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THE MYTH HAS DISAPPEARED. IS IT GOOD FOR ARCHITECTURE?

MIT PRZEMINAŁ. CZY TO DOBRE DLA ARCHITEKTURY?

Abstract

The word *myth* has actually changed its meaning a lot in the last half century.

It used to mean a legendary way of describing ancient episodes that were fundamental to human history, but it has now turned into a legendary way of narrating modern-day people and things, realities themselves distorted by the lens of virtual reality. In this sense, it no longer tells of people and facts, but it's all about how to narrate things, amplifying the nothingness to make it seem real and noisy and prominent. In the field of architecture, few myths remain alive, except perhaps the still present need to look for them, a need which urges further investigation.

In a world where trying to operate responsibly and with an eye to the consequences of the future (as in fact many did in the past, albeit silently) is now called *sustainable sustainability*, it is certainly difficult to free oneself from the corruption of thought and from the pollution of words.

Keywords: 20th-century architecture, social media, real virtuality, science fiction

Streszczenie

W ciągu ostatniego półwiecza słowo „mit” bardzo zmieniło swoje znaczenie.

Niegdyś słowo to oznaczało legendowy sposób opisywania starożytnych wydarzeń, które miały fundamentalne znaczenie dla historii ludzkości. Obecnie przekształciło się w legendowy sposób opowiadania o współczesnych ludziach i rzeczach, realiach zniekształconych przez soczewkę wirtualnej rzeczywistości. Tym samym nie traktuje już o ludziach i faktach, ale skupia się na sposobie narracji, potęgując nicność, tak by wydawała się realna, głośna i znacząca.

Niewiele mitów pozostaje wciąż żywych na gruncie architektury, może za wyjątkiem wciąż aktualnej potrzeby ich poszukiwania, która skłania do dalszych dociekań.

W świecie, w którym próby podejmowania odpowiedzialnych działań z troską o przyszłość (co tak naprawdę wiele osób czyniło już w przeszłości, choć po cichu) nazywa się obecnie zrównoważonym rozwojem... z pewnością trudno jest uwolnić się od wypaczenia myśli i skażenia słów.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura XX w., media społecznościowe, realna wirtualność, fantastyka naukowa

MYTH

Since we are now talking about myth, I think we cannot use clearly stated quotations, but it is necessary to go by memory, the only quality that, with a certain effort, can best recall what we have never actually seen and what we don't know if it ever really existed.

It is with this criterion that these lines have been written. And it is for this same reason that only a few illustrations have been chosen and put on the paper, and mostly appear in low resolution (as opposed to the rule), because the myth cannot be seen too closely – the pictures are put here to remind us of something, not to explain it.

Without a doubt, the myth has been in our history something really important. It served to give a meaning, sometimes a teaching, sometimes just an apparent explanation to significant facts within us. Therefore, the theme of this meeting – which, like almost every year, at first glance seems almost nonsense – becomes truly significant when you look at it in depth.

The word *myth* has actually changed its meaning a lot in the last half-century. It was a legendary way of narrating ancient episodes that were fundamental to human history and has turned into a legendary way of telling the story of people and things of today, which are in turn distorted and magnified by the lens of virtual reality. In this sense, it no longer narrates things, but it's all about how to narrate things, amplifying the *nothingness*, in order to make it seem real and noisy and prominent.

Now a few quotes which, translated from Italian, will unfortunately lose their accuracy.
Myth:

Fabulous narration of ancient religious and legendary beliefs, about divine, heroic beings, about the relationship between gods and humans and nature, as they are found [...] and more or less among people fervid in their imagination [...] | Imagination, fantasy, creation of the mind far removed from reality. Person or fact that seems legendary.

However, it also meant: neol. “Political ideology capable of awakening imagination, fervour, confident expectation in a multitude. | Utopian hope. [...]” Hence “Mythomania, a pathological tendency to tell imaginary facts and spread lies, with greater or lesser awareness of telling falsehoods [...]”¹

And perhaps this is what we are talking about today.

The same dictionary, already in 1990, tends to emphasize other meanings:

[...] Exposition of an idea, an abstract teaching in allegorical or poetic form [...] 3. A schematic or simplified, often illusory, image of an event, a social phenomenon, or a character, as it is formed or received by a human group, playing a decisive role in the practical and ideological behaviour of that group [...] Utopian hope, construction of the intellect without any basis: its fortune is a —.²

As we can see already at the end of the century, the other meanings were more important.

But in fact, already in 1984, the second meaning was:

Myth:

1. A story of great but unknown age which originally embodied a belief regarding some fact or phenomenon of experience, and in which often the forces of nature and of the soul are personified; an ancient legend of a god, a hero, the origin of a race, etc.; a wonder story of prehistoric origin; a popular fable which is, or has been, received as historical.
2. A person or thing existing only in imagination, or whose actual existence is not verifiable.³

¹ *Mito* [in:] N. Zingarelli (ed.), *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, N. Zanichelli, Bologna 1959, p. 998.

² *Mito* [in:] N. Zingarelli (ed.), *Il nuovo Zingarelli, Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, N. Zanichelli, Bologna 1990, p. 1172.

³ *Myth* [in:] N. Porter (ed.), *Websters International Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1, G. & C. Merriam Company, Springfield 1894, p. 960.

The myth was therefore something very important. Perhaps no one was really familiar with it, but it had the function of teaching and warning.

In fact, myths have always represented other meanings, literally far from the facts they depicted.

For instance, the myth of Prometheus.

Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give it to mankind, and his action, which took place in antithesis to Zeus and it is placed at the beginning of humanity, represents the origin of man's existential condition. In the history of Western culture, Prometheus can be seen as a symbol of rebellion and defiance of authority or imposition, as well as a metaphor for thought and an archetype of a knowledge freed from the constraints of myth, falsification and ideology.

Something very important then: why wonder if he really existed?

Or the myth of the Pillars of Hercules.

The myth of the Pillars of Hercules, in itself, is a legend within a legend. I don't know if Hercules really came to identify two mountains, to create a monumental gateway through, but a gateway which one could not pass; and I wonder if he then wrote the simple, clear and concise inscription: *non plus ultra* (no further). It is a very strange idea to open a portal to prevent people from passing through!

And who knows if he wrote it in Latin, the most international language at the time,⁴ after the story of the Tower of Babel?

But we know that beyond that threshold there was something that the adventurous travellers did not know, and that apparently represented heading towards death.

Legend, myth, meaning, everything is the result of man's fear of the new and discovery. This fear, however, does not overcome the fascination of the new, of knowledge and of facts yet to be discovered. This is precisely why the history of mankind tells of journeys, migrations and discoveries, whether by courageous men or by pure chance.

We see that the myth, then, while describing a particular place (where was it?), represents a warning, and identifies the frontier of the civilized world and, from this perspective, can only follow the progress of geographical discoveries and the advance of naval routes. In practice, that "door" is a simple description of an inexorable fascination with the impossible.

Or the myth of the Tower of Babel.

"Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. [...]" Human beings – to tell the truth, the men had just dried out and were recovering after the big Flood (I fear we will soon have to get used to something similar again...) –

[...] came to a plain [...] and settled there [...] And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the

⁴ This is not strictly accurate, but we can assume it to be true here.

earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.⁵

Babel... Bla bla... bla bla... we are speaking of language!

This is certainly a very beautiful story, including the idea of the good Lord having to go down below – perhaps a little bored or just curious? – to see what these people are up to. It talks about new cities, new towers and new bricks. Things for architects, my little readers will say.

Absolutely not!

This story, on the one hand, tells of a divine plan to scatter men over the Earth and populate it; and at the same time explains, in a *mythological* way, the origin of the differences in language between men.

It seems that language was created to understand each other and communicate better. Although, to tell the truth, on reflection, perhaps it was also born to tell lies and cheat... sometimes it seems to us that animals understand each other much better than humans, and without language. But it remains true that language should be born to better understand each other. What is most astonishing is how men, once they have a language suitable for mutual understanding, always and inexorably feel the need to use it also to divide themselves, and to identify themselves as groups among others.

From this point of view, the myth of the tower of Babel, although not very easy to believe, was one of the few explanations we had for this paradox.

So, we see that the whole myth of the Tower of Babel, apparently the most *architectural* of all – starting with bricks, then the city, then the tower itself – had little to do with the art of construction!

At the same time, today, faced with phenomena of tremendous magnitude, looking at them closely, or rather from within, we are unable to trace them back to something mythical.⁶

“We are now at the very end of summer. Or at least we hope so. Once, this was a comforting melancholy, because nothing was as certain as the eternal cycle of nature.”⁷

Today we are beginning to lose this eternity. Thus, the dying Alpine glaciers we visit are a particularly vivid signal of the transformations that occur on the human time scale, but will remain irreversible in the scale of earthly-historical time. It also clarifies the global dimension of the phenomenon, which also affects the regions and their inhabitants, for whom stable glaciers are not only a cherished landscape feature or a guarantee of jobs in ski tourism, but are vital. After all, we are talking about glaciers and volcanoes – masses of ice which, when melted, would cause the sea level to rise so high that almost everyone on earth would be affected, at least indirectly. The mere possibility of such an event destroys the beautiful (mythical?) image of the “eternal ice.” The glow of the Arctic and Antarctic glaciers mingles with the no longer so deep shade of the green trees in late summer.

⁵ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Good News Publishers 2001, <https://biblehub.com/esv/genesis/11.htm> (access: 17.10.2021), Gen. 11, 1–9.

⁶ A suggestion from: U. von Rauchhaupt, *Das Ende der Ewigkeit*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, 29.08.2021, no. 34.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

It's a real shame, but today's society has for more than 30 years produced arguments and false information about a climate change that, whatever the reason, had been evident since the late 1980s. But no myth comes to explain it to us, as the ancients would have done. No myth that, besides giving legendary explanations, also could provide some advice, as the ancients did.

NEW MYTHS

But those myths are now gone, perhaps they have disappeared, or perhaps they have just become dormant. Or maybe they came true, and that's why they disappeared, as dreams do. The dreams, which in today's culture are always proposed as a personal goal for one's life fulfilment (*fulfil your dreams!; you only have to realize your dreams!* – the fake teachers always tell you). But dreams, when realized, vanish!

As E. Canetti had to say: "How quickly has the flight, this ancient, precious dream, lost all attractiveness, all meaning, its very soul. Thus dreams come true, one after the other, until they die. Can you have a new dream?"⁸

Nowadays, of course, the term *Myth* is used for things that perhaps exist, but which virtual reality has made thunderously present in the memory of many, and the struggle between the existing real and the virtual real makes our lives more and more similar to old science fiction novels.

"Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves" (Philip K. Dick, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*).

"Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" (Philip K. Dick, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*).

"It is sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane" (Philip K. Dick, *Valis*).

Perhaps also these quotes are a myth: they are the ones that always come out if you click Philip Dick. Did he really say these quotes? Can they really be found in the texts mentioned? We read them many decades ago, and today we can no longer find those texts that at the time seemed to be just entertainment, pastime in the boring times of those days.

It is not by chance that Philip Dick identified, among the novels he wrote, a canon of works linked to a common thread, that of the confusion between true and false reality, with all its consequences. Indeed, we had myths in the architecture of the last period.

But the meaning of the word has been reversed. Myth is the term we use today for the most trivial things, but which have entered the imagination of the mass media as inescapable and bouncing between social networks as in a play of mirrors. Myth today: *A fictitious story, person, or thing*.

In a looser sense, an invented story; something purely fabulous or having no existence in fact; an imaginary or fictitious individual or object: as, his wealthy relative was a mere myth; his having gone to Paris is a myth. Myth is thus often used as a euphemism for falsehood or lie.

⁸ E. Canetti, *La provincia dell'uomo. Quaderni di appunti 1942-1972*, Adelphi, Milano 2006, p. 16.

So, let's take a look at the latest myths.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao could be one of them.

But I am not talking about the museum itself or its architecture. I really believe in its existence and its architecture should not be bad.

The myth lies in its image, such as the one shown here (Ill. 1) – or one similar to it – since for sure, at the turn of the century this image featured in an incredible number of architectural papers: whether the museum was visited or not, it seemed necessary to mention it in one's writing. "Mythical" because it appeared in a countless number of papers.

And at this point I too am forced to break my rule, and quote it!

The museum was inaugurated on 18 October 1997 by King Juan Carlos I of Spain, with an exhibition of 250 contemporary works of art. Built alongside the Nervion River, which runs through the city of Bilbao to the Cantabrian Sea, it is one of several museums belonging to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and features permanent and visiting exhibits of works by Spanish and international artists. [...]

One of the most admired works of contemporary architecture, the building has been hailed as a 'signal moment in the architectural culture,' because it represents 'one of those rare moments when critics, academics, and the general public were all completely united about something,' according to architectural critic Paul Goldberg. The museum was the building most frequently named as one of the most important works completed since 1980 in the 2010 World Architecture Survey among architecture experts.⁹



Ill. 1. The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, designed by Frank Gehry, and located in Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain. One of the most well-known pictures, source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guggenheim_4_\(3798488142\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guggenheim_4_(3798488142).jpg) (access: 17.10.2021).

⁹ This is from Wikipedia, of course! [*Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* [in:] Wikipedia.org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guggenheim_Museum_Bilbao (access: 17.10.2021)].

But perhaps another kind of myth was also the architectural philosophy advocated, and spread around the world, by the Italian professors at the end of the last century.

It was an approach to architecture that they searched especially through drawing and architectural theory, since for many “great professors of architecture” the work on the building site could “dirty their hands” and perhaps even contaminate the purity of their thinking – as we know, when thoughts are too high, they clash badly with reality.

And so, the whole world studied these architectures, most of which have never been seen, because they were the result of the mission of the architect; a mission which was not to focus on the work to be done, but to focus on the architect’s own mission – truly a strange vicious circle.

Here in the picture (Ill. 2), one of the best moments (since it is a myth, I choose it from the ones that look most like a fairy tale): architecture or scenography? One of the most enduring of all temporary images. Timeless: so we will not put a date on it.



Ill. 2. Il Teatro del Mondo. Aldo Rossi, source: MILANO | Proposta. Il Teatro del Mondo di Aldo Rossi ricostruito [in:] Skyscraper city, <https://www.skyscrapercity.com/threads/milano-proposta-il-teatro-del-mondo-di-aldo-rossi-ricostruito.2066185/> (access: 17.10.2021).

This was the myth, or perhaps the utopia of that moment. In this particular and unique case, the scenography rather than the architecture. But with the power of architecture.

What you can see in the picture was perhaps the most enduring and remarkable “architecture” of this period, that was generally (and superficially) called post-modernism. In general, however, it was clear for all that drawing was better, simpler and safer. Dozens of architectural competitions were held at that time in Italy, with great effort and considerable expense. Most of them ended up with large exhibitions. But almost always the building works were not practicable.

But there are also the myths that we do not see, that remain unnoticed, even though they are very close, and surrounded us for years.

Certainly, in the first half of the twentieth century, very few people remembered the stories of Arcadia and the ancient poems. Yet for almost a hundred years, in the houses of

central Europe, even of the simplest bourgeoisie, one could see decorations and tapestries intended to tell images of a bucolic dream nearby and to give serenity to homes through ancient scenes of Arcadia. Which none of us knew about.

Here, a tapestry from the panel of an old coat rack from the last century (Ill. 3). Of very little value, but a significant indication of the symbolic use of these landscape scenes.



Ill. 3. A tapestry from the panel of an old coat rack from the last century. Source: private collection, author unknown.

Similarly with the architecture of antiquity, when looking at the ancient ruins, no one could understand how the ancients managed to create such wonders, and it was impossible to understand how it was built – it was *mythical*. It was an example to be taken up, but unattainable.

On the contrary, *storytelling* is today's myth. Not the fact itself, but the way it is told and quoted. You will not see the actual forms of the architecture, but the light it radiates! And that is why each building has to “glow” and you will see in all the magazines that new architectures always illuminate from the inside, especially at night, to see not so much their shapes as the light they appear to emit.

If in the early 20th century a villa or a building was talked about for the “purity” of its forms (this is how everyone remembers Le Corbusier's buildings), today you will see the opposite.

The myth of light, a villa (Ill. 4). Here, taken from one of today's best architectural magazines, *The Plan*, which usually overlooks the ideology in order to deepen the way of constructing.

In the field of architecture, few myths remain except perhaps the still present need to look for them, which drives you to investigate further. In a world where trying to operate responsibly and taking care of tomorrow's consequences (as in fact many did in the past, albeit silently) is now called *sustainable sustainability*, it is certainly difficult to free oneself from the corruption of thought and from the pollution of words.



III. 4. Casa Trancura, Pucòn Cile, di Labarca-Martinez, The Plan, 2021, no. 131.

Perhaps we still need myths, those from the past, those that told us a fact, but actually explained a very different concept, that deepened something in our being and perhaps taught something else.

Maybe one more truth, beyond the visible – but also beyond the not unreal but false truth of the digital world?

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A u t h o r ' s N o t e :

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