

## Modernism...Romantic Ideal?

In Search for the Concrete Translation of Abstracts

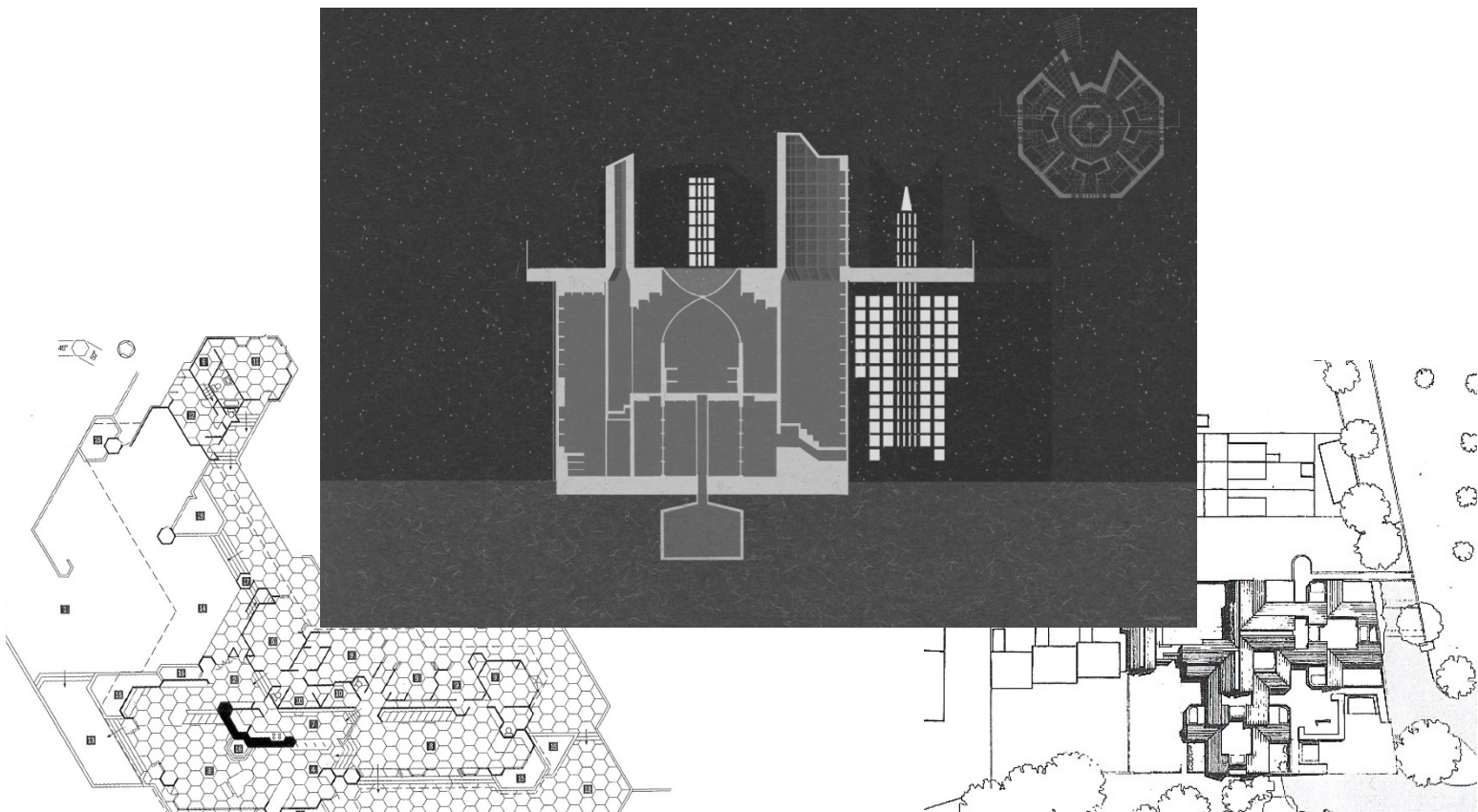
Zuzana Sojkova

Kent School of Architecture

2013/2014

AR548 Modernisms

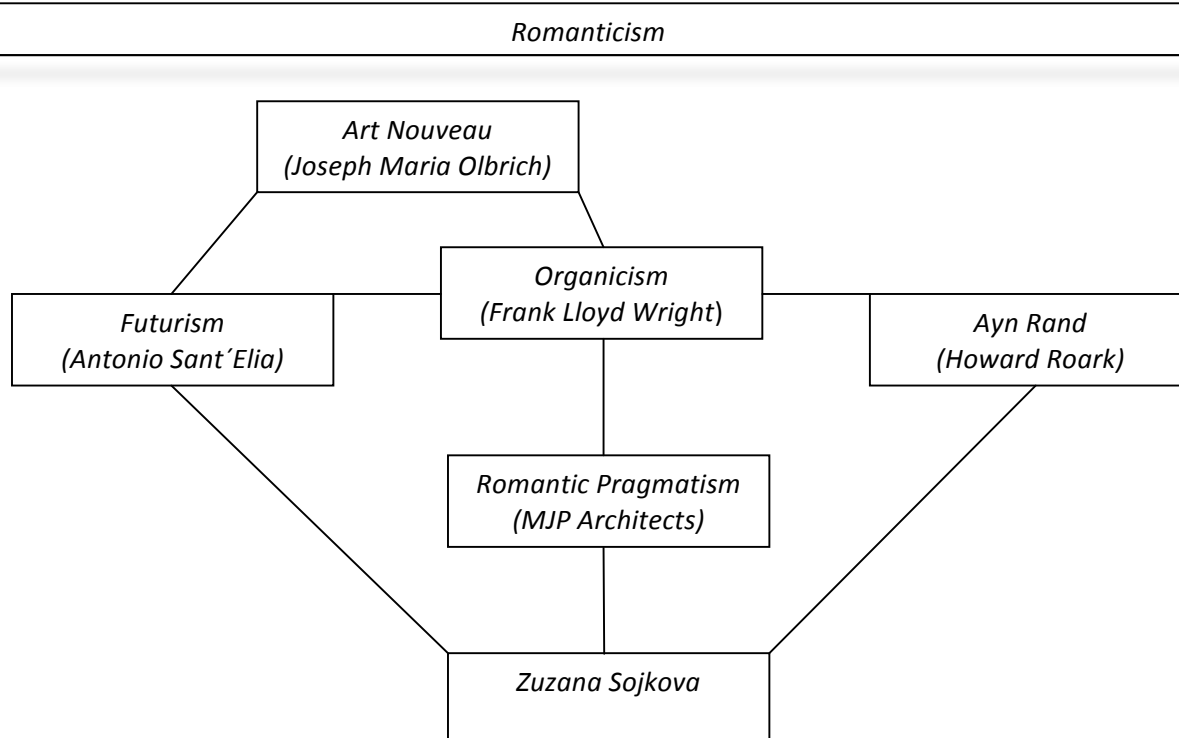
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*“Here are my rules: what can be done with one substance must never be done with another. No two materials are alike. No two sites on earth are alike. No two buildings have the same purpose. The purpose, the site, the material determine the shape. Nothing can be reasonable or beautiful unless it’s made by one central idea, and the idea sets every detail. A building is alive, like a man. Its integrity is to follow its own truth, its one single theme, and to serve its own single purpose....Its maker gives it the soul and every wall, window and stairway to express it.”<sup>1</sup>*  
*Howard Roark, The Fountainhead*

Artistic creation, some might say, serves no meaningful purpose, it evolves to no pragmatic end. Others undertake a journey to prove otherwise, they create manifestoes, rules and principles in search for the right approach, the right form. Is such a form achievable? Even more importantly, is it achievable to strictly abide by the rules one sets to oneself? How do the society pressures enter the equation and why has the desire to answer these questions always existed?

Ayn Rand in her ‘Romantic Manifesto’ explains that in order to understand human consciousness, one must communicate it visually, translate concepts and abstractions into concretes, materialize ideas into art.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, we will be preoccupied with the language, both literary and architectural, real and fictional, with which Romantic principles took on different forms in the era of Modernism. We will trace the influences of Art Nouveau, Futurism and Organicism around Ayn Rand’s Romantic novel ‘The Fountainhead’ in search for a historical placement of Zuzana Sojkova’s Modular project largely rooted in Romantic pragmatism. A diagrammatic demonstration of these relationships is shown bellow.



<sup>1</sup> Robert Mayhew, ed., *The Essays on Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), 119.  
 Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature* (New York: Signet Books, 1975), 5.

First of all, let us look at the principles lying behind Romanticism and similarities between the construction of Romantic art and Romantic literature as carriers of the message. This movement is characterized by the aversion to imitation and a threshold between 'truth to feeling' and 'truth to nature'.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, the balance can be threatened if an artist attaches too much importance to an emotional response termed *Stimmungsmalerei*- mood-painting , thus moving from a 'concrete' towards a 'non-objective' portrayal of surroundings. In all forms of art, such technique can make the link between reality and abstraction non-decodable. On the other side of the spectrum of Romantic art, its aim is to surrender to nature.<sup>4</sup> The first - Fichtean or Expressive approach - strives for the preservation of the ego, of the 'I am', the second - Spinozistic or Organic approach- treasures the object, the 'it is'.<sup>5</sup> According to Ayn Rand, in order to encapsulate the Romantic principle, one has to combine both. This justifies the structure of a Romantic novel, particularly 'The Fountainhead' with its main character - a Modernist architect Howard Roark built on the essence of Frank Lloyd Wright. The 'plot-theme' - the central idea, revolves around 'cores' logically combined building up to a 'climax' of a story.<sup>6</sup> We can observe that this structure is applicable to architecture where a concrete form comes out of a complexity of abstract principles and material elements. Romanticism provides a standard according to which this transformation is possible and neither Antonio Sant'Elia (Futurism), nor Frank Lloyd Wright (Organicism) denied the influence of Romantic writers such as William Blake, William Wordsworth or Thomas Carlyle on their work, which brings us to Expressive and Organic theory of Romantic art.

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<sup>3</sup> August Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories* (Henley-on-Thames: Gresham Books, 1986), 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 54,89.

John Constable, *John Constable's Correspondence*, ed. R.B.Beckett (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, Boydell and Brewer, 1962-70), 211.

<sup>6</sup> Mayhew, *Essays on Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead*, 123-4.

For Romantics, our dynamic and constantly evolving world was subject to infinite number of transformations, infinite in expression.<sup>7</sup> This 'expressionism', most strikingly embedded in Futurism, strove to bring a total experience of art and its fusion with time.<sup>8</sup> As Boccioni described in his Manifesto of Futurist Painting: "...the tram that runs between the houses enters into them, and they in turn hurl themselves on to it and fuse with it."<sup>9</sup> The search for Italian national identity at the end of the nineteenth century caused that Romanticism was at the time associated with nationalism and collective spirit, looking back to the Middle Ages for support.<sup>10</sup> This notion, contradictory to an original Romantic ideal, was however replaced, firstly by the emergence of Liberty influenced by Art Nouveau, then Futurism and their renouncement of unitarism and of the past per se. According to Nikolaus Pevsner, the rejection of historicism was thus the main common thread between Futurism and Art Nouveau.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the works of Antonio Sant'Elia, we can distinguish three significant sources of inspiration. His Villa Elisi from 1912 is reminiscent of Joseph Maria Olbrich's Ernst Ludwig Haus, for its use of frescoes and reference to local vernacular<sup>12</sup> (see Figs 1 and 2). A later study of a villa shows traces of Frank Lloyd Wright's influence with its emphasis on a cantilevering horizontal plane (see Fig 3). Interestingly, there is also a direct connection between Wright and Olbrich, as uncovered by Vincent Scully.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, Sant'Elia's most mature work devoted to Futurism is paradoxically most immature from an architectural point of view (see Fig 4). His neglect of planning, technical solutions and quality of an interior space, his drawing representation - worm's-eye-view perspective, strengthens the 'Sublime' scenographic Romantic impact and perhaps the surrealism of the designs not ready to become real. This shows the preoccupation with the ego, pictorial communication of manifestations for their own sake, rather than their translation into a functioning feat of architecture.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Villa Elisi is his only surviving building instead of a visionary power station.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely this last drawing that corresponds with a notion that Romantic art work must be stylized because it

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<sup>7</sup> Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Nikos Stangos, ed., *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1994), 100.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman, eds., *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Esther da Costa Meyer, *The Work of Antonio Sant'Elia: Retreat into the Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer, *Work of Antonio Sant'Elia*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

condenses particular abstractions important for the artist.<sup>16</sup> Here we can draw a parallel to Zuzana Sojkova's graphic representation. The Modular project incorporates a water harvesting machine, which according to Futurist principles embraces the environment in a dynamic way, makes the fast pace of our lives visible in time and subsequently makes the passage of time tangible (see Fig 5). It attempts to abolish the importance of the façade and provides walk-on roofs enabling people to see Canterbury, where the project is located, from a different perspective, as a whole composed of a myriad of architectural and natural fragments.



Fig 1: A.Sant'Elia: Villa Elisi San Maurizio, 1912

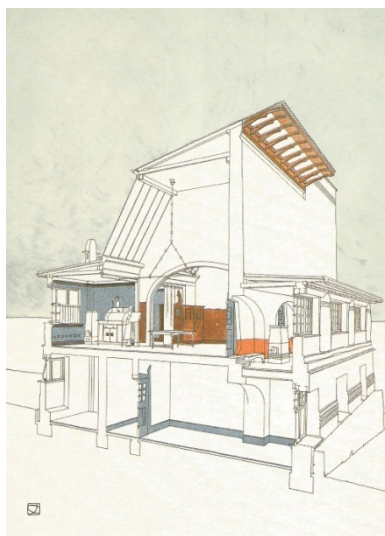


Fig 2: J.M.Olbrich: Ernst Ludwig Haus Darmstadt, 1901

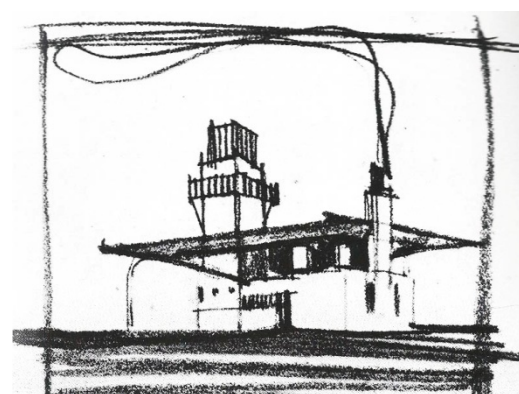


Fig 3: A.Sant'Elia: study for a villa

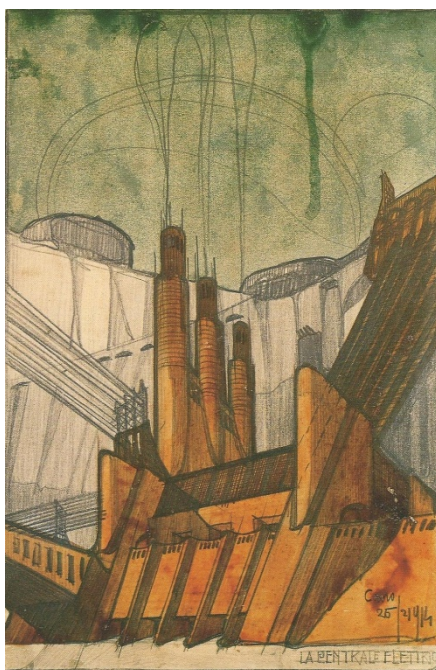


Fig 4: A.Sant'Elia: power station

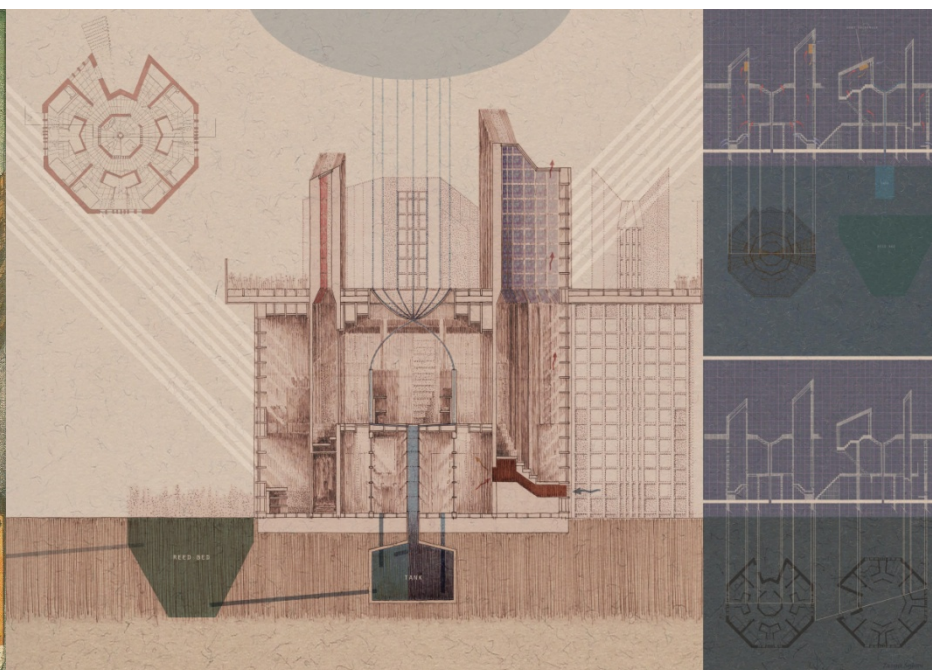


Fig 5: Z.Sojkova: Modular project - section

<sup>16</sup> Mayhew, *Essays on Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead*, 138.

The notion of organic form comes directly from Romanticism and its admiration for the unique and the indeterminate, justified by Wackenroder as the basic norm behind God's Creation.<sup>17</sup> The quest for the Whole associated with the quest for the Holy, perceived the universe as a living totality, the norm first formulated by pre-Socratics - Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.<sup>18</sup> As Frank Lloyd Wright said: "The mission of an architect- of architecture- is to help people understand how to make life more beautiful, the world a better one for living in, and to give reason, rhyme and meaning to life."<sup>19</sup> In order to achieve this goal, he welcomed a cooperation of his clients while applying his architectural principles. He strove for identification of a building with the ground by incorporating horizontal planes and tension with the use of cantilevers, for accommodation of client's individual needs and for creation of imaginative character while using appropriate materials and construction techniques.<sup>20</sup> His preoccupation with flexibility of human movement led to an experimental 'honeycomb' design of Hanna House<sup>21</sup> (see Fig 6). Commissioned in 1936 in Palo Alto, California, it attracts attention for its plan based on a hexagonal grid<sup>22</sup> (see Fig 7). As a result, the walls meet at obtuse angles, which is in Wright's view an organisation better suited to circulation.<sup>23</sup> The Hannas described their relationship with the house as a 'love affair' because of its inspiring atmosphere and capability to accommodate alterations they performed when their needs changed. It is a proof of Organicism - its constant evolution without putting the concept in jeopardy.<sup>24</sup>

In Sojkova's design, in comparison, each accommodation unit is based on an octagonal grid, structurally expressed in the interior as well as creating a whole octagonal complex growing through the site in an organic way, with no front or back, but a composition exclusive to the occupied area (see Fig 8). Each individual house thus becomes independent while finding its place in a logical whole, like a scaled-up Hanna House (see Fig 9). According to Pfeiffer, the concern for the 'individual' and preoccupation with 'Humanity' is always prevalent in Wright's designs. His central idea revolves

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<sup>17</sup> Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 79,90.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, Talk at the University of California, April 27, 1957.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 17.

Frank Lloyd Wright, *Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings Volume 1*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 214-216.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Wilkinson, *Frank Lloyd Wright: 50 Key Buildings by America's Greatest Architect* (London: Quercus, 2010), 108-11.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright*, 308.

<sup>24</sup> Wilkinson, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 108-11.

around 'Manlight', beauty generated from man's integrity, a Romantic ideal.<sup>25</sup> Thus an 'integral design' is achieved in Hanna House by an integrated hexagonal composition.<sup>26</sup>

"A house can have integrity, just like a person," said Roark.<sup>27</sup>

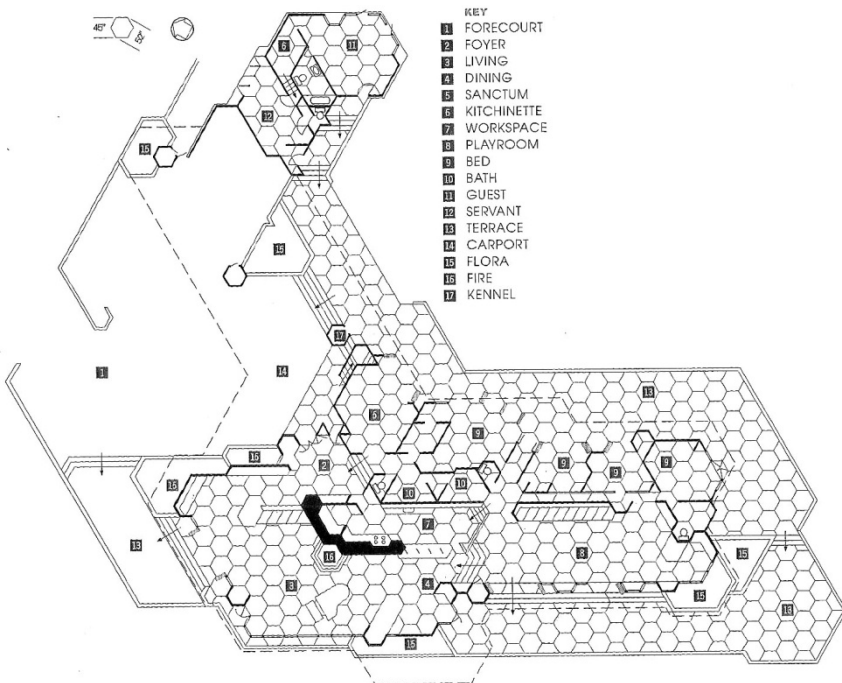


Fig 7: F.L.Wright: Hanna House, Palo Alto, 1936 - ground floor plan

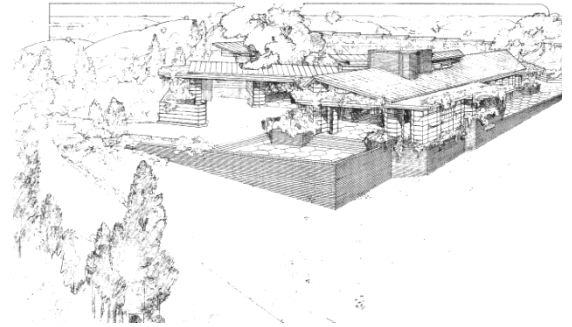


Fig 6: F.L. Wright: Hanna House  
Palo Alto, 1936 - perspective

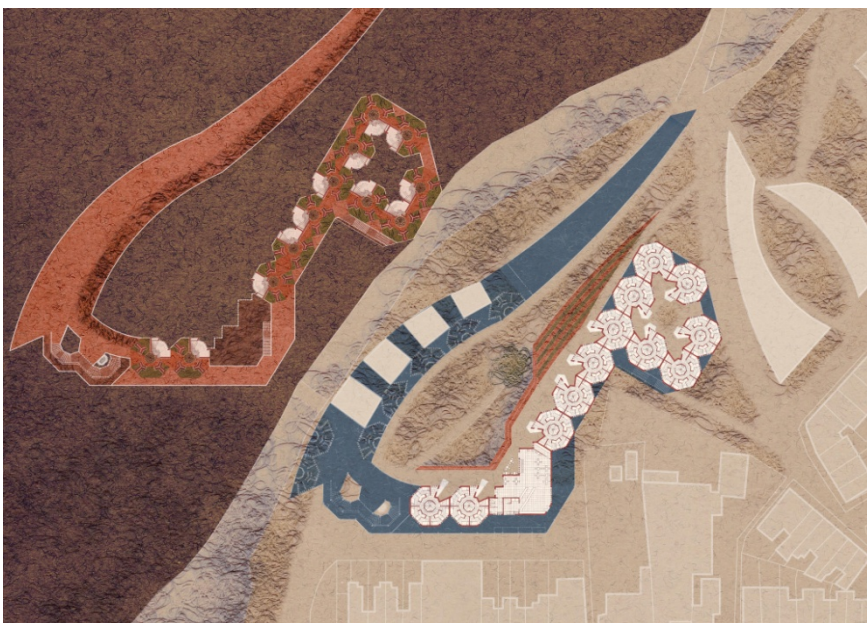


Fig 8: Z. Sojkova: Modular project - masterplan

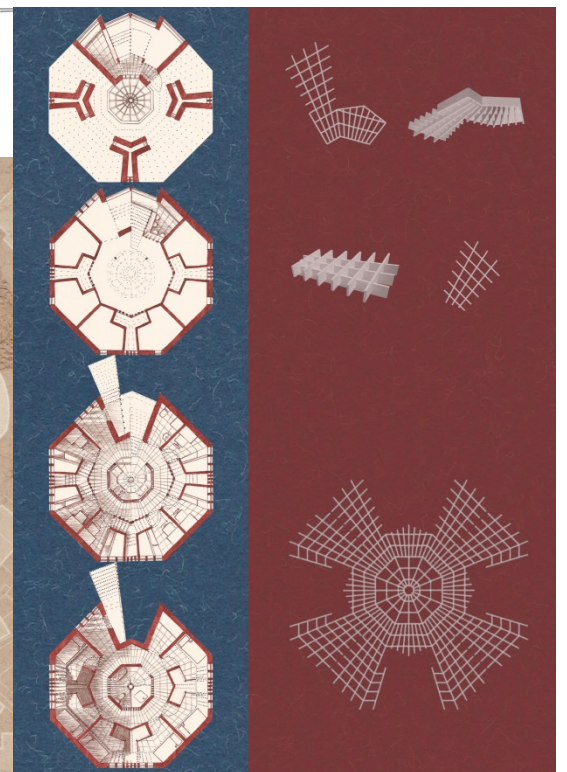


Fig 9: Z. Sojkova: Modular project -  
floor plans and structural grids

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, ed. Peter Gossel and Gabrielle Leuthauser (Koln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, 2000), 36-8.

<sup>26</sup> H. Allen Brooks, ed., *Writings on Wright: Selected Comment on Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 76.

<sup>27</sup> Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 132.

We could say that painting a portrait of Howard Roark, Ayn Rand combined both Expressive and Organic theory of Romantic art. Let us look at the description of one the houses designed in *The Fountainhead*.

Heller House:

*“The house on the sketches had been designed not by Roark, but by the cliff on which it stood. It was as if the cliff had grown and completed itself and proclaimed the purpose for which it had been waiting...”*<sup>28</sup>

This description gives us a clue about the importance of both ‘power of man’ and ‘power of nature’ as if an architect was to reveal nature’s intentions for a particular site. “On one of his statues, Michelangelo made a muscle which never existed on a real human body, when he was told that nature never created such a muscle, he answered that nature should have. That is the true artist.” said Ayn Rand.<sup>29</sup> In this novel, the client’s satisfaction is apparent when Heller says: “...I’ve felt that when I move into this house, I’ll have a new sort of existence, and even my simple daily routine will have a kind of honesty or dignity that I can’t quite define...”<sup>30</sup> There is however a thin line between the right of a creator who brings benefits to the society and who is considered egotistical, which is often the main criticism of Ayn Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism and Individualism.

Roark justifies his design decisions by saying: “...Every piece of it is there because the house needs it-and for no other reason...The relation of masses was determined by the distribution of space within. The ornament was determined by the method of construction, an emphasis on the principle that makes it stand...But you’ve seen buildings with columns that support nothing, with purposeless cornices,...false windows...Your house is made by its own needs. Those others are made by the need to impress. The determining motive of your house is the house. The determining motive of the other is in the audience.”<sup>31</sup>

We can only speculate about what his buildings would look like, their form is not our main concern because each one of them is a concrete combination of various ‘cores’- context, materials, clients and purpose. Is it a utopian thought that idealism can be practical in the world we live in?

In relation to Rand’s take on Wright’s architectural ideas, Sojkova’s Modular project focuses on the honest expression of structure, both vertical and horizontal structural timber elements are made

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<sup>28</sup> Mayhew, *Essays on Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead*, 119.  
Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 124.

<sup>29</sup> Mayhew, *Essays on Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead*, 172.

<sup>30</sup> Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 132.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.



visible throughout (see Figs 9 and 10). Circulation is demonstrated by the configuration of windows, the mass of the building and shape of the towers. These serve, in addition, as a reference to fragmented Canterbury roofscape, thus the context in which the site sits (see Fig 11). They provide a space for contemplation in which, according to a Romantic theory, one can look up and experience the sense of completeness and idealized world, a celebration of human achievement.<sup>32</sup> Romantic influence is often criticized as aesthetic narcissism<sup>33</sup>, we could argue that although all the above mentioned architects were rebellious and opinionated, with the benefit of hindsight, they made a contribution to the evolution of architecture either philosophically or also in assuring a client satisfaction. They managed to demonstrate their ideas, although often rejected by the society. Were they perhaps too radical in search for Gesamtkunstwerk? Would a more pragmatic take on Romantic ideals assure a success without struggle?

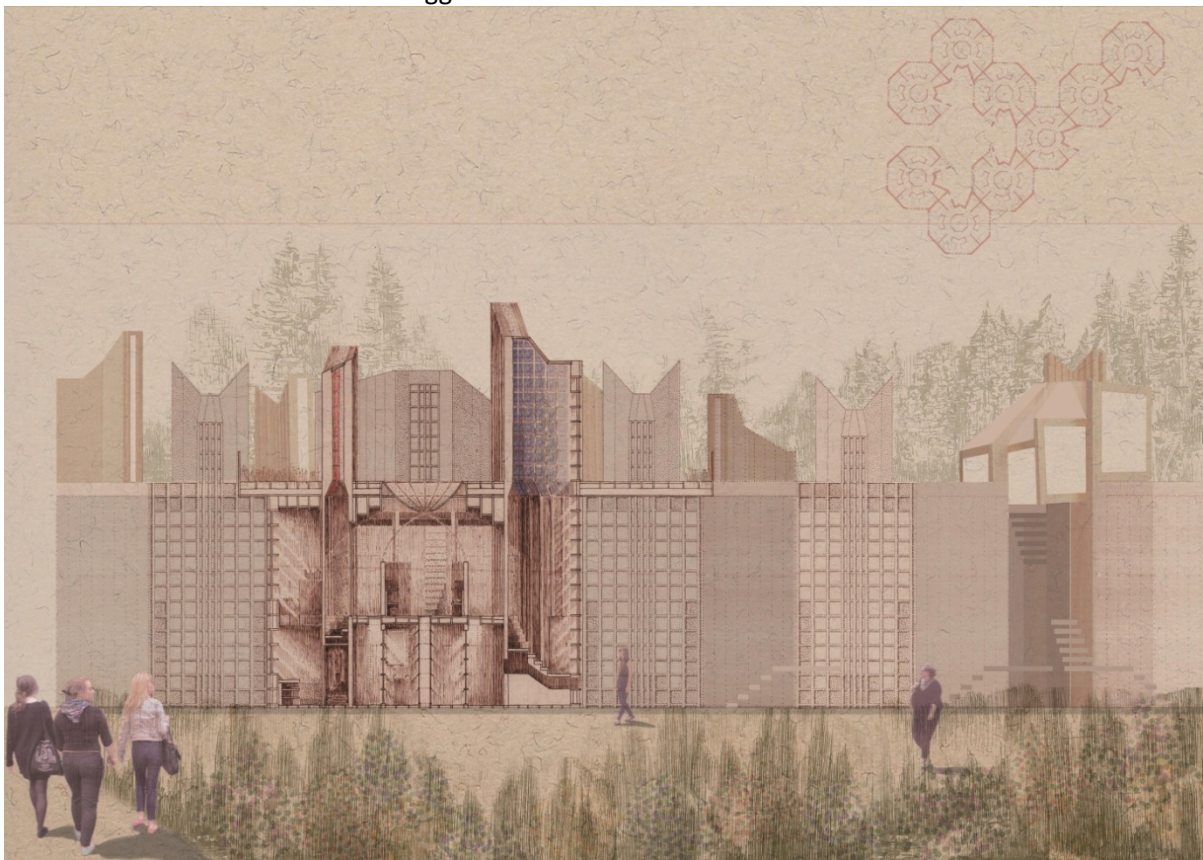


Fig 10: Z. Sojkova: Modular project - sectional perspective



Fig 11: Canterbury roofscape

<sup>32</sup> Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories*, 66.

Coming to Britain towards the end of the twentieth century, we find a different response to Romantic tradition. Romantic Pragmatists, as they call themselves, are architects who attempt to combine the concern for identity, personal or regional, with systematism and analytical thinking of the Modern Movement. Thus, thanks to the symbiotic relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, and the respect for tradition, this approach is similar to Art Nouveau Movement with which we started our quest for Romantic ideals through the Modernist era up to present.<sup>34</sup> The Sainsbury Building in Worcester College in Oxford built by MacCormac Jamieson and Pritchard in 1983, is an example of a development that brings an organic geometric insertion into a traditional academic environment<sup>35</sup> (see Figs 12 and 13). For them, the most apt meaning of Romanticism was found by Lewis Mumford in Wright's work as "respect of nature and the insistence on the claims of the person".<sup>36</sup> As Ted Cullinan put it: "If you want to make free-style architecture work, you have to be more disciplined, not less".<sup>37</sup> Had he lived in the same era as Sant'Elia, he could have taught him this lesson. To Cullinan, the key solution was to always consider the English tradition together with the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>38</sup>

When we look at this 'compromised' approach in contrast with radicalism of Futurism or pure Organicism, is it a step forward or backward? Considering the principles behind Romanticism and its sometimes contradictory interpretations in Art Nouveau, Futurism, Organicism and Romantic Pragmatism, Sojkova in her Modular project decides that looking backward can be a step forward. She shares a view that a historical context of the site can provide as many design clues as the natural context. As a result, we can see that the concept for the project is built around traditional timber construction found in medieval British towns and shows respect for the main local landmark- Canterbury Cathedral. The masterplan of the development evokes the floor plan of the cathedral with its tower, nave and apse (see Fig 14). Moreover, the vaulted structure, as the central feature of the building, is reinterpreted and turned upside down, serving as a water harvesting machine (see Fig 15). Thus history provides a solution to one of the contemporary sustainability issues - the scarcity of water, which is one of the main goals of Romantic Pragmatists.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gillian Darley and Peter Davey, "Sense and Sensibility," *Architectural Review*, vol.174, no.1039 (1983): 22-3.

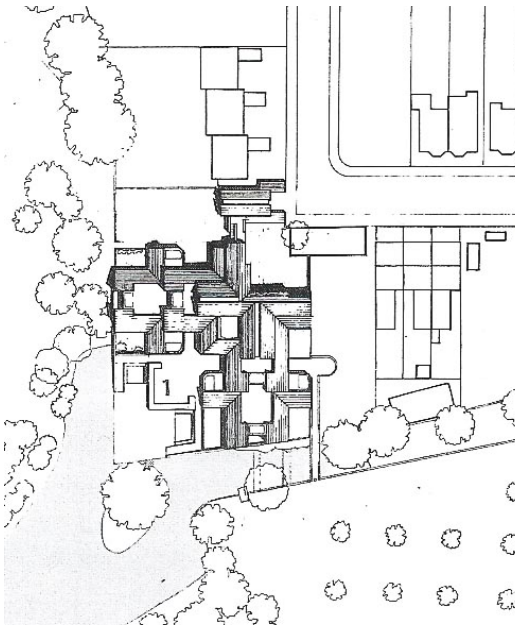
<sup>35</sup> Peter Davey, "Place-making in Oxford," *Architectural Review*, vol.174, no.1039 (1983): 37.

<sup>36</sup> Darley and Davey, "Sense and Sensibility," 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Davey, "The Act and Art of Building," *Architectural Review*, vol.174, no.1039 (1983): 39.

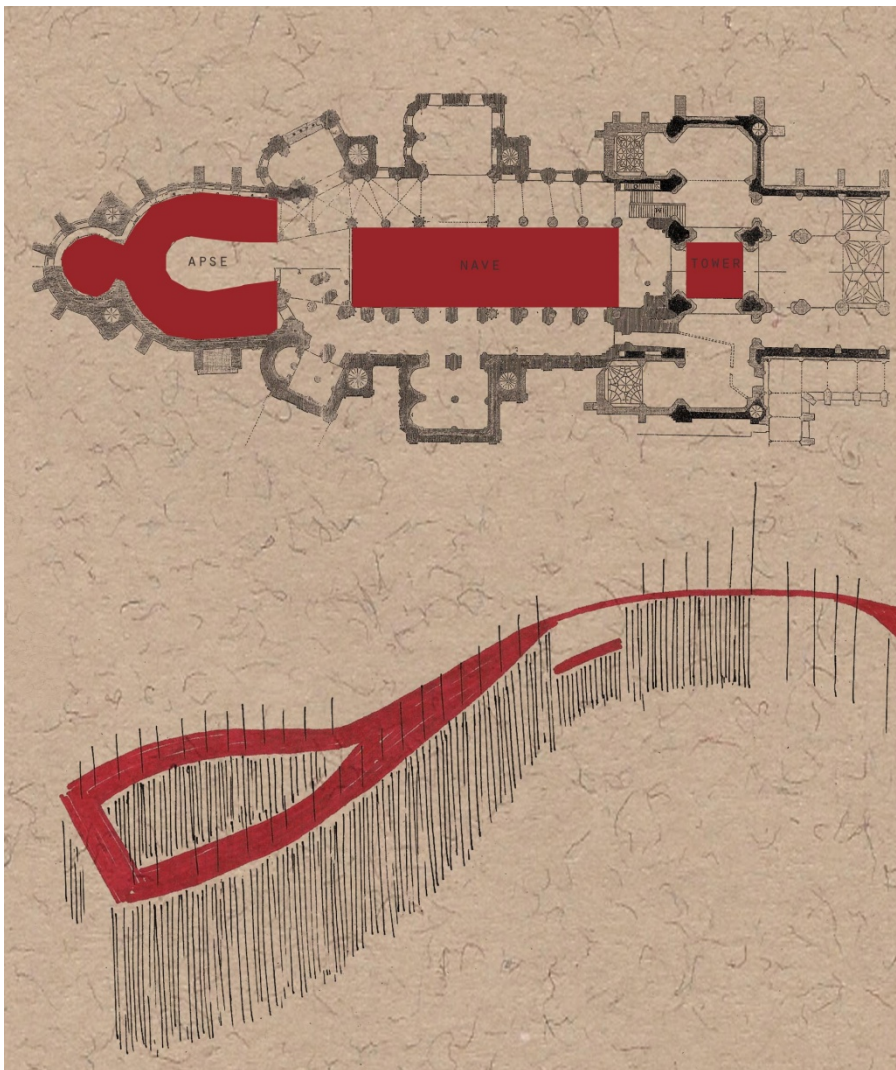
<sup>39</sup> Darley and Davey, "Sense and Sensibility," 25.



*Fig 12: MJP Architects: Sainsbury Building  
Oxford, 1983 - masterplan*



*Fig 13: MJP Architects: Sainsbury Building  
Oxford, 1983*



*Fig 14: Z. Sojkova: Modular project - historical concept*



*Fig 15: Z. Sojkova: Modular project - section*

Looking again at the diagram now incorporating a visual account and location of all the case studies; despite the similarities in ideology behind their creation, can we distinguish any particular style or building form (see Fig 16) ? What they have in common is the belief in individuality, not as a vain demonstration of an architect's egotism as Ayn Rand's notions are often misinterpreted, but as a belief in human capability of volition and integrity. It is the antithesis to a 'mass' type of person as identified by Ortega y Gasset, the one that can be easily modified without resistance by the opinion of the majority.<sup>40</sup> This is the mass depicted by Nietzsche as devoid of humanity and warned against by Le Bon as a threat of the modern era.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, we could associate Rand's take on Romanticism as a concrete transcription of inner life, with Romantic Pragmatism in architecture. It is a Modernist take on Romantic principles, where the creation of form inevitably takes place but it is an end result, not a starting point.

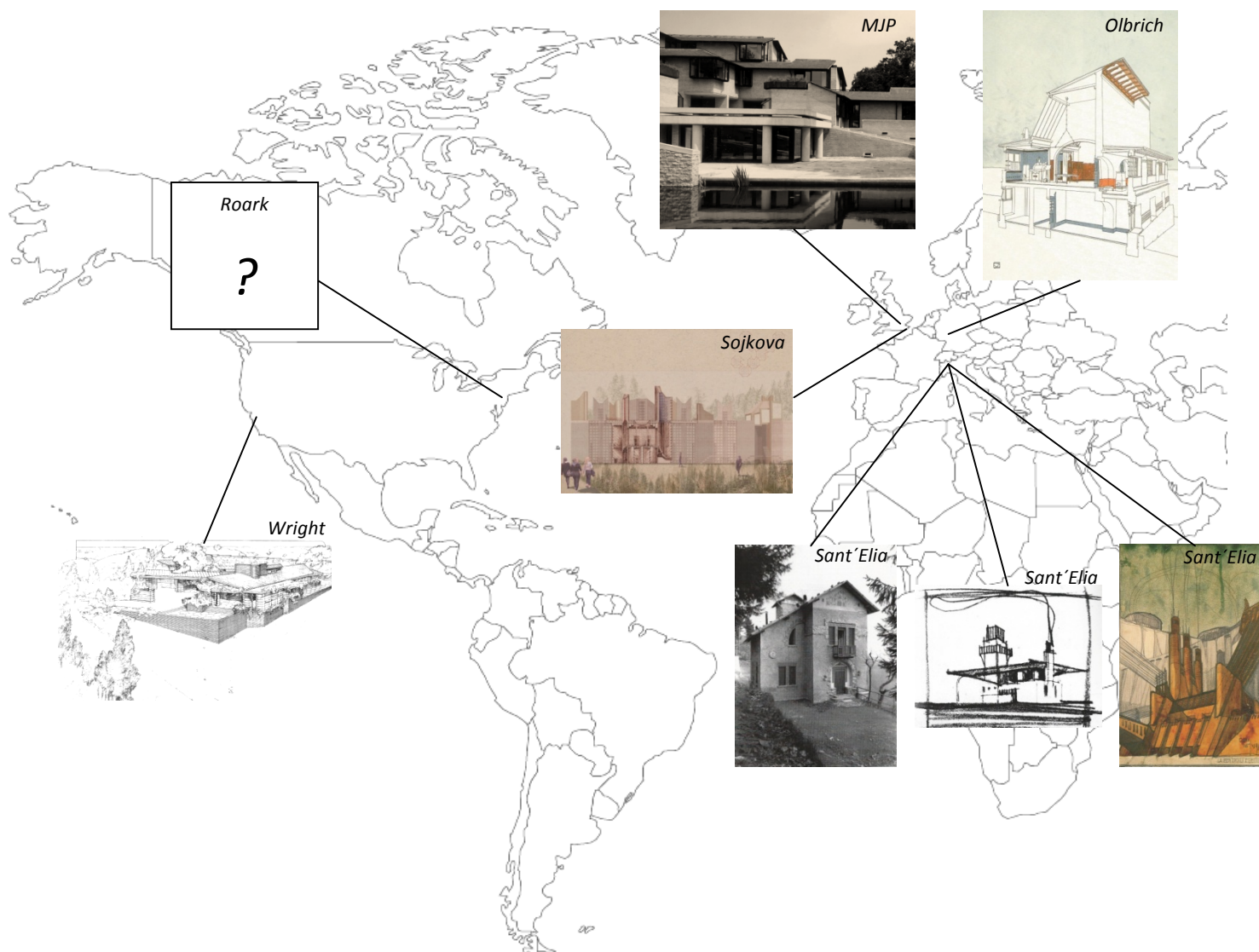


Fig 16: Summary of case studies

<sup>40</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and The Masses: Pride and Prejudice among The Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1992), 23.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-7.

Ayn Rand shows the contrast between cognitive abstractions describing what 'is' and normative abstractions describing what 'ought to be', which is linked to human willpower and ideals.<sup>42</sup> In different eras, abstractions are subject to different influences, therefore the resulting concretes inevitably vary.<sup>43</sup> We can always describe the forms and see parallels between them but their uniqueness stems from a Louis Sullivan's principle that 'form follows function'.<sup>44</sup> Rand explains the purposefulness of art when it comes to nurturing of human consciousness, soul and morals.<sup>45</sup> As well as religion is concretized in mythological figures, moral principles are visible through architecture that the soul inhabits. Thus we could say that an architect 'is' or 'ought to be' a builder of the ethics. Howard Roark as an embodiment of this principle, although fictional, has a power to influence real architect's decisions, by providing a clearer mental image of what integrity means and how it can be preserved.<sup>46</sup> Even Aristotle argued that fiction is philosophically superior to history.<sup>47</sup> Real-life stories can only offer concretes, finished products whereas the most successfully portrayed fictional characters always have an impact on the individual as long as he/she can associate with their values. Positively or negatively, it depends on what concretes one can distill from the abstract concepts one is exposed to.<sup>48</sup> Every architect- innovator, or a futurist of his own age, so to speak, perceives an architectural problem as a challenge, an opportunity to concretize what 'ought to be'. As long as he does not compromise this principle, the values can successfully become reality in various, often even contradicting forms. It is a 'Gehaltsaesthetik in which 'content-Gehalt' is prioritized over 'form-Gestalt'.<sup>49</sup> All the Modernist movements dealt with in this essay were characterized by the denial of uniformity thus continuing in Romantic footsteps. Why can we find such a strong connection between these periods spanning over two centuries? One way or the other, all of them reacted to the industrialization, the machine age and the future versus honesty of nature and tradition. This era of experimentation enabled them to combine various assumptions in search for the whole - a total work of art - Gesamtkunstwerk.<sup>50</sup> Is there a right reaction, a right set of rules that would guarantee this outcome? The common factor is the process of looking for answers to these questions which we 'ought to' nurture. This process is the key because a building is never finished or done, metaphorically speaking, it has a life of its own after it is inhabited. Rather than a 'total work of art' we are striving for a 'never-ending work of art', in a way that it is timeless, relevant in contemporary world providing a reference of the past and a hope for the ideal future. Tendencies are repeated in a loop of historical events, every era has its own avant-garde.

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<sup>42</sup> Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh Morrison, *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001)

<sup>45</sup> Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.

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### *Image References*

*Cover image:* Author's own work.

*Fig1:* Meyer, Esther da Costa. *The Work of Antonio Sant'Elia: Retreat into the Future*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 55.

*Fig2:* Sembach, Klaus-Jürgen. *Art Nouveau: Utopia: Reconciling the Irreconcilable*. Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, 2000, 144.

*Fig3:* Caramel, Luciano and Longatti, Alberto. *Antonio Sant'Elia: The Complete Works*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988, 218.

*Fig4:* Meyer, Esther da Costa. *The Work of Antonio Sant'Elia: Retreat into the Future*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 132-3.

*Fig5:* Author's own work.

*Fig6:* Wright, Frank Lloyd. *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture*. Edited by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 308.

*Fig7:* Wilkinson, Philip. *Frank Lloyd Wright: 50 Key Buildings by America's Greatest Architect*. London : Quercus, 2010, 111.

*Fig8:* Author's own work.

*Fig9:* Author's own work.

*Fig10:* Author's own work.

*Fig11:* Author's own work (Photograph taken 8 October 2013).

*Fig12:* Davey, Peter. "Place-making in Oxford." *Architectural review*, vol.174, no.1039, September, 1983, 37.

*Fig13:* <http://www.mjparchitects.co.uk/projects/the-sainsbury-building/> (Accessed 3 April 2014).

*Fig14:* Author's own work.

*Fig15:* Author's own work.

*Fig16:* <http://galleryhip.com/world-map-outline.html> (Accessed 3 April 2014).

