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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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I have shown my own Taliesin, a house of the North. I have shown a house designed for living down in a glen of a mountain stream. I have shown a house for the rolling prairie, and a home for Texas (Texas needs a Texas house). I have shown a house for California, a house for the desert.

* * *

My purpose and hope in presenting this material in the ARCHITECTURAL FORUM is to promote discussion and rekindle enthusiasm for an honest American architecture. After months of work on this January issue I am more convinced than ever that this work should prove of value, particularly to the younger architects, who are America's last line of defense.

Here is a challenge; may I see it answered in three dimensions across the country.

Faithfully,

[signed] Frank Lloyd Wright

Frank Lloyd Wright

TALIESIN: SPRING GREEN: WISCONSIN: January 10th, 1938

Note

1. A two-page broadsheet probably published and distributed by *Architectural Forum*, reprinted here from a copy in the Willcox papers, University of Oregon. The need for concision heightened the critical, architectural, and design sense and character of his verbal presentation perhaps better than the contents of the magazine itself. The last line begs commissions. It should be noted that the splendid 1938 and 1948 issues of *Architectural Forum* devoted to Wright's work were, as put by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, part of editor Howard Myers's "effort, work, and constant campaigning" presumably to place Wright's work before the architectural public. Pfeiffer says that Wright and Myers often visited and the "deep bond that arose between the two men strengthened with the passing of time" (F. L. Wright 1984, p. 153).

Appendix D Observations by Leonard Reissman

The Visionary The disenchantment with industrial society emerged in one of three ways, depending upon the value placed on industrialism and the social change thought to be needed. (1) Reaction against it all by which industrialism was entirely, if naively, discredited. The machine, the factory, and the city were considered to be beyond salvation in that they could not add anything worthwhile to society. In a reaction against industrialism the tightly comforting security of medievalism was

sought through its image of a rediscovered rural utopia. This philosophy has continued, in one form or another, up to the present, where it has become centered around the small community as the alternative to the metropolis. (2) Reform of some features of industrial society to keep such advantages as labor-saving machinery, release from monotonous tasks, and the comforts that machines could fashion. The reformers championed what Mannheim has called a “spatial wish,” the projection of utopia into space. By controlling industrialism for the benefit of all in a new social environment, the reformer argued, man could once again progress. Applied to the city, this view became the basis for the “Garden City” and its variations. (3) Revolt was yet a third alternative. The revolutionary accepted industrialism as a necessary historical phase; history neither could be set back to some earlier epoch nor could it be stopped. Industrial society could not be preserved as it was, nor could it be remodeled, even in part. Instead, a massive reconstitution was required, by which all existing institutions, values, and social mechanisms would be replaced by a new social order forging into reality the unfulfilled promises of industrialism. Mannheim, once again, has called these wish fulfillments “chiliasms,” projections of dreams into time, the social utopias.

The visionary at one time or another has been identified with all three of these disenchanting responses to industrialism. Ebenezer Howard set forth one such spatial utopia in some detail. Later visionaries, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, perceived that tampering with the urban pattern necessarily involved changing economic mechanisms, political administration, and social philosophy. And throughout much of the writing by visionaries, the simple desire to return to a rural civilization is obvious again and again.¹

Frank Lloyd Wright: Broadacre City Wright was more than simply the American counterpart to Ebenezer Howard and his Broadacre City more than just the American version of Garden City. Howard, as a true Victorian, after carefully adding up the economic costs and arguing for the feasibility of the garden city, had accepted much of the prevailing ideology. An overcrowded and congested London was bad business whereas a planned garden city was good business. Wright, on the contrary, never entered the market place to sell his plans. He much preferred to be the prophet on the mount shouting “Doom!” to the multitudes below. Wright felt the city and the industrial civilization that produced it must perish. They were the consequences of diseased values, and to achieve health, new values had to be established in a new environment. Wright was more consciously a social revolutionary than was Howard. He was prepared to recognize social mechanisms and willing to alter them. Howard’s aim was to build a few garden cities to prove they were feasible,

and by this publicity to have the revolt against the city initiated by society itself. Wright was more impatient. He wanted the wholesale decentralization of cities carried on simultaneously with the creation of Broadacre City. He had no patience with businesslike arguments to support his plan. Perhaps one could not blame him for his impatience and his loftiness, since he was so convinced that human civilization would be strangled by its industrial creation unless decisive and total action was taken. Any less drastic plan would have been hypocritical.

As the citizen stands, powerful modern resources, naturally his own by uses of modern machinery, are (owing to their very nature) turning against him, although the system he lives under is one he himself helped build. Such centralizations of men and capital as he must now serve are no longer wise or humane. Long ago—having done all it could for humanity—the centralization we call the big city became a centripetal force grown beyond our control; agitated by rent to continually additional, vicarious powers.

The city, according to Wright, has perverted our values and has become the environment of false democracy, false individualism, and false capitalism. We have, by our inaction, allowed ourselves to be overwhelmed and dominated by falsity. "The citizen," Wright argued, "is now trained to see life as a cliché." He must be trained to see life as natural for "only then can the democratic spirit of man, individual, rise out of the ground. We are calling that civilization of man and ground . . . democracy." As for capitalism: "Out of America 'rugged individualism' captained by rugged captains of our rugged industrial enterprises we have gradually evolved a crude, vain power: plutocratic 'Capitalism.' Not true capitalism. I believe this is entirely foreign to our own original idea of Democracy."

The cause of these perversions of our basic social values in the city is industrial civilization, where most of the visionaries locate the blame. Wright's contribution was to specify the causes more precisely. First, among these is *land rent*, and Henry George is resurrected as a guide to salvation. The rent for land has contributed to the "overgrowth of cities, resulting in poverty and unhappiness." Land values are artificial monsters that have taken over the destiny of the city, thereby removing us further from the natural state of mankind. Second, *money*, "a commodity for sale, so made as to come alive as something in itself—to go on continuously working in order to make all work useless. . . . The modern city is its stronghold and chief defender." Here the Puritan and Jeffersonian in Wright emerges, berating man to go back to the land and to honest labor. Third, *profit*. "By the triumph of conscienceless but 'rugged individualism' the machine profits of human ingenuity or inspiration in getting the work of the world done are almost all funneled into pockets

of fewer and more 'rugged' captains-of-industry. Only in a small measure . . . and these profits . . . where they belong; that is to say, with the man whose life is actually modified, given, or sacrificed to this new common agency for doing the work of the world. This agency we call 'the machine.'" In these few words, Wright has fairly condensed the Marxian theory of surplus value. Fourth, *government and bureaucracy*. "In order to keep the peace and some show of equity between the lower passions so busily begotten in begetting, the complicated forms of super-money-increase-money-making and holding are legitimized by government. Government, too, thus becomes monstrosity. Again enormous armies of white-collarites arise." These are Wright's beliefs on the state of industrial civilization. The need for revolt is clear; the means are at hand.

Infinite possibilities exist to make of the city a place suitable for the free man in which freedom can thrive and the soul of man grow, a City of cities that democracy would approve and so desperately needs. . . . Yes, and in that vision of decentralization and reintegration lies our natural twentieth century dawn. Of such is the nature of the democracy free men may honestly call the new freedom.

How emphatically this point of view, so characteristic of the visionary, separates him from the mundane practicality of the practitioner. For Wright, the city in its present form cannot be saved, nor is it worth saving. A new environment must be envisioned and built. It must be one that is developed out of our technology, but one that excises the diseased growth that has infected our basic and still sound values. The plan is Broadacre City, realized by "organic architecture" or "the architecture of democracy."

Broadacre City was a more detailed utopia than Garden City. Wright had drawn not only the ground pattern (one acre to the individual) but also planned homes, buildings, farms, and automobiles. He also clearly specified the activities that would be permitted. Wright held definite views, to say the least, not only about architecture, but music, education, religion, and medicine as well. He was an authoritarian, some would say a messianic figure, as sure of the true and the good and the beautiful as were Christ and the early Christian prophets, along with Lao-tse and Mohammed, whom he sought to emulate.

Wright's plans for the physical setting and social order of Broadacre City were comprehensive. They contained small factories because the newer technology has made the centralized large factory obsolete, wasteful, and constricting. Office buildings housing the financial, professional, distributive and administrative services necessary for business, would be organized as a unit. Professional services would be decentralized and made readily accessible to the clients. Banks, as

we know them, would be abolished and in their place there would be a “non-political, non-profit institution in charge of the medium of exchange.” Money no longer would have the power it now has; therefore, the need for its “glamorization” would be removed. Markets and shopping centers would be designed as spacious pavilions to make shopping itself a pleasant aesthetic experience. There would be apartments, motels, and community centers. Radio would carry great music to the people. “The chamber music concert would *naturally* become a common feature at home” [my italics]. Churches would be built, but the “old idea” of religion would be replaced by a more liberal and nonsectarian religion. There would be less concern with the hereafter, with superstition, with prejudice, and with deference to authority. With this new religion man, though still humble, would be made more understanding of himself and more democratic towards others.

Wright also had plans for education and the material to be taught in the schools and university of Broadacre City. He would replace the specialized, mass product of the universities of his day with a student who would obtain a deeper understanding of nature’s laws governing the human spirit. Education would be a total and continuous process for the resident of Broadacre. Aside from the schools, this would be accomplished by “style centers,” and “television and radio, owned by the people [which would] broadcast cultural programs illustrating pertinent phases of government, of city life, of art work, and [would have] programs devoted to landscape and study and planting or the practice of soil and timber conservation; and, as a matter of course, to *town planning* for better houses.”

This long discourse . . . is a sincere attempt to take apart and show . . . the radical simplicities of fate to which our own machine skills have now laid us wide open and [to] try to show how radical eliminations are now essential to our spiritual health, and to the culture, if not the countenance, of democratic civilization itself. These are all changes valid by now if we are to have indigenous culture at all and are not to remain a bastardized civilization with no culture of our own, going all the way down the backstairs of time to the usual untimely end civilization have hitherto met.

With Frank Lloyd Wright, the visionary’s argument found its most dramatic and radical expression, and its most completely detailed one. Wright magnified Howard’s plan and spelled out more specifically the visionary’s discontent and rebellion against the industrial city. In Wright’s words, the planned utopia became a loud protest against the evils of industrialism. His architectural philosophy was, at the same time, a radical social ideology. Wright recognized this and did not hesitate to make the connection clear. His principle contribution to the study of the city, if one does

not care to accept his dream or his philosophy, was in the repeated insistence on the relationship between the city and the society that produced it. The contemporary city, for Wright, was a product of industrial civilization. One could not understand all of its institutions: the political system, social stratification and the economic order, religion and education. Wright might be excused for his authoritarianism, for his failure to consider the motivations of individuals, for his brash structuring of existing social relationships into something he wanted. For he did grasp something of the underlying complexity that sustained the city as a social environment. That he refused to consider what others wanted, or what others thought, was due to his conviction that he was absolutely right. Can the prophet, after all, have any doubts?²

Notes

1. Excerpts require the following acknowledgment: "Reprint with the permission of the Free Press, a division of Macmillan, Inc. from THE URBAN PROCESS: Cities in Industrial Societies by Leonard Reissman. Copyright © 1964, 1970 by the Free Press." The relevant pages are 42–43.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 57–62. Does the sociologist see the city as people who have physical things and the architect see the city as a physical phenomenon fulfilling people's needs?

Appendix E "Wright, American Architect, Gives His Impressions of Moscow and of Soviet People"¹

As my visit to Moscow extends one impression grows concerning the foreign newspaper correspondents: either most of them are blind or vipers. The best of them seem busy drinking the tub of dye to find out what color it is. The notable exceptions are perhaps the "Manchester Guardian" and the "New York Times," whatever their political creed may be. Can any man with a heart and a head see the liberation of a whole people actually working out a new life, without rejoicing with them?

The great nations should gladly stand by, "hands off," to protect the growth of this struggling democracy instead of standing by to see the great effort compelled to waste, on getting ready to fight, resources needed to make better living conditions.

But the human fiber of the ultimate Russia will only be stronger because of this needless difficulty added to inevitable ones.

Yesterday at the Moscow building exhibit [in the House of Unions] I saw a splendid exposition of plans and models for the buildings, towns and cities in the Soviet Union. That exhibit could not be equalled in the world today.

I do not say that all the buildings were what they should be—many were infected by the