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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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talked not only about architecture but of shared beliefs in a single tax and a democraticized socialism (Willcox also supported the Industrial Workers of the World), but there is no evidence of such matters in their correspondence. Nor is there any evidence that those beliefs prompted Willcox's invitation. Rather, the issues were practical and straightforward: education and architecture—Wright's.

A postscript to this episode reveals Wright's continuing search for money as a result of too few architectural commissions. It also indicates that all the hassles in personally arranging lectures and shows was too complicated and tedious for him. He registered with the Leigh Bureau of Lectures and Entertainments, New York. W. Colston Leigh's stable of lecturers included Louis Untermeyer, Joseph Wood Krutch, Fannie Hurst, Dashiell Hammett, Thomas Craven, and Mortimer Adler: nice company. Through Leigh and barely a year after *The Show*, Wright again offered lectures—\$300 each or less if several could be arranged in the same area. No one in the Northwest could raise the money, though the University of Washington tried. People in California did, however, so a 1932 tour was put together. Wright and Olgivanna were again off to the West Coast.

12 Lectures and Exhibitions: Brownell

White, Wright, Willcox, and Bock represent one kind of continuity through architecture, its profession, and secondarily education. The other representative example of a productive social relationship is not concerned with pedagogy or friendly professional continuity. It is of a relatively new personal friendship developed with a local academic who, through a meeting of minds, prompted Wright to define more precisely his attitudes toward architecture, America, and its democracy.

If there was any doubt that Wright was flirting with theories of socialism, if not its practice, then his words in support of Broadacre City and his association with Baker Brownell should have dispelled that doubt. Brownell and Wright produced a book about *Architecture and Modern Life*, which was copyright in 1937 but dated 1938 on the title page. They coauthored some chapters (two) and independently wrote others (Brownell three, Wright two). Before embarking on their book the two had been friends for a number of years and shared ideas about human society. These prompted Brownell to invite Wright to give lectures during the 1932–33 academic year in an undergraduate course conducted by the professor in the School of Journalism at Northwestern University.¹ Such an arrangement continued for a few years and an honorarium was always paid. Often guest lecturers in "science, society, art and philosophy" spoke to Brownell's students about their special subject. The course was also meant to explore "relations," as Brownell put it, between these apparently diverse disciplines.

11.6 Wright's opinion of Los Angeles in particular but most American cities in general, called a "Wisconsin Valentine," drawn by Shoppe, as published in 1937.



The general theme was one that had intrigued Wright for most of his career. In fact it was first expressed in a talk he called "Architecture and the Machine" given in 1894. That was followed in 1901 by the more famous and often reprinted essay "The Art and Craft of the Machine."² After those expositions he had spoken from time to time about adaptations of science and technology to art and specifically architecture. From 1933 to 1937 the academic and the architect visited one another a few times. In 1934, much as Willcox had been, Brownell was recipient of one of Wright's letters seeking support for the Fellowship.³ When invited again to lecture in 1935, Wright spoke on modern architecture, no doubt concentrating on his own efforts.⁴ In 1937 his lecture was on the future of architecture;⁵ that would have been before his departure for Moscow, and it was his last talk for Brownell.

During 1935 Brownell was trying to organize a book that was to have been based on the theme of the course on "contemporary thought." He wanted to bring together two disciplines under one book cover and explore their "relations." Initially he worked with a couple of other academics; one of them was Paul Douglas of Chicago University whom Brownell described as a "prominent young radical economist."⁶ But it seems that those collaborators would not take time off from other more personal projects to work with Brownell. In December 1935 he conceived a "departure," as he described it, and wrote to Wright in a belief that the architect might wish to participate in a "delightful and significant book" to be written "on architecture and music, frozen and fluid form."⁷ He suggested Wright collaborate with Dean Carl Beecher whom Wright may have met a few months earlier; apparently Beecher specialized on Tahitian music. This collaboration came to naught, but having got Wright's interest in a book related to Brownell's pedagogy and philosophy, they eventually agreed in October 1936 to work together on a book about the art of architecture, coincidentally incorporating Broadacres and political philosophy.⁸

During the winter of 1936–37 Wright persisted even though he was seriously ill with pneumonia, the illness that pushed him to build his winter home in Arizona. In February 1937 two of the book's six sections had been completed,⁹ and by midyear 1937 the text was complete in spite of Wright's threat to pull out of the deal because of Brownell's unilateral revisions of Wright's text.¹⁰ This resolved, proofs became available in August.¹¹ The possibility of *Harper's Magazine* serializing parts of the book did not materialize, even though Harper's was to publish the book.¹² Brownell had to rather vigorously push Wright along. Not only was Wright slow but Brownell was rather anxious because the book was most important to the academic's career. He saw it as a "stepping stone" whereby he hoped "to leave the university" and begin the work he "should be doing."¹³ After World

War II he did leave academe (but only on a leave of absence) to put his philosophy into practice. His experiences and those of his colleagues were sympathetically and adequately described as was Brownell's linear fluid society (to borrow his phraseology) in two books by Richard Waverly Poston, *Small Town Renaissance* (1950) and *Democracy Is Yours* (1953), as well as within Brownell's own *The Human Community* of 1950. Just the books' titles indicate Brownell's philosophy and its compatibility with Wright's thinking.

A poet, author, journalist, educator, Brownell has described himself as liberal but quick to qualify his liberalism as not falling into "that snare" called Communism. He acknowledged that the "social evils that have given rise to Communism must be faced."¹⁴ It seems clear that Wright and Brownell were promoting their own—yet not entirely separate—themes within the one book; themes of a social philosopher with strong ideas about participatory democracy that approached classical socialism (but fell short), and an architect with strong ideas about individualism that did not fall short in words or practice. *Architecture and Modern Life* was a book about art, architecture, politics, and urbanism. Wright's contributions about architecture and Broadacre City were similar in content to his earlier writings but with greater concision.

Brownell's thoughts about architecture were partly outlined a few years later when he said that Architecture "lays down patterns of movement for those who live in buildings. It directs their left turnings and their right turnings, their comings and goings, their pauses and speeds in a great dance. . . . It writes thus a rhythmic score," Brownell made an incorrect assumption if illuminating charge when he elaborated: "This kinesthetic function of architecture is almost unrecognized by architects and others, although its significance in building as an art is, in my opinion, great. In a recent book written in collaboration with Frank Lloyd Wright I twice introduced the idea, but so far as I can see neither Mr. Wright nor any critic who read the book—good men all—had any notion what I was driving at, or even saw that I was driving. . . . Architecture is treated too much as a picture."¹⁵ Obviously Brownell was not aware of contemporary architectural theories. The main purpose of their book, however, lay on another intellectual plain.

In a scathing review, Meyer Schapiro outlined the book in three sentences. According to Wright and Brownell "a primitive state of democratic individualism in the Eden of the small towns and the farms was perverted by the cities," Schapiro said. "A privileged class arose which did not know how to administer its wealth in the common interest . . .," and the "deurbanizing of life, the fusion of city and country on a high productive level" is the ideal. This ideal was, Schapiro said,

one “shared by socialists and anarchists.”¹⁶ (The belief that the fusion was shared with socialists and anarchists might seem strange until Schapiro unnecessarily points to his own interpretation of a true socialism.)

For Brownell and Wright, Broadacre City was the exemplar of an ideal that would indeed fuse city and country; a place for urban refugees. Those urban products, socialism and communism, were seen synonymously. The terms even share exactly the same page numbers within the index. “Highly organized society, in a word, is a disintegrating influence on persons,” they said. “It moves towards impersonal ends. It gains in power and fluidity at the person’s expense.” And further, in “fascist Italy, in [Nazi] Germany, in communist Russia this of course has happened.”¹⁷ The authors contended that

socialist theory, which in general is based on an urban conception of life, proposes that the present evils of the city, the slums, the injustice, the predatory savagery of man towards man, can be removed by the evolution of the industrial urban system—the dialectical evolution, indeed—towards more mature forms of organization. This evolution will take place, they think, through the mechanism of class conflict. This is again the competition motif, applied now to classes, that is characteristic of the modern city and of the capitalistic system that produced it.¹⁸

After arguments against “extreme concentration and governmental ownership” they concluded that the “socialist assumption that centralization in all fields is itself the natural and best pattern of economic and social life is by no means justified.”¹⁹

Brownell and Wright were against socialism as then defined or as exemplified in the Soviet interpretation that was so popular in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. The two authors were attempting to redefine socialism—if by another name—and place it in the hands of the people rather than the selfish elite of a political party. The idea of developing an elite from labor unions united with the aristocracy as promoted by the aristocracy in Britain was also ignored. Brownell and Wright were not interested in Fabian socialism or its notion of “gradualism.”²⁰ Yet abrupt or violent change was abhorrent to both men: the elemental freedoms in the American system of capitalism based on constitutional guarantees were too precious. Rather, they wished to induce change by example and allow the results to be inclusive of those guarantees. Brownell’s experiments after the 1945 armistice confirms this. He and Wright wished to disarm the inherent centralizing nature of the single-party system (one party on a long-term basis as in the USSR, or short-term as with the English and Australian parliamentary systems). They wanted to decentralize,

to regionalize government and spread its influence through what might be termed a participatory democratized socialism where grass-roots politics persuaded a less dominant hierarchy. In this way they believed that the evils of modern industrialized urbanism might be less pervasive and hopefully dissipate. Villages would abound; Broadacre Villages. Land, Work, and Home would again unite.

It was clear: while Wright's writings were elliptical if punchy, with his concurrence Brownell clarified Wright's position. Wright's interest in socialism was dialectic, passive, and, as suggested, flirtatious. And it was hardly a desirable mode for him to practice; others surely, but not him. Wright's professional and personal lifestyle were in opposition and asymmetrical to his urban and political theories. Indeed, he tended to apply those ideas that had some sensible application to his architectural practice and supported his anarchistic individualism. Yet what could have been more highly and centrally organized, less a place for the expression or practice of individualism than membership in the Taliesin Fellowship? Contradictions.

As noted above, production of the book had reached galley stage in August 1937. By then Wright had been home at Taliesin for four weeks, resting after his arduous journey through Europe and east to Moscow.

It was during that rest at Spring Green that Mies van der Rohe visited Wright. It occurred shortly after Mies had arrived in the U.S. and was contemplating an academic position from a few offers, including one from the Armour Institute in Chicago. Wright had previously and rather rudely rejected requests by Gropius and one by Le Corbusier to talk or to visit Taliesin. But Wright liked Mies's work. As William Wesley Peters has said, and therefore Wright had said, Mies was the only European who had not only the good sense to follow Wright's lead but the independence to create something original in the process.²¹ Mies arrived on a Friday morning, meaning to spend but a few hours; he stayed over for a long weekend. Of the buildings and landscape that were Taliesin, Mies exclaimed "Freiheit! Es ist ein Reich!" Freedom! This is a kingdom!²² East had met West; the old culture had met the new; patient reserve had met a babbling magician; student and mentor touched. The two architects found a friendship and understanding that, while it did not mature, lasted for nearly a decade; not a bad run when one considers the egos involved.

