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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

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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.

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.