

Decentralization as a Harmonious Architectural Reintegration of All Units into One Fabric: Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City

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Introduction

On 15 April 1935, the Industrial Arts Exposition “A Preview of Prosperity” was inaugurated at the Rockefeller Center in New York City, organized by the National Alliance of Art and Industry. The critic Stephen Alexander wrote in *The New Masses*, “The most important display in the exhibition is Frank Lloyd Wright’s set of scale models for his ‘Broadacre City, A New Community Plan,’ which is explained and illustrated in a ten-cent brochure that presents his ideas on architecture in general and community planning in particular. Briefly, Mr. Wright offers as a solution, not only for architecture but for everything that’s wrong with present-day society, *Decentralization*.” If Alexander disagreed with Frank Lloyd Wright on some points – such as the issue of mass production, which was rejected by Wright – he nonetheless recognized that, “As far as relevance to an immediate program is concerned, the significance of Mr. Wright’s project is that it points inexorably to the necessity for the removal of capitalism and the creation of a socialist society as the primary condition for the progressive development of architecture.”^① What did Alexander really mean by these words?

① Stephen Alexander, “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Utopia,” *The New Masses*, 18 June 1935, p.28.

“Broadacre City: A New Community Plan”

Reading the article “Broadacre City: A New Community Plan” published in *The Architectural Record*^② (a reprint of it was distributed at the exhibition) is essential to understanding the meaning of the model. As Wright states many times, understanding Broadacre City – the model and the concept – entails learning how to read between the lines, because “There is more between the lines still than appears in the lines.”^③

② Frank Lloyd Wright, “Broadacre City: A New Community Plan,” *The Architectural Record*, 77, April 1935, p.243–254.

③ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Mr. Wright Talks on Broadacre City to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,” in *Talliesin*, vol. 1, no. 1, “The New Frontier: Broadacre City,” Mineral Point, Democrat-Tribune Press, 1940, p.8.

④ Approximately 3,65 meters.

⑤ Approximately 1036 hectares.

The 12-foot by 12-foot^④ model of Broadacre City built for the New York exhibition shows four square miles (2,560 acres^⑤) of a “typical seat of government,” explains Wright, on which is settled a community of 1400 families, with an average of five people each, living according to the principles of Broadacres across four generations. Its inhabitants founded a real decentralised society, fully democratic – according to Wright – living in harmony with their environment.



Frank Lloyd Wright, Broadacre City Model.

Source: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives, The Museum of Modern Art / Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University (c) photo: Catherine Maumi, 2017

Each family lives in its own house built on its own homestead, and growing – if it wishes – fruits, vegetables, and so on. It is surrounded by small farms, small industries, and orchards. All services – which are public – can be reached very easily by foot: school, university, zoo, aquarium, museum, concert hall, and so on. Quality is the same for all buildings as well as for all elements of infrastructure, everything being designed by the county architect according to the principles of organic architecture.⁶ As Wright explained to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “It is true that landscape becomes architecture just as architecture becomes a kind of landscape. But both are integral with the ground and are an orchestration of form according to nature. Right in the midst of the future city we have fields of flowers and grain. Right in the farming section are the buildings of industry, culture, recreation and residence. Right in the midst of all is the market place, a perpetual fair. And anywhere in it all folk may live happily at work.”⁷ Such a decentralization of all activities means that it is no longer possible to dissociate the rural world from the urban one. “To reiterate,” Wright insists, “the basis of the whole is general decentralization as an applied principle and a harmonious architectural reintegration of all units into one fabric.”⁸ Wright hopes that his contemporaries would be the first generation of Usonians⁹ living as inhabitants of the Earth, conscious of its value. We can easily understand, reading Wright, that Broadacre City is more than an architectural project. It is primarily a political and economic one, aspects that have probably been obscured by the model built for the 1935 exhibition. Most of the public saw the model as something that should be built one day, whereas for Wright it was made to explain the principles of a new democratic life in America. It didn’t represent a final or perfect stage to be reproduced as such, but rather illustrated a “transition scheme” of living according

⁶ This article is based on the book Catherine Maumi, *Frank Lloyd Wright, Broadacre City, la nouvelle frontière*, Paris, Editions de la Villette, “Textes fondamentaux modernes,” 2015.

⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Mr. Wright Talks on Broadacre City to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,” in *op. cit.*, p.16.

⁸ Frank Lloyd Wright, “A New Success Ideal,” *Taliesin*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1940, *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁹ Wright started to use this term in the early 1920s to refer to the inhabitants of the United States. Usonia refers to the United States of North America finally becoming a democratic nation as imagined by the Founding fathers of the new republic, Thomas Jefferson being the main reference for Wright, along with Thomas Paine.

principles that will be continued in the future. We can read some of them on the exhibition panels that surrounded the models, such as the one titled “Living in America” on which was written: “No private ownership of public needs, no landlord and tenant, no ‘housing’ [...] no traffic problem [...] no slum,” and so forth. As Alexander noted, the exhibition and the article were entitled “Broadacre City: A New Community Plan,” and the photographs chosen to illustrate the publication are important testaments to Broadacre’s ideal: they show the entire community of the Taliesin Fellowship¹⁰ – men and women – working together on the model, confirming that Broadacre City is the result of collective work, of a long process of settlement involving the entire population “from generation to generation,”¹¹ united by the same ideal. The temporal dimension of Broadacre City refers to the cycles of life and nature, as should organic architecture according to Wright. The inhabitants of Broadacre City do their best to combat the selfishness of the many societies that care mostly about their own comfort and wellbeing, rarely taking into account the long-term needs of their children.

¹⁰ The school of architecture established by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1932.

¹¹ Cf. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, “Book Three: Freedom,” New York, Longmans, Green and Company, 1932.

Decentralization in order to fight *metropolization*

This ideal of Broadacre City belongs to its time and can only be understood if we keep in mind the context in which it is set. The 1930s were marked by the world economic crisis that followed the October 1929 stock-market crash. From an architectural point of view, several American architects and critics were looking toward Europe for solutions to the crucial issue of housing for the poorest part of the population. Wright could not agree with the European idea of social housing or “minimum housing.” Furthermore, his concern was not solely with the urban world. He also paid great attention to the evolution of the rural milieu, from the ruination of so many small farmers since the 1920s to the destruction of entire regions due to the expansion of intensive agriculture. The main problem, according to him, was the development of great cities, the metropolises: “Cities are great mouths. New York the greatest mouth in the world,”¹² he asserts. The powerful magnet of the metropolis had not only attracted people, activities, power, money, but it had also totally upset agricultural production in order to feed itself, creating the main problems faced by the American countryside, and major ecological disasters such as the Dust Bowl. *Metropolization* not only devastated natural resources and landscapes but also permanently erased local cultures and lifestyles.

¹² Frank Lloyd Wright, “The City” in *Modern Architecture, Being the Kahn Lectures for 1930*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1931, p.110.

Decentralization is considered by Wright to be a means of fighting against the monopoly of the metropolis and to provide a more balanced development that respects human and natural resources. “I do not wish to ‘disperse’ any city; decentralization is not dispersal – that is wrong ... it is reintegration,” he asserts. “We should soon have in authority developed minds that comprehend the modern

sense of spaciousness so characteristic of today now that scientific mechanization is being made available to everyone, rich or poor. We should soon be able to realize that the door of this cage – this thing we call the great city – is at last – open. The door is open and we can fly.”¹³ This new freedom was possible thanks to the new “slaves” – automobiles, means of communication (telephone, radio, television) – but also energy supplies (electricity).

¹³ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Organic Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy*, London, Lund Humphries & Co., 1939, pp.35 –36, 12.

¹⁴ A *section* is a cadastral unit in the United States measuring one mile by one mile (1,6 km by 1,6 km), or a surface area of 640 acres (259 hectares); the model illustrated a piece of land two miles per side, or an area of 2,560 acres (1036 hectares).

¹⁵ Catherine Maumi, *Thomas Jefferson et le projet du Nouveau Monde*, Paris, Editions de la Villette, 2007.

The model of Broadacre City represents four *sections*¹⁴ of U.S. territory. The reference to the *section* is important: it recalls Thomas Jefferson’s ideal of American democracy. The National Land Survey grid¹⁵ was conceived by Jefferson to anchor democracy in the ground of the United States and to prevent the concentration of inhabitants, money, and power in any place. It was supposed to thwart the creation of large estates owned by rich and powerful landowners, as well as land speculation. The grid of the sections was conceived with the aim that every inhabitant of the United States had the right to own his or her parcel of land, a homestead, on the condition that he or she lives there and maintains it. It is at the root of the ideal, or myth, of the middle landscape or pastoral landscape.

Therefore, the grid, particularly visible on the model of Broadacre City, is there as a reminder of the inherent right of every man, woman, and child to own his or her lot: a homestead of one acre. A large family could claim more, as some farms. An important point regarding the question of ownership has been overlooked by those historians and critics who analyzed the project. As a matter of fact, Wright explained to Mies van der Rohe during the latter’s visit to Taliesin, “Broadacre City is the entire country and predicated up on the basis that every man woman and child in America is entitled to ‘own’ an acre of ground so long as they live on it or use it.”¹⁶ Thus, the land must be lived on, cultivated and maintained. Ownership is dependent on the use of the land – a use “consistently with the common good,”¹⁷ insists Wright. He is convinced that every inhabitant of Broadacre City would take great care of their property not only for what it could bring them (fruits, vegetables, etc.) but also for what it would represent: their attachment to the ground, to a specific culture. “The ground itself is the true sociological basis, and, when rightly interpreted the salt and savor of all good life,”¹⁸ maintains Wright.

¹⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Mr. Wright Talks on Broadacre City to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,” in *op. cit.*, p.10.

¹⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography. Book Six: Broadacre City*, Spring Green, Taliesin, 1943, p.23.

¹⁸ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Broadacres at the Wisconsin State Historical Library Madison 1937,” *Taliesin*, vol.1, no.1, 1940, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

Thus, in Broadacre City, each family is able – if it wishes – to produce its own food, and so to eat healthy and fresh products at a lower cost. The major feature of Broadacre City is the small farm, explains Wright. Small, so that it does not adopt the methods of intensive agriculture, and respects its environment. Most foods and goods are produced locally by small farms, small factories, small workshops, and are sold at the local cooperative market, supplied daily with fresh products. Everything is done in Broadacre City to counter speculation and

¹⁹ Frank Lloyd Wright, "Broadacre City: A New Community Plan," *op. cit.*, p.245.

prevent the "middle-man" from enriching himself and speculating on the work of others. "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,"¹⁹ explains Wright. The cooperative economy is essential to Wright. It is the only way, according to him, to fight against all forms of speculation, to prevent the destruction of natural and human resources, and to preserve natural landscapes and ecosystems. He isn't against progress – as some followers of agrarian or back-to-the-land movements were at the time – but the idea of progress, according to him, is incompatible with the destruction of environment for the sole purpose of achieving short-term benefits. In the same way, he opposes the standardization of the world caused by the expansion of the metropolis and its monopoly.

Just as Broadacre City favors the cooperative economy, all services – including the various infrastructures – are public, and are accessible to the entire population. They are all managed by the community or the government: schools, colleges, and universities, but also cultural places such as theaters, concert halls, museums, zoos, aquariums, and so on. These are all fairly distributed across the territory so that the whole population has access to the same level of education and culture. Schools are located at the center of the model, symbolizing the heart of the community – or of the neighborhood, as defined by Clarence Perry a few years earlier. The constant proximity to nature means that children are trained to observe it and taught to respect it from a very early age. All Broadacres children can walk to school, swimming pool, zoo, sports field, and so on, using specially designed paths that offer protection against cars. The decentralization of each of these institutions reaffirmed access to education and culture as a fundamental right of every American and not just the privileged few, namely those who live in big cities. The same is true of access to theaters, concert halls, museums and so on. Moreover, radio, telephone, and television also contributed to the democratization of culture and knowledge: concerts, cultural and educational programs, and conferences could now reach straight into the home.

This unique "fabric" made up of urban and rural activities also meant there was finally an end in sight to the artificial partitioning between city and countryside, between the inhabitants of the city and those of the countryside. All of them benefited equally from the same services wherever they were on the land, whether in terms of education, culture, or health. This was also true for employment opportunities that were equal for all. "Here the agrarian, the industrialist, the artist, the scientist, and the philosopher meet on the ground itself. It may not be logical. But is the rising sun logical? It is natural and that is better,"²⁰ states Wright.

²⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright, "Mr. Wright talks on Broadacre City to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe," *op. cit.*, p.10.

Broadacre City: An organic capitalism fighting against the “slum solution”

Broadacre City, argues Wright, is based on “genuine capitalism”: “Capitalism made organic since it is broadly based upon the ground and the individual upon the ground. [...] Let us call it ‘Organic Capitalism’ [...]. And that is the promise of true democracy.”²¹ As were many American intellectuals at that time, Wright was looking for a third way between capitalism and communism. Many of his friends were progressive professors teaching at the University of Wisconsin, such as the economist John Commons. In Chicago, Wright was part of the intellectual circle around Hull House and Jane Addams, where he met the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen and the philosopher John Dewey. Like his friend John Dewey,²² Wright was struggling against *Big Business* and strongly supporting the “small.” Furthermore he insisted on the fact that “organic capitalism” is based on “the individual upon the ground.” In his opinion, nothing is more important than individual freedom. The new way of life adopted by Broadacre City’s inhabitants is supposed to develop the “creative individuality” of each one of them. This is one of Broadacre City’s main challenges: to create an environment in which free and equal individuals could flourish, as should be the case in any democratic society. Wright responds to Alexander’s article with these words: “But Broadacres has proposed a life as anti-capitalistic as it is, in this sense, anti-Communitic. It is anti-socialistic, too, so far as current socialism goes. [...] It had nothing to sell. It was a preliminary study for the decentralization that to me seems necessary to human freedom. [...] There must be some way of life wherein there is no antagonism between the more developed and the less developed – or even between the rich and poor if each had a fair chance to be what you call ‘rich and poor.’”²³

Individuality and democracy are inconsistent with the idea of housing, according to Wright. His refusal to consider social classes and class struggle and housing for the poorest is considered by many reviewers, and even Wright’s friends, as the main failure of Broadacre City. His aversion to housing was justified by two main considerations: first, housing is anti-democratic. It means building distinctive houses intended for a certain part of the population. Wright was against the idea of the “minimal house” then being promoted by some architects and architectural journals, as well as the policies on social housing implemented by the New Deal. In Broadacre City, he insisted, “there is no distinction between much and little, more and less. Quality is in all, for all, alike. There is nothing poor or mean anywhere in Broadacres.”²⁴ Second, Wright considered housing to be a European remedy imported into the United States. Once again, European architects were trying to colonize the United States with their architecture – as they previously did with the architecture of the Beaux-Arts School – and were succeeding thanks to the support of the U. S. government and his American colleagues. He therefore opposed this new colonization, as he did at the beginning of the twentieth century.

²¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Mr. Wright talks on Broadacre City to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,” *op. cit.*, p.14.

²² Dewey published *Liberalism and Social Action* in 1935, the same year that the Broadacre City model was presented.

²³ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Freedom Based on Form,” *The New Masses*, 23 July 1935, p.23.

²⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright, “A New Success Ideal,” in *Tallesin*, vol. 1, no. 1, *op. cit.*, p.6.

The correspondence between Wright and Lewis Mumford on the subject is very instructive. They first argued over the question in 1932, regarding the upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (“Modern Architecture: International Exhibition”²⁵) viewed by Wright as the “European show” or “internationalist propaganda.” In 1932, Wright associated mass housing with “International Style,” and he disagreed with both. As he argued in the essay “Of Thee I Sing,” published in order to be distributed at the MoMA exhibition, “Mass-machine production needs a conscience but needs no aesthetic formula as a short cut to any style. It is itself a deadly formula. [...] A creative architecture for America can only mean an architecture for the individual. The community interest in these United States is not communism or communistic as the internationalists’ formula for a ‘style’ presents itself. [...] We are sickened by capitalistic centralization but not so sick, I believe, that we need confess impotence by embracing a communistic exterior discipline in architecture to kill finally what spontaneous life we have left in the circumstances.”²⁶ Mumford agreed with Wright regarding the question of the “International Style”; however, he was also among those who were looking toward European experiments in terms of housing, as is clear from his “Part III. Housing,” written for the MoMA catalog *Modern Architecture*.²⁷ It was an unavoidable step, according to Mumford. “The Great City is doomed: I agree with you there,” he answers to Wright, “but life in communities will go on; and true individualism has nothing to fear from that growth. We must at least have the advantages of communism before we have anything humanly richer and more varied than what is implied in communism.”²⁸ The next dispute on this subject is caused by Mumford’s review of the Broadacre City exhibition, published in *The New Yorker*. The criticism is overall positive except on one point: Broadacres neglects the cause of the most vulnerable part of the population by refusing the idea of mass housing. Mumford explains, “Broadacre City, as Wright has conceived it, is both a generous dream and a rational plan, and in both respects it adds valuable elements that have been left out of a great many current projects for the replanning of our cities and countrysides. [...] The weakest point in Broadacre City is the design of the minimal house. Wright, who hates the very word ‘housing,’ has created a design for single-family houses for the lower-income groups which compares very unfavorably, I think, with the European and American ‘housing’ he detests. He should have permitted himself to dream more generously.”²⁹ Wright immediately answered Mumford’s review, in a letter written on 27 April 1935. He states, “I don’t know what you can mean by preferring the German tenement and slum solution as preferable to the Broadacre’s minimum house and maximum of space.”³⁰

John Gloag reported in January 1935, in *The Architect’s Journal*, parts of an interview he conducted with Wright few days earlier. He recorded that Wright “called the present phase of America’s civilization ‘Money Melodrama’, and [that

²⁵ The exhibition was held from 10 February until 23 March 1932.

²⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Of Thee I Sing,” *Shelter*, vol. 2, no. 3, April 1932, pp.10–11.

²⁷ Lewis Mumford, “Part III. Housing,” *Modern Architecture*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1932, pp.179–189.

²⁸ Letter from Lewis Mumford to Frank Lloyd Wright, 6 February 1932, in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Robert Wojtowicz, *Frank Lloyd Wright & Lewis Mumford. Thirty years of Correspondence*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2001, p.141.

²⁹ Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline: Mr. Wright’s City – Downtown Dignity,” *The New Yorker*, 27 April 1935, re-edited in Robert Wojtowicz (ed.), *Sidewalk Critic: Lewis Mumford’s Writings on New York*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2000, p.131.

³⁰ In Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Robert Wojtowicz, *op. cit.*, p.164.

④ John Gloag, "Design in America. VII. Frank Lloyd Wright," *The Architect's Journal*, vol. 81, 3 January, 1935, p.16.

⑤ Frank Lloyd Wright, "An architect speaking for culture" (1936), in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (ed.) *Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings*, vol. 3: 1931–1939, New York, Rizzoli / The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1993, p.194.

he] was not convinced that any of the Federal housing projects were sound, because they were based on old-fashioned ideas of accommodation and not inspired by plans for living comfortably and happily in the machine age. 'They're going to build these cages, these barracks,' he said 'and they will find that the birds have flown. I don't believe in regimentation.'"^④ The solution, for Wright, lay in organic architecture, and the Usonian house. The first one, the Malcolm A. Willey House, was built in 1934 in Minneapolis (Minnesota), followed by the Herbert Jacobs House in 1937 in Madison (Wisconsin). As Wright has stated many times, "Organic architecture has declared war upon the box and the box man and upon housing à la mode,"^⑤ because "no house is a machine for living. [...] More freedom, better quality – more colorful in effect so far as individuality goes. I tell you *that* is of the true nature of true American Democracy," he asserts in his address "An Architect speaking for culture" given to the Woman's Congress held in Chicago in February 1936.

Conclusion

Even though the Broadacre City exhibition had been a huge success – first in New York and then in Madison, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. – the principles it promoted remained marginal. Some families approached Wright to ask him to design their home or a masterplan for their future community – such as the Cooperative Homestead Development (Detroit, 1942), the Galesburg Country Homes Association, or the Parkwyn Village House, both in Kalamazoo (Michigan, 1947) – but most of the projects failed because Wright's clients couldn't obtain any bank loans. The exception is the Usonia Homes Cooperative (New York), or Usonia II, on which construction started in 1947. John Sergeant estimates that twenty-six Usonian houses were built in 1948. Thirty-one didn't obtain the needed bank loan, because they were too "modern."

Twenty years later, in June 1954, Oskar Stonorov gave a talk at the Annual Meeting in Cambridge "Education for Housing Design – A Dim View." In his talk, he related a recent experience he had regarding a newly completed housing project. He explained, "I took our great friend, Frank Lloyd Wright, through it the other day and he looked at it and he said, 'All right, I think it's a pretty good what you've done here, but the whole thing stinks nevertheless.'" The follow-up to Stonorov's talk could provide an initial conclusion. In 1954, he became convinced that they must end the "business of building housing projects," and he added a "recommendation to the various schools that it is about time to discuss and take issue with Wright's concept of Broadacre City. It seems to me in many cases it is so much closer to the aspiration of the average American family as a political reality today when we are talking about housing, than any other broad concept of urbanization that has appeared on our horizon recently. If there is an

American dream to which pragmatism must apply itself, it is that idea of the home of your own on a generous lot; that is the only way in which we can combat all the negative aspects of the dormitory suburban town which represents the next five years of housing activity in this country.”⁶³

⁶³ Oskar Stonorov, “Education for Housing Design: A Dim View,” panel discussion at the Annual Meeting in Cambridge, MA, 12–13 June, 1954, in *Journal of Architectural Education* (1947–1974), vol. 10, no. 1, Spring 1955, p.34.

⁶⁴ William H. Whyte Jr., *The Exploding Metropolis*, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957.

⁶⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City*, New York, Horizon Press, 1958.

⁶⁶ A. C. Spector, *The Exurbanites*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955.

However, in 1954, sprawl was already destroying thousands of square meters of agricultural land and Broadacre City was seen as the “Exploding Metropolis”⁶⁴ then being condemned by most architects, landscape architects, urban planners, and so on. Nobody could any longer understand the idea of local production and cooperative markets in the era of the supermarket and mass consumption. And nobody could comprehend that Broadacre City was imagined in order to counter sprawl, fight against the standardization of the suburban landscape, and prevent the ruin of the environment. When the aerial perspectives of *The Living City*⁶⁵ were published in 1958, they were seen as echoes of the everyday landscape of most suburban dwellers or *Exurbanites*.⁶⁶ And there is no certainty that the appendix of *The Living City*, “From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Essay on FARMING,” a reminder of the very meaning of Broadacre City, received any attention from the readers.