

The Fountainhead
US 1949
114 mins

Directed by **King Vidor**
Written by **Ayn Rand**
Cinematography by **Robert Burks**
Edited by **David Weisbart**
Original music by **Max Steiner**
Art Direction by **Edward Carrere**
Produced by **Henry Blanke**

Cast

Gary Cooper Howard Roark; **Patricia Neal** Dominique Francon; **Raymond Massey** Gail Wynand; **Kent Smith** Peter Keating; **Robert Douglas** Ellsworth M. Toohey; **Henry Hull** Henry Cameron; **Ray Collins** Roger Enright; **Moroni Olsen** Chairman; **Jerome Cowan** Alvah Scarret; **Bob Alden** Newsboy; **John Alvin** Young Intellectual; **Morris Ankrum** Prosecutor; **Lois Austin** Female Party Guest; **Griff Barnett** Judge; **Monte Blue** Gas Station Executive; **Gail Bonney** Woman; **Ralph Brooks** Courtroom Spectator; **Glen Cavender** Pedestrian Onlooker; **Dorothy Christy** Society Woman; **Tristram Coffin** Toohey's Secretary; **Tom Coleman** Court Clerk; **G. Pat Collins** Jury Foreman; **James Conaty** Party Guest; **Bill Dagwell** Banner Shipping Clerk; **Ann Doran** Wynand's Secretary; **Lester Dorr** Minor Role; **John Doucette** Gus Webb; **Jay Eaton** Party Guest; **Charles Evans** Banner Board Member; **Raoul Freeman** Juror; **Roy Gordon** Vice-President; **William Haade** Worker; **Creighton Hale** Court Clerk; **Jonathan Hale** Guy Francon; **Thurston Hall** Businessman at Party; **Sam Harris** Board Member / Courtroom Spectator; **Paul Harvey** Opera Businessman; **Henry Hebert** Juror; **Russell Hicks** Banner Board Member; **Bert Howard** Board Member; **Selmer Jackson** Cortlandt Official; **Fred Kelsey** Old Watchman; **Douglas Kennedy** Reporter; **Raymond Largay** Director; **Philo McCullough** Bailiff; **Harold Miller** Party Guest; **Boyd 'Red' Morgan** Jury Member; **Jack Mower** Construction Foreman; **Paul Newlan** Policeman; **Albert Petit** Board Member; **Lee Phelps** Juror; **Bob Reeves** Juror; **Almira Sessions** Dominique's Housekeeper at Quarry; **George Sherwood** Policeman; **Paul Stanton** Dean Who Expels Roark; **Larry Steers** Party Guest; **Ruthelma Stevens** Roark's Secretary; **Charles Trowbridge** Director; **Tito Vuolo** Pasquale Orsini; **Geraldine Wall** Woman; **Harlan Warde** Young Man; **Pierre Watkin** Cortlandt Official; **Leo White** Pedestrian Onlooker; **Josephine Whittell** Hostess; **Frank Wilcox** Gordon Prescott; **Isabel Withers** Secretary; **Harry Woods** Quarry Superintendent

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The Fountainhead



In the opening scenes of *The Fountainhead*, the case for and against modern architecture is set out in such a familiar manner that we have to remind ourselves that the film we are watching is over sixty years old. It's not that it feels terribly prescient: rather, there's a wearying recognition that debates about architecture have not developed much since the beginning of the cold war. Even the ludicrous addition of a classical portico to one of visionary architect Howard Roark's brutalist maquettes is something that wouldn't look out of place in London's docklands. Perhaps the tables have turned in modernism's favour; these days a classicist like Quinlan Terry is able to adopt Roark's mantle of scorned visionary. What hasn't changed is the debate.

It's both rumoured and disputed that Roark is based on Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect of New York's spiralling Guggenheim. There might also be an element of that other twentieth century modernist colossus, Le Corbusier: Roark's insistence that only the modernist aesthetic and modern construction techniques can solve the 'problem' of low-income housing in the ill-fated Cortlandt development carries echoes of Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles.

But *The Fountainhead* is very much a film of New York. Skyline shots of the 1940s city look somehow stripped bare without the familiar jumble of high rises we know; during one of Roark's dejected moments he walks around a city in the process of being built: skyscrapers with every architect's name on but his. Ultimately his triumph is to build what will be New York's tallest building.

New York in fact owes its skyscrapers less to the genius of individual architects than to its sturdy bedrock of Manhattan schist. In any case, it's arguable whether *The Fountainhead* is really a film about architecture at all. Rand set out to create an ideal man in Roark; she chose the profession of architect for the challenges it offered him to overcome as a creative man, and the rest of the detail followed.

There's also a certain irony that while *The Fountainhead* is all about character, many of the actual characters in the film are flimsy and one-

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dimensional. Roark's would-be nemesis Ellsworth Toohey in particular, constantly narrating his own ambition, comes across like a second-rate Shakespearian villain. Even Roark's steely determination owes more to Gary Cooper's acting than Rand's script.

If you fail to buy into Rand's Objectivist vision of individual genius, then you're left with a rather traditionally unpleasant view of the modernist architect: arrogant, unfeeling and brutal. The respect for a building's integrity easily translates into a lack of respect for the people who live or work in it. Greek friezes aside, it's hard not to see the addition of balconies and decoration to Roark's hideous design for the Cortlandt Homes project as necessary and humanising modifications.

Similarly, the translation of a 750-page novel of ideas into a Hollywood melodrama might have called for more rounding of corners than was acceptable to its author. Rand was notoriously unhappy with the film adaptation. She didn't, however, take it as far as dynamiting the Warner Bros studios in which the film was made.

Other modernisms

Class and politics are inextricably bound up with how a modernist building is perceived. There is a general conviction that the working class were slotted into a world of concrete walkways and towers when all we ever wanted was the old back-to-backs, with perhaps a little more space, more gardens, maybe without the damp and the dysentery. What can't be imagined is a context in which we might have welcomed modernism, and in fact approached it as part of a specific collective project. The pervasive class hatred only slightly below the surface of British life (what else does the word "chav" signify?) centres on the feared or ridiculed estate dweller. Yet this decline works both ways. Modernist urban planning could be seen as one of those moments where the workers — the Labour movement — got ideas above its station, the period where, as per Bevan or Lubetkin, nothing was too good for ordinary people.

from Militant Modernism, Owen Hatherley,

During the 1980s, one building more than any other came to epitomise the problems of Modernism, at least in the eyes of the general public. Trelick Tower in west London featured regularly in the tabloids, and their stories of what was to be found in its brutalist corridors were terrifying.

Women raped in elevators, children attacked by heroin addicts in the basement, and homeless squatters setting fire to flats were among the more lurid. So bad was the Tower's reputation that one urban myth told how the architect, wracked with guilt at creating this monstrosity, threw himself from the roof.

Hungarian émigré Erno Goldfinger was immensely proud of his 31 storey, 322 feet high rectangular slab which dominates the west London skyline. And in recent years, thanks to the concerted efforts of the residents, the Tower's reputation has been transformed. The number of flats for sale is still small (only a handful out of the 219 flats are bought), but those that do change hands privately go for £150,000- £200,000.

Residents bristle at the Tower's reputation as a home for the new 'urban cool', but since the installation of a concierge and basic security apparatus, Trelick's debilitating social problems have been largely stamped out and the building has become something of a pop culture icon. In 1998, it was awarded a Grade 2* listing.

from From Here to Modernity, Open University/BBC

Programme notes by Danny Birchall