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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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for urban life had rather dramatically altered after his residence in Tokyo and his personal experiences during the 1920s. One must not lose sight of Broadacres's true purpose, which, for this essay, had been so carefully expressed by Ralph Borsodi, as quoted in chapter 5. Broadacre City could not have been conceived by Wright prior to 1928. But then, like the Fellowship, if all had gone well professionally and otherwise there would have been no time—and no need—to design a theoretical city and build a hypothetical model.

10 And Le Corbusier?

Many ideas for new cities were bandied about during the first third of the century and there had been some practical results: Letchworth Garden City and Radburn, New Jersey, are popular examples. Probably the best-known architectural polemicist of the period was Le Corbusier. Anticipating the context of Wright's excursions to Moscow and London, it is interesting to compare briefly a few aspects of Le Corbusier's and Wright's ideas.

Effectively there were no individual houses in Le Corbusier's schemes for everyone was meant to live in a high-rise or massed housing:

A Man = A Cell
From Cells = A City,

he said as early as 1929.[1] Typical of most European architects since Antonio Sant'Elia in 1913, at least those who were fond of speculating about new urban forms, the city tended to be conceived as a building, as a piece of architecture, as a megastructure rather than a problem that could be solved by rational application knitted to holistic theories.[2] Wright and Le Corbusier proposed to use the highway more effectively—or at least more emphatically—than it was in contemporary experience, but Le Corbusier's elevated roadways crisscrossed his city distributing traffic immediately within. He envisaged a perimeter forest and green "protected zone" around his city. Wright's city was to be within a natural forested garden. Le Corbusier would disperse industry while Wright integrated it within Broadacres and within walking distance of home. The two architects shared some ideas about agriculture but farms were more highly valued in Broadacres. Le Corbusier geographically isolated small villages for "Radiant Farms." Fundamentally he wanted to recreate the metropolis in another form, concretized by inflexibility. Wright wanted to abandon the metropolis completely in favor of a series of unique small towns.

Both men foresaw farms run on a cooperative basis: community power centers, pools of labor, tractors, and other equipment, cooperative storage and distribution—the kibbutz and the Soviet *kolkhoz* are similar. Both architects also believed the state should distribute land and own

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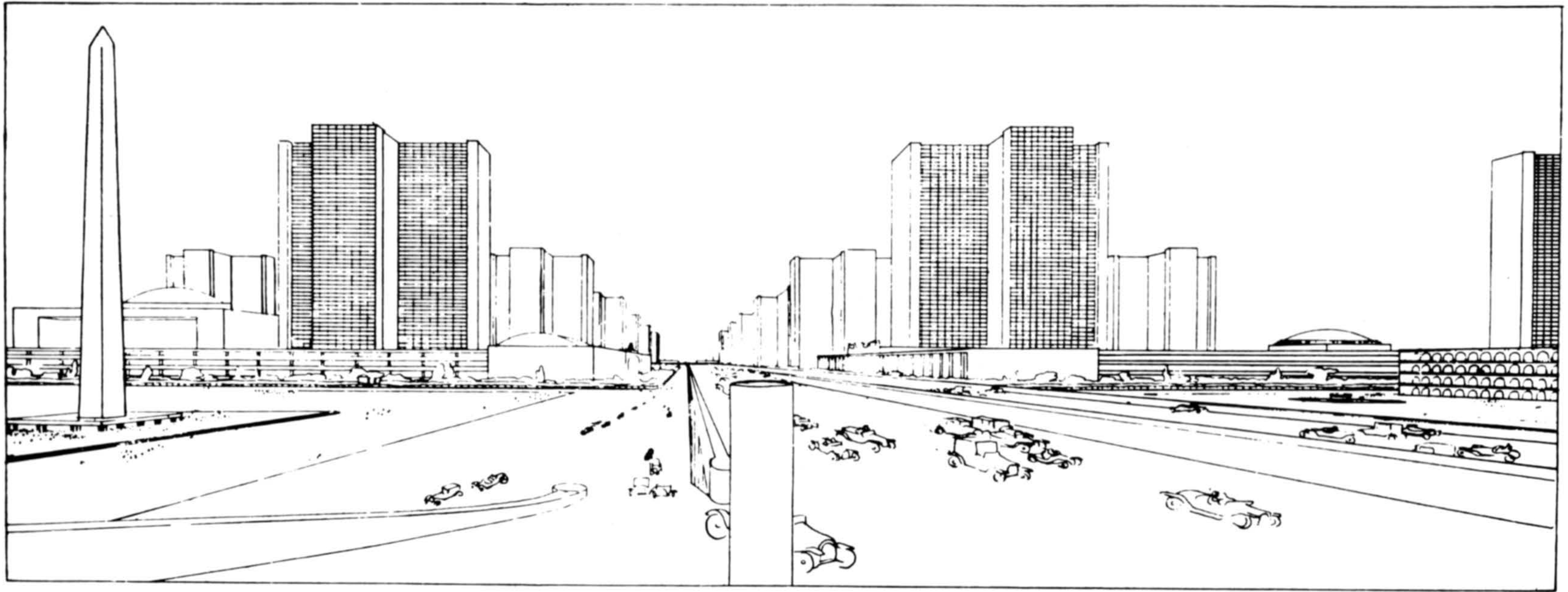

10.1 Perspective of "Une ville contemporaine," a project by Le Corbusier of 1922. Published often in the 1930s and in the first edition of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complète, 1910–1929* (Paris, 1929).

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public utilities. Both found much wanting in modern cities. But Le Corbusier was a typical European urban dweller; Wright was of the open lands of western America. Le Corbusier would virtually destroy and then rebuild; Wright would ignore the existing city, expecting grass to grow on its streets, in favor of new towns. Le Corbusier proposed to collect towers centrally for the urban elite, while Wright dispersed single towers isolated in green areas on the periphery of Broadacre City for government, commerce, and business. Only later did he include high-rise housing. While Wright was certain of the value of the gifted artist-architect, Le Corbusier had a faith in "the superior wisdom of the city designer."[3] He unashamedly promoted the need for an autocratic government to see his designs to fruition, and in a very real sense planning power became more important to him than ideology. To fully appreciate this view, consider that central to his Paris Voisin Plan (exhibited in 1925) was the obliterating of the city's traditional fabric; little was to be saved but Notre Dame and the Louvre. As well, during the 1920s Le Corbusier was a member of the proto-fascist Redressement Français, he wrote favorably of Mussolini, and after the German occupation in 1941 he tried "to persuade the Nazi-sponsored Vichy government of France to implement his plan for Algiers."[4]

Even in the 1950s when Wright proposed a single mile-high skyscraper it was aimed to a large extent at satisfying urbanists. Its construction would then enable the freeing of America's land for the more desirable alternative, Broadacre Cities. The Mile High Illinois "would absorb, justify, and legitimize the gregarious instinct of humanity," said Wright, and as far as he was concerned the necessity for people to band together in his building "would mop up what now remains of urbanism and leave us free to do Broadacre City."[5]

However, as historian George Collins rightly observes, "the world was not electrified by Wright's agrarianism in the 1930s the way it had been by Le Corbusier's Futurism [sic] in the 1920s."[6] And there were other dissimilarities and parallels. Is it too obvious to say how extraordinarily different the concept of home and place as expressed in their architectural resolutions? If the words deceived, the drawings were patent: uniformity and conformity versus individuality and pluralism.

On first examination it may appear that the Broadacre City proposal was not influential on the course of city planning and design at midcentury. But further consideration reveals otherwise. As previously noted, Broadacres was widely published and discussed from 1932 onward. The combination of the two concepts, regional planning and Broadacre City (including new towns), had a profound effect on establishing the need for and then offering methods of decentralization in the postwar period. On the other side, one result of Le Corbusier's theories during the same period was

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"urban renewal"—the demolishing of old buildings and therefore the existing social fabric, to be replaced with high-rise towers.

Wright gambled when he built the model. He must have been aware that by formalizing his idea in architectural and three-dimensional terms he would weaken the concept by specifying all variety of idiomatic detail. Or he might diminish the value of his own architecture by placing it, if abstractly, in an unfamiliar and rather alien context. Broadacre City was, after all, a fluid, undetermined, flexible, existential idea, one that in architectural terms was meant to respond to site and need. His verbalizations from 1930 to 1934 had attracted some attention, but was it enough to induce understanding? Would a diagram have sufficed? And would it have served his intentions adequately? More to the point, he desperately needed money and the commission to build the model was fortuitous; he also *wanted* the publicity that would inevitably come from it. Exhibition of the model, with resulting articles and so forth, was an opportunity not to be missed.

There were two other problems. First, Broadacre City was not a theory, at least not a completely resolved theory. It did not contain a body of ideas or a set of terms that could be measured or could be rationally argued one way or another. His writings were too vague or imprecise to be called a treatise. This imprecision discouraged careful reading and analysis while encouraging equally vague and often emotional responses. Second, he was not proposing a utopia as many observers have suggested. Lyman Tower Sargent's introduction to the subject included one specification: a utopia must describe "fairly completely an imaginary society"; Wright did not. Therefore the architect's pragmatic dream was not included in Sargent's compendium of twentieth-century utopias, and rightly so.[7] Historian John Sergeant was correct when he described Broadacre City as "a scenario for change."

Wright's son John wondered if Broadacre City might have been inspired in part by his father's favorite authors, especially the poets. John listed the New Englanders and transcendentalists only: Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emerson, and Henry Van Dyke: all "Papa's friends." Whitman was special, and particularly one poem entitled "Song of the Broad Axe" from which John quoted the following passages.

The place where a great city stands is not the place of stretch'd wharves, docks,
manufactures, deposits of produce merely, . . .
Nor the place of the tallest and costliest buildings . . .
Nor the place of the most numerous population.
Where the city stands that is belov'd . . .

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. . . no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and deeds . . .
Where the slave ceases, and the master of the slave[s] ceases . . .
Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and [the] President, Mayor, Governor . . . are agents for pay,
Where children are taught to be laws to themselves, and to depend on themselves . . .
Where speculations on the soul are encouraged . . .
Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,
Where the city of the healthiest fathers stand,
Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,
There the great city stands.[8]

The stream of events that composed Wright's career was intimately linked to a vision. With the preparation and presentation of his Kahn lectures, with the completion of his autobiography, and—even if intimately indebted to Wijdeveld—with the formation of his fellowship, he was more strongly convinced of the propriety of his organic theory, which he perceived as holistic and spherical: "I now realize that organic architecture is life and life is organic architecture or both are in vain."[9] With purpose defined, by December 1933 he could announce with certainty his intention and means:

Well Taliesin believes the day has come . . . for a rejection of the too many minor traditions in favor of great elemental Tradition that is decentralization; sees a going forward in new spirit to the ground as the basis for a good life that sets the human soul free above artificial anxieties and all vicarious powers, able and willing to work again as the first condition of true gentility. Taliesin sees work itself where there is something growing and living in it as not only the salt and savor of existence but as the opportunity for bringing "heaven" decently back to Earth where it really belongs. Taliesin sees art as no less than ever the expression of a way of life in this machine age if its civilization is to live.[10]

The discussion so far has shown that in the 1930s lectures, talks, chats, speeches—whatever they were called but most certainly not formal papers—were important financially and as polemical vehicles, more so than any other period of Wright's life. This is also true of exhibitions. In most instances lectures and exhibitions came about as a result of exercising a friendship. Most relationships were related to his architectural practice and to the Fellowship once it was under way, or to

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