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Broadacre City (1935-1958) Is a Work of Art (Cubist Utopian Perhaps?)

Roger A. Lohmann

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What is Broadacre City?

• “…an interpretation [by the fellows of the Taliesin Fellowship] of the changes inevitable to our growth as a people and a nation.” (Frank Lloyd Wright, 1935)
What is my project?

• Does his belief in Jeffersonian democracy have a visual symbolic form in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright?
• Specifically, is there a recognizable “third sector” of common* spaces in Broadacre City?
• *Common space is neither fully public (for everyone) nor purely private but shared by “commons” (groups, clubs & associations).
Zaha Hadid’s Challenge

• In her 2004 Pritzker Award acceptance speech, Zaha Hadid gave these issues more explicit form:
• “I believe that the complexities and the dynamism of contemporary life cannot be cast into the simple platonic forms provided by the classical canon, nor does the modern style afford enough means of articulation. We have to deal with social diagrams that are more complex and layered when compared with the social programs of the early modern period.”
  – What are the modern social diagrams and social programs evident in the Broadacre City project of Frank Lloyd Wright?

• “My work therefore has been concerned with the expansion of the compositional repertoire available to urbanists and designers to cope with this increase in complexity. This includes the attempt to organize and express dynamic processes within a spatial and tectonic construct.”
  – What dynamic processes, spatial constructs and tectonic constructs are evident in Broadacre City?

• All of the present answers to these questions are preliminary.
Frank Lloyd Wright & Fellows with Model

Most published photos of Broadacre City are black and white and reportorial. They understate the depth of color in the model.
Broadacres Is Many Things. . .

- A project to keep Taliesin Fellows occupied during depression
- A utopian concept/urban design
- A vision of a Jeffersonian rural world under modern, urban conditions
- A marketing tool for “the Wright brand”
- A recycling of numerous unbuilt projects
- . . . A large (12’ x 12’ 8”) work of modern art (collage? sculpture?)
Is It A Prediction, Plan, or Description of Emerging Trends?

• “Broadacre City rationalized, coordinated, and repackaged the American order of things. Wright simply made existing land settlement and land ownership patterns coherent and visible.”
A River Ran Through It

The overall model is very low density and designed for 2,283 people living in 761 dwellings in 4 square miles. It is a marked contrast to Le Corbusier’s *Le Ville Radieuse* – a city intended for three million residents!
Rural/Urban Mix

The model contained farms like these and factories as well as a market, county building, churches, schools and other urban amenities.
Drawing and Model

Broadacre City drawings (left) name a large number of functional areas (little farms, small industry, arena, lake, etc.) Four sections, A-D; a section is a square mile
Better in Color

Note secondary roads and driveways to individualized one-acre plots. Imagine a Wright-designed house at the end of each driveway!
Later Drawings

Different versions of the Broadacre City model were produced in drawings between 1935 and 1958. Some of the later ones wandered into science fiction, like the “personal flying machine” shown at lower right.
“Crucial Flaws”

• Critics have most often viewed Broadacre as an urban plan (not a work of art) and largely as a failure. E.g.,

• “The two major flaws in the [Broadacre City] model are 1) the lack of any explicit recognition of cultural diversity and 2) the minimal evidence of ecological variation.”
  – Frederick Steiner, 1995, p. 132.
Is There ‘Common Space’ There?

• Common spaces are “economic, political and social spaces outside markets, households and governments in which associative communities create and reproduce social worlds.” (Lohmann, 1992)
Explicit Mentions of “Common Spaces” of Broadacre City by Wright:

- Athletic clubs
- Music garden
- Baths & physical culture
- Schools
- “Universal worship, columbarium, nine sectarian temples surrounding a central edifice devoted to universal worship”
- Neighborhood guest houses
- Scientific and agricultural research labs
- Arboretum
- Zoo
- Aquarium
- Sanitarium
- Clinics (medical? Or all human services?)
- School for small children (“day care centers”?)
- Crafts center
- Educational center (not in original 1934 model)
What’s Missing? (1)

Several of Wright’s other works dealt with common spaces that are missing from the Broadacre Model. E.g.:

• Churches (Unity Temple, Danforth Chapel, Annie Pfeiffer Chapel)
• Museums (Guggenheim)
• Auditoriums/ theaters (Baghdad project)
• Campuses (Florida Southern & Jiyu Gakuen Girls' School)
• Plan for Greater Baghdad (cultural center, opera house and university)
What’s Missing? (2)

Some spaces Wright never designed:

• Religious diversity
• Social services
• Age-segregated (senior citizen) facilities
• Club houses/association rooms
What Might We Add?

- Electronic Networks
  - Internet of Things
  - Electronic communications
- Peace (D & D) Centers (Northern Ireland)
- People Movers
- Parking Garages
Conclusions

• Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City is, quite rightly dismissed as a plausible plan for urban America.
  – Wright was not a good urban planner
  – However, Wright was an artist who saw & illustrated emerging trends in city space.

• Broadacre City is an extended work of art.
  – Wright is a sculptor of space at all scales.
  – A four-square mile bas relief?

• His other work fits with the overall vision for Broadacre City, even though it never got onto his original 12’x12’ ‘canvas’.