Villalpando’s contemporary project to render the New Jerusalem as described in Ezekiel.

Morrison’s discussions of industrial age utopias are stronger. She provides a useful biography of Robert Owen, explaining how his ideas gathered support in Britain even as he alienated important constituencies. Her analysis of his architecture is brief, unfortunately, and generally disconnected from Owen’s political philosophy, but there are highlights in the two chapters that follow, one on James Silk Buckingham’s 1849 model town of Victoria and one on Robert Pemberton’s The Happy Colony (1854). The former features a well-referenced description of the ills of the Victorian industrial city. The latter offers a strong analysis of both the political philosophy and the architecture of Pemberton’s utopian vision, productively situating his proposal for a glass-roofed college settlement in contemporary debates on the nature of learning and the power of education to improve the condition of the laboring class, as well as the success of London’s Crystal Palace as a venue of working-class edification worthy of civic repetition and amplification. Indeed, this is the best chapter of the book.

The only problem is that the value of the digital model is unclear given the high level of detail contained in Pemberton’s original illustrations. The last two chapters, on King Camp Gillette’s 1894 vision for a corporate Metropolis and Bradford Peck’s The World a Department Store (1900), both feature excellent discussions of historical context and political philosophy, yet they also suffer from the problem that pervades this book: a lack of architectural or urban analysis connecting the designs of the utopian visions to history and politics.

This issue is made worse by the lack of citation of the considerable body of scholarship on these utopias, most unfortunate when Morrison’s ideas seem to parallel those of other scholars, as is the case in her chapters on Albrecht Dürer and Gillette. The chief purpose of the book seems, however, not so much to provide artful scholarship on the history and meaning of these imaginary places as to help them come alive for readers, who are encouraged to enter into the digital models with their imaginations. If the text were reduced to an appropriately cursory exhibition mode and the models were provided as truly immersive virtual environments accessible online or through gaming consoles (and perhaps enhanced a bit by a professional firm such as Ubisoft), there is no question that this would be a most provocative exhibition of unbuilt utopias. As the book stands, however, it is more suggestive of things to come—a utopian project in itself, perhaps, that remains in many respects unbuilt.

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Notes

Neil Levine
The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright

Given the universal understanding of Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideas on the design of cities as having been definitively embodied in his antiurbanist and pro-ruralist design for Broadacre City of 1929–35, which Wright published as “the disappearing city,” Neil Levine notes in the very first sentence of his introduction that this book’s title, The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright, “might strike many as an oxymoron” (xiv). The extent of Levine’s new book (matching his 1996 work The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright) and the wide range of designs he examines from across Wright’s career are deployed to construct an alternate view of Wright as an architect who, both before and after Broadacre City, was continually engaged in making projects that contribute to the field of urban design. Levine has chosen to present a series of Wright’s projects, prefacing each with a compact but comprehensive summary of both the preceding and parallel developments in the larger discipline of urban design as well as discussion of the character and history of the physical context.

The first section of the book comprises four chapters on Wright’s early urban designs for the streetcar suburbs of Chicago, employing what Wright called his Quadruple Block Plan. Levine indicates how, from the start of Wright’s independent career, he endeavored to weave his designs into the square grid that organized the western territories of the United States after 1785, and on which the rapidly expanding western suburbs of Chicago were grounded. Levine notes the generative nature of the square grid and the pinwheel plan in the formation of both Wright’s Quadruple Block Plan, where they are used to order the houses on the urban block, and the Prairie House, where they are used to order the rooms within the house. Initially developed in 1896 as a means of constructing a group of houses on a single suburban block as a unified cluster defining a small square at its center, the Quadruple Block concept made its first definitive appearance in Wright’s designs for the Prairie House, as published in Ladies’ Home Journal in 1901. “A Home in a Prairie Town,” as Wright titled the design, was presented as an individual house within an urban design, both of which were based on the pinwheel plan, and with the town plan based on clusters of four houses set within a square city block. The houses were oriented so that views were directed away from the other houses, providing each house with an unparalleled degree of both privacy and social connectivity.

Levine emphasizes the fact that, in developing the various versions of the Quadruple Block housing plan from 1901 to 1913, Wright consistently rejected the speculative “real estate” definition of land use and subdivision in the Chicago suburbs, insisting instead on a more idealized vision of urbanism that engaged community and privacy, the individual and the collective. This extends from the Quadruple Block Plan for Charles
E. Roberts of 1903–4, which is presented in
some of the most beautiful renderings of
Wright’s career, to the complete neigh-
borhood design of the Chicago City Club
Competition of 1912–13, in which Wright
employed Quadruple Block house clusters
as the foundational unit weaving together
the remarkably nuanced and comprehen-
sive urban plan. Levine presents these designs in
the context of the city beautiful and garden
city movements in urban design, but in this
he oversimplifies the history of urban design
in the United States. He fails to note that
the majority of housing developments of the
period were built by many individual archi-
tects and builders working within nonfor-
malized yet clearly understood principles of
neighborhood construction, and that often-
studied projects such as Frederick Law
Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s Riverside, Ili-
noi (1869), were in fact the exception, not
the rule.

In the book’s second section, Levine
turns to Wright’s designs for the city center
of Chicago, including the National Life
Insurance Company Building of 1923–25,
which was both Wright’s first cantilevered
high-rise design and his initial engagement
with the then newly emerging urban zoning
and setback regulations. Wright addressed
the latter directly with his Skyscraper Regu-
lation Project of 1926, a spatially and so-
cially dynamic clustering of towers of
various heights that rotated in plan around
the edges of their blocks to allow views
across the city while also forming lower
walls on the narrower streets and higher
walls on the wider streets. For reasons that
are never clearly stated, Levine chooses not
to mention even in passing the urban pro-
posals that are usually considered to be pre-
cursors to Wright’s Broadacre City design:
the Como Orchards Summer Colony pro-
ject of 1908, the Bitter Root Town and Inn
project of 1909, the Lake Tahoe Summer
Colony project of 1922, and the theater,
cinema, shops, terrace houses, apartments,
and three residences designed for Aline
Barnsdall on Olive Hill in Los Angeles in
1918–20, among others.

Instead, Levine deploys Wright’s first
design for clusters of pinwheel housing
towers for St. Mark’s Church in New York
of 1930 as a pivot to Broadacre City. The
reason for this surprising segue is that
Levine holds that the ruralist Broadacre
City was not Wright’s response to the onset
of the Great Depression, as is usually un-
derstood, nor was it a result of the series of
urban designs leading up to it; rather,
Broadacre City was designed in reaction
to Le Corbusier’s urban ideas, published in
English translations as Towards a New Ar-
chitecture (1927) and The City of To-morrow
and Its Planning (1929). Here it can be ar-
gued that Levine gives Le Corbusier’s pub-
lished words far too much credit for
dramatically influencing Wright’s thinking
as an architect and maker of spaces, failing
to note the development of Wright’s urban
ideas through his own sequence of designs
that led directly to Broadacre City. Rather
than an exception within Wright’s urban
designs, Broadacre City may be under-
stood not only as the conclusion of the series of
projects leading up to it but also as the begin-
ing of a ruralist logic that
Wright applied to many of his later sub-
urban planning proposals. These include,
most notably, Florida Southern College in
Lakeland of 1938 (ordered, as was the de-
sign for Olive Hill, by the grid dimen-
sions of a preexisting grove of trees); the
house groupings in Usonia, Okemos,
Michigan, of the late 1930s and Pleasant-
ville, New York, of the 1950s; and the “Sun-
top” quadruple house clusters in Ardmore,
Pennsylvania, of the late 1930s, all of which
were realized.

In the third and largest section of the
book, rather than presenting Broadacre
City’s ruralist legacy in Wright’s later
projects, Levine leads us in the opposite direc-
tion, away from the antiurbanism of
“the disappearing city,” by presenting four
unrealized projects for large interventions
set within existing cities: the Lake Monona
Civic Center in Madison, Wisconsin, of
1938; the Crystal City project in Washin-
ton, D.C., of 1940; the Point Park Civic
Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, of
1947; and the Cultural Center and City
Plan Expansion in Baghdad, Iraq, of 1957.
These chapters are in effect miniature monographs on four remarkable yet rarely
studied designs. Levine publishes all of
Wright’s original drawings related to each
and presents excellent summaries of the
histories of the commissions and their ur-
ban contexts. In focusing on these four
large-scale, multiple-programmed inter-
ventions in existing cities, however, Levine
might be said, according to a narrow de-
definition of urban design, to have moved
from a study of Wright’s urbanism per se
to a study of large projects set within urban
contexts. Levine acknowledges this transi-
tion in definitions of urbanism by noting
that CIAM’s postwar calls for a “new mon-
umentality” and for designing “the heart
of the city” are to some degree realized
in these late urban designs by Wright. In
the book’s last chapters Levine can be said
to make the case that, in these late large-
scale urban projects, Wright precisely
presaged the contemporary urban design
concepts of megastructure, megaform,
and landform as means to order large,
enclose-like, hybrid-programmed building
complexes as constructive, experientially
grounded interventions within existing city
fabrics otherwise often determined by
purely economic “planning.”

Levine’s book presents Wright as an ac-
complished and innovative urban designer,
and the selected case studies illuminate
Wright’s application of principles of prac-
tice for weaving new communities into the
fabric of the city, transforming the city
from within through interventions, and re-
placing the traditional city with a new, ex-
urban mode of collective dwelling. By pub-
lishing for the first time the complete
sets of drawings for the projects discussed,
Levine also confirms that there are still
wonders to be found in the Frank Lloyd
Wright Archives (which represent the life-
work of Bruce Pfeiffer, former director of
the archives, to whom the book is dedi-
cated). The fact that Wright’s urban de-
signs remained almost entirely unrealized
does not diminish their critical importance.
As this book clearly reveals, Wright’s urban
design legacy is embodied in his lifelong
propensity to design a comprehensive ur-
ban context for each of his individual build-
ing designs and to define his larger projects
as settlement patterns, city fabrics, and ur-
ban places.

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Notes
1. Neil Levine, The Architecture of Frank Lloyd
Wright (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University
2. Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture, trans.
Frederick Etchells (New York: Payson & Clarke,
1927); Le Corbusier, The City of To-morrow and Its
Planning, trans. Frederick Etchells (Cambridge,