Thus Spake 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 a swashbuckling struggle against the mediocrity of the common man, all sorts of collectivism, moral depravation, and corporate capitalism, "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 modeled her hero Roark on a real-life architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Did this conflation of the imaginary and the real bear any significance for the architectural profession and pedagogy? Rand brought to light, albeit through the literary media, what 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.

[2] This paper explores 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, hypothetically speaking, modern architecture — as it emerged in the early twentieth century — flourished in part on the heady promises of social change through spatial design, how might we assess the broader scope of such promises within modernist architectural pedagogy? I ask whether the heroic myth — often seen removed from its original social and cultural conditions — somehow perpetuate conditions that favor superficial appreciation of "master" architects and, thereby, spawn a globalizing culture of image-ridden architectural practices. If such consequences signal the failure in architectural curricula, what can

we do about it? Could critical history and theory in architectural education play an important role in enabling architects better understand architecture not as a monument-making high art, but as a responsive and responsible building profession that could both represent and influence society in a wide spectrum of possibilities?

In order to address these questions, I will first explore the architect's heroic image within the early-twentieth-century discourse of modern architecture that emerged with loud calls for cultural renewal. 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. The Western societies were hit by a plethora of disparate stimuli — Freudian psychology, 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 Collin Rowe would put it, not to see for architecture a grand, redeeming social role. Thanks to the remnants of 19th-century Romantic individualism, the architect positioned himself as a catalyst for cultural regeneration. A platonic, spartan, and universal architectural idiom devoid of bourgeois decadence would be his vehicle to achieve this goal. Under his leadership, the phoenix of modern utopia, he imagined, would rise from the ashes of 19th-century laissez-faire cities and their dysfunctional architecture.

The classisizing spirit that also pervaded the era 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-Vitruvius role (i.e. a role that goes beyond the regimental aspirations of the Vitruvius triad of utilitas, firmitas, and venustas) in reshaping the world in term of his own conception of reality. This therapeutic service of 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.

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."[3] 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. In *Space, Time and Architecture*, Sigfried Giedion theorized modern architecture's aspirations in millennial terms.[4] 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. Le Corbusier's famous "hand-into-the-picture-frame" 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.

Consider also the Bauhaus projection of the architect as *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. It was hardly surprising that generations of architects — among them, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Erich Mendelsohn, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe — hoisted the Nietzschean torch and sought to project themselves as *Übermensch* or the New Man. 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,[5] while 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 bringing utopia.[6] But if utopia was an infinite state of perfection, its shaper — the architect-hero — inhabited a similar atemporal realm, one that was invulnerable to any historical exigencies.

The problem with such a conceptualization lies, as the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco would put it, in a paradoxical

treatment of time.[7] 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 mythology, 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 immobilistic metaphysics, in which his archetypal persona remains impervious to any historical and social scrutiny.

Seeking to come to terms with shifts in architectural attitudes from traditionalism and neoclassicism to modernism, many architectural schools during the 1920s and 1930s subscribed to this model of the hero. As architectural practice was adjusting to increasing professionalization and especially facing the challenges of engineers, the modernist architectural curricula in way or another internalized the heroic myth for self-legitimacy. The origin of the myth could, however, be traced back to the oldest book on architecture, Vituvius's *De Architectura Libri Decem*: the Vitruvian architect commanded encyclopedic knowledge in geometry, history, philosophy, music, medicine, law, and astronomy: and he later re-emerged as the Renaissance man (Alberti, for instance), who identified strongly with the classical past. Yet within the rubric of modernist architectural education, the heroic persona of the architect became the embodiment of modernity's broader aspirations. Loaded with seductive promises of cultural rebirth, the heroic myth offered architectural theorists an operating framework to look beyond classicism's purported aesthetic autonomy and Ecole des Beaux-Arts' elitist academicism in order to include grander visions for social change. Le Corbusier's penultimate declaration in *Towards a New Architecture* that it was either architecture or revolution became one of the originary mantras of modernist architectural education as it took shape in the early twentieth century. And the modern architect stood heroically at this imagined intersection of architecture and social revolution.

Heroism is a broad concept negotiating complex social sentiments and conditions, and people's expectation. Heroes would rise, no matter what, above the common folk by creating or performing the extraordinary. The purpose here is not to engage in hero-bashing: or to offer a false choice between heroism and pedestrianism: or between individual genius and collective methods: 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 equip him with intellectual as well as practical tools to practice a responsive and responsible architecture. The canonical modernist curriculum — one that places strong, sometimes monolithic, emphasis on individual genius — have generally failed to develop an inclusive framework that addresses culture, politics, economy, and environment as producers of both architecture and its heroic figures. Because courses engaging students with critical history and social

theories are at best peripheral within the curriculum, architectural education still revolves mostly around form-oriented design instruction, one that often over-emphasizes the spectacular and monumental. The overriding consideration in education is specularity, an aesthetic outlook often deriving from the superficial appreciation of great form-givers of the past and present. The professional nature of architectural education is largely insulated from current socio-cultural developments. Not so coincidentally, 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 greater idea. It seems that architectural education is tragically still stuck within the heroic-individual-genius mode that modern architecture passionately championed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Residues of modern architecture's difficult relationship with history still haunt architecture schools. Does the recent global proliferation of what could be called "magazine architecture" attest only to the pervasive aesthetic anxiety to emulate the hero's spectacular edifice?

NOTES

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

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[3] Frank Lloyd Wright, *A Testament* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 24.

[4] 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. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture, the Growth of a New Tradition*(1941; Cambridge, 1959). Also see Colin Rowe, *The Architecture of Good Intentions. Towards a Possible Retrospect* (1941; London, 1994), 30-43.

[5] Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, p. 41.

[6] Among many others, Le Corbusier read *Zarathustra* as early as 1908, see Cohen, "Le Corbusier's Nietzschean Metaphors," p. 311; Mendelsohn in 1911, Neumeyer, "Nietzsche and Modern Architecture," p. 293; Taut read it as early as 1904, Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism*, p. 85.

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