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History of City Planning: 19th and 20th Centuries

13 April 2011

20th Century Urban Architecture: Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier

In order to both compare and contrast the urban utopias of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, it is important to look at both architects' backgrounds. Frank Lloyd Wright, living in a time slightly before that of Le Corbusier, was born in 1867 on his grandfather's farm near Spring Green, Wisconsin (*Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, 97). Wright divided his childhood between winters with the Wright family in Massachusetts, and summers with the Lloyd Joneses in the Valley; the contrasting experiences were of great importance to his future plan of Broadacre City, in which family became a vital center to both work and leisure (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 100). His parents' marriage grew increasingly more troublesome as his mother devoted all her time to Wright, encouraging him to attend the University of Wisconsin in 1885. The University, however, had no architecture program; against his mother's wishes, he left the school of engineering at the young age of 19, sold his father's last books, and made the move to Chicago (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 101).

It was in Chicago that Wright met his "Lieber Meister," Louis Sullivan, under whom he studied and gained the title of "the chosen heir to his [Sullivan's] 'Architecture of Democracy'" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 104). Sullivan and his partner Adler were commissioned to build the Chicago Auditorium, which was to become the world's largest opera house and therefore a great symbol of the increasingly developing city. Wright's time spent as an apprentice to Sullivan had a profound impact on his ideas later found in Broadacre City:

"Perhaps the most exciting implication of the Architecture of Democracy for him was Sullivan's suggestion that the well-being of the public depended upon the architect; his creative mind must embody the democratic idea in visible, functional form if it was ever to become real to the American people" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 105). Another influential individual in Wright's earlier manhood was Jane Addams, who was one of the first to prompt him to "question whether industrialization was the necessary enemy of art and democracy" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 106). Under both Sullivan's "Art of Democracy" and Jane Addams's encouragement, Wright began to realize that only a thorough confrontation and understanding of the machine could develop such a democracy of the present; "My God is machinery," he told Charles Ashbee in 1901 (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 108).

With a thorough understanding of Wright's early childhood and influences, we now turn to Le Corbusier in Europe. Born in 1887 in La Chaux-de-Fonds under the name Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, he was almost immediately seen as a talented watchmaker. Unlike Wright, "Charles-Édouard's childhood was secure and uneventful," his father president of a mountain-climbing club and his mother an artist (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 166). Le Corbusier attended the School of Applied Art, in which he studied under Charles L'Eplattenier. In 1902, he won a prize for his watchmaking at the Turin International Exposition, and L'Eplattenier confidently announced, "You shall become an architect" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 167). It is perhaps ironic that, in his younger years, Le Corbusier was highly affected by the ideas that "the artist must live in the worlds of nature and culture," an idea emphasized by L'Eplattenier, which troubled the young man greatly upon his encounter with the great cities of Vienna and Paris. Like Wright, the perhaps naïve Le Corbusier felt the need to experience the city himself; he left the School of Applied Art to travel first to Italy, then to Tuscany, Budapest,

Vienna, and finally to Paris in 1908. "Jeanneret was declaring his independence" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 169). Similar to Sullivan's effect on the developing ideas of Wright, Le Corbusier was very much affected by Auguste Perret, whose greatest influence was possibly his "belief that architecture must be based on a firm knowledge of materials and mathematics, and the hope that it was a science which would necessarily advance as technology had done" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 170-171).

It is here that we begin to notice the striking similarities between Wright and Le Corbusier: both architects, under the study of great teachers, were forced to realize the perhaps positive (or inevitable) consequences of the coming Machine Age. Interestingly enough, however, we see that Le Corbusier encountered possibly the greater internal struggle – “seeking a synthesis - a means to realize the values of the old arts with the technology of the future” – and wrote a series of letters to L'Eplattenier in 1908 expressing this battle with his opposing ideals (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 171).

While Wright was personally affected by his troubles at home, namely his parents' unsuccessful marriage, as well as by the Depression; Le Corbusier was troubled not by his family life, but instead by the profound effects of the Industrial Revolution. Wright's confrontation with the miserable and unhappy lives of his parents led him to formulate the idea of the Broadacre City in which "the family, if it is to survive, needs a place of its own, an opportunity to work, an inviolable sanctuary, its own land" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 100). Alternatively for Le Corbusier, "La Chaux-de-Fonds [1909-1916] was the scene of his struggle to create 'for himself'" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 173). In 1910, he joined L'Eplattenier's "United Arts Workshop." He made frequent trips to Germany, during which he experienced the "horrible hammering machine" of the Machine Age, which was capable of mass-producing the

once-unique creative works of the craftsman, pre-Industrial Age. Upon seeing the effects of such a Machine Age in Germany, Le Corbusier "had seen enough of technology to be convinced that it was inevitable," and realized that "the future must be an art of the Machine Age or it would not exist at all" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 174-175). It is here where the great utopian architects meet once again: at a realization of the inevitable nature of the Machine Age. It is also here, however, where Wright and Le Corbusier drastically separate in their solutions to such an Age: the fine distinction between the Organic Style of Wright and the International Style of Le Corbusier.

Wright first proclaimed his new ideals of the Machine Age in 1901 in his Hull House lecture. He confidently proclaimed, "The creative artist must dominate and transform this 'greatest of machines, the city' and give it 'A SOUL'" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 109). Almost immediately, we begin to see Wright's inclination towards a natural, organic solution to the Industrial Age. One of his first well-known projects, Oak Park (*Figure 1*), accurately depicts his "commitment to the single-family house as the only permissible shelter for a free society" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 110). In Oak Park, Wright emphasizes the importance of individual home ownership. He "rejects the Queen Anne style" with its luxurious pretentious, and instead focuses on the open plan of the home, centered on the hearth: symbol of a secure family (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 111). Moreover, Wright's style begins to exemplify the importance of the architect as the ultimate planner in not only the design of the city but down to the very details of the furniture and wardrobes of his clients. In 1907, however, there was a drastic change in Wright's lifestyle, as he fell in love with another woman, Mamah Borthwick Cheney. Because his wife refused to divorce him, Wright saw his only way out in abandoning Oak Park, returning to the Valley of the Lloyd Joneses in 1911.

Soon after, however, Wright entered the most difficult years of his life, during which he was criticized by many politicians in the United States, who labeled him as both "a jaded bohemian and irresponsible destroyer of families" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 119). It was also during this time, that Wright was able to "recapture" himself in his isolation, finding himself in his plan for the Broadacre City.

Broadacre City (*Figure 2*) came at an opportune and ideal time, following the Great Depression and the stock-market crash of 1929. In 1932, Wright wrote about *The Disappearing City*, the solution to which was ultimately decentralization. Wright scorned upon the "large, centralized organizations which were in cities" and "was convinced that the big city was as obsolete as the horse-and-carriage, and therefore destined to be replaced by something better" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 123). Broadacre City perfectly demonstrates the very ideals of Wright: a juxtaposition between his individualistic Jeffersonian morals and his acceptance of technology as a means of organized dispersion.

Broadacre City outlined three major inventions which Wright saw as the means to his decentralized city: the automobile, the telegraph, and standardized machine-shop production, also labeled "scientific discovery"; consequently, he outlined three major "inherent rights of any man": form of social credit, land ownership, and ideas (*The City Reader*, 332). Broadacre City developed its structure on the grounds of this outline. His city would allow for very minor government involvement (public utilities, patrol, banking), instead making the architect the ultimate planner and leader. The architect would be in charge of both land allotment and improvement wherever he saw fit. The architect would be elected by his county, thereby initiating his own "organic style" upon said county. There would be no repetition and no class distinction: "In the buildings of Broadacres no distinction exists between much and little, more

and less" (*The City Reader*, 333). Each family would be allotted a minimum of one acre of land and more if needed. The farm would be the "most attractive unit of the city" (*The City Reader*, 333). Wright's decentralized city would essentially be in a constant state of evolution, with no formulated and premeditated plan; instead, the city would be built according to appropriate conditions. As he states in his plan, the typical countryside would be developed "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" (*The City Reader*, 334).

This similar idea is shown in his idea of housing, in which he characterizes the houses into "one-car, two-car, three-car, and five-car" houses; the house grows in size, as does the family. As he states, "...the design [of Broadacre City] has been built by the Taliesin Fellowship, built carefully not as a finality in any sense but as an interpretation of the changes inevitable to our growth as a people and a nation" (*The City Reader*, 335-6). He further remarks that the Broadacres house "should grow as the trees around the man himself grow" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 130). Accurately put, "The idea of the Planner preceded the Plan" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 109).

According to Wright, his weight on the complete fusion of work and family life would solve the problem of unemployment. The typical individual would not specialize in a certain expertise; he could provide for him and his family in the most self-sustainable sense. The only significant business center would be the Roadside Market, a "celebration of the fruits of the community's labor" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 134).

Wright's biggest fear was centralization, and he did anything and everything to avoid it at all costs. While he realized the need for community life, he was careful not to concentrate power

in any specific institution. The Community Center contained a golf track, zoo, aquarium, art galleries, and theaters, but "claimed no power over those who enjoyed it" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 136). Offices were certainly not the focus of the community, located in the outer Garden City.

Wright's faith in the individual can certainly be seen as a flaw in his plan for Broadacre City. "The individuality that Wright prized so highly was dependent on the citizens' mastery of technology and their understanding of the wisdom of the past" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 137). However, Wright continually lost faith in his citizens' capabilities and saw the architect as the ultimate city planner. He had no formulated, mathematical plan, and turned to his definitive county architect as "the most powerful man in Broadacre City" and "guardian of the principles of Organic Architecture" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 142-143). His constant search for "prophetic leadership" seems almost contradictory to his faith in the citizens and fear of administration. While Wright confidently stated that "organic growth" was "slow growth" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 146) and "America needs no help to build Broadacre City; it will build itself, haphazard" (*Frank Lloyd Wright and the Disappearing City 1929-63*, 190), "in private he was less certain" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 148). His uncertainty in his own ideals was further amplified by the coming war, and he eventually began to accept America as an increasingly urbanized nation (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 151). At the Hull House lecture of 1944, he stated, "The 'Machine' has become more and more the Engine of War" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 151).

In 1949, Wright published the book "Genius and the Mobocracy," in which he expressed his great despair towards an America "helplessly drifting toward a bureaucracy so top-heavy that the bureaucracy of Soviet Russia will seem honest and innocent by comparison" (*Urban Utopias*

of the Twentieth Century, 153). While his only truly realized designs were illustrated in the 1935 "Fallingwater" house (*Figure 3*) and the Imperial Hotel in Japan, his ideas had a great impact on the future developments of not only American cities, but those outside the continent as well.

With an in depth look into Wright and his Broadacre City, it is important to study Le Corbusier's opposing International Style, expressed most notably in his Contemporary City and Radiant City. While Wright rested his faith in his individual citizens, Le Corbusier felt that "the forms appropriate to the Machine Age" could only be accomplished "by an elite of trained designers" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 176). While still a part of L'Eplattenier's "United Arts Workshop," Le Corbusier, upon his observations of both France and Germany in the Machine Age, proposed a 1912 New Section which "must educate designers who could apply the most advanced French artistic ideas to the most advanced German technology" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 176). Unlike Wright, Le Corbusier was confident that the worker would pride himself in being part of a mass-produced factory. However, the New Section was abruptly ended in 1914, and E'Plattenier blamed Le Corbusier for the program's failure. This proved to be a tremendous lesson for the architect, who never again turned to the "people" and instead looked to the larger organizations for industrial order.

In 1914, Le Corbusier designed the Dom-ino house (*Figure 4*), "a plan for mass-manufactured houses based on a reinforced concrete frame" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 178). Le Corbusier's housing was greatly influenced by the Garden City movement, characteristic of raised floors and roofs, with open space below. The significance of the Dom-ino design was seen in its "aesthetic breakthrough" and "seeming limitation" which could "become the basis of a new beauty" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 179-180).

In 1916, Le Corbusier left La Chaux-de-Fonds for France. Paris quickly became his

obsession. He realized that the machine was capable of destroying a city if not controlled. In 1920, he became part of a journal, *L'esprit nouveau*, along fellow purist painter Amédée Ozenfant. It was here that he came to the full realization of "a classical art for the new industrial era," announcing "A GREAT EPOCH HAS BEGUN" and celebrating the use of automobiles, airplanes, and grain elevators (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 185).

In 1922, Le Corbusier's plan for the Contemporary City was developed as an exhibition on urbanism for the Salon d'Automne. The design was to become the polar opposite of Wright's Broadacre City. The Contemporary City would be meticulously planned; "The organic city, the city that emerged slowly as the result of many individual decisions, was a thing of the past" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 190). The City would be characterized by symmetrical grids, superhighways forming central axes, intersecting at the exact center – the Central Station. The City would be classified by function, unlike Wright's design. The purpose of his design was to "increase open spaces and diminish the distances to be covered... the city must be constructed vertically" (*The City Reader*, 324). Le Corbusier's "plan for the city" outlined four major components: de-congestion, augmenting density, increasing transportation, and increasing park and open spaces (*The City Reader*, 324). While both the Contemporary City and Broadacre City epitomized the futuristic use of transportation, it appears that Le Corbusier relied less on simply the automobile; his designs show superhighways, subways, roads, pedestrian and bicycle paths. Most distinctive is Le Corbusier's Central Terminal, where "speed becomes the only constant" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 191). The Central Terminal was first surrounded by twenty-four glass-and-steel skyscrapers, each six stories high, each of which could hold 500-800 thousand employees. Interestingly, the towers would cover only 15% of the ground, leaving 85% to gardens and parks; this confirmed Le Corbusier's purpose of increasing density while also

increasing open space, perhaps an ironic suggestion. Moreover, Le Corbusier incorporated a vast amount of strictly planned-out, public amenities, including gardens, parks, avenues, cafes, restaurants, luxury shops, theaters, halls, and parking spaces (*The City Reader*, 327).

Unlike Wright's houses, Le Corbusier's were entirely based upon hierarchy (most likely influenced by France's class division of the 1920s). The elite were housed in luxurious apartments within the city, which he called "Villa-Apartment Blocks," in which there would be 120 inhabitants housed per acre – a stark comparison to Wright's one-acre-per-individual ideal (*The City Reader*, 327). Each unit contained a "hanging garden," and the roof contained a gymnasium. There would be 24-hour maid service, private laundry, a gourmet kitchen staff, and personal waiters (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 197). All of the above would create a great separation – instead of Wright's synthesis – of work and leisure; this was precisely Le Corbusier's aim in his Contemporary City. The architect's main solution to the "labor problem" was to clearly separate work and leisure to the point where both would be perfectly balanced; "In the Contemporary City the dehumanizing effects of eight hours of work would be overcome by eight hours of productive leisure" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 201). Moreover, the individual did not own his own land like he did in Wright's Broadacre City; he was privileged to be a part – a unit – of a greater, organized whole. Administration, practically absent from Broadacre City, instead *liberated* man in the Contemporary City.

Like Wright's Broadacre City, the Contemporary City was never fully realized. Le Corbusier, like his American counterpart, needed a planner for his city. However, Le Corbusier was perhaps even more direct in the fact that he insisted upon attacking the existing city of Paris "head-on" in order to establish his design. In his Radiant City Plan Voisin (*Figure 5*), he proposed the demolition of the Right Bank business district in the very heart of Paris in order to

clear for and build eighteen skyscrapers, surrounded by apartments and gardens; the plan was naturally rejected and Le Corbusier was quickly labeled a "misdirected formalist who understood nothing of the real sources of urban beauty and urban vitality" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 208). Nonetheless, the architect, strongly influenced by Haussmann and deeply disturbed by the painstakingly sluggish planning of Paris infrastructure, stayed confident in his idea that "urban surgery" was the only means by which the city could be realized (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 210).

As Le Corbusier's search for support for the Contemporary City seemed less and less promising, the Plan Voisin "destroyed his faith in capitalism" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 213). He was further discouraged when, in 1927, he was accused of "fostering alien Germanic styles of art," which ultimately led to his inability to participate in the designing of the Palace of the League of Nations (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 216). It was here that Le Corbusier was forced to turn to his last resort: the "ghost of Colbert" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 219). The next decades of his life were spent searching for an architect and planner for his Contemporary City. In fact, quite arguably, "he shaped the doctrines to fit the requirements of urban planning" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 221), a characteristic never found in Wright's plan for Broadacre City. In Russia in 1929, Le Corbusier greatly tried to sway Soviet leaders, but failed to gain their support. In 1930, Le Corbusier officially claimed his well-known name and turned to political activism, giving birth to his ideas of the Radiant City.

The Radiant City is an interesting later development of the Contemporary City, but equally opposed to Broadacre City. With Le Corbusier's distrust in capitalism, the Radiant City turned to absolute authority: "every aspect of productive life is administered from above according one plan" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 227). Replacing the original

hierarchical class organization of the Contemporary City, the Radiant City instead stressed a hierarchy of *administration*, creating a distinct formula of a pyramid of workers, regional councils, national councils, and an ultimate national plan. Le Corbusier deemed "the plan necessary because the Machine Age requires conscious control" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 228).

Interestingly, while the Radiant City stressed the hierarchy of absolute administration, the "realm of leisure and self-fulfillment" became "radically libertarian," perhaps influenced by his 1935 visit to New York, in which he witnessed the luxuries of both Central Park and Lake Shore Drive, juxtaposed with the "poor people" going home "without sky, sun, greenery" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 230).

In response to his changing view of equality among all citizens, he turned to the theory of *Existenzminimum*, characterized in his Unité design for housing. The Unité was representative of his Dom-Inos of 1914, "a masterful expression of scale, complexity, and sophistication" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 231). Le Corbusier, instead of his grand, lavish apartments of the Contemporary City, turned to *Existenzminimum*, which emphasized building according to bare minimum requirements. Moreover, the new housing style encouraged sharing, and therefore, was still very unlike Wright's individual, one-acre houses. Le Corbusier still accentuated the separation of work and family life.

Now with a new Radiant City design, Le Corbusier was even more desperately in search of his "ghost of Colbert." In the 1930s, the architect became so desperate as to exclaim, "France needs a father. It doesn't matter who" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 237). This idea of a prophet became extremely representative of the "l'horreur du face-à-face" concept – a never-ending inclination to turn to authority (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 239).

Once again, Le Corbusier changed his anti-Fascist opinions in the hopes of gaining support from Mussolini in his 1934 visit to Italy, only to be rejected. In Vichy, Le Corbusier spent "eighteen months of fruitless attempts to persuade authority" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 245). While he was appointed to a board of housing and building in 1941, he was taken off the commission in the very same year – his "decree of death" (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 250). His plans for Algiers in the 1930s also proved to be in vain.

Finally, in 1947, Le Corbusier came to the realization that "the great transformation he had wished for would have to occur slowly, if at all" – perhaps more in the fashion of Wright's Broadacre City. "The dreams of my twenties will be realized in three hundred years," he stated (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 253). Conceivably Le Corbusier's realizations of his designs in his lifetime were only seen in his 1945 Unité for Marseilles (*Figure 6*) and his 1950 design for India's new capital Chandigarh. While both were sketches based on the Radiant City concept, they were simply unsuitable; the Unité de Marseilles was "so costly that it discouraged the emulation Le Corbusier had wished to promote" and Chandigarh was simply not a dense and futuristic enough city for his density-specific design (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 254).

Wright's answer to the Machine Age was decentralization, whereas Le Corbusier's answer was centralization. While "Wright was the prophet of middle-class urban flight and automobile-based sprawl suburbia", Le Corbusier "embraced bureaucracy and the command-and-control functions of political and economic elites everywhere" (*Modernism and Early Urban Planning*, 309). Wright's experiences with both his parents' and his own failed marriages led him to put an extreme burden on the family life, whereas Le Corbusier's first-hand view of the industrialization in La Chaux-de-Fonds caused him to seek out the machine to use geometrical,

repetitive, and mathematical means in order to “build in the open: both within the city and around it” (*The City Reader*, 328). These contrasting ideas are seen distinctively in the housing techniques employed by both architects, but furthermore in their streets, transportation, and administrative designs.

There are many faults in both Wright’s Broadacre City and Le Corbusier’s Contemporary and Radiant Cities. While Schapiro attacks Wright by stating that “he avoids the question of class and power” (*Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 191), Mumford “rejected Le Corbusier’s glorification of the centralized metropolis (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 258). Wright rested [perhaps too much of] his faith in the individual citizen, but was also in search of a prophet or architect-planner; “like the serpent eating its own tail, Wright’s individual is always threatening to consume himself” (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 157-158). In addition, because he was so determined in radically decentralizing the city, he refused to see the actual benefits of the urbanized city and its ability to help develop the individual. Le Corbusier, on the other hand, is mostly criticized for his “Victorian love of bigness for its own sake” (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 258). In his confident and unrelenting character, “Le Corbusier makes no provision for legitimate opposition to the plan” (*Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century*, 261). Perhaps this proves that both architects were too absorbed in the idea that their counterparts would share their vast imaginations – a problem seen in too many urban utopias of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.