became one of the originary mantras of modernist architectural outlook. Henceforth, the modern architect stood like a secular god at this imagined intersection of architecture and social revolution.

Heroism is a broad concept that negotiates between complex social sentiments and cultural conditions, as well as people's notion of the lofty. Heroes fulfill popular ideals and they rise above the common folk by creating or performing the extraordinary. My purpose here is not to propose an anti-heroic aesthetic, or to offer a false choice between the heightened heroics of Le Corbusier and the pedestrian sensibilities of Jane Jacobs, or between individual genius and collective method, but to highlight the pedagogical as well as professional pitfalls of

uncritical hero-worshipping and to identify areas in the architect's education that require critical revision in order to enable him the intellectual rigor necessary to practice a responsive and responsible architecture. The modernist curriculum—one that places strong, sometimes monolithic, emphasis on individual genius—has generally failed to develop an inclusive framework that addresses culture, politics, economy, and environment as vital conditions from which both architecture and its heroic figures might emerge.¹⁷

Because courses engaging students with critical history and social theories are at best peripheral within the curriculum, architectural education still revolves mostly around formal design instruction, one that often over-emphasizes the spectacular and monumental. The overriding consideration in the modernist education has been specularity, an aesthetic outlook often deriving from the visual, ahistorical appreciation of great form-givers of the past and present. In other words, the professional nature of architectural education has largely remained insulated from current socio-cultural developments. From early on students begin to perceive architecture through the lens of Le Corbusier, Wright, or Louis Kahn, and, more recently, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Tadao Ando. Learning from good architects is a great idea, but possessing the critical faculty to assess their work within a broader context of culture and society could be a even greater idea. Since the tumultuous 1960s when a countercultural ethos began to seep into architecture, historians, theorists, and architects, such as Jane Jacobs, Bernard Rudofsky, and Robert Venturi, have made compelling arguments to dethrone the architect from godlike heights by proposing the alternative notions of community design, nonpedigreed architecture, and pop. Yet, architectural education seems still to be stuck tragically within the individual-genius mode that modern architecture passionately championed during the 1920s, a period Curtis has called the "heroic age" of architecture. Despite the increased intellectualization of education, residues of modern architecture's difficult relationship with history still haunt architecture schools. Modern architecture's foundational claim that it evolved from a vacuum outside of history proper as a prerequisite for creating the authentically new necessitated a concomitant mythology of the hallowed architect's placement outside an evolutionary continuum.¹⁸

Such a placement crowned the architect-hero, who, unencumbered by any historical impurities, alone could build the promised utopia on the *tabula rasa* which, allegedly, was the originary ground of modern Architecture.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, carefully choreographed its emergence as a paradigm shift by introducing what its theorists called a self-critical irony to the architectural discourse. By claiming that modern architecture's master narrative died a tragic death in 1972 with the demolition of St. Louis's Pruitt-Igoe housing project, the Postmodern theorist Charles Jencks in one way or another announced the demise of the modernist hero-architect; instead he championed the historical import as an allegory for both architectural authenticity and the displacement of the hero. In a similar vein, Vincent Scully, in his preface to Venturi's Postmodernist manifesto *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), appeared to rush too quickly to consecrate Venturi as the diametrically-opposed "other" to Le Corbusier, or as an anti-hero, who catalyzed the shift of perspective "from the Champs-Élysées to Main Street."¹⁹ But, in hindsight, we know that during the 1980s and 1990s, posing themselves as the sole custodians of the historicist discourse that would buttress an authentic architecture, Postmodernist architects, such as Venturi, Charles Moore, and Leon Krier, perpetuated the same patriarchal heroism that had earlier mobilized modern architecture's visions of social change through an individualist ethos. While architectural historians and theorists have critically assessed and contested modern architecture's building contribution, a key factor in this 20th-century aesthetic movement to the broader architectural discourse had gone uninvestigated: that is, the myth of the architect as a hero with grand reformist aspirations, a myth that endures even today. In February 2003, when Daniel Libeskind was named the winner in the World Trade Center project competition, the ensuing media hype around him was only the latest manifestation of the modernist architect-hero as celebrity, and now media star.

As much as they inspired us with masterpieces, the heroes of modern architecture also left us a legacy of failed utopias, conceived from prophetic heights, a method criticized by the now-clichéd phrase "planning from above." In some ways, they resembled Charles Baudelaire's "Albatross," the graceful bird that soared in the sovereign space of the sky, but

remained clumsy on the ground, since "he cannot walk because of his great wings." It is time architectural education incorporated a post-Roarkian, post-heroic discourse.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (1943; New York, 1971), 14.

² See Julian Petley, "The Architect as *Übermensch*," in Philip Hayward, *Picture This: Media Representations of Visual Art and Artists* (London, c1988) and Andrew Saint, "The Architect as Hero and Genius," in *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven, 1983).

³ Peter Blake, *The Master Builders: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright* (1960; New York and London, 1996), xv.

⁴ This is a common theme in architecture survey books. See, for instance, William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (1982; New Jersey, 1983); Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture/1* (1976; New York, 1986); and Blake, *The Master Builders*, 417. Curtis wrote: "...the protagonists of the modern movement of the 1920s...shared a commitment to social improvement through design and a feeling for the progressive potential of modern technology...Despite a degree of alienation intrinsic to their avant-garde position, they thought of themselves as the prophets of a new society and as preservers of higher values: their Utopias combined apocalyptic expectation with a vein of nostalgia," *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 386. For an insightful exposition of the heroic theme, see also Vincent Scully's introduction to Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture, 1966).

⁵ See, for instance, Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 386, and Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture, the Growth of a New Tradition* (1941; Cambridge, 1959), 290-293.

⁶ Colin Rowe, *The Architecture of Good Intentions: Towards a Possible Retrospect* (London, 1994).

⁷ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936; Middlesex, 1960), 21.

⁸ Frank Lloyd Wright, *A Testament* (New York, 1957), 24.

⁹ Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*. Giedion's work was first delivered in lecture form at Harvard in 1938-39. It chronicled the history of three centuries of modern

design and planning and presented the New York park commissioner Robert Moses's planning as its climax. See also Rowe, *The Architecture of Good Intentions*, 30-43.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Pehnt, "The 'New Man' and the Architecture of the Twenties" in J. Fiedler, *Social Utopias of the Twenties: Bauhaus, Kibbutz and the Dream of the New Man* (Wupperthal, 1995).

¹¹ Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture* (London, 1973), 41.

¹² Among many others, Le Corbusier read *Zarathustra* as early as 1908, see Jean Louis Cohen, "Le Corbusier's Nietzschean Metaphors," p. 311; Mendelsohn in 1911, Neumeyer, "Nietzsche and Modern Architecture," 293; Taut read it as early as 1904, Iain Boyd Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism* (New York, 1982), 85.

¹³ Umberto Eco, "The Myth of the Superman" *Diacritics* (Spring 1972).

¹⁴ Blake, *The Master Builders*, preface to the paperback edition (1996), x.

¹⁵ See Joseph Esherick, "Architectural Education in the Thirties and Seventies: A Personal View," in Kostof, Spiro, ed., *The Architect, Chapters in the History of the Profession* (New York, 1977) and J. A. Chewning, "The Teaching of Architectural History during the Advent of Modernism 1920s-1950s," in Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, *The Architectural Historian in America* (A symposium in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Society of Architectural Historians; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1990).

¹⁶ Blake, *The Master Builders*, 417.

¹⁷ The modernist curriculum's monolithic espousal of certain principles has been described by Blake: "Like all of my contemporaries, I had been educated to accept a number of clear and idealistic precepts regarding architecture, planning, urban design, and related matters. Most of these precepts had been developed in Europe and in the United States between 1920 and 1950 by a handful of extraordinary pioneers whose visions dominated our lives, first as students and then as practitioners." Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked* (Boston and Toronto, 1974), 9.

¹⁸ Vincent Scully, "Introduction," in Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture, 1966), 16.

¹⁹ Vincent Scully, "Introduction," in Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 9-11.