Frank Lloyd Wright and the Disappearing City

David G. De Long

[SIDEBAR: A historical review of the urban themes of America's greatest architect.]

Frank Lloyd Wright's final book, The Living City, was published in 1958. At the time some considered it as something of an embarrassment. There he was, over ninety years old and busier than ever with new commissions, pausing to promote yet again his city of the future. This time it was illustrated with bizarre images of futuristic helicopters and giant-wheeled automobiles. Now, almost forty years later, Wright's work is being re-examined with great interest. His designs--once dismissed as hopelessly romantic--command new attention. Just as fewer people dismiss his claim of being the world's greatest architect, his city of the future is being revisited to consider his ideas regarding urban development.

As a young man without a college degree, Wright worked for the famous Chicago architect Louis H. Sullivan from 1887 until he established an independent practice in 1893. By the turn of the century he had designed what many historians consider to be the world's first truly modern building, and within the next decade his work was widely published in the United States and Europe. During the twelve years, from 1909 to 1922, he lived for extended periods in Europe and Japan. He then returned to the United States and sought to re-establish practice in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles had much to offer the architect then in his mid-fifties. The city was experiencing

meteoric growth--its population almost tripled between 1920 and 1930, from around 500,000 to nearly 1.5 million. In 1923 alone, more than 60,000 permits for new buildings were issued, and it was reported that a new house was completed every 26 minutes of the working day. The automobile ownership rate was the highest in the world--in 1924, for example, one car was registered for every 2.9 persons. Government funding for new roads poured money into an already highly charged economy. Planning for an extensive system of parkways had begun in 1913, and by the 1920s Los Angeles's dramatic highways were featured on tourist brochures. New building types (such as the drive-in market) were beginning to emerge and suburban development was affecting the traditional urban core. Between 1923 and 1931, it was calculated that the number of people entering downtown Los Angeles actually declined by 24 percent, while traffic congestion was increasing at the periphery.

Wright, well aware of his changing surroundings, railed against the insensitive construction of tract housing. In 1923 he proposed his solution: the Doheny Ranch residential development. It was his first truly urban-scaled design, and in it he proposed nothing less than a new landscape, with buildings, roadways, and plantings conceived as one continuous structure. The project was planned for an undeveloped tract of some 411 acres owned by one of the city's richest citizens, Edward L. Doheny, who could readily have financed its realization. However, it was a purely speculative proposal--Wright, it seems, never even met Doheny—and it came to nothing. Yet it illustrated the changing direction of Wright's work. Compared to his earlier designs it was new in scale, its complexly angled geometries, and in its pioneering approach to prefabricated construction. Most important, it was accepted and even celebrating the automobile.

Wright's actual commissions during the 1920s were relatively few in number, and only the smallest were built. In his grander designs he continued to explore new approaches to large-scale architectural composition, seeking an unprecedented unity between building and place through enhancement of what he perceived as each location's underlying geometric structure. He consistently incorporated automobile roadways as an essential component of these compositions, celebrating

movement as a timely reflection of the rapidly changing world. Probably most dramatic was the Gordon Strong automobile objective (Sugarloaf, Maryland, 1924-25, unbuilt), a ziggurat-like, circular spiral conceived as an automobile roadway leading to an overlook on top of the mountain. Beneath, under a huge dome that was (somehow) to support the spiraling roadway, was a planetarium.

During these years, while the majority of his designs were being rejected, Wright began questioning the nature of the city and to predict with uncanny foresight its gradual dissolution. His major projects became prototypes that were incorporated within the future settlements he envisioned. In a series of lectures given at Princeton University in 1930, he began to express his ideas more publicly. He identified key factors of decentralization that have since become widely recognized: the automobile and various means of electronic communication. For Wright, the freedom of movement offered by the automobile, together with the freedom of location that would be effected through further developments of telecommunications, would greatly expand individual freedoms of choice. He believed a majority of Americans--freed from the need to live and work in congested urban cores--would migrate to places they inherently desired: open countryside. He warned that without appropriate planning, urban sprawl and traffic congestion would result.

In 1932, he published his first formal tract on the subject: The Disappearing City. Echoing nineteenth-century sentiment, he described the old city as "some tumor grown malignant....a menace to the future of humanity." Claiming people needed more expansive places to live humanely and greater freedom to move at will, he outlined the new type of settlement he believed should take its place, tying his solution to what he characterized as modern human needs for space and movement. He believed urban functions would be dispersed across a carefully planned countryside; markets, businesses, cultural and community facilities would be linked by a network of roads. More radically, he suggested that the nation's land be redistributed, with each family being allotted at least one acre of ground. He alluded to the economic theories of Henry George as a means of financing his vision. No visual images were offered, instead tantalizing descriptions:

> Imagine spacious landscaped highways....Giant roads, themselves great architecture, pass public service stations, no longer eyesores, expanded to include all kinds of service and comfort. They unite and separate--separate and unite the series of diversified units, the farm units, the factory units, the roadside markets, the garden schools, the dwelling places (each on its acre of individually adorned and cultivated ground), the places for pleasure and leisure. All of these units so arranged and so integrated that each citizen of the future will have all forms of production, distribution, self-improvement, enjoyment, within a radius of a hundred and fifty miles of home now easily and speedily available by means of his car or his plane. This integral whole composes the great city that I see embracing all of this country--the Broadacre City of tomorrow.

During the winter of 1934-35, at the urging of Pittsburgh department store owner Edgar Kaufmann, Wright began to give visible form to his ideal city. With financial support from Kaufmann, he sketched a rough plan and directed his apprentices to construct a model. The result was large--more than twelve feet square, showing four square miles at a scale of one inch to 75 feet. The model portrayed a dispersed city with buildings spread evenly over a generally flat site, similar in its topography to the farmland surrounding Wright's native Wisconsin. The basic layout was orthogonal in nature, intentionally related to the larger pattern of the nation's surveyed section lines. Roads provided unifying pattern, ranging in scale from multi-level arterials to narrow cul-de-sacs, with movement throughout to be primarily by automobile. Within the area shown, 1,400 families were to be accommodated. Small farms predominated, their individual dwellings integrated with service structures and appealingly ordered garden plots, Next in order of importance were small factories, really an array of places for cottage industries, with dwellings on an upper level. For Wright these two building types formed the basic social units of Broadacre City, with each to be built on individually-owned parcels. Each family was to have not only one acre or more of land, but also at least one automobile. Rent was to

be abolished and new forms of "social credit" were to substitute for interest-bearing investments. Interspersed along roadways (and sometimes related to such natural features as meandering waterways) were various public amenities, including cathedral-like markets, cultural attractions, sports facilities, and even a few widely-spaced towers, some to serve as offices for county government, some to serve as apartments.

There was no downtown, no urban core. Wright claimed instead that the old city, as it began to be abandoned, would gradually disappear; hence, The Disappearing City. He never proposed that existing cities should be destroyed--indeed, he was drawn to the beauty of European cities and believed they might survive, for they embodied cultural patterns different from the American milieu he addressed. He simply argued that in America people were free to choose how and where they lived, that they were acquiring the means to move freely and quickly by automobile, that new means of electronic communication made close physical proximity less necessary, all with the result that people were opting against living in dense urban centers. He warned repeatedly of the consequences that would result if planning for this inevitable future did not occur: severe traffic congestion, needlessly wasted natural resources, vast areas of insensitively developed countryside. All this was far from obvious in the mid-1930s.

Beginning in 1935, the model of Broadacre City, related models illustrating selected components, and a descriptive site plan were exhibited in New York, Pittsburgh, Washington, and in smaller cities in Wisconsin and Michigan. Reportedly curious and even enthusiastic crowds came, but critical reaction was mixed. The urban writer Lewis Mumford was among those who first praised the concept, then later withdrew his endorsement. In 1938, the noted art historian Meyer Schapiro damned Wright's proposals as "perfectly consistent with physical and spiritual decay." In general, the entrenched attitudes that supported the sanctity of urban life were resistant to questioning. Understandably vexing to critics was the vague framework of economic and social reforms suggested by Wright as the means to bring his ideal into being. Particularly in the political climate of the later 1930s, Wright's notions in this regard

correctly struck many as radically socialistic.

Undeterred, Wright continued to develop his ideas. He published two booklets in 1940 and 1943 further outlining his ideas. In 1945 he expanded his 1932 tract, calling it When Democracy Builds, and illustrating it with views of the Broadacre models. Clearly Broadacre City was becoming central to his work. He discussed it repeatedly in his writings, and he continuously added to the model. It served as a focal point of his theories regarding an ideal society, providing opportunities for illustrating how his theories might be put into practice. His proposals suggest how comprehensively he thought in terms of prototypes, conceiving key designs not as novel reactions to specific and unrepeatable conditions, but as integrated components of the future.

More recently critics have found much to praise in Wright's schemes. Lionel March, in a series of talks broadcast over the BBC in 1970, explained how effectively Wright's proposals reflected progressive thought of the 1930s, and how politically connected to such thought Wright was through certain of his clients, notably the progressive economist, Owen D. Young, and Dean Malcolm Willey, of the University of Minnesota, who had reported positively on mobility and mass communications to President Herbert Hoover. Other writers credit Wright with prophesying the new form of settlement that has changed the face of America. In his books on urban utopias, Rutgers professor Robert Fishman shows how Wright came closer than anyone to imagining how dispersed settlements of today would actually look. Joel Garreau, analyzing urban patterns in his 1991 book, Edge City, said Wright "anticipated with stunning accuracy" many of the features of dispersed settlement now dominating American development.

Wright suggested in the 1930's that one's sense of community would no longer be dictated by location, but would instead be a matter of choice facilitated by individual mobility. Wright also foresaw that more people would choose to work at home when possible, or at least in locations remote from urban cores, and would no longer find it necessary to journey downtown. He predicted that office buildings in urban centers would gradually be abandoned. He suggested that they could be converted to

housing. As early as 1930 he had urged major retailers to plan suburban branches, pointing to patterns already underway in Los Angeles and Chicago. Yet his core ideas were resisted. Articles in Women's Wear Daily as late as 1953 ridiculed his recommendations. Shortly after World War II, he designed what would surely have been the nation's first drive-in bank. However, his client rejected the idea as beneath the dignity of banking.

By 1958, Wright was warning that passenger trains were obsolete and that people would travel long distances by plane and short distances by automobile. Rail lines, he felt, were too fixed in their routings to appeal to the dispersing population. He suggested railway right-of-ways be retained for gradual conversion to new rail systems that could facilitate an efficient movement of heavy freight. For personal transport, he urged reliance on smaller, more energy-efficient automobiles. By then he had become increasingly alarmed by insensitive suburban sprawl, and by the waste of natural resources, that occurred without intelligent, comprehensive planning.

Wright was not prescient on all points. Although plenty of people in America now live on plots of one acre or more, hardly anyone raises vegetables in the gardens that Wright thought fundamental to Broadacre City. Cities are still being built and continue to serve essential purposes. People still seek cultural attractions downtown, although they do drive to distant "automobile objectives" that Wright believed would be built in the countryside -- they are called theme parks. Traditional neighborhood developments, popularly termed "the new urbanism" propose alternate images of dense, pedestrian-oriented village clusters.

Beyond predicting key aspects our present situation, what lessons did Wright offer? The diagrammatic plans of Broadacre City were not strikingly original. They look, in fact, very much like aerial photographs of contemporary suburban Phoenix or Dallas. Wright's more or less accurate predictions of the future and his specific designs for Broadacre City matter less than his openness and accommodation of change. Sensing realities of future development, he stretched the programs of selected commissions in order to propose large-scaled architectural frameworks that would continue to

support social interaction and connectedness however much urban life might dissolve. That is, while he accepted and encouraged planning for decentralization, believing it expressive of consumer democracy, he also conceived building complexes that would re-connect a disintegrating society. He included images of these and other large projects in perspectives prepared for The Living City, the book so maligned at the time of its publication in 1958. For in Wright's mind he was already building Broadacre City, conceiving his actual commissions as corrective prototypes for the new urbanism then emerging. In these designs he offered workable, city-scaled images that remain without equal and that might still give structure to a suburbanized nation.

This paper is adapted from a longer article to be published by the Vitra Design Museum, Weil-am-Rhein, Germany, in conjunction with an exhibition of Frank Lloyd Wright's work that is scheduled to open in June, 1998.

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