

Roark's Shadow – Between Defiance and Docility

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Introduction

When looking for architecture in popular culture's shallow waters, you tend to come across some amusing things. Frank Gehry's appearance on Fox's *The Simpsons* draws immediate attention, as does the character Ted Mosby of CBS's *How I Met Your Mother*, and the more distant memories of Mike Brady, the curly-haired father of the *Brady Bunch*. My personal favorite, however, is a smaller, more elusive fish in these shallows. In 2005, Esquire Magazine published a story titled "If They Build It..." featuring seven notable architects. Though all of the architects would be recognized with disciplinary circles, Daniel Libeskind stood out among the seven as the architect that had soared above conventional architectural strata to a higher plateau occupied by only the most recognized designers. In my humble opinion, this article does a dismal job in reflecting on Libeskind's influence within the broader architecture discourse, and more so in bringing this discourse to its readership, though this is not to say that the article is without merit. It is quite specific in one amusingly attribute, acknowledging what each of the seven architects is wearing - Libeskind is conveniently adorned in a "Two-button wool suit (\$2,210) by Jil Sander; cotton shirt (\$195) by Calvin Klein Collection; silk tie (\$110) by Z Zegna."¹ In this one anecdotal moment, Libeskind becomes a living mannequin for the fleeting fashion world, his corporeal existence stripped of any substantive architectural commentary beyond the requisite quip about his background. Libeskind, having garnered the colloquial title 'starchitect'², orbits within a foggy, ether-filled realm between practitioner and celebrity, where adulation-induced intoxication suggests that his resulting architectural offerings are beyond reproach. Libeskind is in good company, surrounded by a pantheon of anointed

architectural laureates, each having ascended through the pressured expectations of having produced profound, original work. Many of these architects could easily be aligned with the fierce brand of individual genius framed within the archetype of Howard Roark, Ayn Rand's protagonist in her novel *The Fountainhead*, who has become the centerpiece of society's romantic portrait of the maverick genius architect. Roark's individuality and integrity as a designer emerges as a direct confrontation to the persistent fashions, critiques, and dogmas of an architectural discipline that is fixated on preserving neo-classicism as the proper architectural order and style. Roark's resistance is unwavering, to the extremes of Roark wagering his own self-destruction instead of bowing to the expectations for professional obedience and corruption. It is easy to admire Rand's portrayal of Roark as the architect-hero, but it is more of a stretch to see how this portrayal and embodiment of architectural integrity has morphed into the self-aggrandizing, commodified suggestions of architectural brilliance hiding below by Libeskind's jacket and tie. Surely Roark must be rolling in his proverbial grave.

The preceding passage is a bit of an aside, though it sets in motion a vexing and persistent question within the discipline as a whole, and more poignantly within the academy – the influence and affect of the individual in design. Though architecture as a discipline has long recognized the critical role of collaborative thinking in the design process, the romantic image of the lone architect has been etched so deeply into our collective psyche that we prefer to identify ourselves with this maverick spirit rather than indulge in the personal sacrifices required by committees, collaborations and group thinking. Roark is the master of the compelling, controversial and problematic image of a singular genius, and the predominance of this view is so far reaching that it is nearly impossible to find an architecture student who has not, at some point in their academic training, read Rand's novel and envisaged themselves in his place – the architect-hero who can see through the meaningless drivel of contemporary architecture and cleave a new brand of architecture from its discarded carcass.³ I, like many of my undergraduate classmates, drew upon Roark as one of my earliest influences, and in doing so reinforced the "myth of the autonomous architect-hero"⁴ offered by Rand.

At the time, I was disinclined to notice that Rand introduces Roark with his expulsion from the academy, but in retrospect, this portion of Rand's story brings many of my more recent inquiries into focus – namely the role and significance of the individual within design pedagogy.

In fairness to Rand, the common understanding of Howard Roark has drifted away from the more complex character of her narrative towards a more direct, unrelenting archetype that is as intoxicating in his integrity as he is problematic in his portrayal of the architect in society. Upon departing from the Stanton Institute of Technology, Roark meets with the Dean of the School of Architecture for a forthright discussion about his expulsion and potential return. The conversation that unfolds is powerful and moving, in part because Roark's argument draws into question the role and relevance of the client, eschewing the normative architectural conventions in favor of the transformative power of architecture, and in doing so raising the spirit and power of architecture as a catalyst for social change. More so, the essence of Roark's architectural vision is fundamentally modern and as such offers a clear connection to the modernist foundations of architectural pedagogy to which we are all familiar.⁵ Roark as an individual embodies the heroic aspirations of the modern architectural movement while simultaneously rejecting the stale codifications of normative thinking, offered first and foremost in the academy from which he had just been expelled.

The Beginning of Things

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on design education in recent years, particularly its curricular structure and more so the maintenance and/or abandonment of the independent thesis as the capstone exercise of architecture students.⁶ This upending of academic tradition is anchored to an extended set of observations about the disjunction between education and practice in architecture. Dana Cuff, in her book *Architecture: A Story of Practice*, draws a collects numerous observations about contemporary practice into a set of four dualities within the profession, with the academy taking the lead: "Within the schools, the core belief in individualism over collaboration is bred in the studio. This is counter-intuitive, since the studio depends upon

the group spirit and cohesion among its members, as well as upon a close working relationship between instructor and student. The problem resides in the fact that these in-use principles of design are not part of the espoused theory. Collective aspects of designing receive virtually no pedagogic attention and generate little reflection, nor does the importance of architecture's social context, even though it plays a definitive role in the studio."⁷ Cuff's observations are precursory to the more hefty Boyer Report of 1996, which sought to realign "architectural education around seven goals – many of which emphasized a renewed vision and commitment to the multiple publics that it served."⁸ Though it would be difficult to fault the larger ambitions of the Boyer Report, the general emphasis on societal context and connectivity runs at odds with the view of architecture proffered by Roark: "Well, I could say that I must aspire to build for my client the most comfortable, the most logical, the most beautiful house that can be built. I could say that I must try to sell him the best I have and to also teach him to know the best. I could say it, but I won't. Because I don't intend to build in order to serve or help anyone. I don't intend to build in order to have clients. I intent to have clients in order to build."⁹

Roark's sentiments are conveyed with certainty, suggesting that the idiosyncrasies of the client should not lie central to the project or even at its margins, but rather should be transcended. This particular sentiment has been a part of architecture's academic discourse in varying degrees, with the occasional studio project having external client, but the more common position of faculty is simultaneously both critic and provisional client.¹⁰ In this scenario, the students are sheltered from the potential corrupting factors of the 'real world', favoring instead the fertile fields that are of particular interest to the faculty, and through them to the architectural project at hand. "This is why a studio problem can be esoteric and conceptual in a way that the problems of practice never are."¹¹ The resulting projects are generally responsible in their development, but can easily be steered towards architectural ends that are of particular interest the faculty in charge, and in doing so reinforce the Roarkian attitude that clients are of little service to the broader architectural project, or are, at best, inconveniences worthy of agitation.

The pressures of architectural practice are immense and undeniable, though the corresponding lessons in the academy are more difficult to introduce, let alone evaluate. The academy tends to champion a simplified design problem that allows an individual student to move through a process that yields thoughtful work that doesn't attempt to resolve the full complexity of client wishes, regulations, budgets and schedules, with the responsibility and consequence resting solely on the shoulders the student.¹² To expect more would overwhelm even the strongest students, requiring a cadre of consultants and advisors that may open the eyes of the student to larger professional goals, but more likely would whittle the experimental ambitions of the student into a metaphorical paper-doll project, normative and compromised. Thus the studio environment, and within it the students as a collection of individuals, are provided sanctuary from excessive external professional standards and expectations. "The academic setting is intended to provide, as far as possible, a risk-free environment for students to learn and experiment. Yet the very opportunity that school offers is exactly the reason why design values can easily dominate in a context where design ability is the only element at stake."¹³

Head of the Class

The question of design ability is at the crux of architectural education and with it the significance of the individual becomes paramount. Early design studios have a distinct benefit in addressing this concern head on, largely because they focus on specific introductory skills such as drawing or model building as well as foundational design principles including ordering systems, hierarchy, and spatial thinking and making. The presence of prior skills or proclivity towards design thinking may be pronounced at the beginning of the studio, but a rapid building of skills and confidence can quickly balance the extremes of student performance within a studio. Furthermore, the presence of a group of skilled students can accelerate the progress of the studio as a whole, particularly if the group is open to sharing their skills with their peers. That said, the gremlin of ego lingers in any studio, and can turn the studio environment into toxic competition. More often than not, the faculty member intervenes to prevent this kind of studio culture from emerging, but on other occasions,

faculty appear to reinforce this characteristic as a motivational strategy. "From Princeton University comes tales of Michael Graves announcing at the beginning of the semester that he will only be interested in working with a few of his students, those being the most talented. The others (who have also paid their costly tuition) are expected to get along with minimal supervision. Whether or not this story is true, it reflects the perception of the instructor-student relationship as a limited, valued resource, and it reifies the belief that the talented (both Graves and his chosen students) can claim special privileges in architecture. This talent is not taught; it is believed to be a natural gift bestowed upon the best designers."¹⁴

This notion of "bestowed gifts" is a perplexing and frustrating one for design students, particularly when they feel as if they have received the short end of the stick. More often than not, students can demonstrate technical competence with a range of tools but struggle in finding meaning in their work. The strongest students often need less instruction than their struggling counterparts, though the quality of their work often commands the lion's share of attention in reviews. Alternately, those students' whose work fails to excite may be pushed to the margins, with their efforts labeled as derivative, uncreative, or unoriginal. To be fair, the faults may rest on the student's shoulders, the resultant of lagging initiative, effort or investment in the design process. That being said, other factors may also be steering their struggles. Sir Ken Robinson has offered a particularly compelling case for the decay of creativity, faulting in large part the predominance of educational models that reinforce a "right/wrong" rationality, which in turn discourages the kind of risk-taking that is essential for original thought.¹⁵ More so, the vehicles that can carry forward these ideas for students are often smothered by ideological attitudes regarding mistakes, methodology, and media. "Our creative capacities are released and realized through the medium we use. Discovering the right medium is often a tidal moment in the creative life of the individual."¹⁶ This is particularly significant for design students, who are required to think through a variety of concerns not simply in their heads, but through their work, a particularly troublesome task for students who are trying to master a technique while simultaneously sorting through a design problem. At some point in this process something gives, the work suffers and

the ensuing review lacerates the student for an inadequate effort.

More troubling studio scenario happens when a medium or technique is required that provides no useful outlet for the student's ideas. The direction offered by faculty may lead to a negotiated approach that allows the student to move forward, but depending on the particular scenario, the students may be left with a choice between two competing ends – obedience to the professor's lesson plan, or the risk of rebellion. "Creative rebels are sometimes defined as those who "break the rules for the right reasons" –that is, by breaking with convention or going against the instructor's program they achieve great results."¹⁷ This scenario places the student in a stunningly similar position to Roark, risking rejection by the professoriate in order to preserve the integrity of their work, or accepting conformity to attain the sought-after approval of their professor.

Professorial Blessings

The role of the professoriate in this instance requires turning a critical lens onto the manner, methods and intentions of design pedagogy. We, as part of the larger academic elite, yield a much higher degree of control over students than we are likely to admit. Our position of faculty grants us tremendous authority of the direction of design exploration. In ideal terms, our role is multivalent, oscillating between instructor, critic, therapist, counsel and mentor. In more poetic terms, we procure the position of altruistic shepherds to our flock of students, offering nurturing guidance as they move into the depth and breadth of the design fields. Equally, and intentionally antagonistic in language, we are the tastemakers of the academy, wielding a baton that can be quickly struck to keep the more rebellious students in line as they move toward a predetermined end. Though I indulge in hyperbole in describing these two extremes, it is fair to say that we have all witnessed professorial behavior that is close to both ends of this spectrum. Ursula McClure offers a clear and rare incision into this predicament. "To indulge is one thing; to become self-indulgent is another. Professors would be remiss to ignore this aspect of the profession."¹⁸

McClure's insight is directed specifically towards the potentials and pitfalls of growing presence of

research studios as a means of design learning and delivery, though her scalpel extends beyond the limits of this pedagogical setting. In many ways, McClure reveals the risk of believing too closely our own rhetoric, and with it indoctrinating our students into our own belief structure rather than assisting them of developing their own. Paul Shephard offers a similar critique in his comparison of the one professor's methods to that of dressage. As he notes of the review: "The students stand up in front of their drawings and describe what they've done. No why or what for, just what. They don't contribute to the discussion—they remind me of a flock of exotic birds migrating, on their way through, just landed for a short stopover, tired out after the flight. Why not? They've been working all night to get these drawings finished.

Each student's scheme looks the same. A brick is a brick is a brick, I said to myself—and then made the observation, aloud, that a brick is not the only thing to build with—"what about the Assyrian Army, who built pyramid trophies in the battlefield out of severed human heads?"¹⁹

Shephard's decision to offer the gruesome extreme of constructing architecture from "severed human heads" is shocking and perhaps inflated for effect, but the resonance of his criticality of persistent architectural dogma is well placed. The review process is a difficult one for student and faculty alike, and though the student's may often feel that they are intentionally subjected to public flogging, the faculty leading the studio are frequently tied up in the work of their students to the extent that criticism lobbed to studios is shared by their faculty, and occasionally directed at the faculty, not the student. Shephard's story showcases this condition, with the faculty's ensuing retort to Shephard's outburst being delivered with a sense of patience and calm that we reserve for unruly children. "Look at this shoe," he says, his voice gentle with care, as if he is describing a rainbow to his lover. "This shoe is made of leather. Leather is a perfect material for the clothing of feet. Leather has been used for centuries for just this purpose. My shoe is made of leather just like the shoes in ancient Rome were. So, brick and stones have been used for building. They have stood the test of time." He's word perfect; he's said this before."²⁰

I, like many, have been on the receiving end of this kind of rehearsed lecture and have grown nearly as frustrated as Shepherd. I have found myself wishing for the ghost of Roark to rise up and fuel a critically placed rebellion in the students, fighting off the architectural self-righteousness that they are being fed. Unfortunately, this kind of resistance from students has become an infrequent occurrence, in part to avoid the appearance of the contempt for the faculty and the resulting academic punishment that will come, but also because their failings are two-fold; in producing an satisfactory architectural object, and also in comprehending the larger architectural principles in question.

What to do at the end?

This point offers an ideal moment to pivot way from the threads I have unraveled thus far and attempt to refocus the question of the student's academic experience at the end of their education. This moment has historically been defined as an independent thesis, a broad and shifting title for an array of project types, scopes and scales. The critical link is not in the project itself, but in its execution as an independently directly architectural inquiry. As David Salomon notes, "The seemingly perpetual angst surrounding thesis, the vast array of proposals that qualify as one, and the growing number of alternatives to it, expose the competing and often contradictory demands placed on architecture and architectural education."²¹ His essay addresses the growing position of the research studio as an alternative to the independent thesis, emerging as "the result of both internal and external pressures placed on architectural education and practice."²² Salomon is thorough in his examination of histories, influences and directions of this pedagogical method for inquiry, and offers insight into both the strengths and pitfalls of this collective pedagogical experiment. At its best, the research studio is an "experimental process of making and testing risky propositions with recursive trials and errors, that has the potential to move architectural thought and action beyond the dual mythologies of objective reason and individual genius."²³ Equally, they carry the burden of serving faculty interests first: "The shift from an independent thesis to a research studio shifts the burden of defining a research project back to the faculty."²⁴ This task presumes that faculty leading the studios operate with academic integrity, through which the individual

aspirations of each student can be channeled towards the larger, collective goal. That said, Salomon also notes that "the research studio does not automatically produce good research, and it is not immune to the historical problems of the independent theses. It too can be prone to (collective) acts of narcissism, to vague methodologies, to blindly following fashions, to focusing on expression rather than experimentation, to overemphasizing non-disciplinary issues, or letting its results languish unpublished."²⁵ In relieving the burden of the independent thesis from the student, the ideas of students becomes blurred, as the expectation of integrity and originality of the student's work may not be distinct from that of the faculty, the studio, or the school. "For some, the channeling of students' creativity and intuition toward faculty, institutional, or disciplinary agendas is tantamount to limiting artistic and intellectual freedom. Students could be at risk of losing an opportunity to develop their own theories of architecture or to challenge, rather than reinforce, their curriculum."²⁶

This shift necessitates broader concerns of the integrity and discipline to the professoriate, which at this point is suspect. "I could conjecture that the abuse of student labor in academic settings leads to the unpaid intern, the underpaid architect, and eventually the devaluation of the profession in general. Like any system of abuse, the abused often becomes the abuser."²⁷ This circular pattern is undeniable but difficult to prove, requiring a level of self-criticality that the academy, and frankly the discipline as whole, has been neglecting for some time. The difficulty in this regard is not in finding a moment for introspection, but the courage to execute this critique without mincing words.

Full Circle

Which brings us full circle to the early questions of Howard Roark and the shadow that he casts. The Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston opened in 1997 to much applause and initially glowing reviews. Designed by the lauded New York firm Diller and Scofidio, the project was to reframe Boston's waterfront and with it the larger architecture discourse. Though most critics offered initial praise, hushed words over drinks with other practitioners suggested a latent suspicion. But why would this be the case, particularly given the general applause offered in trade and scholarly journal alike? Philip Nobel's

review of the ICA for *Metropolis* is perhaps the first to hold Diller and Scofidio accountable for the project's failings: "and it's a mess, even an embarrassment. Thoughts turn to naked emperor's and their court. Again."²⁸ Nobel's critique is stinging in the world of architectural reviews, but hardly mean-spirited or unwarranted. His words are refreshing in their bluntness, giving voice to the concerns and questions that much of the profession recognizes but are unwilling to say. Nobel closes his review with a slicing appraisal of architectural criticism in general, and the kid gloves that are worn when reviewing the most elite of architects. "Certainly there's more power in constructing fame than in questioning it. Or is it that such critics think that star-crafted buildings, even if derivative and poorly realized, are inherently better than the alternative? Do they fear that by challenging these architects they might discourage innovation? Do they imagine that promoting innovation—even just the look of innovation—is such a pure good that the defense of all other values must be suspended along with our disbelief?"²⁹

It is rare for this kind of review is offered, let alone lobbed against the elite. It reminds us that our discipline has drifted into self-indulgency without self-criticality, constructing architectural idols on the coattails of Roark's fictional heroism. McClure notes, "*We are also aware of the architect who takes a lesser fee in desperation to get a commission. Where does this devaluation come from? It must be learned. Where and from whom does one learn? One learns from the academy.*"³⁰ Similarly, considerations of greatness in architecture are first learned in the academy and we, the professoriate, are at the fulcrum. We can be content in our complicity in perpetuating the myth of individual genius, and forwarding to our students a confused understanding of integrity, originality, individuality and celebrity in architecture. We can also be complicit in our shift towards collective thinking and making, where we can shape the next generation of architects in our own image, assuming the we know best. Alas, neither of these extremes offers much appeal, but the balancing act between them is exciting. It relies on resistance to the temptation to accept without critical questioning, and more so to be told unequivocally what to do. Perhaps we should encourage our students to rethink Roark and embrace not his ego or large-

than-life heroism, but simply his willingness to resist being defined by others.

Notes

¹ "If They Build It...", *Esquire.com*. July 1, 2005, <http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0705ARCHITECTSrev_126>. (accessed March 3, 2013)

² "Starchitect," *Wikipedia.com*, January 22 2013, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starchitect> (accessed March 3, 2013)

³ This observation is my own, though Dana Cuff notes a similar experience in her introduction. See Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*. (New York: Signet: 1971), 5-27.

⁶ David Salomon, "Experimental Cultures: On the "End" of the Design Thesis and the Rise of the Research Studio." *Journal of Architectural Education*. 65. no1. (October 2011), 33-44.

⁷ Cuff, 251.

⁸ Salomon, 35.

⁹ Rand, 26.

¹⁰ Cuff, 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁵ Ken Robinson, "Schools Kill Creativity." TED Talks. TED. Monterey, California. February 2006. Lecture. http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html (accessed March 3, 2013)

¹⁶ Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Mind, Learning to be Creative*. (Chichester, West Sussex: Capstone Ltd, 2001), 129.

¹⁷ Cuff, 122.

¹⁸ Ursula Emery McClure, "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. Use and Abuse of the Research Studio." *Journal of Architectural Education*. 62. no1. (September 2007), 73.

¹⁹ Paul Shepheard, *What is Architecture? An Essay on Landscapes, Buildings, and Machines*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994), 4.

²⁰ Shepheard, 5.

²¹ Salomon, 33.

²² Ibid., 34.

²³ Ibid., 42.

²⁴ Ibid., 35.

²⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁶ Ibid., 42.

²⁷ McClure, 75.

²⁸ Philip Nobel, "Design Another Day." *Metropolis*. May 2007, 98.

²⁹ Nobel, 99.

³⁰ McClure, 75.