

BROADACRE CITY, 1932-1959

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

The idea of Broadacre City, or as Wright often referred to it – Broadacres, was developed at the pinnacle of Wright’s professional career and late in his life. Its debut came in *The Disappearing City* (New York: Payson, 1932), was first revised in *When Democracy Builds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), and the final revised publication was entitled *The Living City* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958).

Wright’s discontent with the city arose in the years of the Great Depression which occurred some years after the Great War (1914-1918) as a result of the Stock Market Crash of 1929. He viewed the centralization of cities as “overbuilt”¹. He mocked the idea that a man in his right mind would leave the opportunities granted in the countryside to live in the confines of the overcrowded city. As one author is quick to point out, Wright is the product of an agrarian society, his interest in architecture possibly fuelled by an early interest in geometry². He felt city as it was, centralized, was demoralizing the individual by the pressure created from the concept of rent – rent for land, rent for money and traffic in invention³. He further surmises that the Great Depression is a direct result of the government and private enterprises controlling profits and giving the wage-slave a false sense of prosperity, thus inverting disrupting the equilibrium of a capitalism base – apex at the ground and base in the air.

It would fall for the same reason that masonry or monarchy falls, as all despotism surely falls: the law of gravitation and the law of diminishing returns (a law of nature).

In it, the individual is forced to conform to the speed and the business of the city, keeping up appearances eventually leading to the deterioration of his individuality:

He, the wage-slave in some form, puts his own life into bondage, or is busy managing to get the lives of others there just in order to keep up the superficial privileges to which he has consciously, fatuously, subscribed and which are often described to him as great, beneficent "free enterprise".⁴

He believed that a man's true success lay in a greater freedom of movement which he suggested would be possible with the improvements in technology which brought about the automobile, electrification and improvements in communication. True democracy would be achieved by reclaiming one's individuality and engaging in "natural architecture" rather than communal living of the cities. His aim was to develop a truly American, and or as he later renamed Usonian, way of life which was not an imitation of European counterparts to foster creation. He was not entirely against the facets of the existing city, such as the skyscraper, but shunned the notion of large masses of them interspersed by the concrete jungle. Rather, he anticipated fewer of such structures within a open, beautifully landscaped terrain. There was a time when centralization was necessary, but with electrification, mechanical mobilization, and organic architecture there is no longer any difference between a few blocks and a few miles⁵.

Broadacres was to accommodate at least one acre per individual (adult or child) since at that time there was fifty-seven green acres available per person in the United States⁶. This would eventually lead to a density of about 500 persons per square mile, which Zygas notes as "scandalously low"⁷. In this landscape, each entity was enveloped in some kind of "green space". Entities included factories, skyscrapers, schools, places of

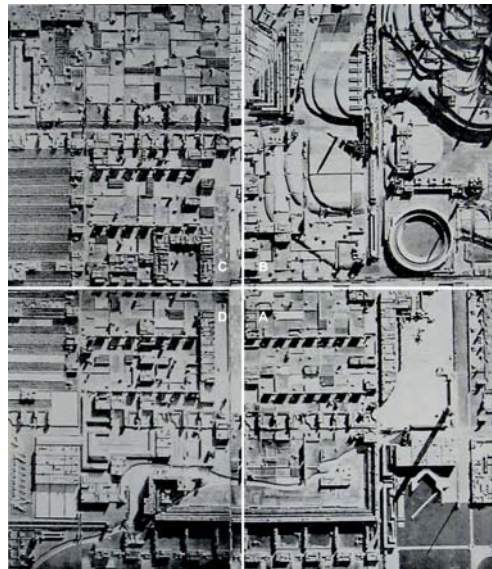
worship and places of recreation. The area was fed by super-highways (at least 6 lanes) which feeds into progressively smaller roadways, the size of which was determined by the use of the associated entities (that is, main roads had at least 4 lanes and residential streets were the most narrow often ending in cul-de-sacs). Railways and truck right-of-ways were to remain separate and out of sight from main thoroughfares. Wright also despised the city's "wires on poles"⁸ and proposed the placing of utility lines underground. Other aesthetic contributions included no open drainage along roadways, large-scale landscaping over the entire site (including broad views of native vegetation), and all terminal buildings and warehouses were restricted to ports of entry or under tracks (this is the only area for which concentration is permitted). Other elements include fueling and service stations, and county seats would be located at various important intersections; underground refuges (for times of war) would be kept as storage units during times of peace along or under railways; highways would be built with the terrain at safe grades; road construction would be done by the regional governing agency but supervised by architects, landscape architects and structural engineers; and minor flight stations would be installed for the safe landing, takeoff and storage of private flight vehicles. With these various elements working together, the mode of exchange would now be from "rail to house or hand to hand [and] farm to family or family to factory"⁹ which is to say that

*As the natural city grows in completeness distribution is more and more easy.*¹⁰

With the various elements working together, Wright supposed that employment was no longer done on a need-to-pay-rent basis. The individual will now work based on what he wanted to do or liked to do because he was no longer absolutely dependent on the operations of others for his success. This is what he determined to be true democracy

and true individualism. This is further encouraged by the fact that professional offices (clinics, small shops, studios, art galleries, etc.) were expected to be located in close relation to home or be minor features of the landscape, but “professionalism” would be diminished. Financial services, public services and other commercial enterprises would operate close to county seats (close to important intersections) or public functions (such as police or fire stations).

In his 1934 model, Wright became more specific in his designation of the various elements. In a model representing four square miles, he proposed a main arterial adjoined to rectangular field used for agricultural purposes (vineyards and orchards). There was a meandering stream in the southern portion. Zoning was done by activity and function, and single-family home was the predominant building type. Large thoroughfares were intersected by large street at half-mile intervals.



The 1934 Broadacre City Model

Architecturally, buildings would be designed by “organic architecture”¹¹, to reflect the individuality of the population, one of the objectives Wright hoped to achieve. This would eliminate the imitations which he felt were reflected in the World Expositions in Chicago (1893) and New York (1939-40). He further advocated the use of more modern material such as glass and steel which keeps the elements (of weather) out, but allows the outdoors in, putting man less separate from nature and eliminating what he likens to a fortification. Additionally, each of buildings regardless of function were not to be monstrosities, but rather groups of smaller units in a beautifully landscaped setting. He advocated the concept of mobile hotels and houseboats which promoted the freedom of movement aforementioned – the freedom to stay or the freedom to go.

The idea of Broadacres was to let go of traditional form – of the city as a whole, and of individual pieces such as the hospital (sunlit clinics¹²), the church, the universities (institutions for creative expression and deep thought – the settings for becoming more universal), public schools (no longer to resemble factories, but set in “the choicest part of the whole countryside”¹³ as a conglomeration of smaller schools hosting 25 students each with common outdoor/activity areas, flower beds and gardens giving the student the opportunity to work with the ground).

Criticisms about Broadacre vary from academic to academic. In some instances arguments on urban planning do not even mention Broadacre City. In other circles, Wright has secured many supporters as evidenced in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Phoenix Papers Volume: 1 Broadacre City*¹⁴. Though no participant accepted the concept totally,

many of the principles have been extracted and advocated as pertinent to urban design. Professor Paul Zygas admitted that Wright did not invent any new approach to urban planning but rather he “repackaged the American order of things”¹⁵. According to Peter Rowe, Wright was planning based on observations of trends that were already taking place. Decentralization was already taking place in the form of sprawl due to improvements in communication, electrification and transportation (better networks, cheaper automobiles, greater ownership of automobiles and high-speed travel ways). At that time also federal loans for home-building was picking up as the country began to recover from the Great Depression. Commercial enterprises were soon to follow the movement to create “poly-nucleated spatial form”¹⁶ such as found in Houston and Boston. He related Broadacre to contemporary development by pointing out the similarities in the fusion of city and countryside, the imposition of a grid (to some degree), the adaptation of existing phenomena such as parkways and some garden city principles, the need for decentralization and reintegration, and the relationship between romantic agrarianism and liberating technology. The difference he noted are that in Wright’s model, there was a close-knit relationship between home, work and recreation (versus dormitory towns), the spatial order emphasized “economies of scope” rather than “economies of scale” (employing a greater number of persons through an increasing spatial agglomeration)¹⁷, each region was uniquely identified (individuality will create differences expressed in the design/architecture), no greater emphasis was placed on the design architecture than the design of infrastructure, and development was done with consideration to nature (working with it and not against it). John Sergeant¹⁸ conceded that the numerous single-house developments gave rise to an

inefficient use of energy (with respect to cooling and heating). However, he admitted that centralization also contributed to energy waste through other means (for example, traffic congestion) and therefore was not necessarily more energy efficient than Wright's concept. He also noted that Wright's anticipation of the universal participation in agrarianism has been overshadowed by the rise of commercialization through the concept of the mall. He also noted that the promotion of individuality may have worked so well to in fact have lead to alienation which defied any movement towards reintegration. Finally, he suggested that a density increase in population would be appropriate with the significant advances made in technology even since Wright's writing.

According to Stephen Grabow¹⁹, Wright ignored "the dynamic complexity of life" and "it would a gross oversimplification to believe that a physical relocation of the population (even with the social and economic changes ...) could solve the functional problems of democracy in a rapidly industrializing society"²⁰. He also highlighted that Wright's approach was purely architectural and agreed with other writers that it was "a self-righteous advertisement for Wright's own designs and a display of individual examples of his domestic architecture"²¹ (which largely involved the use of glass and steel in his later years). Although he believed Wright was influenced by the times, he also praised Wright for his foresight with respect to the effect of technological advances on urban growth patterns. He was however disappointed with the general uniformity across the horizontal landscape – "no differentiation of functions, just a uniform physical pattern"²².

James Krohe Jr., in his essay *Return to Broadacre City*²³, highlighted that though there was a need for the city life, as it existed, in some ways, and the suburban life in other ways, the need for each is not exclusive. He also pointed out that the application of Broadacre City realized the property as a source of wealth (by maintaining or improving property value) instead the site of wealth production (through agriculture) as Wright had hoped.

Even though the development of Phoenix, Arizona has been associated with the Broadacre City concept, due to significant similarities, it must be realized that though the pattern may be similar, the growth was not carried out with a respect to the environment but rather because it was easy to develop the desert, and the economic forces to promote private land ownership were not the same, and that the effects of decentralization that occurred were likened to those of sprawl (costly, waste of space, etc)²⁴

The concept of Broadacre, like many other theories of urban development addresses many key issues, and overlooks others. Many principles may be adapted from this theory and applied, as appropriate, to a given landscape successfully. Additionally, it may be incorporated with various other theories to produce optimal results. Wright was simply responding to the notion that decentralization would occur in some form or fashion, and Broadacre city is his contribution to organize or formalize the movement. His perspective may be architectural and therefore seen a limited, but there is yet one

person that has yet produced the perfect solution to the problem of centralization, or decentralization (in the form of sprawl).

¹ Wright, Frank Lloyd, "The Living City" in *Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings Volume 5*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1995), 265.

² (Author Unknown), *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and Work*.
<http://www.uky.edu/Classes/PS/776/Projects/Wright/wright.htm>.

³ Wright, pp 262

⁴ Ibid., pp 257-258

⁵ Ibid., pp 278

⁶ Ibid., pp 281

⁷ Zygas, K. Paul, "Broadacre City as Artifact" in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Phoenix Papers Volume I: Broadacre City*, The Herberger Center for Design Excellence (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1995), pp 29.

⁸ Wright, pp 301.

⁹ Ibid., pp 302

¹⁰ Ibid., pp 302

¹¹ Wright (pp 290) notes that "Architecture is organic only because it is intrinsic. In the reflex it seeks to serve man rather than become a force trying to rule over him ... it is building from inside out, instead from outside in ... The result: style is character. It is by integration in this interior sense that Broadacre City would give style birth; have great style all the while as something natural; not as something exterior or forced, either in its structure or upon its people."

¹² Wright, pp 323

¹³ Ibid., pp326

¹⁴ The Herberger Center for Design Excellence (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1995)

¹⁵ Zygas, pp 19

¹⁶ Rowe, Peter G., "Broadacre City and Contemporary Metropolitan Development" in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Phoenix Papers Volume I: Broadacre City*, The Herberger Center for Design Excellence (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1995), pp 54

¹⁷ Ibid., pp 59

¹⁸ Sergeant, John, "Broadacre City: Looking Backward 1991-1935" in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Phoenix Papers Volume I: Broadacre City*, The Herberger Center for Design Excellence (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1995), pp 66-79

¹⁹ Grabow, Stephen, "Frank Lloyd Wright and the American City: The Broadacres Debate" in *The American Institute of Planners Journal*, April 1977, pp 115-123

²⁰ Ibid., pp 119

²¹ Ibid.,

²² Ibid., pp 120

²³ In *Illinois Issues*, April 2000, pp 27-29

²⁴ Gammage Jr., Grady, "Squareacre, Broaddesert: Visions of Phoenix" in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Phoenix Papers Volume I: Broadacre City*, The Herberger Center for Design Excellence (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1995), pp 118-123