Laying Siege to the Stadtkrone: Nietzsche, Taut and the vision of a Cultural Aristocracy

MICHAEL CHAPMAN & MICHAEL OSTWALD
School of Architecture and Built Environment
University of Newcastle

In 1919, in the tumultuous period following the First World War, Bruno Taut offered a proposal for an ideal town plan which he described as the Stadtkrone (city crown). Based on a cruciform plan, the layout grouped all cultural facilities of the city in the centre of the town, occupying its highest point. This central square became the site for the dominating meditative space of the “crystal-house”, surrounded by residential, business, recreational and industrial zones which step away from the centre giving the city its characteristic pyramid form. In Taut’s plan the political and institutional structures of the city have been replaced unceremoniously by artistic ones that now occupy the pinnacle of the cultural pyramid. Thus, a fundamental characteristic of the Stadtkrone is the emergence within society of a new cultural elite—now embodied and legitimised within the rigid form of the city.

This paper will examine the way that the cultural elitism inherent in Taut’s project was an embodiment of the political thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche. In an era dominated by democratic and socialist doctrines, Nietzsche continually heralded the arrival of a new cultural elite that would transcend mundane and sterile political systems and legislate for the future. This aristocratic vision is often equated by Nietzsche with the metaphor of height and he prescribed an architecture of verticality to counter the horizontal homogeneity he saw as intrinsic to democratic and socialist doctrines. The paper demonstrates close correlations between Nietzsche’s political philosophy and the utopian vision of Taut most clearly depicted in the vertical stratification of the Stadtkrone project. The paper uncovers the theoretical and practical instabilities present in Taut’s Stadtkrone and
traces the manner in which the ultimate assimilation of such forms of expressionism by the proletariat paradoxically lead to the collapse of the movement.

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In 1919, in the tumultuous period following the First World War, Bruno Taut offered a proposal for an ideal town plan which he described as the Stadtkrone (city crown).\(^1\) Based on a cruciform plan that was oriented towards the passage of the sun, the layout grouped all cultural facilities of the city in the centre of the town, occupying its highest point. Four principal buildings, comprising an opera house, theatre, public hall and assembly hall, were congregated around a central square with access to colonnades, private squares and garden terraces. This central square became the site for the dominating meditative space of the “crystal-house” which, according to Taut, “reigns over the whole as pure architecture.”\(^2\) The arrangement of the town was governed by this sacred structure, falling away pyramidically into residential, business, recreational and industrial zones. Most importantly, in Taut’s plan the political and institutional structures of the city had been unceremoniously replaced by artistic ones. Thus, a fundamental characteristic of the Stadtkrone was the emergence within society of a new cultural elite—now embodied and legitimised within the rigid form of the city.

The Stadtkrone, as described by Taut, is an architectural apparatus which monumentalises the natural stratification of individuals within society. According to Taut, the town is “graduated from top to bottom in a similar way to people being graded in their inclinations and their dispositions.”\(^3\) The higher levels, inoculated from contamination by the masses, are reserved for individual activities such as meditation, contemplation and artistic endeavour. The lower rungs of the pyramid, emerging from the flat plane of housing units, are to be given over to more common activities such as shopping, eating, socialising and relaxing. The structure of the pyramid effectively enforces a quarantine around the central Crystal-house occupying the masses at the base of the pyramid and inviting only solitary individuals to infiltrate the apex. The architectural result is, as Taut concludes, “a crystallised image of the stratas of man.”\(^4\) All individuals find their position within this pyramid, moving “in the direction to which [they are] drawn”.\(^5\) This spatio-social tendency not only congregates those of the same rank together, eliminating conflict, but induces new levels of creativity that are unencumbered by the forces of cultural homogenisation. The crystal-house, situated at the apex of the pyramid, is a source of artistic aspiration for individuals on all rungs of the architectural matrix. According to Taut, it should lead humanity “towards the heights” and should not be seen “as an end in
itself but as an encouragement towards the realisation and further establishment of goals.”

Taut’s plan for the Stadtkrone coincided with a personal period of rampant idealism that was facilitated by his own profound dissatisfaction with the war. The war, which had induced an economic collapse in Europe and particularly in Germany, led Taut, like many others, to withdraw from the art of building. Instead, Taut turned his imagination to utopian schemes that he maintained were capable of rectifying the damage caused by the war. Taut, who was committed to the principles of pacifism, blamed the nationalism of the German State for the war. He saw the need to drastically restructure the composition of German society along cultural, rather than militaristic, lines and to allow artists a central role within the legislative body. The artist, and in particular the architect, had a duty to propose alternative ways of living and in doing so to challenge the political systems that had lead to the war. In an essay from 1919 Taut asked his fellow Europeans to “[p]ush the dirty rubbish of establishment aside, the sticky stinking shrouds which cover your people, be naked and kneel before the radiant sun of art.”

In 1918 Taut, along with other architects and artists, established the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Working Council for Art). The Council, which included Walter Gropius, Erich Mendehlson and Adolf Behne among its members, attempted to attain some political backing for their cause and to elevate artists to new positions of political influence in the turbulent political climate that followed the end of the war. Taut launched a manifesto in December 1918 proclaiming the principles of the council, described by Iain Boyd Whyte as “a radical programme for cultural reform based on the benign dictatorship of a self-proclaimed artistic elite.” Weeks earlier, Taut had been the only architect member of Kurt Hiller’s short-lived Rat der Geistigen which also attempted to galvanise proletarian support for artistic principles. Like the Arbeitsrat für Kunst, the movement was created “neither by nomination nor by election, but by intrinsic right.”

Despite drawing upon proletarian support for their cause, the socialism described by Taut is quite different to that of the political parties which were sweeping Europe in the aftermath of the war. The political system endorsed by Taut was an aristocracy, led by elite artists who would elevate the masses to a new level of civilisation that was far removed from the philistine culture of the working classes that Taut believed was intrinsic to proletarian socialism as well as Marxism and democracy. Taut argued that the most gifted artisans were the ones who must be given the greatest power, in order that they may influence the most people. Taut had made this point abundantly clear in his address to the Werkbund in 1914, where he contends that art:
represents a pyramid, which widens towards its base. Above, at the apex, stand the most able—the artists with ideas. The broadening base means nothing more than a levelling down of these ideas. [...] I find it exceedingly depressing that we cannot bring ourselves always to trust simply in the artists at the top.\textsuperscript{10}

The “broadening base” represented by the masses were only important in Taut’s system in their subjugation to an artistic elite who would lead them towards a new cultural renaissance. This is reminiscent of the rhetoric of Taut’s colleague, the writer Kurt Hiller, who considered it a “mistake to try and cultivate the pyramid of human society from the base up. The more effective way is to work from the top.”\textsuperscript{11} At the apex of Taut’s pyramid, as with all aristocratic structures, was to be an all-powerful leader. Taut suggests that: “[f]or all artistic questions, we should arrange to elect a recognised artist as a dictator, whose decision would be absolute […] A dictatorship in artistic matters—I am quite certain […] that therein lies the possible way in which good, artistic values might be promoted.”\textsuperscript{12}

This position is apparent in the \textit{Stadtkrone}, whose pyramidal form actively enforced a cultural aristocracy upon the landscape. The dialogue between the broad base of the public housing and the pinnacle of the crystal-house is representative of Taut’s mission to lead the masses from the depths of mass-culture towards a new level of cultural enlightenment. The crystal-house was symbolic of an artistic spirit which would reside over everything and impact on all aspects of cultural life. As with Hiller’s description, this was a pyramid built from the apex and not from the base.

The project of the \textit{Stadtkrone} can be seen as the architectural culmination not only of a new cultural aristocracy, but more profoundly of the political thought of Friedrich Nietzsche who had become influential to the emerging German Avant-Garde of the period and in particular Taut. As early as 1904, at the age of 24, Taut had written to his brother Max reiterating his enthusiasm for Nietzsche’s \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}, a work that had a major impact on Taut’s creative life. Taut had quoted from the third of Nietzsche’s \textit{Untimely Meditations} (1874) in his essay that accompanied the \textit{Stadtkrone} project, pointing towards Nietzsche’s description of a state led spiritually by artists and where bureaucrats are reduced to positions of mundane organisation.

Throughout Nietzsche’s life he maintained an enthusiasm for the establishment of an elite community insulated, as Hayman writes “from the vulgarities and frustrations of life among the philistines.”\textsuperscript{13} From the establishment of \textit{Germania}, (a private intellectual gathering founded by Nietzsche while at school) to his impulse in his early twenties to “create a new Greek academy”\textsuperscript{14} Nietzsche retained this mission throughout his life. Such idealistic elitism suffuses Nietzsche’s philosophy and in \textit{Beyond Good and Evil} Nietzsche
writes that: “[e]very enhancement of the type “man” has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man.”15 In the aphorism which follows he concludes that “society should not exist for the sake of society, but only as a foundation and scaffolding upon which a select order of beings may raise itself to its higher task and in general a higher existence.”16

This is an important (and notorious) aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy that is developed at length in his subsequent work, On the Genealogy of Morals (1887).17 In this work, peculiar in Nietzsche’s writing, he temporarily abandons his aphoristic style to provide three essay length meditations on the origin of morality. Fundamental to Nietzsche’s argument is the concept of “master” and “slave” moralities that form the foundation of his aristocracy. In Nietzsche’s interpretation, the “masters” formed the highest caste as a result of their “natural” evaluation of all things. Their values are depicted by Frithjof Bergmann as “health, strength, physical or sexual attractiveness, but also talents and gifts of every sort: wit, imagination, as well as cunning, the capacity to sustain passion, and beyond this, toughness and endurance and much more.”18 Nietzsche argues that these traits became associated with the word “good”. Conversely the word “bad” came to represent its opposites, or the lack of such qualities. It thus became associated with deficiency and inferiority. Those without the aspects of the “good” in Nietzsche’s scenario, were not inherently disenfranchised, or oppressed, but more specifically “untalented and ungifted”. Nietzsche’s genealogy traces the way that the qualities of humility, modesty and compliance (associated with the qualities of the “bad”) eventually superseded the arrogant aspects of the “good” and society, essentially through the Christian faith, became structured upon mediocrity. The naturally gifted members of society became the disenfranchised and the most ennobled became those with the least courage and individuality. The result, according to Nietzsche, was that the Christian morality of equality before God not only inhibited the lesser members of society but, more heinously, imprisoned the most brilliant ones.

As a result of this line of reasoning, Nietzsche’s entire political construct seeks a reversal of this situation where, as Keith Ansell-Pearson has surmised “individuals [who] cannot attain greatness, [...] should at least be made to serve it.”19 The outlet for such an ideal was developed in Nietzsche’s philosophy through the conception of culture modelled heavily on the Greek agon. In the third of Nietzsche’s Untimely Meditations where he first canvasses his concept of culture, he describes it as a state of “liberation, the removal of all the weeds, rubble and vermin that want to attack the tender buds of the plant”20. In this essay Nietzsche posits the function of culture definitively as “to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist and the saint”21. These three figures, intrinsic to Nietzsche’s early philosophy and the ancestors of the free-spirit and the superman, are the pillars upon which any culture must be built. To this end Nietzsche concludes famously that the
goal of humanity cannot lie in the end, but only in its highest specimens." According to Walter Kaufmann “there is no more basic statement of Nietzsche’s philosophy in all of his writings than this sentence.”

Nietzsche thus identified a militant role for artists and architects that would undermine the homogenising forces of the state and allow the usurpation of a new cultural elite. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) Nietzsche had announced that art and the state were enemies, where “one thrives at the expense of the other.” According to Nietzsche “what is great in a cultural sense has always been unpolitical, even anti-political.” Elsewhere in the same work Nietzsche offers the architect as a key-figure in this relationship and a prelude to Taut’s architect-dictator, embodying

the mighty act of will, the will which moves mountains, the intoxication of the strong will, which demands artistic expression. The most powerful men have always inspired the architects; the architect has always been influenced by power. Power, victory over weight and gravity, the will to power seek to render themselves visible in a building; architecture is a kind of rhetoric of power, now persuasive, even cajoling in form, now bluntly imperious.

Throughout his philosophy Nietzsche makes a distinction between “peasant” architecture, associated with horizontal space, and aristocratic architecture, which found its model in the tower. In Nietzsche’s philosophy horizontal space is associated with the forces of homogenisation and mediocrity. Such space exists in the sprawling market-place where Zarathustra’s discourses are continually pronounced to the unsympathetic ears of the masses. In a letter to von Gersdorff Nietzsche refers to the “peasant-houses” where he is forced to live, complaining that “the rooms have low ceilings which press down on one.” Elsewhere Zarathustra complains of the “lower doors” of domestic housing where “anyone like me can still pass through them, but—he has to stoop!” This incessant gravitational pull is a distinctive trait of what Nietzsche calls “peasant” architecture and he declares his love of “tranquil aristocratic Turin” and in particular the monolithic Mole Antonelli which towered above the city. Completed in 1888 just as Nietzsche’s descent into insanity began, Nietzsche describes it to his friend Peter Gast as “perhaps the greatest work of genius ever built” and, through its instinct for height “suggestive of nothing so much as my Zarathustra.” The building, built entirely using traditional stone masonry, climbed to an overall height of 167 metres making it the tallest masonry building in the world.

There is a clear correlation between Nietzsche’s hierarchical and inherently aristocratic conception of society and Taut’s utopian speculations, described by Bletter as “a kind of Nietzschean gigantomania.” In 1920, as part of the Crystal Chain correspondence which
he had initiated, Taut offered a phallic "Monument to the New Law" not only embracing Nietzsche's love of height, but also incorporating the seven tablets of the new law announced by Zarathustra. Wolfgang Pehnt refers to Taut's "fascination with size and mass" resulting in monuments "wildly out of scale, with complete disproportion between the building and the people using it."\(^{32}\) Pehnt describes how "the workers wend their way like pilgrims to colossal sanctuaries" and "people appear, if at all, as tiny dots."\(^{33}\) In an essay from 1919 Taut reveals his desire to "know how high man can build" and announces that architects "must courageously bring that which is highest before man's senses and drive a nail through his flat world."\(^{34}\)

Taut (and Nietzsche's) call for a new sublime verticality is most implicit in the Stadtkrone project. Taut uses the broad plains to house the masses reserving the highest peaks for an impenetrable artistic elite. The model for the housing was to be low in profile, spacious and surrounded by communal gardens. Against this sea of homogenous space Taut placed its antithesis, the cultural crown of the crystal-house forming what Iain Boyd Whyte describes as the "silhouette of the city, rising from squat, profane housing to the sacred central crown."\(^{35}\)

Taut was not the first German architect to embrace Nietzsche's fascination with a new artistic aristocracy dominated by vertical isolation. In 1901 Peter Behrens, himself an enthusiastic reader of Nietzsche,\(^{36}\) had attempted to fashion a new aesthetic culture based around his Artist's Colony in Darmstadt. Here the symbolic vertical stratification inherent in Nietzsche's aristocracy is clear—Behrens forcefully positions the artist at the pinnacle of the cultural landscape of Germany. Bletter observes that: "[l]ike Zarathustra's cave at the top of a mountain, the Darmstadt Artists' Colony, built on a height overlooking the city, suggests in clear visual terms such a stratification of society. The artist has taken up the position at the apex of the social pyramid formerly occupied by the aristocracy."\(^{37}\)

Taut, who maintained similar objectives, had already experimented with a language for such a quasi-religious architecture several years earlier in his proposal for the Glashaus in Cologne (1914). Inspired by the polemical poetry of Paul Scheerbart, and bearing fourteen of his aphorisms around its perimeter, the prism structure used glass-blocks, cascading water and coloured glass in its attempt to simulate a new spiritual epicentre for German culture. The crystal-house which dominates the plan of the Stadtkrone, clearly borrows heavily from this earlier precedent, but Taut introduces a Nietzschean dimension in his description of the central chamber:

> Infused with the light of the sun, the crystal-house reigns over all like a glittering diamond which shines in the sun as a sign of the heights of pleasure and the purest peace of mind. In this room a lonely wanderer will find the pure delight of
architecture and, ascending by the steps in this room to the upper platform, he will see at his feet his town and behind it the sun, [...] rising and setting.38

The description of the lonely wanderer evokes an image of Zarathustra, whose cave resides in the mountains above the town and every morning embraces the rising sun. Significantly, Thus Spoke Zarathustra begins with a dialogue between Zarathustra and the sun39 and ends with Zarathustra’s departure from his cave “glowing and strong like a morning sun emerging from behind dark mountains.”40 With the devastation inflicted on German culture by the war, Taut and many of his contemporaries, saw the Nietzschean image of the dawn sun as symbolic of a new cultural birth, led not by militant technology, but artistic achievement.

Architecture became instrumental in this endeavour. Taut thus sought to establish architects not only as spiritual leaders, but as the political and cultural leaders of a new society. Recalling Nietzsche’s description of architecture as a “rhetoric of power” Taut attributed totalitarian powers to a new architect-dictator whose role was to establish a uniform direction in building. In uncompromising terms, Taut announced that the architect alone would be “responsible for the visible fabric of the new state. He must determine the form giving process, from the statue, right down to the coin and the postage stamp.”41 This is reminiscent of Nietzsche, who saw such a pristine monopoly in the “aristocratic calm” of Turin described in a letter to Peter Gast as a “princely capital where a single commanding taste prevailed throughout: that of the court and nobility.”42 Here the cacophony of styles, endemic to the market-place had been circumvented by the all-powerful persuasion of a cultural nobility who presided over all aspects of its construction.

However, for Taut the social and political reality of Europe mitigated against his capacity to realise his visionary utopian ideals for the masses. This growing realisation is expressed in a number of projects wherein Taut’s mystical elite became divorced from the city entirely—no longer a force within the structure of the city but high above the clutter and congestion of the rabble. In his project of the same year entitled Alpine Architecture43 Taut proposed a string of glass structures stretching along the Alps for meditation, serene reflection and creativity. However here, unlike the Stadtkrone, the architectural crowns weren’t grafted on the matrix of proletarian housing, but isolated and alone, penetrable only by the artistic elite. In contrast to the Stadtkrone where “everything is accessible to everyone”, Taut’s Alpine Architecture had abandoned the masses completely, seeking safe-haven in the air above the contaminated clutter of the cities.

One of the primary reasons underlying Taut’s rejection of his early emancipatory stance was that, in the hands of the common people, his architecture had lost its power to inspire and had become effectively normalised. As Whyte has illustrated, the most dynamic factor
in the disillusion of the Expressionistic Period was its unsuspected acceptance by the proletariat. Despite writing in his 1918 programme for architecture of the need for buildings to “appeal to the popular taste, almost like a fair” Taut’s position had long since abandoned mass culture. Whyte points out that Taut’s vision, “[f]ar from being populist, […] is elitist, aristocratic, didactic.” The role of the architect-dictator was to exercise complete control over the aesthetic composition of the city, cultivating the proletariat, rather than empowering it. The potential danger of popularisation was foreseen by Hermann Finsterlin, one of the corespondents of the Crystal Chain group who, in an open letter to Taut, saw the need to “[k]eep our temple pure…Keep back the profane mob!”

The problem of popular contamination was a perennial one for Taut, who sought to lead the masses upwards, beyond the incessant clutter of Zarathustra’s marketplace. Whilst Taut’s Stadtkrone project had protected the crystal-house from the activities of mass-culture by pressing them centrifugally to the edges of the pyramid, Taut was unable to protect his sacred structure from being appropriated and reproduced within the popular culture of Germany. The jagged, crystalline forms, associated with the aesthetic purity of Taut’s new elite had, as Whyte writes, “exploded onto the streets” and had now been disseminated indiscriminately for a range of popular functions, such as the 1920 Berlin nightclub designed by Walter Würzbach. A more extreme example of this was the use of Taut’s prism like forms in the design of Luna Park in Berlin which placed the imagery of the crystal-house against a backdrop of rampant mass-culture.

Nietzsche also fell victim to a similar process of popularisation in Germany which has been well documented by Steven Aschheim. Aschheim refers to the “delicious ironies” that resulted after Nietzsche’s insanity, as the pristine summits of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra became the site not of serenity or solitude but mass-tourism. A similar irony is inherent in the recently completed conversion of the Mole Antonelli into the National Museum of Cinema in Turin. The monolithic tower, which once stood as a monument to Nietzsche’s aristocratic thought and the nobility of Turin, is now symbolic not of a new artistic elite, but of the most popular of proletariat art-forms—the cinema.

As with the posthumous desecration of Nietzsche’s beloved monument, the popular assimilation of Expressionist forms in Germany inverted Taut’s utopian pyramid and deprived his vision of the inaccessible altitudes that protected it from homogenisation. Rather than a pyramid constructed from the apex, Taut now found himself helpless against the forces of mass culture which eroded the pyramid from its base. The stylistic appropriation of Taut’s exclusive crystalline forms now travestied the entire project, betraying the immaculate purity of the crystal-house and laying siege to the Stadtkrone itself. Shortly after Taut abandoned his Utopian speculations to return, once more, to pragmatic architectural solutions. Despite the initial enthusiasm of Taut and his friends to
elevate the masses to a new cultural pinnacle, the reverse happened. The pinnacle had been reduced to the level of the marketplace.

Michael Chapman is a Research Assistant and Design Tutor at the University of Newcastle. He is currently completing a Masters on the philosophy of Nietzsche and its architectural implications. michael.chapman@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au

Professor Michael Ostwald is Head of the School of Architecture and Built Environment, the University of Newcastle. He has held previous academic positions in the United Kingdom, Europe and North America. His research in architectural theory explores the relationship between architecture, philosophy, mathematics, and virtual environments. michael.ostwald@newcastle.edu.au

1 See: Bruno Taut, Die Stadtkrone, Jena: Diedrich, 1919.
3 Taut, ‘The City Crown,’ p. 84.
4 Taut, ‘The City Crown,’ p. 84.
5 Taut, ‘The City Crown,’ p. 84.
6 Taut, ‘The City Crown,’ p. 84.
10 Bruno Taut, 1914 address to Werkbund quoted in Whyte, Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism, p. 85.
16 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, p. 193 (Aphorism 258) Italics in original.
20 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’ in Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, trans. R.J Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 130 (Section 1).
21 Nietzsche, ‘Schopenhauer as Educator,’ p. 160 (Section 5)
22 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life’ in Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, p. 111 (Section 9)
33 Taut, ‘*Ex Oriente Lux*: Call to Architects, 1919,’ p. 82.
34 Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism*, p. 78.
38 In the first paragraph of Zarathustra’s Prologue the prophet “rose with the dawn, stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus…” See: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 39 (Zarathustra’s Prologue: 1)
39 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 336 (The Sign)