

INTRODUCTION

The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright must strike many as an oxymoron. When thinking of Wright and the city, one usually thinks of Broadacre City, the plan the architect produced between 1929 and 1935 proposing the disappearance of urban and suburban settlement patterns as they were known. In fact, his first book-length presentation of the project, published in 1932, was titled *The Disappearing City*. Paying no attention to existing cities and avoiding contact with the already urbanized fabric of the country, Broadacre City proposed a continent-wide, decentralized network of continuous, low-density rural communities consisting of predominantly single-family houses and small farms all linked to one another by the automobile, the highway, and new forms of telecommunication. Broadacre City substantiates the stereotypical image of Wright the antiurbanist, whether it be the American frontiersman, the Jeffersonian gentleman farmer, the back-to-nature transcendentalist, or the legatee of Frederick Law Olmsted's organic picturesqueness.

Broadacre City grew out of a dissatisfaction with the congestion of the modern metropolis and embodied a utopianism similar to that which drove many European proposals for new forms of urbanism of the preceding decade. Indeed, Broadacre City was explicitly projected by Wright as an American type of "ruralism" to counter Le Corbusier's Machine Age "urbanism."¹ But it represents only one aspect of Wright's rich and complex output in urban design and was, in effect, more a reaction to events than a direct outgrowth of the architect's own previous work. It should therefore not be taken as characteristic of his thinking on the subject of urbanism nor as the culmination of his work in that area. This study documents, analyzes, and interprets Wright's major achievements in the field of urban design both before and after Broadacre City. It provides, for the first time, an integrated and coherent overview of that production and, in the process, reveals Wright's thinking to be less eccentric and less idiosyncratic than previously thought, though no less radical or consequential.

This book is divided into three parts. The first and third, though unequal in length, cover equal periods of time; the middle section, devoted to the work of the 1920s and its outcome in Broadacre City, marks the transition from a city based on one mode of transportation to that based on another. The first part deals with Wright's designs for the inner suburbs of Chicago done between the mid-1890s and the mid-1910s, at the very moment when, as historian Kenneth T. Jackson has remarked,

"a 'new city,' aided by the development of the streetcar "and encompassing an area triple the territory of the older walking city, had clearly emerged as the center of the American urban society."² This was also precisely when Chicago's downtown commercial Loop was being developed and the issue of city planning as such, including both the old city centers and the new residential suburbs, was first receiving professional attention and formal direction in Europe and America.

Following an analysis of Wright's first attempts, in the 1920s, to tackle the challenges faced by the city center at the very dawn of the automobile age and the singular response offered by his Broadacre City project, the third part looks at Wright's designs for Madison, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, and Baghdad dating from the late 1930s through the late 1950s. These large-scale designs for civic, cultural, and residential/commercial centers reflect, and in some cases predict, the renewal of interest worldwide in the "core" of the city that began in the immediate post-World War II era and gave rise to the new concept of urban design developed in large part as a response to problems posed by redevelopment. The three stages in Wright's urbanism embody the general evolution from turn-of-the-century city and town planning practices to the visionary thinking of the interwar years to the ameliorative, problem-solving efforts of the postwar era.

Wright's engagement with urban design issues began within three years of starting his own architectural practice. In 1896 he was commissioned to design an entire block of twenty-two single-family houses in the Chicago suburb of Ridgeland, later annexed to Oak Park. His solution, the subject of chapter 1, was to create a central garden, entered from one of the short sides, that replaced the traditional alley and thus transformed a service element into a communal amenity. Equally important was the fact that he embraced the underlying grid of Chicago's street system as the basis for the plan, a methodology that would remain critical to his work until the later 1930s. For this reason the origin and meaning of the grid in American land-use ideology and practice will be examined in contrast to the later development of the picturesque approach exemplified by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's Riverside of 1868–69. It will certainly come as a surprise to many that Wright neither valued the Riverside plan nor embraced the Olmsted-Vaux aesthetic.

More radical than the Roberts block project was the plan

Wright presented in the February 1901 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* as the precondition and framework for his revolutionary Prairie House. The concept he called the Quadruple Block Plan, to be discussed in chapter 2, envisioned a complete restructuring of the city's system of land subdivision for the purpose of establishing a new basis for the relationship between community and privacy. Blocks were to be square rather than rectangular and to contain only four houses, each occupying the center of a corner lot created by the quartering of the square. The pinwheeling plan of each house extended into low garden walls connecting one house to the next and enclosing a communal garden housing a shared stable in the center.

In 1903, the same client who commissioned the 1896 project asked Wright to revisit the by then Oak Park site; and this time Wright adapted the Quadruple Block Plan to it. Chapter 3 examines the result as well as the numerous variants Wright developed from it for different block configurations in different areas in and around Oak Park. Though never realized, these projects showed how a modern conception of free-flowing space could be applied to the abstraction of the grid to create an overall sense of dynamic order. Its modernity will be contrasted to the prevailing concepts of the City Beautiful and Garden City that were contemporary with it.

The second Roberts block plan formed the ground for the final project in this series that Wright developed in 1912–13 when the City Club of Chicago, which was holding an international housing competition, asked him to offer a model quarter section of a residential neighborhood of the city containing buildings for commercial, government, and cultural uses as well. Chapter 4 reveals how, in contrast to the picturesque, self-contained village-like Garden City designs of many of the competitors, and the City Beautiful-inspired plans of others, Wright's decentered, nonhierarchical, open-ended plan based on the grid established a powerful continuity between center city and suburban edge wherein the latter appeared as merely the extension, rather than the opposite, of the former.

Following the passage in New York in 1916 of the first ordinance limiting building heights, building uses, and area coverage on a differential basis, zoning became the preferred tool of American city planners. Wright's Skyscraper Regulation project of 1926 for the Loop, to be discussed in chapter 5, took into account both the new zoning regulations of Chicago (1923) and the modern concept of a multilevel city to offer a template for decongestion shared with many other architects

and planners of the period. Notable among these were Le Corbusier, Eliel Saarinen, Harvey Wiley Corbett, and Ludwig Hilberseimer. Broadacre City, the subject of chapter 6, can be seen as an expansion of the City Club design into the rural network of the Jeffersonian grid. More importantly, it will be analyzed as an argument for decentralization as the ideal solution to the problem of congestion. And just as the sequential 1896–1913 designs are analyzed in relation to their contemporary European and American counterparts, Broadacre City is compared and contrasted with the other utopian schemes to which it was consciously addressed. Wright's emphasis on the textual as opposed to visual articulation of the design will serve to highlight its utopianism and place it in proper perspective in the architect's career.

The discussion of Broadacre City as a reaction to the automobile's impact on the city serves to highlight and provide a background for the final phase of Wright's engagement with the city, which began almost immediately after the appearance of Broadacre City and focused directly on the revitalization of the downtown core. Chapter 7 takes up the first of these projects, a civic center for Madison that was designed in 1938 and went through a number of revisions during Wright's lifetime before being posthumously realized in much reduced and altered form in the 1990s. Making use of air rights and modern reinforced concrete construction, Wright projected a theater-like semicircular platform over the railroad tracks along the lakeshore and into the lake itself to define an open-air public forum. Spaces for governmental, cultural, and recreational facilities as well as transportation and parking were accommodated in a series of decks suspended beneath the upper terrace.

This new megastructural concept, combining building, landscape, transportation, and parking in a single, multi-functional symbolic whole, determined the form of both the Crystal City residential/commercial complex for Washington, D.C., of 1940 and the Pittsburgh Point Park Civic Center of 1947. The former, the subject of chapter 8, projected a mixed-use "city within the city" containing twenty-five hotel and apartment towers plus a shopping and entertainment center along with what would have been the largest indoor parking garage of the time. It was, among other things, the architect's modernist response to Rockefeller Center.

The Pittsburgh project, discussed in chapter 9, was situated at the city's historic point of origin. In its first iteration, it took the form of a fifteen-story ziggurat-coliseum, containing

a convention hall, theaters, restaurants, and even an astro-dome within the atrium space of its encircling roadway and parking decks. In the scaled-back second version, it became a cable-stayed bridge rivaling in symbolic presence and purpose the contemporary Gateway Arch for St. Louis designed by Eero Saarinen. Both Wright schemes created the very type of modern public gathering place as a space of spectacle that Sigfried Giedion was then espousing in his call for a “New Monumentality.”³

The 1957 project for a cultural center for Baghdad, the subject of chapter 10, was part of an extraordinary effort by the Iraqi government to modernize the country’s capital city through a campaign of commissions awarded to an international contingent of “star architects,” perhaps the first of its kind, including, aside from Wright, Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Gio Ponti. Wright’s contribution, which incorporated an opera house, a university, museums, crafts shops, restaurants, and a zoo, was the only one with an urbanistic intention. His cultural center, contemporary with that of New York’s Lincoln Center, was planned to anchor the new development of West Baghdad. It was placed in a pendant position to the historic core of the city so as to preserve it intact while opening up the old city into a dynamic relationship of past and present, of commercial downtown and residential fringe.

When viewed as a whole, Wright’s urban designs show the architect to have been both an innovative precursor as well as a creative participant in the world of ideas that helped shape the modern metropolis. Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century with his radical thoughts on how to expand the traditional city as part of a newly developing suburban ring and ending with a series of remarkable designs for reinvigorating the city center after it had been threatened by the automobile, to which he gave pride of place in Broadacre City, Wright emerges as an urbanist who offers new, always fascinating, and invariably important perspectives on the history of modernism as it attempted to accommodate contemporary patterns of living under conditions often at odds with them.

Throughout the book, Wright’s designs will be related to those of his contemporaries. Le Corbusier, Corbett, and Eliel Saarinen, already mentioned, are all well-known figures in the history of twentieth-century urbanism. Others, less celebrated and rarely discussed in books on Wright, will appear, often on repeated occasions and in very different contexts. They include such important figures in the fields of city planning and

urban design as Frederic Delano, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Harland Bartholomew, Ladislav Segoe, and John Nolen. In this way, Wright’s work will be integrated into the larger picture of twentieth-century urbanism as a whole. And by being discussed in this larger context, the traditional aspects of Wright’s urbanism will be revealed just as its radical and inventive ones will be thrown into sharper relief.

Let me add just a few things about scope and methodology before concluding with some remarks on terminology. As a book about Wright’s urbanism, it will not examine his designs for individual buildings planned for the city, such as skyscrapers, churches, apartment houses, or cultural institutions, except when larger urban considerations, like zoning, were critical to the design process and speak to the historical significance of the issue.⁴ Because of the very nature of the urban design enterprise, which generally undertakes to create schemas or models for future development, more often than not remaining on paper, this book is about projects rather than buildings. In fact, other than the project for Madison, none of the examples discussed ever made their way into built form.

What we will study, therefore, are drawings, models, and texts, some of the first being so rich and stunning in their plasticity as to make one almost forget they exist only on paper. To further compensate for the lack of materiality but, even more, to help clarify the origin and significance of a project, much space will be devoted to establishing and explaining the physical, historical, social, and programmatic contexts. Where an individual building has a limited sphere of action and relations, an urban design, whether for a section or neighborhood of a city or for the city as a whole, must take into account an extremely wide range of factors and, often, an equally wide range of disciplinary approaches. For this reason, at least one-third and sometimes nearly one-half of a chapter will be devoted to the context within which Wright had to work, or planned to transform.

Almost all the words generally used to describe the planning and designing of parts or the entirety of a city, or the professionals involved, are modern. They date to the later nineteenth century at the earliest. The term “urbanization” is thought to have been coined around 1867 by Ildefonso Cerdà, the Spanish engineer responsible for the plan of modern Barcelona, the so-called *Ensanche* (1858–60).⁵ But urbanization is not the same thing as urbanism, just as modernization

is not the same as modernism. The term “urbanism,” meaning “the study of the physical needs of city dwellers,” did not make its appearance until 1889 according to the eleventh edition of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, and “urbanist,” meaning “a specialist in city planning,” not until 1930. The online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000), which defines “urbanism” as “urban life or character” as well as “urban development and planning,” dates its first use in English to the 1880s and its connection to planning to 1929, the latter as an importation from the French. Le Corbusier’s book *Urbanisme*, published in 1925, certainly represents a signal event in modern architecture’s embrace of the term. Le Corbusier later characterized the “urbanist” as “nothing other than an architect [who] . . . organizes architectural spaces, fixes the location and use of built containers, [and] connects all things in time and space by a network of circulation.”⁶

The American term “city planning,” referring to “the drawing up of an organized arrangement (as of streets, parks, and business and residential areas) of a city,” according to *Merriam-Webster’s*, first came into use in 1900. As the practice devolved in the later 1920s and 1930s into a statistics-driven, economics-based analytical tool geared toward policy decisions, the more inclusive concept of urbanism as a spatial-formal response to the “physical needs of city dwellers,” as well as their spiritual and cultural ones, came into use not only as a modern substitute for the discredited City Beautiful idea of “civic design,” but also as a delimitation of the concept of urbanism to mean “that part of city planning which deals with the physical form of the city” at any scale.⁷ Although most city planners and/or urban designers, from Daniel Burnham and Raymond Unwin to Wright, Le Corbusier, and Nolen, looked to certain precedents for their work in earlier periods, it is quite clear they thought they were engaged in something new and modern.

There is no commonly accepted term, however, for such a thing as “suburban designer” or “suburbanism,” nor does one often hear the phrase “suburban planner.” This underscores the fact, as most definitions of the modern suburb have maintained, that the suburb was considered an integral part of the city until the proliferation of the automobile in the 1950s and 1960s created the critical degree of economic and social change that separated it to all intents and purposes from the central business district. *Merriam-Webster’s* gives as its first definition of the suburb “an outlying part of a city or town”

and, as its second, “a smaller community adjacent to or within commuting distance of a city.” For historians of the suburb like Kenneth Jackson, the railroad, streetcar, and even early automobile suburbs were part of a “new” definition of the city itself “as an urban-rural continuum.”⁸ For Robert Fishman, whose book *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (1987) remains one of the most trenchant on the subject, the suburb and the city are interdependent, the one incapable of existing without the other. Together they create the modern urban dialectic of living in one place and working in another — the one built-up, densely organized, almost entirely man-made; the other spread out, low-lying, close to nature.⁹

Although the suburb and the city center have much in common, they are also, by intention, at odds with one another in many important respects. At the turn of the twentieth century, the period of suburbia that will interest us most here, people were very aware of this dichotomy. Where living in a suburb prior to the late eighteenth century had generally been a sign of poverty, the reverse was true by the end of the following one. In February 1903, to take just one relevant example, the Oak Park newspaper *Oak Leaves* published part of a sermon by the local Reverend William E. Barton in which he began by saying, “The suburb is created by the city, and is a reaction from it. It is an effect and a protest. . . . In the old world, men work in the fields by day and sleep at night in their walled cities; we . . . reverse this, working in the city by day, and turning it over at night to the hotel population, the policemen and the firemen.” “But,” he continued, “the suburb must not desert the city, nor believe it wholly bad. . . . We are out in the fresh air, thank God; we must bring fresh air to the city.”¹⁰ Progressive architects and city planners beginning at the turn of the century looked for ways to bring the advantages of open space and greenery to the city center just as they tried to provide amenities, usually associated with an urban way of life, to the suburb. Throughout his long career, Frank Lloyd Wright was one of those who worked most imaginatively at asserting the ideal of an urban-suburban dialectic and proposing ways to ensure it as a continuum.