"Broadacre City: A New Community Plan"

Architectural Record (1935)

Frank Lloyd Wright

Editors' Introduction

For more than half a century, the question "Who is the greatest American architect?" could have only one answer: Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959). First with his revolutionary "prairie houses" that seemed to grow directly out of the Midwest landscape with their long, low cantilevered rooflines, and later with such masterpieces as the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the breathtaking "Fallingwater" house in Western Pennsylvania, Wright became the spokesman for "organic architecture" and a style of building that expressed "the nature of the materials."

To many, Wright's architecture and "the architecture of American democracy" were synonymous. As an unabashed egotist and a pioneer in the field of media celebrity, Wright encouraged the popular identification of himself with the American spirit. He cultivated an imperious image of plain-speaking, anti-collectivist democracy and sought personally to embody the notion of radical individualism. As an artistic genius, Wright despised the popular philistinism of his day and attributed the observable decline of American popular culture to "the mobocracy" and to the unprincipled bankers and politicians who served its interests. By the 1920s and 1930s, Wright had become a social revolutionary but not, characteristically, of the socialist Left. Rather, Wright called for a radical transformation of American society to restore earlier Emersonian and Jeffersonian virtues. The physical embodiment of that utopian vision was Broadacre City. Wright unveiled his model of Broadacre City, illustrated in Plate 39, at Rockefeller Center, New York, in 1935. The article reprinted here represents his first and clearest statement of the revolutionary proposal whereby every citizen of the United States would be given a minimum of one acre of land per person, with the family homestead being the basis of civilization, and with government reduced to nothing more than a county architect who would be in charge of directing land allotments and the construction of basic community facilities. Many at the time thought the idea was totally outlandish, but Broadacre (and the small, efficient "Usonian" house) proved to be prophetic as sprawling suburban regions transformed the American landscape during the second half of the twentieth century.

Wright believed that two inventions – the telephone and the automobile – made the old cities "no longer modern," and he fervently looked forward to the day when dense, crowded agglomerations like New York and Chicago would wither and decay. In their place, Americans would reinhabit the rural landscape (and reacquire the rural virtues of individual freedom and self-reliance) with a "city" of independent homesteads in which people would be isolated enough from one another to insure family stability but connected enough, through modern telecommunications and transportation, to achieve a real sense of community. Borrowing an idea from the anarchist philosopher Kropotkin, Wright believed that the citizens of Broadacre should pursue a combination of manual and intellectual work every day, thus achieving a human wholeness that modern society and the modern city had destroyed. He also believed that a system of personal freedom and dignity through land ownership was the way to guarantee social harmony and avoid class struggle. Broadacre City invites immediate comparison with the very

different models of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (p. 328) and with Le Corbusier's cities based on towers in a park (p. 336). Intriguingly, the overall population density of Broadacre, on the one hand, and the Garden City and Corbusian visions, on the other, were not all that different, depending on the actual acreage of the surrounding parkland or greenbelt. Both Wright's and Le Corbusier's plans are wedded to the automobile, one vision seeing a centralizing, the other a decentralizing, effect. But the most revealing comparisons are with Robert Fishman's description of the post-suburban "technoburbs" (p. 75), Melvin Webber's prediction of a "post-urban age" (p. 549), and Manuel Castells's concept of "the space of flows" (p. 572). Considering the nature of the global cities described in Part Eight of this volume, one cannot help but wonder whether what Wright envisioned in 1935 may actually be realized, with the help of computer-based telecommunications and the possibility of "telecommuting" to work over the Internet in the twenty-first century.

This selection is from *Architectural Record*, 77 (April, 1935). For more on Broadacre City see Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1984) is also useful, and William Allin Storer, *A Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994) is an impressive and definitive reference book.

Three excellent biographies of Wright are Meryle Secrest, *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Biography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), and Ada Louise Huxtable, *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2004). For good overviews of Wright's work, see David Larkin and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (eds), *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Masterworks* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Roger Friedland and Harold Zellman, *The Fellowship: The Untold Story of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Fellowship* (New York: Regan, 2006). The very best sources on Wright are Wright himself, although his writing style is often quirky and hyperbolic. Of particular interest are *When Democracy Builds* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1945), *Genius and the Mobocracy* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1949), and *The Living City* (New York: Horizon, 1958).

Given the simple exercise of several inherently just rights of man, the freedom to decentralize, to re-distribute and to correlate the properties of the life of man on earth to his birthright – the ground itself – and Broadacre City becomes reality.

As I see Architecture, the best architect is he who will devise forms nearest organic as features of human growth by way of changes natural to that growth. Civilization is itself inevitably a form but not, if democracy is sanity, is it necessarily the fixation called "academic." All regimentation is a form of death which may sometimes serve life but more often imposes upon it. In Broadacres all is symmetrical but it is seldom obviously and never academically so.

Whatever forms issue are capable of normal growth without destruction of such pattern as they may have. Nor is there much obvious repetition in the new city. Where regiment and row serve the general harmony of arrangement both are present, but generally, both are absent except where planting and cultivation are naturally a process or walls afford a desired seclusion. Rhythm is the substitute for such repetitions everywhere. Wherever repetition (standardization) enters, it has been modified by inner rhythms either by art or by nature as it must, to be of any lasting human value.

The three major inventions already at work building Broadacres, whether the powers that over-built the old cities otherwise like it or not, are:

1 The motor car: general mobilization of the human being.
2 Radio, telephone and telegraph: electrical inter-communication becoming complete.
3 Standardized machine-shop production: machine invention plus scientific discovery.

The price of the major three to America has been the exploitation we see everywhere around us in waste

and in ugly scaffolding that may now be thrown away. The price has not been so great if by way of popular government we are able to exercise the use of three inherent rights of any man:

1 His social right to a direct medium of exchange in place of gold as a commodity: some form of social credit.
2 His social right to his place on the ground as he has had it in the sun and air: land to be held only by use and improvements.
3 His social right to the ideas by which and for which he lives: public ownership of invention and scientific discoveries that concern the life of the people.

The only assumption made by Broadacres as ideal is that these three rights will be the citizen's so soon as the folly of endeavoring to cheat him of their democratic values becomes apparent to those who hold (feudal survivors or survivals), as it is becoming apparent to the thinking people who are held blindly abject or subject against their will.

The landlord is no happier than the tenant. The speculator can no longer win much at a game about played out. The present success-ideal, placing, as it does, premiums upon the wolf, the fox and the rat in human affairs and above all, upon the parasite, is growing more evident every day as a falsity just as injurious to the "successful" as to the victims of such success. Well – sociologically, Broadacres is release from all that fatal "success" which is, after all, only excess. So I have called it a new freedom for living in America. It has thrown the scaffolding aside. It sets up a new ideal of success.

In Broadacres, by elimination of cities and towns the present curse of petty and minor officialdom, government, has been reduced to one minor government for each county. The waste motion, the back and forth haul, that today makes so much idle business is gone. Distribution becomes automatic and direct, taking place mostly in the region of origin. Methods of distribution of everything are simple and direct. From the maker to the consumer by the most direct route.

Coal (one-third the tonnage of the haul of our railways) is eliminated by burning it at the mines and transferring that power, making it easier to take over the great railroad rights of way; to take off the cumbersome rolling stock and put the right of way into general service as the great arterial on which truck traffic is concentrated on lower side lanes, many lanes of speed traffic above and monorail speed trains at the center, continuously running. Because traffic may take off or take on at any given point, these arterials are traffic not dated but fluescent. And the great arterial as well as all the highways become great architecture, automatically affording within their structure all necessary storage facilities of raw materials, the elimination of all unsightly piles of raw material.

In the hands of the state, but by way of the county, is all redistribution of land – a minimum of one acre going to the childless family and more to the larger family as effected by the state. The agent of the state in all matters of land allotment or improvement, or in matters affecting the harmony of the whole, is the architect. All building is subject to his sense of the whole as organic architecture. Here architecture is landscape and landscape takes on the character of architecture by way of the simple process of cultivation.

All public utilities are concentrated in the hands of the state and county government as are matters of administration, patrol, fire, post, banking, license and record, making politics a vital matter to everyone in the new city instead of the old case where hopeless indifference makes "politics" a grafter's profession.

In the buildings for Broadacres no distinction exists between much and little, more and less. Quality is in all, for all, alike. The thought entering into the first or last estate is of the best. What differs is only individuality and extent. There is nothing poor or mean in Broadacres.

Nor does Broadacres issue any dictum or see any finality in the matter either of pattern or style.

Organic character is style. Such style has myriad forms inherently good. Growth is possible to Broadacres as a fundamental form, not as mere accident of change but as integral pattern unfolding from within.

Here now may be seen the elemental units of our social structure [Figure 1]: the correlated farm, the factory – its smoke and gases eliminated by burning coal at places of origin, the decentralized school, the various conditions of residence, the home offices, safe traffic, simplified government. All common interests take place in a simple coordination wherein all are employed: *little* farms, *little* homes for industry, *little* factories, *little* schools, a *little* university going to the people mostly by way of their interest in the ground, *little* laboratories on their own ground for professional men. And the farm itself, notwithstanding its animals, becomes the most attractive unit of the city. The

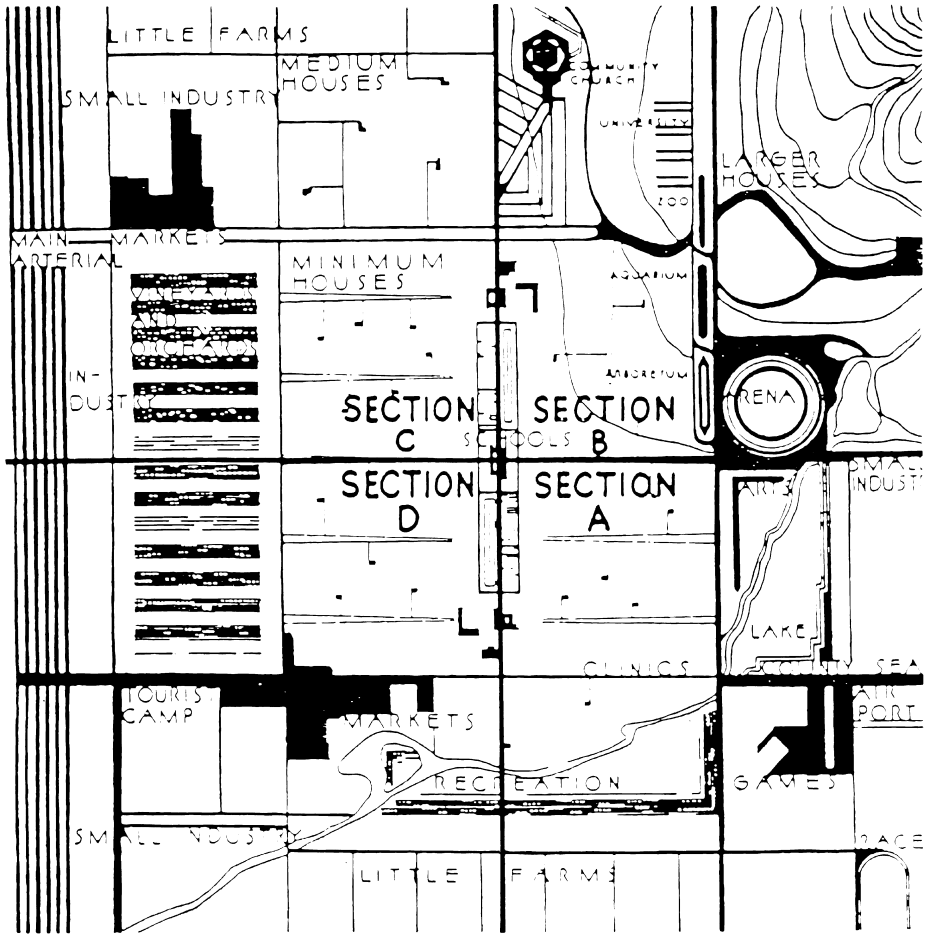

Figure 1

husbandry of animals at last is in decent association with them and with all else as well. True farm relief.

To build Broadacres as conceived would automatically end unemployment and all its evils forever. There would never be labor enough nor could underconsumption ever ensue. Whatever a man did would be done – obviously and directly – mostly by himself in his own interest under the most valuable inspiration and direction: under training, certainly, if necessary. Economic independence would be near, a subsistence certain; life varied and interesting.

Every kind of builder would be likely to have a jealous eye to the harmony of the whole within broad limits fixed by the county architect, an architect chosen by the county itself. Each county would thus naturally develop an individuality of its own. Architecture – in the broad sense – would thrive.

In an organic architecture the ground itself predetermines all features; the climate modifies them; available means limit them; function shapes them.

Form and function are one in Broadacres. But Broadacres is no finality! The model shows four square miles of a typical countryside developed on the acre as unit according to conditions in the temperate zone and accommodating some 1,400 families. It would swing north or swing south in type as conditions, climate and topography of the region changed.

In the model the emphasis has been placed upon diversity in unity, recognizing the necessity of cultivation as a need for formality in most of the planting. By a simple government subsidy certain specific acres or groups of acre units are, in every generation, planted to useful trees, meantime beautiful, giving privacy and various rural divisions. There are no rows of trees

alongside the roads to shut out the view. Rows where they occur are perpendicular to the road or the trees are planted in groups. Useful trees like white pine, walnut, birch, beech, fir, would come to maturity as well as fruit and nut trees and they would come as a profitable crop meantime giving character, privacy and comfort to the whole city. The general park is a flowered meadow beside the stream and is bordered with ranks of trees, tiers gradually rising in height above the flowers at the ground level. A music-garden is sequestered from noise at one end. Much is made of general sports and festivals by way of the stadium, zoo, aquarium, arboretum and the arts.

The traffic problem has been given special attention, as the more mobilization is made a comfort and a facility the sooner will Broadacres arrive. Every Broadacre citizen has his own car. Multiple-lane highways make travel safe and enjoyable. There are no grade crossings nor left turns on grade. The road system and construction is such that no signals nor any lamp-posts need be seen. No ditches are alongside the roads. No curbs either. An inlaid purfling over which the car cannot come without damage to itself takes its place to protect the pedestrian.

In the affair of air transport Broadacres rejects the present airplane and substitutes the self-contained mechanical unit that is sure to come: an aerator capable of rising straight up and by reversible rotors able to travel in any given direction under radio control at a maximum speed of, say, 200 miles an hour, and able to descend safely into the hexacomb from which it arose or anywhere else. By a doorstep if desired.

The only fixed transport trains kept on the arterial are the long-distance monorail cars traveling at a speed (already established in Germany) of 220 miles per hour. All other traffic is by motor car on the twelve lane levels or the triple truck lanes on the lower levels which have on both sides the advantage of delivery direct to warehousing or from warehouses to consumer. Local trucks may get to warehouse-storage on lower levels under the main arterial itself. A local truck road parallels the swifter lanes.

Houses in the new city are varied: make much of fireproof synthetic materials, factory-fabricated units adapted to free assembly and varied arrangement, but do not neglect the older nature-materials wherever they are desired and available. House-holders' utilities are nearly all planned in prefabricated utility stacks or units, simplifying construction and reducing building costs to a certainty. There is the professional's house with its laboratory, the minimum house with its workshop, the medium house ditto, the larger house and the house of machine-age luxury. We might speak of them as a one-car house, a two-car house, a three-car house and a five-car house. Glass is extensively used as are roofless rooms. The roof is used often as a trellis or a garden. But where glass is extensively used it is usually for domestic purposes in the shadow of protecting overhangs.

Copper for roofs is indicated generally on the model as a permanent cover capable of being worked in many appropriate ways and giving a general harmonious color effect to the whole.

Electricity, oil and gas are the only popular fuels. Each land allotment has a pit near the public lighting fixture where access to the three and to water and sewer may be had without tearing up the pavements.

The school problem is solved by segregating a group of low buildings in the interior spaces of the city where the children can go without crossing traffic. The school building group includes galleries for loan collections from the museum, a concert and lecture hall, small gardens for the children in small groups and well-lighted cubicles for individual outdoor study: there is a small zoo, large pools and green playgrounds.

This group is at the very center of the model and contains at its center the higher school adapted to the segregation of the students into small groups.

This tract of four miles square, by way of such liberal general allotment determined by acreage and type of ground, including apartment buildings and hotel facilities, provides for about 1,400 families at, say, an average of five or more persons to the family.

To reiterate: the basis of the whole is general decentralization as an applied principle and architectural reintegration of all units into one fabric; free use of the ground held only by use and improvements; public utilities and government itself owned by the people of Broadacre City; privacy on one's own ground for all and a fair means of subsistence for all by way of their own work on their own ground or in their own laboratory or in common offices serving the life of the whole.

There are too many details involved in the model of Broadacres to permit complete explanation. Study of the model itself is necessary study. Most details are explained by way of collateral models of the various types of construction shown: highway construction, left

turns, crossovers, underpasses and various houses and public buildings.

Anyone studying the model should bear in mind the thesis upon which the design has been built by the Taliesin Fellowship, built carefully not as a finality in any sense but as an interpretation of the changes inevitable to our growth as a people and a nation.

Individuality established on such terms must thrive. Unwholesome life would get no encouragement and the ghastly heritage left by over-crowding in overdone ultra-capitalistic centers would be likely to disappear in three or four generations. The old success ideals having no chance at all, new ones more natural to the best in man would be given a fresh opportunity to develop naturally.