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Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City as a manifestation of American values of freedom and democracy

Abstract. Architecture of a particular country is one of the most visible manifestations of its cultural heritage. When approaching this subject matter in reference to United States of America, mentioning Frank Lloyd Wright is inevitable, as he is often referred to as “the greatest American architect of all time”. Frank Lloyd Wright’s vision of Broadacre City was a project that consumed the greater part of the architect’s life. The article investigates the technical, structural and ideological aspects of the Broadacre City concept. The main objective of this article is to establish whether Broadacre City was designed in the spirit of the most fundamental American values of freedom and democracy and how those values were manifested in the project itself.

Key words: Frank Lloyd Wright, Broadacre City, American values, freedom, democracy.

Introduction

According to various sources devoted to Frank Lloyd Wright’s life and work, he was recognized as “the greatest American architect of all time” by the American Institute of Architects in 1991 (Web 1). This event only confirmed his expectations, as Wright himself once claimed: “(...) not only do I fully intend to be the greatest architect who has yet lived, but fully intend to be the greatest architect who will ever live. Yes, I intend to be the greatest architect of all time” (as quoted in Weesjes, 2011:1). He is believed to be the creator of almost 1000 structures during his seventy-year-long

career, some 400 of which were actually built (Weesjes, 2011:2). His architectural genius was additionally appreciated by the *Architectural Record* by putting twelve constructions of Frank Lloyd Wright's on the list of the one hundred most important buildings of the 20th century.

Frank Lloyd Wright's work significantly influenced the architectural world of America, contributing to the development of various styles and trends in national, as well as European architecture. He devoted his entire life to architectonics, designing various buildings, and realizing commissions. Nevertheless, it was the Broadacre City idea that focused the greater part of Wright's attention, especially in his later years. This multilayered, utopian vision of future America was repeatedly revisited and revised by its originator. Notwithstanding the fact that it is not as easily and commonly known as, for instance, the Fallingwater House, the Broadacre City should be placed among the most significant works of the architect, since its features are a complete embodiment of his beliefs and ideals. Wright was an advocate of, inter alia, the promulgation of American values of freedom and democracy which translated into many aspects of Broadacres. The main intention of the following article is to determine whether Broadacre City should be referred to as a display of American ideals of freedom and democracy.

The Broadacre City

The idea of the Broadacre City was first revealed to the public in the book *The Disappearing City* (New York: Payson, 1932) written by Frank Lloyd Wright, and was revised twice in such publications as *When Democracy Builds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945) and *The Living City* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958) (Brown, 2007:1). It was developed late in Wright's life (*The Disappearing City* was published when Frank Lloyd Wright was 65 years old) and worked on until his death. The Broadacre City, or as Wright often referred to it, Broadacres, attracted a wider audience in April 1935, during an industrial arts exposition held in Rockefeller Center, New York. Frank Lloyd Wright exhibited there a detailed twelve by twelve foot scale model of his vision of the ideal city in the form of a three-dimensional "cross section of a whole civilization" (Fishman, 1982:91). A picture of the mockup is presented below.

The Broadacre City was Frank Lloyd Wright's utopian development concept created together with its socio-political scheme. Wright believed that his vision would inevitably and naturally emerge in the architectural fabric of the United States, replace traditional urban establishments and give way to the creation of synthesized urban and rural developments.

Once built, one self-sufficient unit of the Broadacre City would cover an area of four square miles (1,040 hectares) and would accommodate approximately 5,000 people in 1,400 homes (Johnson, 1995:140). Each individual would be guaranteed a minimum of one acre of land, free of charge. An area of such size would allow people to have a garden, or even a small farm next to the house, so to enable self-sufficiency (Nelson, 1995:341). Due to its structure, the Broadacre City is a perfect example of the incorporation of an urban settlement (a settlement with all the amenities and facilities of the city) into a rural landscape (Nelson, 1995:341).



Picture 1. Photograph of the Broadacre City scale model

Source: on the basis of Web 2

The concept of the structural design of the Broadacre City was based on two already existing and operating inventions:

- The motor car, which led to the general mobility of Americans
- The radio, telephone, and telegraph that enabled electrical intercommunication to become complete (Wright, 1935:346)

and on another one that was to become, according to Wright, generally accessible in the upcoming years – an aeroplane. He believed that those inventions made old cities “no longer modern” and such dense, crowded conglomerations as New York or San Francisco were on their way to wither and decay (Wright, 1935:346). In their place Broadacre Cities would occur. He claimed that the idea of the Broadacre City would be possible to execute mostly due to properly planned

communication and transportation systems. Only by arranging and integrating units in such a way that every household would have an even access to all indispensable urban facilities would it become feasible. As Krohe wrote in his article “the car would simultaneously make huge swaths of land accessible for development and make it possible to live on it without foregoing social connection” (Krohe, 2000:29). According to Wright, it is not urban sprawl that makes the automobile indispensable – it is the car that makes it possible to exist.

In Broadacres all the institutions of advanced society would be dispersed throughout the city so that every citizen would have ready access to them. Factories, stores, schools, cultural centers and professional buildings would all be of small scale and, as Nelson claims in his article, “located in such a way as to ensure that there is no central point around which people and power can cluster” (Nelson, 1995:341). Even the county seats would not be the center focus of the community. Such persistency in terms of a departure from the centralized model of the city has its roots in Wright’s ideology. He believed that centralization was an urban relic of the past. There was a time when it was necessary, even though it has always entailed, according to Wright, overcrowdedness and incursion of the individuality and democracy, but with mechanical mobilization and electrification there is no longer any need for committing the misdemeanor of centralization.

Single family dwellings were to be the predominant building type. This kind of building is most commonly associated with the architectural work of Frank Lloyd Wright; it would occur in every section of the city. A tower building is another housing type which could be found in Broadacres, but its existence within that design is not so obvious and natural. If Wright was trying to escape the overcrowdedness of the city, why should he use in the Broadacres the kind of building which is a perfect example of urban development? It seems that for Wright the skyscraper itself was not a problem, it is the clustering of skyscrapers. If the residential tower building is situated in a surrounding of nature and in isolation from other tall structures, it can still be a valid and coherent part of Frank Lloyd Wright’s tenets (Web 3).

The environment of the Broadacre City would be comprised of carefully adjusted land uses, assigned to particular zones and areas so that they fitted the land. Frank Lloyd Wright’s vision was bipolar in its character: it simultaneously included tall urban structures and rural settlements surrounded by agriculture which, when combined, formed both a pastoral and yet urban setting (Aguar and Aguar, 2002:256). Naturally, if Broadacres substituted regular cities and covered the landscape of United States, they would vary among one another in terms of land use distribution, since the function should always harmonize with the existing landscape. For redistributing land and regulating its use, a county architect would be responsible. He would wield powers of “the agent of the state in all matters of land allotment or improvement, or in matters affecting the harmony of the whole” (Wright, 1935:346).

Frank Lloyd Wright did not seem to consider the Broadacre City to be just another commissioned design. The architect became personally and ideologically involved and, therefore, the Broadacre City was an embodiment of his world view and his values, which he had been establishing throughout his life. Consequently, the physical layout of the Broadacre City was designed to be

a vessel for an economically and politically reformed society. As Krohe states in his article “Broadacre City embodied a program for economic reform that was the keystone of a model democracy he [Wright] called Usonia” (Krohe, 2000:28). Wright believed that Broadacres, and particularly their architecture and land use distribution, were going to be a perfect environment in which democracy, freedom and individualism would thrive.

Freedom and Democracy in Frank Lloyd Wright’s Understanding

Wright was often referred to as a continuator of Thomas Jefferson’s ideals. Jefferson has frequently been called “the most democratic of [Founding] fathers” (Kazin, Edwards, Rothman, 2011:149), as he preached public education, free press, free voting, limited government, and agrarian democracy that avoided the rule of aristocrats (McPike, 2003:8). He believed that democracy has its roots in citizens’ economic and physical independence, which belief was also advocated by Wright (Nelson, 1995:339). It is important to emphasize, however, that Jefferson’s views were inextricably linked with the political system; democracy for him stood for the structure of a particular organization, state or country, or a form of government, whereas for Wright democracy stood for an ideal (Dehaene, 2002:95), for which the freedom of the individual was the groundwork. According to Wright a society could be called democratic only when every citizen “would have entered a full state of inner freedom” (Dehaene, 2002:95). This can be achieved only when democracy grows into its “true form” and old “classical” forms are rejected (Dehaene, 2002:95). Such a statement implies that even though America has always been a democratic country in terms of its structure, it had never been fully democratic from the perspective of Wright. Dehaene in his publication concerning the Broadacre City provides the interpretation of Frank Lloyd Wright’s perceptions of freedom: “Man had squandered his freedom from the false “civilizations” of the old world and now found himself trapped in the city, once again built according to the “old ideal”. In order to regain freedom, the individual had to move away from the old center and become himself again the center of society” (Dehaene, 2002:95). Wright seemed to blame the structure of cities of his time for the shortcomings of freedom. A new kind of city (the Broadacre City) would solve this problem, and become the aforementioned “true form” of democracy. Inhabitants of Broadacres would be able to live their lives democratically due to recovering their freedom.

Another noteworthy aspect of Frank Lloyd Wright’s understanding of democracy is the fact that he has always thought of it as a process or a way (e.g. of living), not as a form (e.g. of government). In Lionel March’s opinion, by democracy being a lifestyle Wright meant that every adult should take part in the establishment of “the values that regulate the living of people together”, as it would contribute to the development of individuals and, simultaneously, to the growth of general social welfare (March, 1970: 198). This participation would not be one-sided, though. All social institutions (industry, schools) should, according to Wright, have common purpose in setting free and developing every individual into “the full stature of his possibility” (March, 1970: 197). Nevertheless, Wright rejected the idea of the “rugged individualism” of America as it contributed

to the evolution of plutocratic capitalism, which he referred to as crude and vain power promoting “cowardly selfishness” instead of “noble selfhood” (Wright, 1958:46). In his opinion, the notion of democracy should be perceived in the same way as its fathers viewed it: as the “free growth of humane individuality” and “mankind free to function together in unity of spirit” (Wright, 1958:45).

Frank Lloyd Wright created his own definition of democracy on the basis of Jeffersonian ideals. This definition was the groundwork for the Broadacre City and revealed itself in that design repeatedly.

American Values of Freedom and Democracy Expressed in the Broadacre City

There is a fairly widespread tendency to equate Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture with the architecture of American democracy. Not only was Wright aware of that, but he also seemed to purposely foster the “identification of himself with the American spirit” by appearing in all kinds of media and cultivating “an imperious image of plain-speaking anti-collectivist democracy” (from an editorial to an article by Wright, 1935:345). He advocated recasting the architectural model of the United States into Broadacres – a design whose grounds were, according to Wright himself, established on the American values of freedom and democracy. How were the aforementioned values manifested in the Broadacre City? Which features of that proposal testify to Frank Lloyd Wright’s beliefs?

Decentralization

The foremost feature of Broadacres that attests to Wright’s intention to advocate the values of freedom and democracy is connected with the idea of decentralization. This departure from the centralized model of a city and a return to inhabiting the rural landscape was the fundamental premise of the Broadacre City. Wright severely criticized the centralized urban patterns which were, and still are, the hallmarks of the American city. He believed that they were “promoting dehumanizing values, robbing people of their individuality and jeopardizing their democratic lifestyle” (Nelson, 1995:338). He thought of centralized cities as relics of the past, built on the foundations of the old world, in which clustering was inevitable due to the limited means of transportation and communication (Wright, 1932:11). According to Brown, Wright “mocked the idea that a man in his right mind would leave the opportunities granted in the countryside to live in the confines of the overcrowded city” (Brown, 2007:1). The Broadacres, with their automobile-oriented structure and policy of assuring a minimum of one acre of land for every dweller, were to be a solution for the holdover, anti-democratic cities of the past.

Mobility

As was already mentioned, the Broadacre City proposal would be possible to implement due to the emergence of the automobile and telephone. These were the inventions that, according to Wright, vastly contributed to the promulgation of a democratic lifestyle, since they ameliorated freedom

of movement and communication. Therefore, assuming that the Broadacre City was a truly democratic vision, it was unavoidable for those inventions to appear as a coherent part of Wright's proposal. Additionally, the aforementioned innovations were to enable the process of decentralization in the Broadacre City acclaimed by Wright. The fact that every inhabitant of Broadacres would possess at least one car would help in effacing the difference between quarters and and, therefore, would allow dispersed development. Later alterations of the vision of the Broadacre City involved the concept of aircraft being available to the same extent as an automobile, making total mobility a reality.

Rent

Moreover, the large, centralized cities of Wright's time, being too congested, overcrowded, and overbuilt, appeared to him as economically artificial or simply "uneconomic" as he states in *The Disappearing City* (Wright, 1932:8). He claimed that "human concentration upon the city has been abnormally intensified because, as hangover from traditions having their origin in other circumstances, three major economic artificialities have been grafted upon intrinsic production and grown into a legitimate economic system" (Wright, 1932:8). These aforesaid artificialities were all connected with the idea of rent (rent for land, for money, and for access to machine inventions), which is an "extrinsic form of unearned increment" (Wright, 1932:8) and whose existence, according to Wright, contributed to the factitious and exaggerated growth of the phenomenon of the centralization. Frank Lloyd Wright held an unfavorable view on the idea of rent, which, he believed, caused an absolute dependence on the operations of others for the success of individual (Brown, 2007:2) and, thereby, prevented true democracy and true individualism from thriving. It is the tenant-landlord relation, with all its liabilities that should be blamed for people losing their individual freedom and, therefore, receding from a democratic lifestyle. Wright's view of the concept of land ownership is best exemplified in his own words from *The Living City*: "when every man, woman and child may be born to put his feet on his own acres, then democracy will have been realized" (Wright, 1958:49).

Furthermore, with the abandonment of the notion of rent, which would be possible due to the widespread land ownership, freedom of employment would occur. In the Broadacre City people would not be forced to work on a "need-to-pay-rent basis" (Brown, 2007:3) anymore, they could choose their profession only according to their fields of interests or ability. As their earnings would have to be spent neither on rent nor on food, they would be able to choose their occupation with no restraints. Consequently, property and work would finally be deprived of their monetary values, since such an order of things tended to benefit only the selected few. In the eyes of Frank Lloyd Wright this is another aspect which contributes to perceiving Broadacres as cities built on the foundation of freedom and democracy.

Organic architecture

Delving into the decentralization idea applied in the Broadacre City, it has to be mentioned that it was to be performed in the full meaning of the term: in Wright's vision neither the center nor the

distinction between urban and rural land uses would be recognized (Fishman, 1982:92). Wright believed that “true democracy would be achieved by reclaiming one’s individuality and engaging in natural architecture rather than communal living of the cities” (Brown, 2007:2). Therefore, the United States as we know them should be, in Wright’s vision, replaced by small houses dotting the rural landscape. Housing developments would be designed in accordance with organic architecture, whose most important tenet assumes that every building should be created in such a way, so to become an “extension of nature and its principles” (Cruz, 2012:29). Therefore, residential areas were to be sprawled over open countryside and harmonize with the natural landscape. The architect maintained that accepting the organic architecture as the groundwork for a city would conduce to shaping the democratic life of its citizens. According to Wright, organic architecture enables dwellers to connect to his or her land in such a way that “roots him/herself in freedom from the constraining notion of centralized city” (Özpek, 2006:53). Due to the eradication of the boundaries and limits of the city, democracy would triumph and “no man will live as a servile or savage animal; holling in or trapped in some cubicle on an upended extension of some narrow street” (Wright, 1958:96).

Agrarian Democracy

In addition, Wright envisioned that each allotment’s design should promote a domestic, family-oriented, self-sufficient lifestyle and should be inhabited by people who are at least part-time farmers (Nelson, 1995:339). This kind of self-sufficiency, possible not only due to the practice of agriculture or horticulture, but also thanks to the abandonment of landlord, tenant, and rent phenomena, thus allowing the development of universal ownership of land, was to ensure people complete physical and economical independence, in line with both Jeffersonian and Wright’s theory of democratic society. Donald Leslie Johnson in his article provides an accurate summary of the Broadacre City philosophy, giving particular attention to the rurality of the vision:

Broadacres was a concept meant to reinforce and reinterpret the American tradition of rurality and to encourage a return to democratically formed village life with all its implications, if in modern geometric form. Villages were to be scattered about the vast North American landscape, integrated “along the horizontal line which we call the great highway”, disposed by compatible determinants such as work, travel, industry, population density and other internal or regional needs. Moreover, the Broadacre villages were to be self-sufficient... (Johnson, 1995:139-140).

The quotation indicates the existence of connections between the premises of Wright’s Broadacres and the Jeffersonian idea of agrarian democracy, whose frequently repeated surmise refers to the independent farmer being the “backbone of democracy” (Renck, 2002:1). Wright, similarly to Jefferson, perceived agriculturalists as symbols of “honesty, integrity, democracy and statesmanship” (Renck, 2002:2), values deeply rooted in American tradition. By designing Broadacres, the architect meant for America to become a nation of independent citizens, who cultivate the soil, grow crops and rear animals and are “bound to the land, which cannot be moved” (Renck,

2002:14). Such people would be more inclined to vest their interest in the nation and society, as their welfare and prosperity would be dependent on the ground they own. They would be liberated, however, from the constraints, limitations, and dependence on the general food industry and from the jeopardy of losing their properties. In Broadacres, self-sufficiency represented by producing food for each inhabitant's own needs is an indicator of the democracy of the society.

Equal access to urban amenities

Referring again to Johnson's summary of the Broadacres' philosophy and the description of Wright's vision provided previously, another evidence for the Broadacre City being the manifestation of freedom and democracy is the way in which all services, medical care, amenities, or industrial structures were to be disposed throughout the Broadacres. Wright designed and dispersed them, so to guarantee if not equal, and then at least close to equal access to them for all inhabitants. Such a city structure represented fairness and justness, which are, next to freedom and individualism, the most essential features of democracy. All people in the Broadacres would have equal chances for individual development, as each and every one of them would be granted comparable possibilities. A minimum of one acre of land, automobile, even access to the amenities, entertainment and other places of modern city – with all that every citizen of the Broadacre City would be supplied.

Individualism

In Wright's opinion, the development of the individual seems to be a prerequisite feature of the democratic lifestyle, as it contributes to regulating the rules of people living together and to the general evolution of the community. It is also essential, since even the "Declaration of Independence of the U.S. regards individualism as the victory of democracy" (Özpek, 2006:36). This is the reason why in Broadacres individualism thrives and commercial state-owned businesses tend to be avoided. There would be no middleman as the distribution of goods would flow directly from the producer to the consumer. Industry in Broadacre City would be either privately or cooperatively owned (Nelson, 1995:339). Additionally, dwellers of Wright's ideal city were to be not only part-time farmers, but also part-time mechanics and part-time intellectuals (Nelson, 1995:339). All this was to create the abundance of possibilities of development for every inhabitant of democratic Broadacres.

Government limited

The importance of personal advancement in Wright's design is also connected with Jefferson's view on that subject. He represented the opinion that true democracy is equivalent to a society in which "every member would be the best of possible men" and opposite to "the society ruled by its best men" (Dehaene, 2002:95). Such an attitude was to eliminate the notion of aristocracy and would lead to a significant limitation of the body of local government. What substantiates the application of this attitude in the Broadacre City vision is that the only local public administrator would be the county architect. Wright advocated that "government [should] be reduced to nothing

more than a county architect who would be in charge of directing land allotments and the construction of basic community facilities” (Wright, 1935:348). The architect would be chosen “by the county itself” (Wright, 1935:346) and his or her main responsibility would be concerned with the redistribution of land. Furthermore, the national government’s role would be significantly limited as well. Its sole purpose would be “the regulation of natural resources, the provision of the national defense, and the compilation and distribution of information” (Nelson, 1995:339).

Concluding remarks

The design, structure and socio-political scheme of the Broadacre City are obvious avatars of Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideology of promoting freedom and democracy. Many aspects of the vision were created in such manner so to provide Broadacres’ inhabitants with the possibility of living their lives in accordance with a democratic lifestyle. Aforesaid features contribute to creating the image of the Broadacre City being a manifestation of the American values of freedom and democracy not only in Wright’s understanding, but also in reference to the universal comprehension of these terms and in accord to the ideals of one of the Founding Fathers of the U.S. – Thomas Jefferson.

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