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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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23 A Touching Affair

Writing about experiences during the spring of 1939 for his autobiography, Wright commented that "there is something indomitable in British pluck and splendid in British character," and he wondered what England "might have been like . . . were it not for the 'white man's burden'—her Empire. Surely such qualities as hers are good for far more than war and conquest and the conduct of subjugated peoples." He concluded that if England was free "on her own—developing slowly the characteristics and strengths of Englishmen from within, the nation might have been small, but the world would have had one mighty, genuine democracy by now. . . . Empire has ruined England." He recalled his long personal and unsuccessful struggle to save America from the unfair economic and undemocratic forces he saw within. He dwelled on his vision of a "genuine democracy" free from past hegemonies. He then added two lines: "A disease took root and spread by way of her [Britain's] success. Dismal reflection: it has now spread to us."[1]

We can understand the tag to his telegram accepting the gold medal: "a culture like that [not Britain but England] can never lose." He used a similar phrase in Moscow when arguing that the varied Russian traditions should not be lost in the rush to Sovietize. Wright wished to differentiate the British Empire (as one evil political function) from England as a discrete culture and tradition. This is further evidenced in personal notes, such as a letter to author John Gloag in 1938 where Wright looked forward to seeing Gloag "on the spot that was England"; perhaps "was" should have been emphasized.[2] Public exclamations were also forthcoming.

It was the war that dominated Wright's thoughts in those years as it did most everyone's. Events took their course by the thrust of their own destructive velocity. With its own power and impetus there was not much he or anyone could do about the war. Protest, yes. Encourage conscientious objection, yes. Fight for the isolation of America from those European troubles, yes. Perhaps now was the time also to finish the revisions to his autobiography, to bring it up to date, more or less. It might show by example a path that avoided the idea of war, its centralized government, and its profiteering. The new autobiography could illuminate not only a personal struggle but his success through steadfastness, through striving for ideals held high. Perhaps his words might stimulate an understanding of his philosophy and provide an apocalyptic inspiration. Or perhaps his architecture of the past might inspire others. Perhaps the publications *On Architecture* and *In the Nature of Materials* also might provide ideas for reconstruction after the war. But first the war . . .

Of course Wright was not involved with policy at the national level or with international diplomacy. He chose to try to persuade, to protest, or to critically attack from outside. During 1940 a great deal of propaganda was generated for and against America's becoming involved in the European war. Proponents for participation laid particular emphasis on the obvious need to defend Britain. In Wright's attempts to dissuade people he used Britain as an arguable example against participation in the war. His main thesis was that democracy had failed to counter by example. The best defense, he suggested, was to "put better ideas" than those offered by Hitler's "total state and total war"; and one example not to follow was Britain's. It was one typical antiwar position.

In a letter published November 1940 in *The Christian Century,* a Chicago religious and missionary magazine, he observed that America's "most creative minds" were ignored by the "by-party act" to save Britain. To "save Britain" he maintained America would be on the road to self-destruction. "Wake up, America!" he exhorted.

Such standards as we have been aiding Britain to maintain or have been ourselves aided by Britain to maintain are played out! They are senile, a demonstrated bottleneck without issue except war. To beat our enemy *his way* [Wright emphasized] we have not got a good foundation. We won't get one with extravagant preparation for war no matter how far we go. English culture will not die but British imperialism never was anything but a foolish challenge to the world and more than ever an empty one.

Democratic ways and means are gone wrong or rotten just when the world needs us most as the great forces of life again surge forward in the ceaseless tide of change. Fearful as we are, we the exploited must face great organic change and we must face it on our own merits. We cannot face it on Britain's! If we go on in that old way of life, we are lost anyway.

Perhaps his presentation is somewhat confused but it can be understood as an open display of disgust with the kind of system—colonialism and its economics—that America should not support, especially by shedding America's "young blood." Those who were properly educated, he argued, should make decisions concerning weighty philosophic matters, not the politicians, not the journalists (the propagandists), and not even the voters *unless* they were properly informed by the country's "most creative minds." He continued with his views that closely approximated Jaeger's text on *Paideia:*

The only safeguard democracy has is a free, morally enlightened, fearless minority. But democracy deprived of either the vote or the voice of that minority will stay in infancy, a pushed or helpless drifting mediocrity. Democracy's very life depends upon entire freedom to choose from among its free minority the bravest and best thought. If party pacts are made to end or continue the way of life before they go before the voters, what has democracy? Any influence

whatever designed to keep the people ignorant of the real issue by falsifying or by stultifying the enlightened minority is soon fatal to democracy. Must manipulated mediocrity overwhelm the real issue in a democracy? If so, let's say mobocracy, not democracy. To mobocracy dictatorship is inevitable. We have it in conscription.[3]

(In 1949 Wright published a book *Genius and the Mobocracy,* ostensibly about Louis Sullivan and containing illustrations of the elder master's drawings. In it, among other familiar themes, he discussed discursively the topic of a "fairly decorated mobocracy," which was a substitute "for a thought-built democracy.") Wright had now and then expressed his view that the U.S. should stay out of the war and that the British establishment and its empire were not worth saving. If the British or Europeans wished to know his position they had only to look or ask.

The Christian Century letter exemplifies Wright's attempt to insert his ideas into the war debate. As might be expected he attracted some not irrelevant attention, and some flack.[4] More extrovert utterances followed. And interestingly, they seem to gain momentum after receipt of the Royal Gold Medal. In fact the medal prompted one response that centered on London and one of its morning newspapers was the intermediary.

The haphazard growth of London had been of concern for decades if not centuries. In the late 1930s there was a surge of renewed interest in how to rectify the city's many problems, caused mainly by industrialization's inherent impetus toward centralized population and industrial power. That interest was due in part to the evolution of the idea of regionalism promoted in the late nineteenth century and into the 1930s, and to a kindred planning notion, the popular green belt that grew out of the garden city movement. In the 1930s that interest brought into being a series of studies of industrial cities in Britain. The hope was that a total national plan might result. In 1938 a law prohibiting the expansion of London was passed that effectively halted building at certain boundaries and established a surrounding relatively undeveloped green belt. Then the bombings of 1940–41 destroyed large parts of the city.

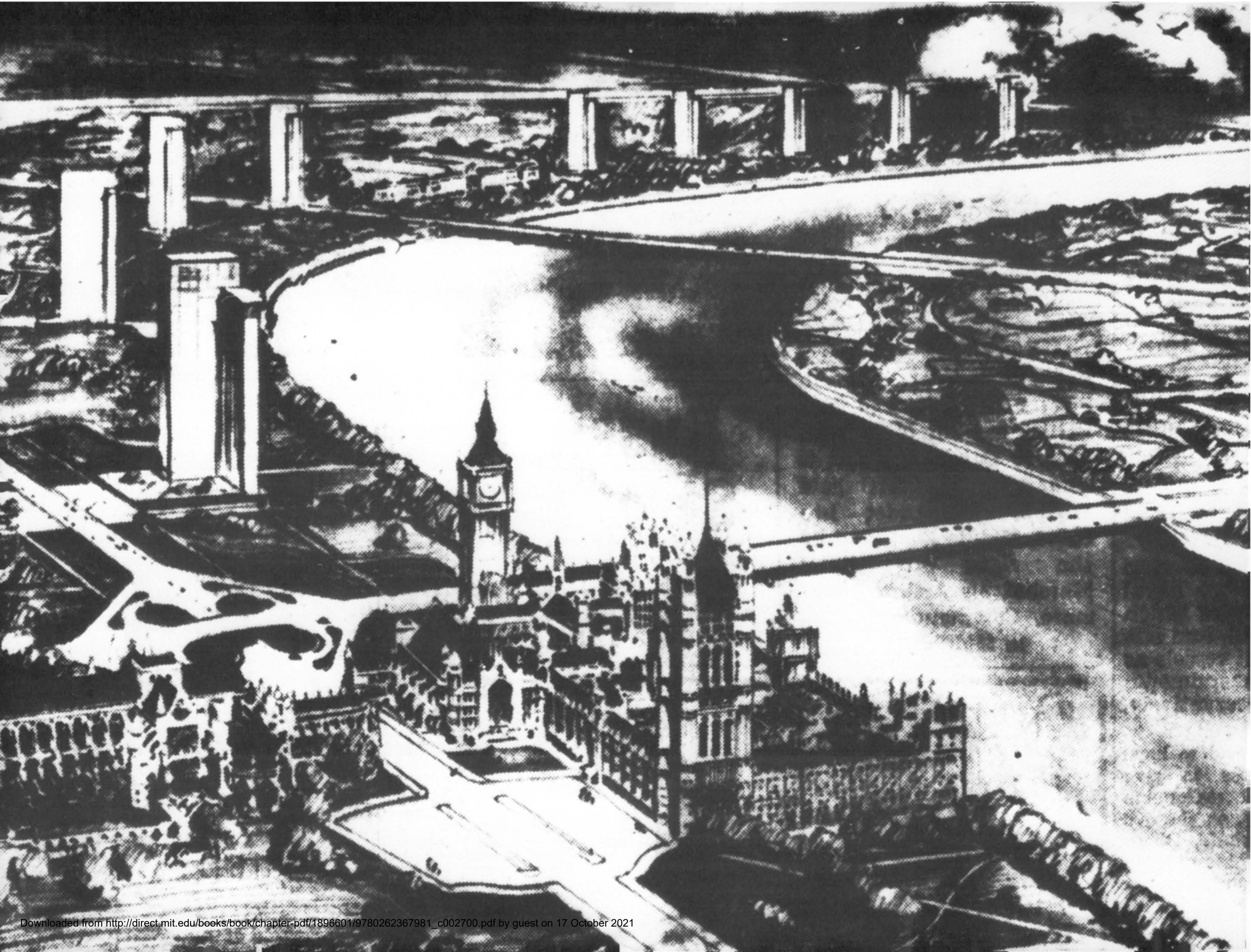
By 1942 planning was optimistically again under way to an extent that encouraged the presentation of ideas for a new physical plan for greater London. In that year, for instance, MARS revived their 1937 proposal for a theoretically viable linear physical plan of green areas alternating with developed built-up areas divided by a narrow core of central facilities. It was obviously derivative of the many linear-city notions proposed in the USSR in the early thirties. But a traditional physical plan (foreshadowed by a proposal for Paris as early as 1928 and Moscow in 1937) by Patrick Abercrombie and J. H. Forshaw in 1943 was officially accepted in 1944. As soon as practicable, i.e., in 1946, a total plan for the English industrial centers was enacted: in a few words, decentralization by the creation of new towns. It negated the intense urbanization favored by MARS. Although we have no evidence, at least such a general concept (if not the particulars and the architectonic results) must have found favor with Wright whose decentralization proposal called Broadacre City was well known. While not involved in the planning for—or debates about—London, he was at least asked to participate: only once.

Three weeks after his Royal Gold Medal was announced, with optimistic zeal the London newspaper *News-Chronicle* asked Wright on 21 January 1941 to write 1,500 words on his suggestions for the planning and rebuilding of London after the war. The actual title requested was "How I would re-build London."[5] He telegrammed a manuscript on 25 January.[6] The time spent on the piece suggests it was hastily drawn; all extant copies strengthen the suggestion.

But again, there are a number of extant versions. One version was, as expected, published on the morning of 17 February 1941. The next version was published in Wright's sporadically released newsletter *A Taliesin Square-Paper,* probably in March 1941. Another version was published in his 1943 autobiography and yet another in the 1977 edition of the autobiography.[7] This last is, of course, the least reliable for reasons outlined in the references at the end of this book. The 1943 text is similar to that published in London, only condensed. The *Square-Paper* version was quite different from the other three in some parts, for reasons that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Wright's article in the *News-Chronicle* was presented in an interesting manner. It was entitled "How I Would Do It"; the introductory remarks noted that he invented "a new era: B.B.—before the bombs," cited his "Welsh extraction" (again he disregarded his father's family), and mentioned his Imperial Hotel and its survival. Above the article was a reproduction of a drawing by British architect Hubert Bennett, five columns wide and entitled "London Rebuilt," supposedly as the city would appear if planned to Wright's specifications. In fact the drawing shows an urban scene, obviously London but more like Le Corbusier's dream of a congested city of towers proposed in the 1920s. Preparation of the drawing may have delayed publication until February. (A cable to Wright on 27 January acknowledged receipt in London of his article and it was published two weeks thereafter.[8] Wright's reaction to the drawing is not a matter of record.

Wright rewrote his favored old themes and inserted some that were for the occasion. The bombing of London was sad but must be seen as fortuitous, for planning could start anew. There was some detail. "London should be a motor-car aeroplane London" with wide spaces and tall buildings on the periphery. Railways should be elevated and truck routes set low. Traffic problems



23.1 "London Rebuilt," a drawing by Hubert Bennett as reproduced in the *News-Chronicle* in February 1941 to accompany Wright's article "How I Would Do It."

solved in his Broadacre City plan should be emulated. Land for all, each to have his own ground. There must be a "good modern plan for a Democratic people." He saw no reason for "difference in quality of thought between the house of a man with more and the house of a man with less: only difference in extent" (more and less of what and which extent?). Were his organic city planning ideas executed the British Empire "might disappear." This was followed by a confusing sentence, "Were Germany to win this war it would be to lose it on any basis of a plane and gun future." He then asked Britain not to grieve if the Empire were lost for it was not essential, "the Empire of Imagination is more enduring."

Wright, as usual, vaguely and elliptically presented many ideas through a series of assertions never refined. The result was always a perplexing diminution. But he was persistent. The political and economic Empire may die, he argued, but England will live: "Traditions must die in order that great Traditions may live." Linked to these notions was a question to be answered: was England humanitarian or only English? If humanitarian, it should decentralize London. Then boldly he stated that "Great buildings always begin at the beginning." Strangely this meant that there were "necessary items" to begin with:

1. No very rich nor very poor to build for—no gold [bullion?].
2. No idle land except for common landscape—no real estate exploiters.
3. No holding against society the ideas by way of which society lives—no patents.

In short, no speculation in money, land, or ideas; not one of them must be . . . a speculative commodity but *must be used* [Wright emphasized] as the actual necessities of human life, like air and water. This is the true basis for what we could honestly call democracy.[9]

These three "items" he had listed before. In fact much of the article for the *News-Chronicle* paralleled an address Wright had given to the Chicago Real Estate Board on 2 June 1938.[10] It should be noted, however, that in six decades of writing he never once specified how his varied political/economic declarations were to be achieved. Fortunately other writers have since shown the derivations of some of his ideas but also avoided the subject of implementation.[11] Both they and Wright, notably in his 1943 autobiography, offered Henry George, Thorstein Veblen, and Silvio Gesell as sources for at least those ideas related to contemporary economics and parapolitical needs. To his mind, adoption of the three items would cause a "liberation of human individuality." The intellectual logistics of such a transfer were avoided, not only on this occasion but on all others. Perhaps he reasoned that dogma was not only a virtue but an aspect of logic.

All money, land, and ideas were to be magically and freely available to all, and with his unclear notion of the new undefined state, he asserted that there would be no unemployment, therefore war impossible. To his London audience he shouted over the cablelines:

Skeptic? Well, laugh and be bombed![12]

Was he actually naive? Had he lost all pragmatic reason? Were his personal ideas and ideals above the obvious realities of death and destruction by an accelerating war? Was he wholly and imperiously arrogant? On the other hand, what better time to institute an "honest democracy" than during postwar reconstruction? What better time for a social reformation to throw off the shackles of squireism, to be finally and irrevocably free of the iniquitous and divisive class system inherent in the British form of aristocracy? Entwined within the article and knitted to his planning ideas was the need to drop the "grandomania" that physically enshrined the aristocracy and to drop economic as well as cultural enslavement. Perhaps he was prophetic. After 1945 and in awkward twitches the Empire died; but unhappily the aristocracy persists.

However . . . that extraordinary outburst was not published in London: it was edited out. It was published in *The Architectural Forum* in August 1941 in what was supposedly a short resumé of the *News-Chronicle* article. It was not published in either the 1943 or 1977 autobiographies but it was retained in the 1941 *Square-Paper* version.[13] Wright added in the *Square-Paper* that a cable had been received by him from the London newspaper offering news that the article had been well received.

Reaction to the article was measured, or as New York correspondent for the *News-Chronicle* Robert Waithman said, it "inspired a certain amount of waspish criticism."[14] The socialist bits pleased Clough Williams-Ellis. As well, he found Wright "a Prophet with a philosophy of life, as sentimentally romantic and unrealistic as the poetic eloquence wherewith he delights to decorate his thesis." As to the London plan, "this sort of thing just will not do."[15] Another reader found the message "stirring" and "heartening."[16] Elizabeth Denby thought Wright's intention was to make Londoners laugh. "Jokes can, however, be in bad taste, if not risky: there may be some who will take these empty phrases seriously, who will think that London's slums were in fact 'blasted out of the way in a few days,' . . . who would not notice the confused mind." She doubted if Wright knew where London was, and in any event his "empty phrases" were based on "complete ignorance," and so forth.[17] Soon after publication of Wright's article, W. H. Ansell as president of the RIBA gave a talk to the Royal Arts Society and asked for a "vastly improved old London" rather than a new city, with "shining gold and ivory, reliefs and panels."[18] Well, Wright might have said, at least Ansell's paper offered old tasteless spice to the affair.

Wright received twenty guineas or about US$100 for the cablegram. "In the circumstances," he said, "a touching affair—that check."[19] What that meant is anyone's guess.

24 AIA Gold

Patterned after the RIBA, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) began awarding its own Gold Medal in 1907. The first award should have been an announcement of national and professional pride, but instead the medal went to an Englishman, Aston Webb, R.A., RIBA, etc. Other foreign architects were honored in succeeding years, without much misgiving but no doubt with factional and personality problems. So it was when the controversial Wright became again controversial during deliberations for the American medal. His receipt of the AIA Gold Medal in 1949 is well outside the decade under study here. However, some knowledge of how it came about, if only in outline, allows an interesting comparison to the British honor and exposes causes initiated in the late 1930s. The equanimity of the British architects in determining Wright as their medalist for 1941 was not evident with the American professionals. Richard Guy Wilson, historian of the AIA medal has noted that in spite of the fact that Wright had never become a member of the Institute and had often publicly criticized the average professional and most twentieth-century American architecture, thereby implicating many of its architects, his "omission from the AIA Gold Medal list became embarrassing," to use the AIA's words.

Just two years after Wright received the RIBA tribute, in 1943 architect Ralph Walker proposed him for the AIA Gold Medal of 1944. Also nominated were Louis Sullivan (posthumously) and the West Coast architect Bernard Maybeck. Various local and state Institute chapters and members submitted letters of endorsement. As the minutes circumspectly recorded, "letters opposing this award were also submitted." Both Wright's and Maybeck's nominations were subsequently ruled incomplete; supposedly they lacked portions of a biographical statement and a "history of attainments." Perhaps in response to other problems with his nomination, in 1945 Wright replied to a query of the AIA as to why he was not a member. His response was as might be expected: he was interested in Architecture, not the Profession; he was a freelancer and an anathema to the old guard; no man can cooperate and still maintain independence "of his Spirit"; the Profession is for personal gain not for Principle; and so forth. In the past and when asked, however, he had never refused "the boys" anything "on decent terms."[1]