CHILDREN OF PROMETHEUS

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Abstract

The superhuman is a notion of mankind's relationship between himself and his tools. This bound condition of dependence with ingenuity both liberates his body from mortal perils and binds him to indefinite dependence with the complex, the external, and inhuman. Architecture as an extension of mankind's agency which asserts and protects his will against unknown forces contends with this implicit contract, a contract and paradox most poetically considered in our earliest Western myths.
PROLOGUE

The names for our lived conditions have changed, but the conditions themselves remain the same. To live we must conquer the unknowable, even hostile. According to the myth of Prometheus, humankind, its people, arts, and sciences flourished through Prometheus' apprehension of the Gods' fire. Upon the dawning of this technological revelation, Prometheus ushered in a new age where man possessed the power of Gods. Such a discovery could never be undone, this epiphany given as a fait accompli to all generations to come.

The architectural expression of the Promethean myth can be understood in modern terms through the notion of the superhuman. This is not to be confused with Nietzsche's "ubermensch" which more accurately translates to "above" or "superior" human, an argument concerning human ideals. I here identify the superhuman as the expression of a technological vision for humankind, a material utopia realized through and only with invention.

The relevance of the Promethean myth began to emerge within my architectural study gradually, subtly. At the outset of this work, I grappled with the expanding extents of the Modern movement, its campaigns appearing already a total success, enmeshing and flattening the earth within its progressive system. Our products and artifacts had now proliferated across the globe and the Anthropocene had begun to reveal the maturity of its signature. The dawn of a new earthen vernacular was coming into view.

What had become of the Urwald, the unspoiled and ancient forest? In our most developed nations, one needs make a special effort to travel beyond earshot of planes and highways. The age of the Romantics and their exotic encounters with the wild and a world-as-given seemed to be no more. Architects were now contending with the emergent consciousness of our significance on the planet, a precarious dance with our own presence, past and future. Could it be that the aspect of nature was itself shifting under the weight of our enormous presence? Was it now time to reassess the balance of what we commonly understood as "nature" and "culture"? Are we to now take the whole of the world under our wing, its protector and keeper? Architecture would be sure to tremor at such a moral reckoning. The superhuman utopia occupies the land, not as a place, but a terrain, a grand arena for the muscular display of provenance over the earth. This could be no small afront to the God fearing, but to the civilized the only thing left to fear was miscalculation, an unfortunate and avoidable lapse in the very means of our deliverance: forethought.

I have gathered here a collection of works which trace the contour of my study for the past year and beyond. The thread I have drawn from my first efforts to my last has revealed the special character of my architectural critique - that our moribund secular condition frustrates and inquires architecture's purpose. To embody and convey meaning through our work is sacred to human liberty and a pillar of the architectural endeavor.
INCLUDED WORKS

Writings:
A collection of writings is included herein. Though the last of my completed work, these essays address the full extent of my thesis study and bring into focus the aim and insights of various episodes of my study. They have been selected to trace the contour of my thinking. The first writing entitled “The Mortal Charter”, a fiction, emerged at my realization of the significance of the Promethean myth. I began this writing as an attempt to form a work of architecture through the germ of a narrative program, my central question to know if meaning through story could itself order a building. The building was a boathouse by a lake, born for the purpose of rescue and formed for the theater of great drama to unfold. The fiction became a meditation, contemplating the tragic figure of the Prometheus, the essence of its dilemma, and if a path could bring about salvation for the fated.

Plates:
During these episodes of work I made and collected countless images. Despite the abundance of work, it was often only one image that came to represent the central theme. The plates compiled herein correspond to a related essay. Some images were themselves the catalyst for the writing, an exchange of meaning between forms.

Video:
I expanded my means of work to include multiple forms of media, including computer modeling and video editing. I have included a short video composed and edited with unique recordings, images, and timelapse photography. This is a moving archive, occurring in time but lacking in sequence, a work which seeks to reconcile digital and analogue forms.

Sketchbook:
For the duration of my thesis study I kept a sketchbook in hand. At times it was the primary forum for my work and other times simply a notebook for jotting down passing conversation. In both cases, it served as a repository and shows the undulation of my thinking during the last year. Many of the pages I have included in this collection show fantastical images which emerged just before and just after the Promethean fiction.
The Mortal Charter

1.

Prometheus stirred, with a heart so great it made not once an echo. One day Prometheus, the unbounded beating drum came upon a flame in his house, for all was his house. The tiny flame, only a spark, revealed its naked self to Prometheus from within, a benevolent trespasser. His gaze was met, his heart was pierced. Prometheus grew uneasy and deeply in love.

2.

Amidst throes of desire and confusion, Prometheus bellowed and circled the spark, drawing both nearer it and nearer himself. His heart raced, the wound left by the dimly shining flame opening deeper. Though the spark had not been invited, he could not unsee its glow. Prometheus asked meekly, what should it demand of him, but the spark only shone. Groaning and famished, Prometheus set out upon a raft, amidst the murky fog and swamps and wild mountains. He ventured away from that place, away from the flame, and for the first time heard the echo of his beating heart, sounding against the great bluffs. Here, he sensed his wet body shiver in the dark, cold as wet clay. He longed for the flame. He began to dig. A left, a right hand, lunging forward into the salty beach. Amidst the blackness he groped endlessly across the expanse of shallow seas and silt. Sweat traced his brow. It was here, across the nothingness his edge was bound at last, against the edge of earth. Dolomites sprung forth from the froth and surf. Prometheus wept and with his great might, embraced the crag, lifting it from the underworld. His hands and the stones began to fly, whirling, as he cast stone upon stone. He never stopped longing for the flame and feared for it. He resolved to here tame his love. Under canopy of stone, dark like the night sky, he laid to rest and saw here the light come forth again, shimmering as heavens brought to his arms as he fell deeply asleep.

Here he dreamt of the flame and heard his heart again bellow like thunder down the cavern halls and spill out into the ocean, dissolving into the pitch of dark sea. He woke and rose again, lifting ever more stone to fill the sky with a great canopy of stone, one to guild with his beloved flame. He did this for days and night and days and ages again. Mad and in love, Prometheus trolled the land and surf for stone until one day a great storm came and swept the mighty Prometheus into dark waters. His hands clung to the dolomites, pulling him beneath the blue waves. Prometheus felt here the wind escape his wild lungs as he vanished, the fleeting spark escaping his eyes. Prometheus, drawn asunder, called for his flame to his last.
The Covenant of Realms

He sat on a quiet afternoon in his library. The lazy evening sun shone through the window casting a golden hue on his collection. He loved to feel the moving air, though hot and humid. The buzzing flies made concentration difficult, so he kept a screen over the window. This way all those things bothersome about the outdoors could be kept safely at bay while he read his books in peace, free from nuisance.

A sudden epiphany seized him. “Louis Kahn was right. The library is an institution,” he thought, “and architecture seeks purpose in realizing this body of institution.”

His eyes adrift out the window, he recalled how many times he’d taken nothing but a book with him on a bike ride across town to the lake or a park, searching for the perfect tree or bench or hollow to steal away an afternoon of solitude with the words and pages. Always it turned into much less reading than intended. The trickling waters or horseflies or passersby competed for his attention and took a portion. But in the cove of the library the other world was kept out for a new world to blossom within. A world born to give other worlds. A dream that dreams. How many vital ideas had been laid on paper and rediscovered in the dim light of the first libraries? Inside the walls of this room lived a sanctuary proffering a new nature. This new nature and every beast and fable in it could only live sheltered inside their covers, inside these walls. This was a place which fostered discoveries, but discoveries only possible within its protected realm. This realm afforded a bounty – with a catch. The bounty could be savored only by the grace of the survival of the realm. And if the civilized world were to relinquish its grasp and protection of this place? Why, the realm would cease to be, and the bounty within would vanish from the earth forever.

This troubled him. How any act of architecture could reckon with such an eternal bond seemed too daunting for words. To accept the wealth born of a place is to form a covenant with it. To accept the covenant would mean to become beholden to the realm, both he and all those to benefit and come into being by its virtue, bound to this place of earth.

Amidst these thoughts, a fly intruded, landing on the open page of his book. At once he set the book aside to wave the pest back out an open window. Soon enough, he was back to his studies in the quiet room, thoughts of tomorrow and the books he would read multiplying across his mind.
How to Get Started

With each stroke of the pencil and keyboard, his mind expanded with both possibilities and doubts. "I love it. I hate it." and so on, the dance continued. Each page and stroke of the pencil or keyboard filled his mind with possibilities and doubts, but continue to make the marks he must, he thought. Only with marks can we make a past and perhaps only then give dream to future.

It was the dead of night. After the rain had stopped, he walked into the driveway, entering his car. It was the middle of the night. The ground was damp and hardly a soul in sight, except for the rare car speeding along the residential drive. These were the right conditions for the work, or more accurately, the exercise. For this exercise he needed perfect quiet and privacy. The dark was helpful too to shut away distractions. The world seemed asleep. After a shut the door, he noticed himself comfortably alone.

He had with him a phone, headphones, and a laptop. Selecting the proper equipment was important. The exercise, which he had learned of many years earlier from a prominent artist and musician required total quiet to carry out a series of recordings. First, he recorded himself speaking extemporaneously. Then with the first recording playing back into his ear, he spoke along with it, recording extemporaneously again. Finally, with both the first and second recordings in his ear, he made a third and last. What resulted was a collision of sound and words, a cascading echo that felt stronger than any whirlpool to escape. His voice made cacophony, a feedback disaster.

The only thing more dizzying than listening to the finished product was performing the exercise in the first place. His hope was that this self-referential activity would open a window into a subconscious reservoir of insights. It didn’t feel like that at all though, but more like a charade of naval gazing. In the end the exercise offered little more than evidence that he had taken a first, albeit bewildering step. But alas, no matter how doomed the exercise proved to be, that step was itself a small achievement, drawing him closer to a better destiny if by nothing else showing where not to go again. A reliable wrong answer can after all prove as valuable as any right answer. "This must be what they call ‘progress’" he thought. The idea was to produce and produce he had.

What could be more wrong about this than any other first attempt? Was it meaningful? Was it relevant? Was it inspiring? These important questions mattered far less than the one most crucial question which guided him first, "was this practicable?" It was certainly that if nothing else, and so as good as any other wrong place to begin.
Still Life

The clarity he enjoyed after his initial recording exercise was short lived. His impulse now was to go out from under his subconscious and observe the real. He reflected on his years of study in the arts, from the titans of the classical salon all the way to the pseudonymous graffiti tags in dark alley ways and rail cars. The history books of art were filled with still lifes – simple works of observation. If it could work for centuries, it could work for him.

He resolved to make a still life. This humble exercise however almost immediately met crucial challenges he had taken for granted. What would the subject of this little work be? To reduce a world to a small picture was itself a mighty task, but what world? And contrary to his assumption that facility in drawing would make for a pretty picture, the true challenge seemed to be the seemingly banal task of fashioning a subject to feature. Faced with this sudden and daunting prospect, it occurred to him that perhaps the most honest and meaningful subject could only be found through a naive selection of ready objects. In this way the objects and things at hand could relay their story without the clutter of the artist’s intent and perhaps tell their own story of existence.

A basket was easy enough to find. He had one he used to hold onions and garlic at home. An apple and a banana came immediately to mind, the typical trope of a still life of fruits in the kitchen. Already here he committed a fault, relying more swiftly on the recollection of a vision than on his own eyes. Had better sense prevailed, the lonely onions and garlic that now rolled around helplessly on the kitchen counter would’ve become the center of a pretty still life, the window to look beyond himself as he had first hoped.

He placed the bananas and apples in the woven basket, then on a sunny table by a window in his house and then again later in the clinical fluorescent light of his academic studio. First came sketches on news print, then a tablet of fine drawing paper, then a long sheet of infinity paper neatly organized inside his computer tablet. Each attempt to show the little arrangement charmed him at first, beckoning deeper questions about the situation in front of him – the light, the time of day, the dusty table it sat on and the drab, dark colored walls behind it. Maybe driven by cleverness or impatience, the drawings were soon not enough. He marveled at the roundness and turned to make a sculpture of the still life. He thought how perfect they were already and how foolish it seemed to mimic their form in sculpture; better he plant an apple tree itself to bring about more of its being to be appreciated. No, to be a work in any formal sense, he needed to meddle in some way, show the ‘otherness’ of the sculpture from the still life itself, bearing boldly the aspects that quite obviously set it apart, calling into question not how they differed, but in what way, if any, they were the same.

He remained loyal to the naive spirit. The techniques employed were crude at best; a grade-school recipe for paper mache and xerox copies of internet bananas finished the papered orbs. Stuffed with newspaper, their lightness amused him, inspiring a strange sense of wealth to be in possession of two “apples” and two “bananas”, as if by some alchemy he’d crossed the Rubicon. This intoxicating agency inspired the creation of a diorama, a curious stage set for found and fashioned objects. The more he replicated, the more his unusual little world expanded. The humble first apple and banana were soon ignored, bruised in the basket. This other place of objects he had now assembled, a pastiche of memories and unlikely pairs disturbed him. Finally, he rendered a stick of chalk to dust at the center, accepting the haunting exercise now complete. He captured the scene in a photo and immediately destroyed the abomination.
Remodeled

He had first ventured within, then expanded and looked out. The next
vector he could imagine along which to align his work was the twin pole of
backward and forward.

Two years prior he had made a funny picture of fantasy. It was a
competition entry that never grew wings. This former work, a watercolor
painted in the style of an Italian surrealist, pictured a deconstructed
architecture. A café, but without walls, it was a barista in keep of coffee
and blankets for anyone to borrow for a relaxing drink in the grass. These
miniature settlements were the delight; a provincial program of civilized
leisure. As a work of architecture, it was dubious at best, but he found it
charming.

He set out to study the painting by remaking it. He would save it and
make it a proper work of architecture, giving it form in a digital model. The
difference was immediate and drastic. Inside the computer, every line and
asset existed syntactically. There was no ambiguity, and each sleight of hand
took on an ease render of realism. He continued work with the model,
“finishing” it in the language of his computer, indulging in the haphazard
power to bring the “unlikely” into view, together, suggesting a reality he
would never know. Here a house plant, a satellite, a glass banana could
cocoon in total indifference.

To work from an existing picture for a change, here a fiction, was a delight.
His thinking was governed, the outcome planer to achieve and perceive.
There was a humor behind the earie appearance the picture took when
resolved in the computers binary language. The awkwardness of the
exercise was itself more revealing than any grand insight he could muster
in the hours spent looking closely at the paper where once his colored
brush passed. This was no poetic translation, but a new and absurd account,
the kind that affords a drunk with an equal purchase on the written page as
the eye-witness, as if they were the same and equal and speech was nothing
more than words.
Objects World

He stayed awake late at night staring into a pair of glowing computer monitors in his dark, make-shift studio room. Hours passed in minutes, trolling curated collections of images to curate his own collection of images to submit to the university's curated collection of words and images. Every image glowed and commanded its distinction on the page. Glossy, handsome pictures asked for the suspension of disbelief, convincing him the image was no imagined world but a portal to a new world itself. "This was the power of the cascade and proliferating projections," he thought. And each world shown next to the next confused and teased the senses. The echo chamber born within this internet realm grew louder.

He gathered invisible digital models of objects by the invisible truckload, building a fantastic digital catalogue of the world known to humans and computers; an ark to withstand a great flood populated with two of every kind aboard a magnetic disk. In these late evenings he was in a fever, drunk believing each of these semblances somehow promised their possession too. The unknown and abundant world made knowable, at his fingertips, forevermore.

It was months later when sifting through unsolicited mail at his door he saw a pamphlet and was disturbed remembering an ironic loss. With a charming picture of a brown bear by a brook, the pamphlet stated "Save the Wildlife." Without the picture of the bear, this was itself a fascinating proposition. The thoughtless paradox struck him, "what can be saved and yet remain wild?" Suddenly the helpless penguins and the bumblebees were no longer his to shepherd, but his brethren, sharing mystic present-hood and striving each night to make home and tomorrow possible amidst chaos. For a moment he paused, pondering if he'd saved a penguin to his hard disk.
Place Rendered

The comfortable first year and a half he spent with classmates in the studio had abruptly become a distant memory. Since the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic, everyone it seemed made the overnight pivot to telecommuting in all walks of life—work, school, and play. Although it seemed the world had already long ago embraced digitizing everything it could, his school was among the few remaining that prioritized making by hand and pencil. But even here in this bastion of the school of craft nobody was immune as it seemed from the virus or the cataclysm it wrought upon ordinary life. Soon even his own anachronistic school had no choice but to teach and learn all things through the window of a computer screen.

Partially through his fourth semester working in this new mode, not by compass and triangle but by Turing complete, he began to see the entirety of his work differently. It seemed to make little sense to work as he had in the analog way, only to bash the charm of a little cardboard model into a web camera. Instead, he would permit his work to explore those digital confines that would ultimately transmit his work. The hope to understand a new world of space and architecture bound to the digital realm emerged. This bold pursuit of apperception seemed a worthy cause and one likely to yield striking, unexpected works. This was the hope.

He set out reading essays and articles that pondered the relation between objects and their digital counterparts. He invested in technology designed to transposing any three-dimensional model on earth into a neatly layered excursion. He explored software and devices that aimed to bring the world into some spatial model with cartesian attributes. Each of these was an inquiry into the state of the art of objectifying the world and speaking about it at a great distance.

A small paper mache pony made for a useful object to test a lidar scanner. Also a coffee mug. He took several hundred of a toy boat and a shoe to create a model by photogrammetry. He abandoned any effort to fabricate a firsthand object itself and instead used leading software to model vectors and render photograph-like images. Each software program was designed to assume some attribute about the world that was either knowable or worth knowing. Each program seemed painfully unable to speak with the next one. And each one seemed woefully ill suited to the task of fashioning a work of genuine architecture. Moreover they seemed to optimize pantomime a particular quality of architecture. What had seemed like a glorious revolution to show the world in its fullness and all with the convenience of a few microns of magnetic disc space began to feel further and further away from the physical goodness of a well-proportioned column of stones, cool to the touch, dappled with fading setting sunlight. How could a code show the richness of language? Accidents were prohibited and the sense of vastness against one’s own skin ever more obfuscated.
The Boathouse

A few months had passed by now. He'd formulated a few exercises and systematically carried them out, documented them, and discussed them with advising faculty. He had developed a set of concerns and topics he thought preexisting in architecture, but none yet had risen to the surface in a way he could say with conviction he wished to study. It proved increasingly difficult to pinpoint the exact place in the practice he saw should be reformed.

To regain footing perhaps more literally than figuratively, he returned to an earlier study. In an earlier semester he'd been prompted to propose a new boathouse by a lake in Switzerland. This prompt bubbled over with charm and he had, at the time, developed an attitude towards the work he felt was principle and compelling. But then a pandemic seized the globe and the project like so many others was left on the shelf.

To work with something "real", a proper condition which he'd seen for himself and could grasp felt in all the right ways liberating. He returned to his original sketches and began to develop more of them. No longer in dialogue with himself and self-reference, he aimed to respond to the actual.

Relief came in the form of forming himself to the place. How could he think the bounds, parameters, qualities, or nature of this place be known and brought into measure? The work to sort these questions along could have been the entirety of his study. Context in the form of stories and language were valid considerations, as were ecological pressures, not to mention social concerns, economic demand, materials and skilled labor availability and so on and so on. This sudden confrontation with the matter of distinguishing just what were the most vital aspect of this place from which to consider an architectural proposal, and then the degree to which they would be considered was immediately thrilling - and daunting.

Facing the milieu of choices govern meaningful action, he came to a few conclusions: that the man's relationship with the boundary between his world and the wild made its most decisive determination at waters' edge. And that any architectural of consequence must undertake a moral reckoning. When viewed through this lens, his own work could hold a prayer of becoming a contribution.

He considered the figuration of the lake and its river's contour and what such well hewn boundary lines suggest. He considered the composition of the mountains and the valley and the slow drifting dance between the two. He remembered the verticality of the little place, surrounded by topless mountain and what such vistas inspired when looking out across valleys above and below. He thought of the importance of leisure and perspective, that without these a park could not offer anything of distinction or worth to its neighbors. And he thought of the rescue boat, whose home should be a shelter to recognize the solemn purpose of its presence.

And all of this he thought about as he began obtaining resources to show these considerations. Faced with the unusual and uniquely 21st century convention of designing for a place far away from his own, he did his best. He collected and curated his own images for whatever use they could offer. He gathered digital files from municipal databases and laid them out in his computer at the other side of the Atlantic. He searched for particular clues in other Swiss buildings and their landscaping to inform his alien disposition. And all of this work and thought came together in the form sketches and digital models, shown with a realism of render it never earned and curiously out of step with its actual maturity. These works did however offer a visage of what could be. This was itself a subtle misstep he would later understand, but in the moment, he had found a place on the digital earth to place his spade and get to work.
Superhuman

They fullest extents of the valley had been surveyed. From the tops of the cradling mountains to the bottom of the cool dark lake, all he required to know to situate a building was available to him and anyone else. A robust national database proudly boasted a suite of such assets, transmissible to any corner of the earth to know with great precision the position of practically each tree dotting the hillside from here to the horizon. His task was to build on the shores of a lake and to do so from beyond the shores of another ocean. This almost absurd notion was more than possible; it was typical.

He endeavored to propose a little building by a little lake and set about gathering each asset that was made available to him to know just what the conditions at the site were. The soil composition, the elevations of the land and waters, the contours of the rivers and lake were all kept in tidy reserves for the endeavoring architect. He made full utility of these.

When he looked at images he himself captured at that place, he himself looked with eyes that surveyed, not searched. This he knew and it pained him. The deep woods appeared no more enchanted; the great swaths of craggy lands only not yet despoiled. Even the broadest reaches of the wild appeared to have been defanged, colored by the mere notion that they could have been swept away if not graciously spared from such meddling through benevolent governed intervention. The wild here and everywhere was now incorporated within a vast plan.

He studied the conditions where land meets water around the world. At our great metropolises, miles of sandy shorelines were reinforced with oddly shaped concrete blocks. Titanic steel levies have been constructed, swinging from artificial islands to stop rivers like a bathtub drain. He discovered Islands built in the sky on soaring stop sleek, muscular pedestals made buoyant by massive hollow cylinders of concrete of all things. For a time, this was what he considered to be architecture while he turned his thoughts to the little lake. In equal measure though he lamented the distant memory that once was charm in the frenzied world. Yet he too looked on with a boyish marvel at the prowess of powerful structures built that no loving god would themselves have conceived. The mighty breast of earth was become tame, the luster of wild set coquetishly on our mantle.

He wished to build a great, little building. And all great buildings must declare its place perhaps with or against, but not the same as nature. However, this itself became the illuminating task, because the nature itself looked in his eyes now altered. The mountainside was no great mystery any longer, merely an undeveloped parcel. He saw his own footprints across the sandy water’s edge at places he’d never been. Voyage was vanishing. Confrontation with the unknown was evolving to an encounter with self.

The water’s edge seemed to him the relentless front line of some strange epic battle between the endeavoring architect and immutable and indifferent cosmos. Here he would declare his new stance about nature. His great, little building would deliver great perspective on human affairs and offer a visage to take in the lands we held in our keep.
Salvation

He was in the midst of a series of drawings realizing a boathouse by a lake in Switzerland. Bound and stymied with endless investigations into the latest engineering technology and scholarly writings about the Anthropocene, he felt a strong urge to rebel. He wanted to allow a vision of architecture that obeyed a program of a different sort to take hold. Not a program that took its measure from catalogues of emergency rescue vessels and their imperial dimensions, but measure from where and how throngs or individuals might sense their own confrontation with mortality staring into deep water.

He began studying the works of anthropologists and story tellers, viewing his work through a lens not of empiricism but of narrative. Could a building be born from an act? Contemplating this, he began to see the building anew, as if the relic of a great myth embodying some sense of paradox, love, and death. The Promethean myth entered his mind.

He continued to sketch, but the sketches became different. Where before he showed improbably engineered island towers, he began to picture teenagers idly passing time on an anonymous afternoon. He pictured the urgency of a rescue unfolding and the compulsion of onlookers to see the tragedy, or miracle, with their own eyes. He began to draw these visions of a narrative which showed not the machinations of a boat coming to port, but the drama of a rescue of a noble boy like any other good neighbor, lost in the waves. He made an array of sketches, drawings, and watercolors. Some took on the semblance of a fantasia, an ethereal wander into a dreamscape that bothered not with any declaration but to evoke.

He was searching for a seed of embodiment in the form of an initial act. Words describing action seemed to be the appropriate form to describe this drama. His thoughts again came to Prometheus.

Never before was the tragic myth of Prometheus of particular fascination to him, but it returned to him with some urgency. He thought of the great clever sin and the binding punishment to deliver genius to mankind. Prometheus ambition and ingenuity would become his fortune and his eternal undoing. Like many great myths, the story circles a dance with fate, a tragic and unavoidable end. The sense of tumbling forward toward destiny captured him. The inseparable embrace with the material earth in pursuit of sustaining renewed life could not be avoided and somehow Prometheus conveyed this. Knowingly or not, every architect accepts this same contract. But if it was indeed fate, then could Prometheus be redeemed and the rest of humanity along with him?

Here he wrote a new fiction, imagining the doomed Prometheus accepting the punishment for an act he accepted as duty.
An Evidence

Those works which had always transfixed him were those which possessed
not only beauty and some semblance of lasting truth, but also were in
themselves a most improbable act of achievement. To envision a sacred
truth was itself a grand achievement. To be conceived on ruddy paper and
kept somehow protected from destructive natural forces for centuries or
more was nothing short of miraculous.

Those ruddy sheets of paper, or slabs of limestone, or fragments of
velum and parchment possessed qualities of mystery too which seemed
inextricably bound to the carefully plotted drawing or carving or writing
- the work. These markings together with their surface had been made apart
from the world, crafted to carry like a vessel a most benign impression
from their moment in time. Tattered corners and cracks and rips and faded
sun spots themselves told a story of their precarious existence. An erasure
mark visible so near the well-defined contour it later informed indeed
revealed the lengthy unwrapping of that form upon its surface. The subtle
ghost of marks shining through the surface from the verso describing how
precious the surface was, scarce yet drafted to contain.

On this day he wrote quickly, freely on his computer keyboard. Some
words were suggested to him by the program itself. Other words he
deleted, wiping them away without a trace of their ever having existed.
This pristine state of work seemed to tell a story unlike the truth of what
took place. As if ice skating on a frozen pond and strangely never leaving
a score on the surface, his virtual surface remained unfettered, steadily
perfect. He wondered how another later witness of the work might
decipher the minutes or hours he had given to make it. How he wished
there were incidental traces to be observed from the act of the work itself.
Any attempt always returned back to the programmable sort, the utterance
modified through code. In the virtual surface every word seemed somehow
immaculate and terminally alien.

Perhaps something could be done. He resolved to make a record of his
record keeping, a grand scheme in countersurveillance. He would build
a metanarrative bearing those lost trace marks and show it was a hand
and matter at work afterall. And he knew too it was a doomed effort.
Those aspects of the ancient works were always inherent, incidental, never
prescriptive and this would be all together deliberate, itself a farcical
display of self-style. He carried on with the work anyway. He devoted time
to edit, watch, critique and edit again. He failed and the work remained
immaculate and fundamentally indistinguishable from any other object
encapsulated inside his computer. There was hope though. If redemption
existed in the work it was not in any deliberate trace, but in the possession
of time the work required to be understood. No mere projection, the
impression was a duration of tempo and every duration reveals the
temperament of its existence across time. An invisible trace and not as he
had intended, but a trace nonetheless.

So the work would be like so many others confined to the code of the PDF
and locked forever as a string of numerals. Perhaps meaning could not be
encoded after all. Perhaps perceiving meaning as mere transmission was
itself the folly.
Well Prepared

His final year of study required a cumulative work, a comprehensive demonstration of his mastery. He had prepared for this task as best he thought he could. For years prior, he kept notebooks and sketchbooks, living lists of passing thoughts he thought could portend something more deeply significant when eventually the work called for it. Surrounded by files, piles, and mounds of this work, a steady accumulation of influence and practice, he set out in this great comprehensive work to show not only what he’d learned, but also to demonstrate in the most provable manner possible what remained to be learned. Could an education be shown in this way?

He had long anticipated this work. First, he surveyed all he had done. He took all of his drawings, his sketchbooks, his models and laid them bare on the hardwood floor of his living room. The afternoon sun shone through the blinds, illuminating the most random patches of linework and color, a curious happenstance to bring forth moments within the disparate works. Some drawings remained at the bottom of the piles—the floor was only so big after all. Newsprint sketches, drawings on vellum, photo prints, cardboard models, plaster casts, plywood forms and half-finished choochkies; they were nestled together each vying for a chance to be given a second voice and carried forward for another year of attention, admiration or scrutiny. The rest would be locked away in large folders or tossed in the trash and forgotten.

He held one special notebook as well. It was kept always in his leather shoulder bag, a leather folio, itself a gift from a caring friend since before the journey began. In here he kept a pen, a handful of post-its, a few handwritten notes as motivational reminders, and his notebook. He sat with this notebook at times to record his thoughts or make a sketch or take notes from a magazine. “This will be a precious collection of ideas, my grandkids will carefully sort through,” he thought.

The day came to begin the work of the culminating project and he sat, finally with the book to reap the good work he’d done, like plucking ripe berries from a bush. But there was no such epiphany inside, no eureka moment. It was something else, a strange confrontation with speculation and half-thoughts, notes and drawings that sounded more like an echo poorly remembered of what discovery would seem like. There was no secret password, no crucial discovery in the lines of text or scrawled drawings, no magic insight to carry on to the publisher or the patent office. They were the words and marks of a man, slightly younger than himself, searching for understanding. It somehow seemed after all this a grand disappointment. A well-crafted, cared for, perfectly honest disappointment.

It seemed unsettling that such well-intentioned attempts to prepare for the unknowable could offer so little reward. He recalled a late-night during study in France he awoke in early morning hours just to record a passage in this very book—and still this due diligence bore no magnitude.

The matter of preparation seemed to offer one glimmering insight, however. The writing itself offered no gemstone but fostered the strange birth of a place that came to exist between the writing and his later reflection upon it. There did exist a place, a tension, an immeasurable distance between what he imagined the journey would demand and what the journey itself would come to demand. In this place the hubris of preparing for the unknowable was revealed.
The Great Tide

A young boy sat on the sandy banks of the river. Cool water slipped between his toes, the sun cutting through empty air on his tan arms. His mother had given him an errand long ago and he intended to get around to it long after. For now, the minnows were circling his feet, curious what this monster in their shallows could be. A melody circled round his head. There could be no cause to disturb such tranquility.

He stood at last, took his backpack over his shoulder and followed the banks of the wide river towards his home. The glist of the sun across a polished gem captured his mind or maybe it was a murm, or magnetic impulse. But his eyes turned to the other bank where a village stood upon rocks overseeing the water. Their voices were pitched at every degree and all shouted despair. Their beloved Prometheus had drifted off under the waves.

Near to him a pale skinned shoulder crested the lazy river. A body or a treasure or a terrible monster beckoned his urgency. This was his purpose come to be, all before and every since, now gurgling underwater.

He tossed his bag aside and dove headlong into the waters he’d swam in and rowed across since he was even younger still. The lazy river his dearest friend held his closest secrets and today, a lifeless body. He threw his arms, growing more muscular in each instant over his head, pulling and treading the familiar dipperly water past him, gasping and staring forward to save this damned soul. Gasping and paddling, gasping, swimming, looking ahead and still clinging for his own breath. But to his despair like each villager, the pale skinned shoulder would come no closer. He furrowed his brow and gave the water still mightier strokes with his long arms, but the damned soul ahead drifted only further and he could come no nearer.

He stopped his breathless pursuit in astonishment. The poor body swept away before his eyes, against his great will. And now, the great shame washed him colder than the water. He sensed himself now miles from the banks. The water obeyed no common God. The tide roared, drawing the vast waters of land like a deep breath drawn into the deep belly of the sea. The great tide had carried the body and sealed the fate of the dead Prometheus and was prepared to carry him too, off into the impossible icy blue. Where before he felt the surrounding comfort of trees on the hills he now only saw a misty horizon and dark clouds rolling above.

He remembered his backpack on the shore, filled with the ordinary things mothers need and wept in the deep water, prepared to drown with the damned Prometheus. When his eyes shut at last under the gloom, he discovered he still lived at the strange, sudden sound of a powerful speedboat racing toward him. Lights flashed, sirens blared, the waves cast aside from its crafted prow. He had brought himself to the deepest waters to save a dead man and it was here through no special rite he was rescued. Brought afloat in the speeding vessel, he collapsed and felt his body sink against the hollow deck underneath, leader, as he gazed at the blazing sun.
Epilogue

IF SKETCHING IS A FORM OF ENTILECHY

As he looked through stacks of his old sketchbooks, filled with pictures of places he had been, he had the distinct sense he was looking at more than an image — he was looking at time and place. The sketch showed something which was, or had been, but the sketch was not the thing itself. To sketch seemed itself impossible. To take the whole of the world and bring it into knowing through only a few gestures of the wrist was ludicrous. His years of practice taught him that the sketch then was no mere recording. It was a happening, an attempt to seize the essential from some glimpse of the world.

It seemed a antiquated to sketch as well. So many of his fellow students and admired professionals for that matter believed in the virtue of the computer rendering. The professional practice too had embraced this mode so thoroughly that there seemed hardly an room left to consider architectural thought through the humble pencil. If he was a rebel or a luddite, he himself couldn't answer. If nothing else, the barrier to entry in sketching had always appealed to him. It was a level playing field. Anyone could take hold of a pencil and make marks. It was a great equalizer and a perfectly direct showing of not literal, but a more elusive, figural thought. He tried other means but always returned to the pencil and the page.

When he began to consider the work of architecture through narrative, allowing the seed of a moral adventure to embody his thinking, he chose to carry a pencil too. With a place on earth in mind and a story of paradox and purpose emerging, he attempted to sketch. Images of a place from the future or past came to his mind and he made his best attempts to show them on a page.

A fantasy began to emerge on his pages. A place or mixture of places, lacking in boundaries or even gravity. Domes, arches, and classical columns filled his mind. He felt strongly that the building must be of the mountains themselves, just as the delta on which it stood was formed. It would be built with blocks of stone, a lithic monument and home for the drama. Here, the sketch seemed always the most comfortable for him, free and rapid, responsive in a way no computer modeling program could ever hope to be. Marks could be left in perfect unison with his flowing intuition, intuition which flowed like the water at the little building and searched to find its ultimate form as if the stage upon which the great drama would unfold. He considered it as if it was a place born from and only for this very drama.

The motif of an earthen mound emerged and reemerged. Some place which was rising up from the ground, distinguishing itself both from the flat soil and the waters of the lake, lapping at its edge. His sketches became numerous, even redundant. It would be a grotto, a plinth, an arcade and a balcony. It would be verdant, covered with plants. It would be humble enough to sense its place, but proud enough to reckon with the mighty mountains all around.

The forms of the building borrowed nothing from industrial materials. He considered memories of caves, rocky cliffs against water. He looked at photos he'd taken from every angle near the place when he had visited the year before. He drew the place as if it were an improbably perfect natural wonder, born of the for the purposes of man.

Looking later at these evocative sketches, he was reminded of virtue within sketching. The ability to draw forth an essence and nearly show a dream. The sketches also showed a new limit, a limit within their boundlessness. This limit was the dreamstate itself. No sketch is capable of carrying forward the realized form. This is the domain of drawing, the sketch illuminated and drawn forth, made clear in the light of sun. The sketch was a slice of the unresolved, a dreamscape like Pan's wood. The sketch is not anachronistic or antiquated. It is merely limited to a kind of thinking that must end for proper endings to come to their ultimate form.
Plate 1: THE MORTAL CHARTER

"The Body Extended
Prometheus grew uneasy, and deeply in love."
Plate 2: THE COVENANT OF REALMS

Louis Kahn was right. "The library is an institution" he thought, "and architecture seeks purpose in realizing this body of institution."
Plate 3: HOW TO GET STARTED

Was it meaningful? Was it relevant? Was it inspiring? These important questions all played second fiddle to the one most crucial question he thought first; “was this practicable?” It was if nothing else, that, and so seemed as good as any other wrong place to begin.
Plate 4: STILL LIFE

Finally he rendered a stick of chalk to dust at the center, accepting the haunting exercise now complete. He captured the scene in a photo and immediately destroyed the abomination.
Plate 5: REMODELED

This was no poetic translation, but a new and absurd account, the kind that affords a fool equal purchase to the scholar, as if they were the same and equal and speech was nothing more than words.
Plate 6: OBJECT WORLD

The paradox struck him, “what can be saved and yet remain wild?”
Plate 7: PLACE RENDERED

Each seemed to assume some attribute about the world that was either knowable or worth knowing.
Plate 8: THE BOATHOUSE

In equal measure though he lamented the distant memory that once was charm in the frenzied world. Yet he too looked on with a boyish marvel at the prowess of powerful structures men built that no loving god would themself have conceived. The mighty breast of earth was become tame, the luster of wild set coquettishly on our mantle.
Plate 9: SUPERHUMAN

And any architectural of consequence must undertake a moral reckoning. When viewed through this lens, his own work could hold a prayer of becoming a contribution.
Plate 10: SALVATION

The building could be born from an act, an episode in a story which accepts beginnings and ends.
Plate 11: AN EVIDENCE

Perhaps meaning could not be encoded after all. Perhaps perceiving meaning as mere transmission was itself the folly.
Plate 12: WELL PREPARED

It somehow seemed after all this a grand disappointment. A well-crafted, cared for, perfectly honest disappointment.
Plate 13: THE GREAT TIDE

Alight in the speeding vessel, he collapsed and felt his leaden body sink against the hollow deck beneath and gazed into the blazing sun.
ROOM FOR GHOSTS

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1h288qt3VIOP19sBfMrAQ_D3gTaN2oAR/view?usp=sharing
AFTERWORD

The crucible of the thesis offers a unique anguish any student knows well. One feels both the weightlessness of possibility and the impossible burden to realize only one aim among many – and to do so expertly. The works collected here portray this endeavor. Ironically, the thrust of this work was not precisely informed by the object of my intended study. Rather, the works that came about through periodic and consistent efforts yielded a body of work which traced the contour of my inquiry. I later came to understand that this contour was itself the defining aim of this body of work.

This thread of coherence was not in fact what I had set out to achieve, but one that I carefully crafted after building a substantial body of works upon which to reflect. Early works investigating the nature of objects and things, of monads, of nature and culture were stimulating, though disjointed at first blush. I had hoped to determine a principle claim targeting some vital, contemporary concern in the discipline of architecture. I intended to support this claim as a well formulated position. Such a claim proved elusive, however. As I worked, my intrigue shifted with discoveries, readings, and new insights I gathered along the way. Despite the apparent divergence from Heidegger, how was I to ignore the writings of Gabriel Tarde on Monoidology and Sociology when I found it? This and the thousand other spurs which blossomed during this study came to suggest a certain contour which became clear only from the other side of a year’s worth of investigation.

I endeavored as a final act to bring these insights into unified coherence, else they would remain fragmentary, incoherent. The sustained effort of the thesis itself across days, seasons, and various modes brought about a conviction with a related intuition – that the ideal form of a thesis work is through writing. This critical form was to become the crucial final step to unify my broad ranging study into a body of work. In fact, perhaps nobody benefited more greatly from the clarity of this final step than the author himself. The bringing together of these parts into a total written work, one of a free design yet bound to the duty of providing structure to its parts was the final salve, a significant and formalizing act.

The form of this work as a digital document not to be taken for granted. The long tradition of making a “book” of one’s thesis work is under threat. The common means of one’s time must be accepted or ignored at one’s benefit or peril. This final work as a digital document will undergo the muted, unforeseen strains all works do which are intended to survive. The nature of working through a computer renders a view of ones work within the world in a particular light. Perhaps this light will live on. Perhaps it will fade with so many other trends and with it, this and countless other works which staked their existence on it. Here my work is complete. Time becomes the great Arbitor and will render judgement on these decisions unfeeling.

I would like to thank the tireless support of my thesis committee, faculty members at the College of Architecture and Urban Studies, my superlative studymates, friends, and family. all of whom played vital roles in this journey and supported my efforts at every step. As Benjamin Franklin blithely put it, “either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.” May these words find eyes that find worth in their having been written.
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