FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

"Broadacre City: A New Community Plan"
Architectural Record (1935)

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). He hit with his revolutionary “prairie houses” that seemed to grow direct out of the surrounding landscape with its long, low horizontal lines and large windows that opened up to the natural world. In Tokyo, the Guggenheim Museum of Art in New York, and the strikingly modern "Falling Water" 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 egalitarian and a pioneer in the field of media democracy, Wright encouraged the popular identification of himself with the American spirit. He cultivated an impertinent image of plain-spoken, anti-colonial democracy and sought personally to embody the notion of radical individualism. As an artistic genius, Wright despised the popular philistine of his day and attributed the observable decline of American popular culture to "the mobocracy" and to the unprincipled bankers and politicans 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 its model of Broadacre City, illustrated in Plate 29 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 basic unit of civilization, and with government reduced to nothing more than a county architect who would be in charge of directingÏ and allotments and the construction of basic community facilities. Mary at the time thought the idea was totally utopian, but Broadacre (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 conglomerations like New York and Chicago would wither and decay. In their place, Americans would re-inhabit the rural landscape (and re-accept the rural virtues of individual freedom and self-sufficiency) with a "city" of independent homesteads in which people would be isolated enough from one another to secure 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 would 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 this 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. 321) and 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 at all different, depending on the actual acreage of the surrounding parkland or greenbelt. And both Wright's and Le Corbusier's plans are washed to the automobile, one vision seeing a centripetal, the other a de-centrational, effect. But the most revealing comparisons are anti-Robert Goldwater's description of the new emerging "technocrats" (p. 77) and Mehran Webster's prediction of an "extension of work" (p. 99). One cannot help but wonder whether what seemed impossible 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.

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Given the simple exercise of several inherently just rights of man, the freedom to decentralize, to redistribute and to correlate the properties of the land as much as to his liking — the ground itself — and Broadacre City becomes reality.

As I see Architecture, the best architect is he who devises 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 soundly, it is necessarily the fixation called "academic." All regimentation is a form of death which may sometimes serve but more often imposes upon it. In Broadacre all is symmetrical but it is seldom obviously and never academically so.

Whatever forms issue are capable of normal growth without destruction of such patterns 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 Broadacre, whether the powers that built the old cities otherwise like it or not, are:

1. The motorcar, general installation of the human being
2. Radio, telephone and telegraph, electrical intercommunication 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.
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 habitation 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 and unexceptionally and all its evils forever. There would never be labor enough nor the land under consumption ever cease. 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 labor would likely have a place to the harmony of the whole within broad limits fixed by the country 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 these functions and shapes them.

Form and function are one in Broadacres. But Broadacres is no novelty! The model shows four square miles of a typical country-side developed on the same site 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 various specific crops or groups of acre units are: in every generation, planted to useful trees, meannoteable beauty, giving privacy and various rural divisions. There are no rows of trees alongside the roads to shut out the view. Rolls where they occur are perpendicular to the road or the trees are planted in rows. Useful trees like white pine, walnut, birch, beech, fir, would come to maturity as fruit and nut trees and they would come as a profitable crop meannote 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 sectioned from noise at one end. Much is made of grassed sports and festivals by way of the stadium, zoo, aquarium, arbor均um and the arts.

The traffic problem has been given special attention, as the more mobilization is made a comfort at and facility the more will Broadacres arrive. Every Broadacres citizen has his own car. Multiple-lane highways make travel safe and enjoyable. There are no grade crossings nor level turns on grade. The road system and circulation is such that no signals or any lamp-post need be seen. No ditches are alongside the roads. No curbs either. An inlaid curbing 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 aeroplane 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, 300 miles an hour and able to descend safely into the hangars from which it arose or anywhere else. By a doorstep at desired.

The only fixed transport trains kept on the arterial are the long-distance railroad cars traveling as a speed train (already established in Germany) of 200 miles per hour. All other traffic is by motor car on the twelve lane main roads or the fourteen lane main roads and the heavy traffic on the lower levels which have on both sides the advantage of delivery docks to warehousing or from warehouses to consumer. Local trains may get to warehouse-storage on lower levels under the main arterial itself. A local train runs parallel the swifter lanes.

Houses in the new city are walled, made much of fireproof synthetic materials, factory fabricated units adapted to free assembly and varied arrangement, but do not neglect the older nature-materials whenever they are desired and available. House-builders' unions are nearly all planned in prefabricated utility staches or units, simplifying construction and reducing building costs to a certainty. There is the professional's house with its laboratory, the medium house with its workshop, the medium house, the larger house and the house of machine age. The steel house is like a house 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.

There are too many details involved in the model of Broadacres to permit complete explanation. Study of the model itself is necessary. Study of many details is explained by way of collateral models of the various types of construction shown: highway construction, a local train, a crosstown, an underground and various buses and public buildings.

Anyone studying the model should bear in mind the thesis upon which the design has been built by the U.S. National Board, fact carefully noted as a reality 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 not get enough encouragement and the ghastly image left by overcontrol in overdone ultra-plastic 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.