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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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attempt to see Broadacre City realized, but one small cooperative housing scheme does not a city or village make.

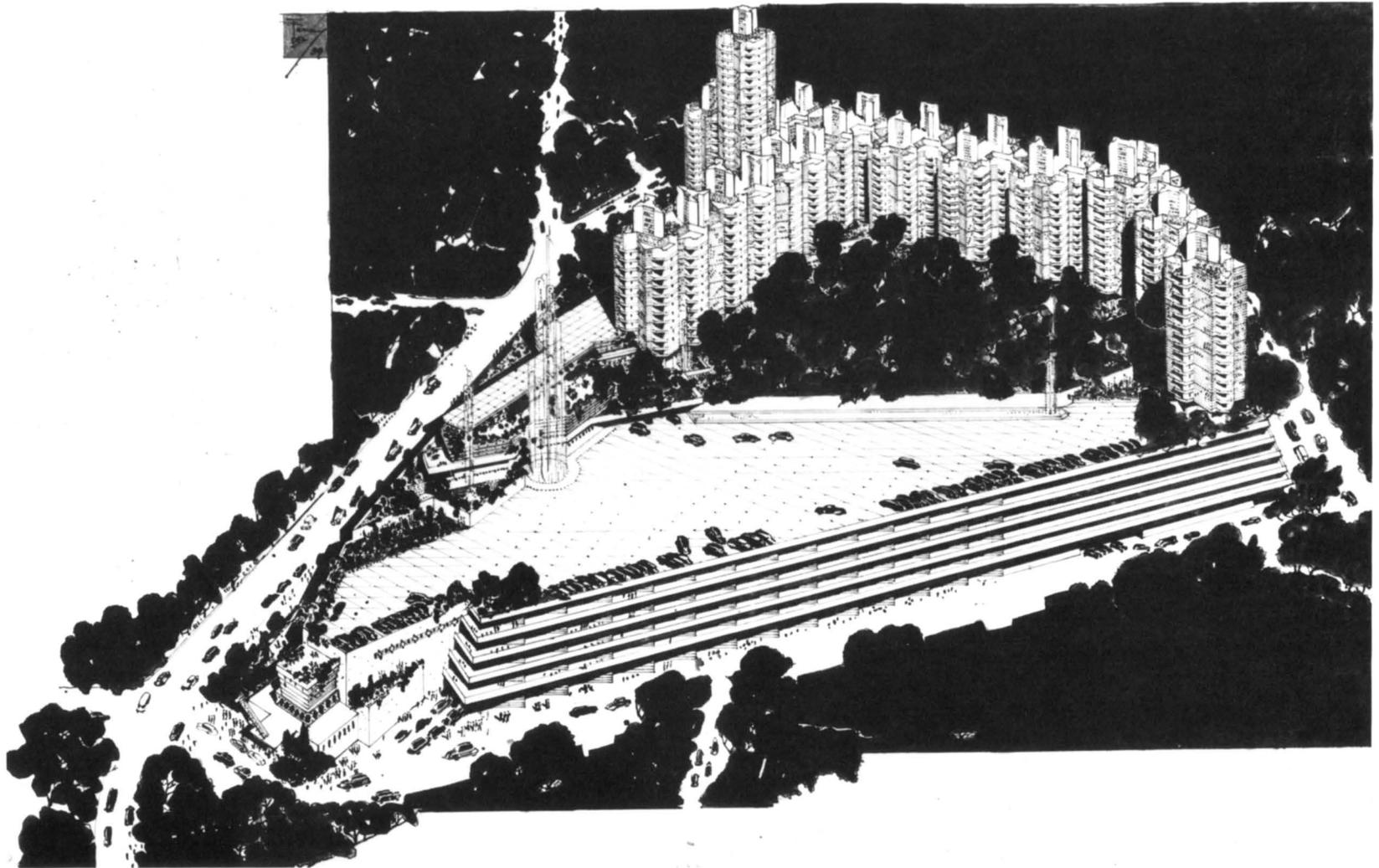
At about the same time as the Pittsfield project was being tossed about, Wright had been commissioned to design a hotel and office complex for Washington, D.C., not for the government but for a private syndicate headed by Roy Thurman. The scheme included a large five-story parking complex with a landscaped terrace. Thurman and Wright included a hotel, private apartments, movie theater, and retail shops. The capital city's planning commission, however, was dominated by conservatives and the planners preferred Beaux-Arts classicism. But that was not the whole of the problem. The complex was dominated by a wall of linked high-rise buildings each based on Wright's St. Mark's Apartment Towers for the Boverie, New York, a project of 1929. The plans and elevations for St. Mark's did not function properly in 1929 or in 1940 at Crystal Heights: improper exit stairs, tiny almost unusable rooms, and solar heat build-up, for instance. The problems exposed themselves in 1956 when the Price Tower was built in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, only to be quickly altered and recently abandoned to become dead storage for records. Variances for Thurman's tower were refused in December 1940.¹⁹

The general concept of a high concentration of parking with a community of services above or on the periphery was theoretically challenging for the year 1939. It was also influential on Wright's design of a Self-Service Garage for Edgar Kaufmann in 1949. More importantly, together with the aborted Monona Terrace of 1938 for Madison, Wisconsin, a direct lineage can be detected as follows: Wright's Pittsburgh Point Park Civic Center (with mass transit termini) of 1947–48; Louis I. Kahn's brilliant theoretical plan for Philadelphia of 1952–53 and soon thereafter Victor Gruen's similar study for Dallas; and all subsequent similar schemes including the megastructure proposals that arose in the late 1950s worldwide.

28 Rededication

At no time did American critics or architects dwell on the fact that the Central Europeans were promoting a socialist or Marxist architecture. In America the International Style was viewed throughout the 1930s and 1940s as simply a new style and not as having a political base. As a notable example, architect and historian Vincent Scully, Jr., has said, "I never saw the International Style as socialist," adding that this allowed his "intense social convictions . . . to remain free of stylistic predeterminism.¹ If so, then Scully was not typical of the style's promoters. Nor was Wright typical in opposition. He was one of few architects or critics in the early 1930s to publicly challenge the architecture of Central Europe for its narrow political bias and equally restricted aesthetic. As such,

27.5 Aerial perspective of the Crystal Heights project, Washington, D.C., 1939–40. Courtesy and © 1942 the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.



he argued, it was ipso facto full of dangerous predeterminants and caught in the sweeping current of an intransigent positivism. For him it had frightening consequences that he found difficult to adequately express. Perhaps the words of philosopher Susanne Langer would have been the kind of alarm Wright wanted to issue. "Any miscarriage of the symbolic process is an abrogation of human freedom," she has said, and

the most disastrous hindrance is disorientation, the failure or destruction of life symbols and loss or repression of votive acts. A life that does not incorporate some degree of ritual, of gesture and attitude, has no mental anchorage. It is prosaic to the point of total indifference, purely casual, devoid of that structure of intellect and feeling which we call personality.²

Indeed, it would erase cultural identities, in fact nearly did so east of Bavaria in the 1920s and 1930s.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez has outlined the debilitating effect of positivism. While humans may say they search for order (formal, syntactic, symmetrical correspondence), their *action* is always to the contrary, toward reverence, history, poetry, tradition, symbols, even the irrationality of violence, and therefore to the transcendental. The "invariance" of mathematics, if one believed the propagandists, provided the structure that enabled the search, and then it became the functionalist's foundation. Its supposed immutable neutrality was perceived as the ultimate of orderliness. But as a human contrivance it could not reconcile, for example, the "conception of architecture as an art rather than a science." Indeed, the assumption that architecture "can derive its meaning from functionalism . . . [this algebraization] of architectural theory as a whole, the reduction of architecture to a rational theory," assumed importance in mid-seventeenth century to culminate with Durand. His functionalized theory was "already a theory of architecture in the contemporary [mid-twentieth-century] sense; replete with the modern architect's obsessions, thoroughly specialized, and composed of laws of an exclusively prescriptive character that purposely avoid all reference to philosophy or cosmology." Only economy and technology were relevant.

The main concern became "how to build in an efficient and economical manner, while avoiding questions related to why one builds and whether such activity is justified. . . . The inception of functionalism coincided, not surprisingly, with the rise of positivism in the physical and human sciences." Around 1800 developments in mathematics "augured the possibility that the external world of man could be effectively controlled and dominated by a functionalized theory subsumed by technology." Understandably, at its socially political extreme it became integral with the materialistic rationalism of Communism, but it infected all Western thought. One result of the crisis created by technological dominance "has been an unprecedented inversion of priorities: Truth—demon-

strable through the laws of science—constitutes the fundamental which is always ambiguous and accessible only through the realm of ‘poetics.’” Theory became methodology, process replaced “ultimate objectives.”

Applying this to architecture, Pérez-Gómez observes that **because positivistic thought has made it a point to exclude mystery and poetry, contemporary man lives with the illusion of the infinite power of reason. He has forgotten his fragility and his capacity for wonder, generally assuming that all the phenomena of his world, from water or fire to perception or human behavior, have been “explained” [or will be explained].**

And further, no matter how much

architecture may resist, it cannot renounce its origin in intuition. While construction as a technological process is prosaic—deriving directly from a mathematical equation, a functional diagram, or a rule of formal combinations—architecture is poetic, necessarily an abstract order but in itself a metaphor emerging from a vision of the world and Being.

Wright may not have been consciously aware of the historical implications of the devolution of what has been described as the human condition, but as a disciple of Sullivan he, if in the beginning less than Sullivan, saw the threat. He was soon committed to the restoration of intuition, which is a responsibility that resides only within the individual. He challenged the persisting trend first by proclaiming the beauty of transcendentalism by example (something Sullivan was unable to do), then fighting for that beauty. (Beauty, of course, can not exist in a functionalist, *quantitative* world.) First, therefore, by his productivity around the turn of the century when he constantly reaffirmed the fundamentals of nature as a perceived phenomenon. Perception can be described as “our primary form of knowing and does not exist apart from the a priori of the body’s structure and its engagement in the world. . . . The body has a dimension. Through motion it polarizes external reality and becomes our instrument of meaning.”³

Second, after much personal suffering, Wright reiterated his deep concern about what he believed was the sterilizing effect of the materialization of life. For example, he was not being cute when he asked, “Does it thrill you to know the heart is a suction pump?” He fought against the subtraction of human engagement and cultural symbolization, and for his firmly held beliefs, by word and by a reinvigorated architecture and rededicated lifestyle. By example he hoped to be persuasive. It is difficult to find another architect so deeply and openly committed. He laid bare his personal commitment for all to see and savor and belittle as it turned, for he could not effectively

communicate his beliefs. Except through architecture; and there his intellectuality was *almost* universally misunderstood.

That is not wholly correct. He could and did display his beliefs by example. The activity that united Wright's philosophy and its varied practices was the Fellowship as it supported both his lifestyle and profession. And the spirituality of the philosophy and the manner of life in its practice—not for the apprentices, though—was attractive to many as was Wright's apparently quixotic personality. During the turmoil generated by Germany in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in Europe, and by Japan in the Far East (or Far West when viewed from Chicago), Wright was occupied with revising his autobiography. Out of context and much as a reverie about the 1930s he inserted the following:

Young people had come from all over the world. . . . to learn I suppose what message the indigenous United States had for Europe. And, evenings, after good work done, the piano, violin and cello spoke there the religion of Bach, Beethoven and Handel. William Blake, Samuel Butler, Walt Whitman and Shelley often presided. Carl Sandburg, Edna Millay and Ring Lardner, too, had something to say or sing. And life in the hills revived for the little cosmopolitan group eager to know this "America," for Taliesin was at work quietly Americanizing Europe while American architects Europeanized America.⁴

The impending war bothered him; the good *old* musicians and painters thrilled him; good like-minded friends, mainly in the letter arts, sustained him. However, the current hegemony of the Central European architectural aesthetic did not just rankle, it made him mad.

There were, of course, other architects opposed to the new European architecture but they were more often than not critical of its aesthetic qualities, so to speak. Most were against it because it challenged tradition and the safety of historical continuity. They may have determined that its source was, as architect Cass Gilbert noted, Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union, but such a discovery did not necessarily mean a distaste for or even a recognition of the extremes of the political left, or more importantly, of the materialistic and positivistic symbolism patent in the European styles. To better understand Wright's position, a brief look at a notable reactionary should be instructive.

Along with other individuals of the political right and left, including historian Charles A. Beard and Wright's crony Philip A. La Follette, architect Gilbert was somewhat infatuated with the "bold energies" of Benito Mussolini. It was not surprising then that around 1930 he referred to architecture's modernist malady, to paraphrase Gilbert, spreading out of the USSR and Central

Europe as a threat to the status quo Gilbert himself represented. Moreover, in support of his artistic beliefs he linked radical art with radical politics. Gilbert belonged to and actively participated in a number of august organizations including the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Society of Arts and Sciences, the Architectural League, and the National Academy of Design. As early as the late 1920s he warned that there was “generally a tendency of such organizations to drift into the extreme Bohemian or vulgar form of association and thereafter to become radical or ‘Bolshevik’ in art, manners and point of view.” He thought it a “danger to be avoided.” As for the imported architecture, he stated with emphasis in 1933 that “crude and ill-drawn forms and strident inharmonious colors is *not* progress,” that there were people leading the United States “back to barbarism” and the American Academy of Arts and Letters should—must—“guide public taste toward the paths that lead to the higher realms of Arts and Letters and warn them against perversion.”⁵

Gilbert was a model of typicality of his time who, for his last commission, redesigned the Roman temple to house the U.S. Supreme Court, for which construction began in 1932. Note the difference: Gilbert was at all times defending historicism and the status quo while Wright sought new symbols identifiable as American. Wright’s arguments against the imported architecture and its political bias were always in a realm much distant from the more narrow protestations of those people typified by the ultraconservative Gilbert.

29 A Sad Ending

The content and outline of Wright’s article for the London *News-Chronicle* sustained Wright on occasions when he needed to further his—and only coincidentally the isolationist—cause in the United States. The isolationists’ popular if not titular head was Charles Lindbergh, who around 1930–40 was almost more famed for his outspoken ultra-antiwar position than as a long-distance pilot. As early as May 1940 Wright wrote to Lindbergh a private communication of three short lines, praising the aviation hero and ending by saying that talk is “cheap and unreliable—you are brave enough to talk straight. I respect your integrity.”¹ Obviously Lindbergh and like-minded people were one resistance to intervention in the war, a thorn that irritated and effectively restrained Roosevelt. The position of neutrality as argued by the isolationists was a mighty force affecting America’s international diplomacy and measured its participation. Its influence ceased immediately with the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Again Wright played out his role not within the group but as one aligned with their purpose. One cannot help but hold a strong impression that Wright was for maintaining appeasement, that as far as he was concerned Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was not necessarily