

Design of Cities
The Radiant City and Broadacre

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- Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier developed differing ideas of the modern city.
- Like Howard, they were reacting to the growth and problems of the industrial city. However, by the 1920s, industrialization had evolved into modernization—a time of rapid change where new processes and materials made new things, anything, possible. So for Wright and Le Corbusier, dealing with the modern industrial city would be more than just a reaction, but also a vision toward the future of cities.
- Wright's Broadacre City: Broadacre City was a reaction against the high density, over populated, and polluted industrial city. Broadacre City was a means of returning to nature—a decentralizing of the large central city—in favor of a spacious urban region that blended country and city. Peter Hall explains:
 - The conception shares many philosophical affinities with the ideas of the Regional Planning Association of America, and some of these with Ebenezer Howard. There is the same rejection of the big city – specifically, New York – as a cancer, a 'fibrous tumour'; the same populist antipathy to finance capitol, and landlordism; the same anarchist rejection of big government; the same reliance on the liberating effects of new technologies; the same belief in the homesteading principal and the return to the land; there is even that distinctively American transcendentalism that derives from writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (Hall 1998: 312)

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- Broadacre City is truly American in its perspective, and Hall's link to transcendentalism also evokes the return to nature theme of the Anglo-Evangelicals, their ideals of family, home, and the picturesque that influenced American suburbanization (Jackson, 1985; Fishman, 1987). Hall continues:
 - Broadacre, of course, would be a city of individuals. Its houses would be designed: 'not only in harmony with greenery and ground but intimate with the pattern of the personal life of the individual on the ground. No two homes, no two gardens, none of the farm units on one – to two, three – to ten acres or more; no two farmsteads or factory buildings need be alike...' (Hall 314, 1988)
 - 'Given electrification, distances are all but eliminated as far as communication goes... Given the steamship, airship, and the automobile, our human sphere of movement immeasurably widens by many mechanical modes, by wheel or air.' Now, 'not only thought but speech and movement are volatile: the telegraph, telephone, mobilization, radio. Soon television and safe flight.' Modern mobility was available even for the poor man, 'By means of a bus or a model A Ford.' (Hall 313, 1988)
- In Broadacre we see the American ideals of liberty and individual freedoms, but also the influences of modern times, technology, travel, and movement.

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- Hall continues:
 - Out of these technological ingredients, Wright constructed what he called his 'Usonian Vision': 'Imagine, now spacious, well-landscaped highways, grade crossings eliminated by a new kind of integrated by-passing or over- or under-passing all traffic in cultivated or living areas... Giant roads, themselves great architecture, pass public service stations no longer eyesores but expanded as good architecture to include all kinds of roadside service for the traveler, charm and comfort throughout. These great roads unite and separate and unite, in endless series of diversified units passing by farm units, roadside markets, garden schools, dwelling places, each on its acres individually adorned and cultivated ground, developed homes all places for pleasure in work or leisure. And imagine man-units so arranged that every citizen as he chooses may have all forms of production, distribution, self-improvement, enjoyment within the radius of, say ten to twenty miles of his own home. And speedily available by means of his private car or public conveyance. This integrated distribution of living related to ground composes the city that I see embracing this country. This would be the Broadacre City of tomorrow that is the nation. Democracy realized.' (Hall, 1988: 313-14)

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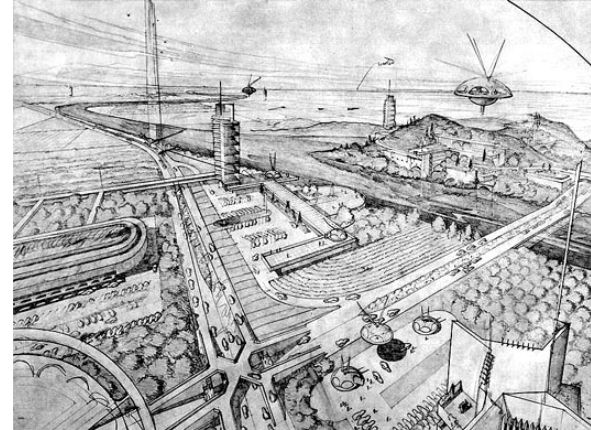
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- The irony of Wright's Broadacre City is that "No one liked it. For his pains, he was attacked by almost everyone: for naivety, for architectural determinism, for encouraging suburbanization, for wasteful use of resources, for lack of urbanity, above all for being insufficiently collective in his philosophy" (Hall, 1988: 314-15).
- "Yet Broadacre City is significant for the nature of its vision. It probably could not have occurred in just that way, when it did, in any other country. It seized the American future, and embodied it in a vision. The remarkable fact is just how visionary it proved to be." (Hall, 315, 1988)
- Wright's solution to the existing circumstances of the large city is a grand vision of the Broadacre City, a city of the future, based on individual freedom, democracy, technology, decentralization and a return to nature.
- Is this a middle-class suburban ideology?
- Today, eighty-plus years later, his vision has been realized in the sprawling metropolitan regions of America.
- The unaccepted vision of the modern city realized.

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- Le Corbusier, an influential modern architect and part of the European Bauhaus movement, developed his Radiant City plan as a reaction and alternative to the Haussmann Plan—the remaking of central Paris.
- The Radiant City, using Hall's term, was The City of Towers. Essentially, Le Corbusier believed that the central city must be made less dense, through densification:
 - At the center were skyscrapers of the Plan Voisin which, Corbusier emphasized, were intended as offices for the elite *cadres*: industrialists, scientists, and artists (including, presumably, architects and planners); 24 of these towers would provide for between 400,000 and 600,000 top people's jobs at 1,200 to the acre, with 95 percent of the ground area left open. Outside this zone, the residential areas would be of two types: six-story luxury apartments for these same *cadres*, designed on the so-called step-back principle (in rows) with 85 percent of the ground space left open, and more modest accommodation for the workers, built around courtyards, on a uniform gridiron of streets, with 48 percent left open (Hall, 1988: 224).

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- Le Corbusier's Radiant City Plan is not solely about architecture and urban form, it is about class and social structure—a separation of the wealthy and the poor into different areas of the city. Le Corbusier is often blamed for the evils of failed American policies and planning. Hall explains:
 - The evil that Le Corbusier did lives after him; the good is perhaps interred with his books, which are seldom read for the simple reason that most are almost unreadable. But the effort should be made, because their impact on twentieth-century city planning has been almost incalculably great: obscurity is no barrier to communication, at least of a sort. Ideas, forged in the Parisian intelligentsia of the 1920s, came to be applied to planning of working-class housing in Sheffield and St. Louis, and hundreds of other cities too, in the 1950s and 1960s; the results were at best questionable, at worst catastrophic. (Hall, 1988: 219)
 - The irony then was that the Corbusian city of towers was perfectly satisfactory for the middle-class inhabitants who he had imagined living their gracious, elegant, cosmopolitan lives in *La Ville contemporaine*. It might even work for the solid, tough, traditional tenement dwellers of Glasgow, for who the transition from a Gorbals rear-end slum to the twentieth floor seemed like the ascent to paradise. But, for a welfare mother born in a Georgia shack and dumped in St. Louis or Detroit with a brood of uncontrollable children, it provide an urban disaster of the first magnitude. The sin of Corbusier and the Corbusians thus lay not in their designs, but in the mindless arrogance whereby they were imposed on people who could take them and could never, given a modicum of thought, even have been expected to take them" (Hall, 1988: 260-1).

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- We must question the connection between Le Corbusier's vision and ideals of the Radiant City and American planning policy related to housing and transportation. Hall and others never make a direct link or connection between the two.
- Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City plan was harshly criticized and virtually ignored, even though it was realized in our modern day sprawling metropolises.
- Le Corbusier and his Radiant City plan—which was never built/realized in any meaningful way in North America—is vilified for the destruction of the central-city.
- Ironically, Le Corbusier was opposed to the sprawling American metropolis (1935). He explains in *When the Cathedrals Were White* (1947: 80):
 - Nevertheless, in a surreptitious way, the tumor of the great American waste fastens itself upon this magic station. Grand Central is the head of the gigantic suburbs of Connecticut Luxurious trains, agreeable servants of exodus. Leave! It is proof of an urban existence which has been upset, turned upside down. In the course of my talks in the USA, my thought concerned itself more and more with the great evil of the USA: the excessive extension of urban regions, the prodigious—and mad—networks of railways, of roads; a whole people in eternal and sterile movement; the hurry, the agitation, failure of action. Hundreds of thousands of houses pushing nature into the distance and spoiling it; conduits for water, gas, electricity, telephone, which go to each house! A gigantic expense, an immense burden on the nation, a bewildering social deficit...!"

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- This passage questions the idea that America was listening to Le Corbusier, influenced by what he was saying, and heeding his advice. If they were, the Broadacre City vision of Wright, which was ignored and criticized never would have been realized in our modern sprawling metropolises.
- So what was it about The Broadacre City, which as Hall explains, "is significant for the nature of its vision. It probably could not have occurred in just that way, when it did, in any other country. It seized the American future, and embodied it in a vision. The remarkable fact is just how visionary it proved to be" (Hall, 1988: 315) that no one liked it and yet it was realized.
 - Broadacre City was top-down planning—Wright was telling Americans how they should and would live in the future. While the form and function of Broadacre City came to be realized as the postmodern suburban form that most Americans live in, the act of telling them how to live was very un-American.
 - Broadacre City being realized points to emergence, the self-organizing (Johnson 2001) nature of our urban development patterns. Our modern sprawling suburban form is the manifestation of our American democracy—the right to freedom, land ownership, limited government intervention, and the freedom to choose how and where to live—provided you have the economic means to make such a choice.

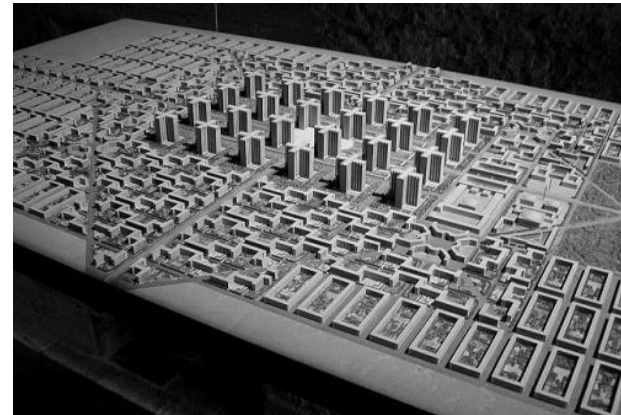
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- Le Corbusier and the Radiant City raises the question, why is Le Corbusier and his failed Radiant City that was never achieved vilified for the destruction of our central-cities?
 - Is it easier to blame Le Corbusier—the scapegoat for modern designs used in urban renewal schemes—for the demolition and decline of urban centers, than to accept the reality of our own self-organizing behavior—in the context of our American democracy—which has allowed for the emergence of our postmodern sprawling metropolitan regions that are dominated by suburban spaces and our suburban way of life—a form, a function, and a lifestyle that most Americans choose, and more would choose if they had the economic means to afford it?
 - Is it possible that the very view provided to middle-class and wealthy, from the Le Corbusier inspired office towers of our central business districts and reflections in their windows of poorly designed (in both form and function) government tower blocks of public housing projects that cause us to vilify Le Corbusier—while we live out our American Broadacre City dream?

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