

PROMETHEUS

02

CHICAGO SCHOOLS: AUTHORS, AUDIENCES, AND HISTORY

Edited by Dan Costa Baciu

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IIT Architecture Chicago

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Dan Costa Baciu





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Dan Costa Baciú

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PROMETHEUS: JOURNAL OF THE PHD PROGRAM IN ARCHITECTURE

Why *Prometheus*?

Prometheus is a peer-reviewed journal that presents research-in-progress developed for the annual student-run symposium organized by the PhD Program of the College of Architecture, Illinois Institute of Technology. Each year, PhD students are selected to serve as editors of the journal. The research featured in each issue is produced primarily by PhD students from IIT and universities all over the world who participated in the annual symposium. It utilizes different methodologies to explore questions related to architecture and engineering, as well as allied disciplines such as design, landscape architecture, and urbanism. Additionally, each issue of *Prometheus* includes an annual overview of the academic accomplishments of our PhD students, plus related activities ranging from our weekly Architecture Research Forum lectures to social events aimed at fostering community.

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Why did we select Prometheus as the symbol and masthead of our journal? He was the irreverent Titan who stole fire to pave the way for the advancement of humankind. From our vantage point in Chicago, we understand that fire is both a tool for destruction and creation. The Great Fire of 1871 leveled the city and provided Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett with a reason to devise the Plan of Chicago (1909). Without the fire of modern blast furnaces, the steel girders and supporting beams in our Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed S. R. Crown Hall would not have been possible.

As a College of Architecture within a science and technology-rich university, our faculty and PhD students are committed to fostering an environment of interdisciplinary inquiry. Since the early 1940s, research with real-world applications has been produced by our Master of Science Program graduates. Our PhD Program in Architecture was established in the late 1990s as a continuation of the research conducted by MS students in collaboration with faculty. In the intervening years, we have trained researchers who have made significant contributions within academia and in practice across the globe.

We hope *Prometheus* will serve as a platform for emerging researchers who, like the symbol and masthead of this journal, take risks that lead to game-changing innovation at the service of humankind.

We wish to thank Dan Costa Baciu for his efforts as the editor as well as helping organize the symposium scientific parts and coordination with the Chicago Biennial, Daniel Whittaker for his contribution to the organization of the symposium, Melinda Van Leer for her copyediting oversight, and designers Bud Rodecker and Alyssa Arnesen of Thirst.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Any given day in the fall of 1938 must have felt grim and disheartening, the beginning of a story with unforeseeable, dreadful outcomes that inspired a sense of escape, or the wish to stop and start over. In Europe, radicalism gained ground, promoting destruction, terror, and expulsion. Mass hysteria and dogma broke out into a war of sledgehammers and fire. Madness, fear, and fury filled the streets with shattered windows. That fall, immigration rates in the United States peaked despite the wish of the general US public to restrict immigration policies. At the same time, many European and Latin American countries refused refugees.

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Turning their back on Europe during that fearful eve of World War II, as part of an unparalleled cultural transfer, the very heart of the European vanguards reached the American East Coast and Midwest. In this process, two major personalities of the Bauhaus framed their educational concepts as Chicago schools: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe arrived in September 1938 to reform the Chicago School of Architecture, and László Moholy-Nagy, who had crossed the ocean in 1937, searched for support to initiate the Chicago School of Design. Ludwig Hilberseimer, Walter Peterhans, and György Kepes followed along. At Harvard, Walter Gropius, who had arrived in 1937 accompanied by Marcel Breuer, was promoted to chairman of the Department of Architecture. This influential position allowed Gropius to call on Sigfried Giedion to teach architectural history.

Gropius and Giedion had met at the Bauhaus in Germany back in 1923, during the heyday of the institute's enthusiastic beginnings. Along with innovative teaching, the 1922 competition entry for the Chicago Tribune Tower might have attracted Giedion's attention. The thirty-five-year-old historian was mesmerized by the school's progressive spirit; and he promoted the Bauhaus with an overly positive article in one of the most regarded Swiss architectural magazines. Five years later, Giedion became general secretary of the newly launched International Congresses of Modern Architecture, a position that he continued holding in 1938 when he left Zurich for Harvard.

In the menacing light of change, when the European vanguards were searching for a place in the Americas, the Swiss historian and critic wrote down the story of the Chicago school of architecture that had begun the previous century in the context of the expanding construction industry. Giedion's choice of buildings and architects to represent the Chicago school followed a traditional line later continued by his student at Harvard, Bruno Zevi, who wrote that his generation owed their historiographies down to the very examples of architecture and modernism to Giedion. Zevi's Italian book on the history of architecture mentions the Chicago school in terms so similar to Giedion's that it could seem a translation—as Zevi himself acknowledged. Then came Rowe, Tafuri, and many more with them. The vanguards accepted the Chicago school as one of their historical foundations. However, culture and public space are often fought for.

The story of the Europeans is a parallel world to Thomas Tallmadge's Chicago school, whom Giedion nicknamed Tom, but silently disagreed with. Tallmadge had inspired his historiography of the Chicago school from the same sources as Giedion, but he proposed a different view: Prairie houses instead of skyscrapers, and horizontal instead of vertical lines. What ensued seems all the more unpredictable and remarkable. Many, many Chicago schools emerged side-by-side. In the 1960s, this plurality became so overwhelming that historians such as H. Allen Brooks tried to forcibly put an end to it all.

Robert Bruegmann's "myth of the Chicago" school goes into a similar direction. The Chicago school had become a myth. Then again, if one were to accept that the Chicago school is an urban myth, how did this myth form and evolve?

In the 1910s, there was a great deal of interest in the Chicago school. No, not the Chicago school of architecture. Much was written about the Chicago School of Civics, an institution at the University of Chicago that few write about today although it formed one of the roots of the Chicago school of sociology. The Chicago school of architecture was only occasionally referenced to in press around the time, for example when the Art Institute opened its Chicago room, today held in high esteem among historians. Something has changed.

The first century of the Chicago school, from 1850 to 1950, was a period of formation in which Chicago schools competed for public attention and diversified. This, that, and yet the other school followed on each other's heels. Over time, diversity accumulated, reaching, in the 1960s, a threshold to joint breakthrough. People might then have asked each other: Have you heard of this or that Chicago school? Suddenly, one had to specify "Chicago school of commercial architecture," rather than just saying "Chicago school" or "Chicago school of architecture." This process, together with what happened next, is the heart of a new understanding of urban culture that comes out of my dissertation "Everything Called Chicago School." Diversity leads to growth, but growth diminishes diversity. It's all a natural cycle of culture you can read about in Chicago Lecture 1, "The Chicago School: Large-Scale Dissemination and Reception."

Accordingly, some schools lost out during the phase of growth. Among them was the Chicago school of architecture. Although one of the earliest and strongest Chicago schools, the school of architecture has been less prolific in recent decades than the Chicago schools of social science at the University of Chicago that will now have to search for a new sister—because absence of diversity curbs the growth. In a forthcoming article, I have called this phenomenon diversity selection; it may constitute a distinct type of cooperation. Giedion and the avantgarde inspired a spirit of cultural richness in the Chicago school. However, today, where is this spirit? Is it lost forever? We trust not.

The Chicago school symposium was different than the arrival of the German "Avantgarde." The storm was different. It was peer-reviewed and it accompanied the celebrations of the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial. Nevertheless, in the esteem of cultural exchange, the symposium brought together students and experts from four continents to enrich the spirit of joint success, and help diversity rebound and generate new growth. *Prometheus* is the continuation of this new tradition.