
WHY WRIGHT ENDURES

BY WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

The enduring fascination with Frank Lloyd Wright—evinced most recently by this year's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—is a tribute to an architectural genius whose distinctive style “spoke, and still speaks, to most Americans.”

Last summer, having accepted a position at the University of Pennsylvania, I came to Philadelphia to look for a house. Going through the pages of a real estate agent's directory, I chanced upon a postage stamp-size photograph of a structure that looked familiar, a building I remembered visiting 30 years ago as an architecture student on a traveling scholarship. The house was of unusual design: A sort of quadraplex, it was one of a four-unit cluster whose cruciform arrangement ensured privacy for each of the dwellings. According to the directory, the house was located in Ardmore, a suburb on



Frank Lloyd Wright in 1937.

Philadelphia's Main Line. It was not where my wife and I were intending to live, but I thought the house itself would be worth a visit.

The brick and lapped-cypress exterior of the building was almost completely hidden from the sidewalk by trees. We went up the short driveway, under a large balcony that sheltered the carport (which previous owners had partially enclosed to create a study), and turned right to face an unprepossessing front door. Once inside, we found ourselves in the corner of a room that rose unexpectedly and dramatically to a 16-foot height. Two tall walls, entirely glass, not only allowed light to fill the interior but also made the garden outside seem like an extension of the room. There was a deep fireplace in one corner and a cozy built-in settee in the other. Built-in cupboards and bookshelves lined the brick walls, and the floor was polished concrete. The owners were in the process of moving out, but the room, even though empty, was a beautiful, serene space.

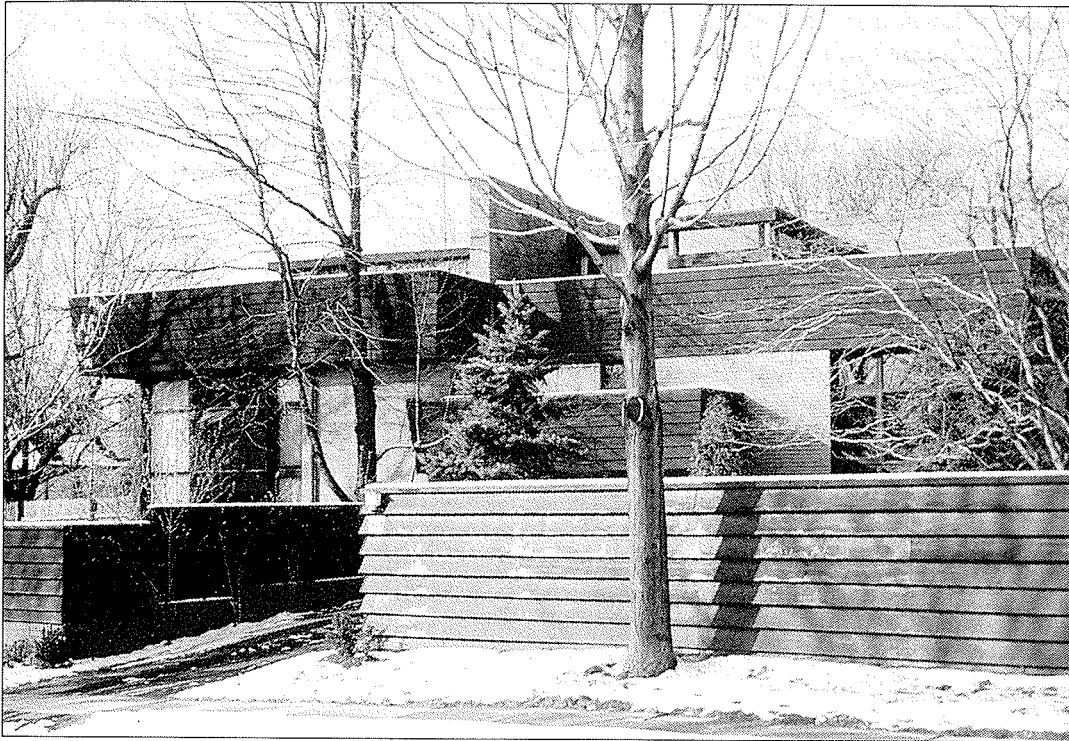
The modest materials and the profusion of built-in furniture throughout reminded me that when the quadraplex was built in 1938, it was intended to be an affordable starter house for young couples. Each 2,300-square-foot unit, which cost \$4,000 to construct, had a master bedroom and two additional bedrooms with bunk beds. Each unit had three levels, with two large roof terraces that augmented the outdoor space of the small garden and made the upper rooms feel like penthouses—features that no doubt accounted for the development's original name, Suntop Homes.

A narrow stair led from the living room to an eat-in kitchen overlooking the living room and the garden beyond. An ingeniously designed clerestory window provided additional light, and the kitchen table was flanked by a built-in banquette. Also on this level were a compact bathroom (which reminded me of a Pullman sleeper), the master bedroom, and a tiny nursery; the two children's rooms were above. As the architect himself explained in 1948, the kitchen was conceived as a kind of command post, "where the mistress of the

house can turn a pancake with one hand while chucking the baby into a bath with the other, father meantime sitting at his table, lord of it all, daughter meantime having the privacy of the front room below for the entertainment of her friends."

The architect was Frank Lloyd Wright. And while his notions of gender roles are excusable relics of the past—after all, he was born in 1867—there is nothing old-fashioned about the Ardmore house. The only thing that may be old-fashioned is the example of someone of the stature of Wright, then the most famous architect in the United States, applying himself to the humble problem of the small suburban house. Famous architects today seem to be too busy building grand museums and luxurious corporate offices. Wright built those, too, but he never lost his concern for the common man. That generosity and breadth of vision explain why, 35 years after his death in 1959, Wright and his work maintain such a strong hold on the public imagination.

Even by the frenetic standards of contemporary architectural publishing, which churns out illustrated monographs on individual architects—living and dead, famous and obscure, gifted and talentless—by the score, last year's flurry of books on Frank Lloyd Wright is impressive. Rizzoli, in conjunction with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, is issuing a multivolume series of the celebrated architect's collected writings. So far, it covers the period from 1894 to 1939. The editor, Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, once a Wright apprentice and now director of the Wright archives, has also written the text that accompanies the lavish photographs of 38 Wright buildings contained in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Masterworks* (1993). He includes several lesser-known houses such as the Zimmerman house in Manchester, New Hampshire. Alvin Rosenbaum, a planner who grew up in a Wright-designed house in Alabama, has produced an uneven memoir entitled *Usonia: Frank Lloyd Wright's Design for America* (1993), and this year, Pedro Guerrero,



Wright conceived Suntop Homes in Ardmore, Pennsylvania as an experiment in affordable housing.

who was Wright's photographer for 20 years, published *Picturing Wright* (1994), which includes some charmingly candid pictures of the architect at home.

Academics have always found in Wright a rich lode to mine, and two new studies explore the international influences on his designs: Kevin Nute's *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan* (1993) examines the role of traditional Japanese art and architecture in Wright's work, and Anthony Alofsin's *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost Years, 1910-1922* (1993) offers a fascinating analysis of the middle-aged Wright's European travels.

Then there is William Allin Storrer's valuable *Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (1993), a comprehensive guide to the almost 500 buildings that Wright realized during his fruitful

life. About 300 of these are still in existence, carefully maintained by their owners or restored by corporate or individual effort, and Storrer provides a useful index of their street addresses for the interested traveler. This year, fueled by a comprehensive retrospective that recently opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Wrightiana will continue to flourish.

The public interest in Wright's work has always been sustained by the personality of the man himself. "He is a fascinating, adorable, and utterly irresponsible genius, full of magnetism, selfish to the extent of violating all the conventions if he sees fit; and an artist to his fingertips," wrote his friend, Frederick Gookin in 1919, in as good a capsule description of

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Wright as anyone has provided.

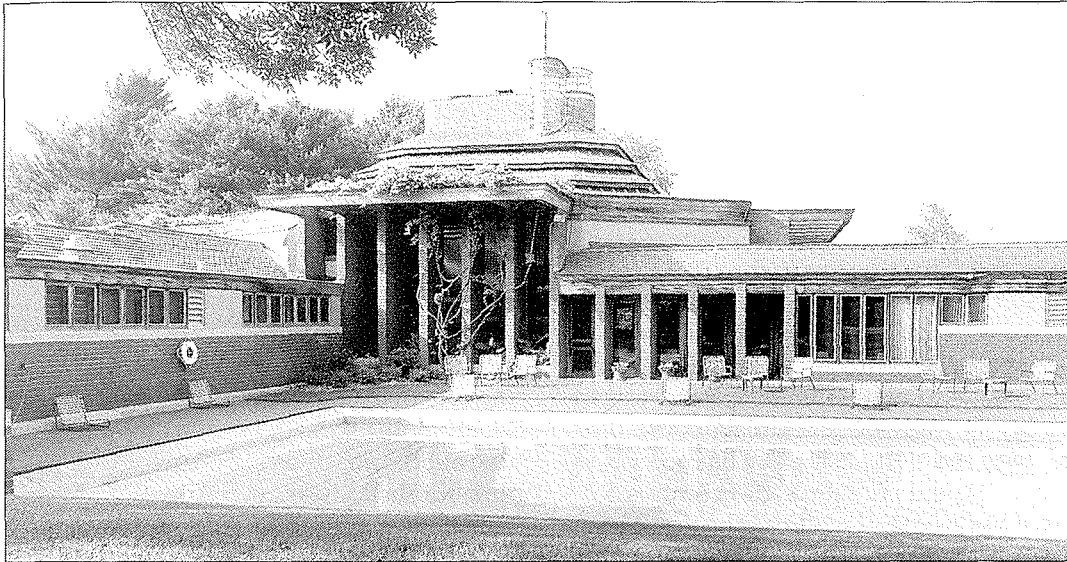
The melodramatic contours of the famous architect's life, which are recounted in two recent popular biographies, one by Meryle Secrest, the other by Brendan Gill, are well known: The rube from Wisconsin, whose domineering mother told him that he was to be a famous architect, comes to Chicago in 1888 and catches the eye of an old master—Louis Sullivan—at whose feet he learns the rudiments of his profession. Impatiently, the youngster soon strikes out on his own, and almost immediately—effortlessly—he begins to produce work that bears his own individual stamp. His career blossoms, the clients come, the commissions multiply. And then, willfully, he throws it all overboard—family, six children, flourishing practice—and runs away to Europe with the wife of a client. They return, and though they are the objects of scandal, they live together in a beautiful country house of the architect's design. He resumes his practice and attracts new clients. Then, in 1914, tragedy: A deranged servant kills Wright's mistress and her two children, and burns the beautiful house to the ground. However, the architect is unstoppable. He rebuilds the house—it is even more beautiful. He remarries and produces more masterpieces. By the age of 50—not old for an architect—he has already built three great buildings: the Larkin Administration Building in Buffalo, New York, Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois, and the Robie House in Chicago. He takes up with a young Montenegrin ballerina, they have two children out of wedlock, and as a result of the ensuing scandal (he is threatened with indictment under the White Slave Traffic Act) he almost goes to jail and is driven to the edge of bankruptcy. He is now 60, but there are still 31 years of the saga to go, years during which he will design some of his best—and best-known—buildings: the "Fallingwater" house, the Johnson Wax Building, the Guggenheim Museum, and his own remarkable desert retreat in Arizona. He lives to be 91, a grand old man

surrounded by young acolytes, making oracular pronouncements, the most famous architect in the country, just as his mother promised.

The only other 20th-century American architect who stands comparison with Wright is Louis Kahn. (Mies van der Rohe's buildings are predominantly in America, but their roots—and their essence—like those of their transplanted maker, are firmly European.) Kahn's talent flowered late. Nevertheless, among the less than 50 buildings that he did complete before his death in 1974, there are some undoubted masterpieces, such as the sublime Kimbell Museum of Art in Fort Worth, Texas, and the great capital complex in Dacca, Bangladesh. But Kahn never achieved the public recognition that was accorded Wright. For one thing, his buildings, despite their cool beauty, are intellectual exercises in minimalism of a sort that architects find attractive but that often leaves the layperson unmoved. The unplanted, paved courtyard of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, for example, drew plaudits from critics, despite the fact that it provides an uncomfortable setting where a shaded and welcoming garden was surely called for. Kahn's architecture, which is characterized by monumental forms based on abstract geometry, is often described as timeless, but it could as well be termed placeless. His designs look equally at home—or not at home—in Bangladesh or a southern Californian industrial park.* This placelessness gives Kahn's work a mysterious, almost mystical air, which may explain why, although his influence in the United States was short-lived, his ideas have taken root in India, where they continue to be explored by gifted architects such as B. V. Doshi and Anant Raje.

In Wright's buildings, the American public recognized a homegrown product. This set him apart from almost all of his contemporar-

*There is a small house designed by Kahn in the Philadelphia neighborhood where I live; it is a beautiful gem, but it looks absolutely divorced from its surroundings.



A view of "Wingspread," Wright's most expensive and, in his view, best-built house up to then (1937).

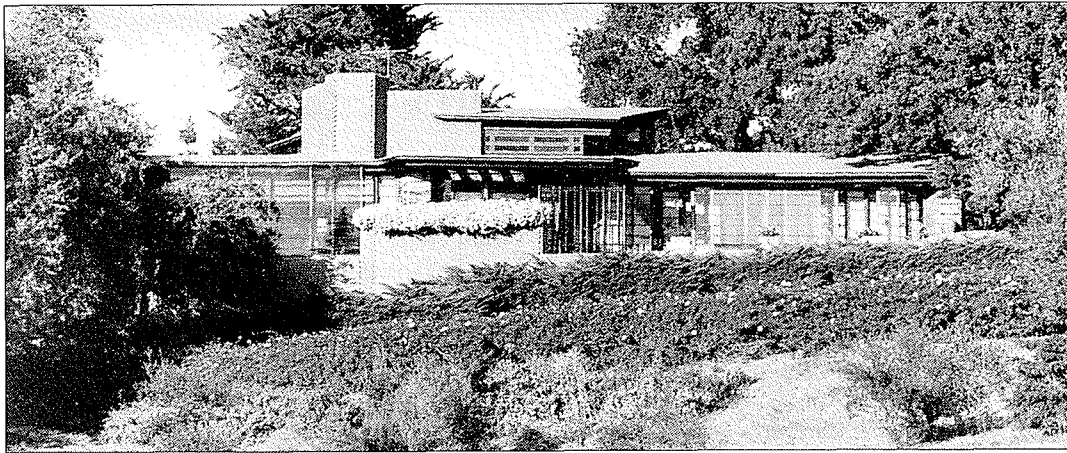
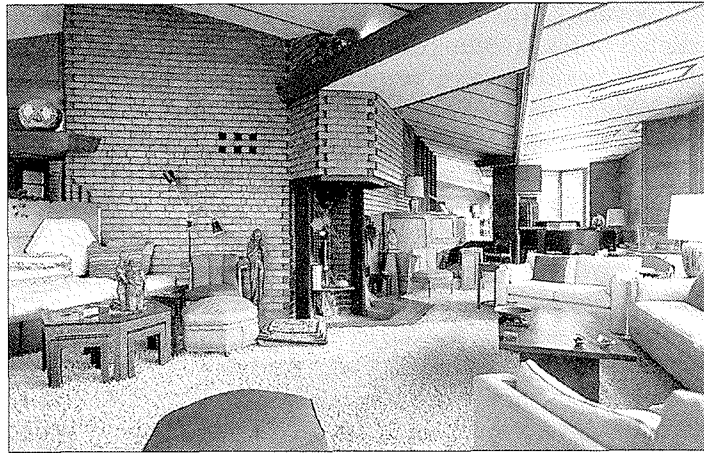
ies, and from succeeding generations of American architects. Classicists such as John Russell Pope, John Carrère, and Paul Cret were every bit as skillful, but their skill derived directly from the Parisian Beaux-Arts; eclectics such as Stanford White and Horace Trumbauer met the demands of their East Coast clients by manipulating the historical architectural styles of Europe. The influence of Europe was equally strong in the first generation of immigrant modernists—not only Mies van der Rohe but also Walter Gropius, Richard Neutra, and Marcel Breuer—who dominated the American architectural scene in the postwar years, and whose successors (and, often, students)—Paul Rudolph, Eero Saarinen, and Philip Johnson—followed in their footsteps. To modernist architects, Wright—who had known such historical figures as Louis Sullivan and Daniel Burnham, but who continued to practice until the end of the 1950s—appeared to be an anomaly or, at best, a leftover from the past. "America's greatest 19th-century architect," quipped Johnson, in an ill-disguised attempt to put Wright in his place.*

*In turn, Hilton Kramer once described Johnson as "the most successful artistic failure in the history of American architecture," which is likely to remain the judgement of posterity.

The postmodern architecture of the 1970s, which was a (chiefly American) reaction against the abstract internationalism of glass-box building, might have signaled a return to a native American architecture. Indeed, the domestic work of Robert Venturi and the late Charles Moore is rooted in the American vernacular, as Vincent Scully has convincingly argued. Moore was particularly adept at playing with regional styles (Californian, southwestern, New England) in a series of wonderfully exuberant houses. Venturi, too, played on American motifs. But the interest of both designers in architectural history also led them to explore European themes; so did Robert A. M. Stern's fascination with early 20th-century eclecticism. The buildings of Michael Graves, arguably the most talented of the postmodernists, progressively owe more and more to European classicism, especially to the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean.

Nor is Americanness an issue in the work of what passes for the avant-garde today. Not only is the outlook of architects such as Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman international, like their practices, but if deconstructivism has any roots—other, that is, than in the Euro-American world of high fashion—it's probably in the

The Hanna Residence (1936) in Stanford, California, was one of the early "Usonian" homes. The near-acronym—derived from United States of North America—reflected Wright's search for a national architectural idiom. Typical features include an L-shaped plan, a cantilevered roof, a large "window wall," and generous interior space.



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abstract architecture of the Russian constructivists of the early Soviet Union.

As the millennium approaches, it is obvious that Johnson was mistaken: Wright was—is—America's greatest 20th-century architect, not only by dint of his considerable architectural accomplishments, which have proved remarkably durable, but also because of their very Americanness. His buildings belong to America in the same way as Whitman's poems, Faulkner's novels, or Gershwin's music. Wright's Americanness is not merely a question of style, although style has a lot to do with it. The use of natural materials, the drive to simplify, the fascination with what are often technological gimcracks, the unabashed use of dramatic effects (especially the masterly

use of concealed electric lighting), a love of novelty and a willful evasion of history—all add up to a style that spoke, and still speaks, to most Americans.

It's not just the style of the buildings though; it's also the style of the man. Brash, self-promoting, largely self-taught, individualistic, Wright embodies most Americans' notion of the great *artiste*: bohemian in behavior and dress, extravagant, emotional, inspired. The Bauhaus architects dressed themselves up like proletarians in leather jackets and flat caps; Le Corbusier preferred black suits and severe, wire-rimmed glasses. Wright, on the other hand, wore striking costumes of his own design, and drove

flamboyant Cords and Packards, specially painted in his favorite color, Cherokee red. Decades before the term came into common use, Wright made himself into a celebrity.

His untutored self-sufficiency—also a part of his Americanness—was carefully cultivated. No European architect had influenced his work in any way, Wright consistently maintained. This was true at least to the extent that Wright avoided explicit references to European classicism as well as to European modernism. Nevertheless, as Anthony Alofsin's book amply demonstrates, Wright learned many lessons from Europe, especially from the Austrian Secessionist architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, and from other artists and craftsmen associated with the Wiener Werkstatte. At an earlier moment in his life Wright was also influenced by Japan, and he developed a style of perspective rendering that was openly derived from Japanese pictorial art. It may also be, as Kevin Nute suggests, though not altogether convincingly, that Wright drew on Japanese architecture for the open planning of what he came to call his Usonian houses. But while it is possible, and even valuable, to question Wright's blatant assertions of creative autonomy, this does nothing to diminish the extraordinary impact of his work. You don't have to be an architect, or an architectural historian, to appreciate Wright's buildings—their impact is immediate, and visceral.

Before Wright, most famous American architects were associated with a particular city or region: H. H. Richardson with Boston and New England, Louis Sullivan with Chicago and the Midwest, Frank Furness with Philadelphia, Bernard Maybeck with the Bay Area. There are more Wright-designed buildings in Illinois and Wisconsin than elsewhere, but he was really a national architect—and not only because he undertook projects in 37 of the states.*

*The only buildings Wright completed outside the United States were several in Japan, including the famous Imperial Hotel, a handful in Canada, and six tiny beach cottages in Egypt.

Although Wright did not always alter his architecture to suit different regions—the concrete block technique he developed for a house in Los Angeles pops up later in Oklahoma, Ohio, and New Hampshire, and the great sweeping roofs of his so-called prairie houses show up in Colorado and northern California—he did develop ways of using local materials that seem, on the whole, admirably suited to their climate and geography: heavy stone walls in the Southwest, patterned concrete and flat roofs in southern California, plant-draped trellises and pergolas in Florida, wood walls and protective overhangs in the Midwest. But regional as they may be, these buildings are always recognizably Wrightian.

What makes Wright's architecture American, however, is not only its appearance. Most of his work was residential, and his acceptance—and celebration—of the single-family house is also quintessentially American. Wright did design some grand villas in the British country-house tradition (apart from his own homes in Wisconsin and Arizona, "Wingspread" is probably the grandest Wright country house). But most of his houses were middle-class homes and, especially after the 1930s, projects such as Suntop Homes were intended to be affordable to families of modest means. These are not scaled-down versions of Tudor mansions or Palladian villas, nor are they imitations of Cotswold cottages. They are different from these predecessors not only because they look different but because they are designed to contain a way of life that is different: less formal, more comfortable, more connected to the outdoors, more aware of technical conveniences, that is, more American.

In the popular imagination, a Frank Lloyd Wright house is surrounded by a natural landscape, is built on the flank (never the top) of a hill or in the open desert. There were such houses but, more typically, they were situated on streets, close by other houses. (This was not always evident in the photographs of his so-called prairie houses, which were really in the



Wright with apprentices in his Hillside studio at Taliesin in 1948.

Chicago suburb of Oak Park.) Here is, I think, another aspect of Wright's continued popularity: He was America's premiere suburban architect.

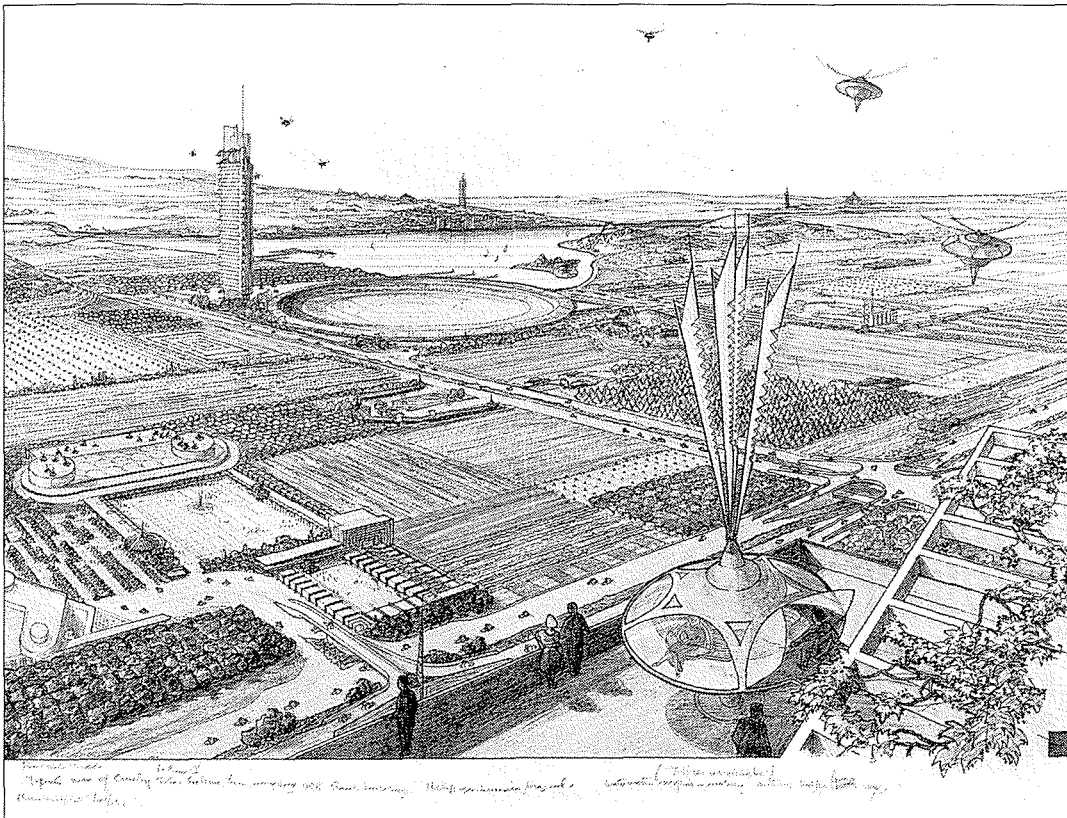
Unlike almost every other architect of the 20th century, Wright did not live and work in a city. For the first 16 years of his independent practice his home-cum-office was in Oak Park; later he moved to rural Wisconsin, and still later he constructed a winter retreat outside Scottsdale, Arizona. Nevertheless, urbanism did interest him, and, in 1935, Wright unveiled a theoretical proposal for a new kind of city, as unusual in its own way as the earlier Ville Radieuse proposal of his European rival, Le Corbusier. Broadacre City, as Wright called it, consisted of buildings in the landscape, linked to each other through a system of roads and highways. The residential areas consisted of individual houses—the smallest lots were one

acre. Shopping was to be in "wayside markets" and "distributing centers for merchandise of all kinds" located at highway intersections. Office buildings, factories, and community centers were scattered. There was nothing resembling a downtown in Wright's suburban vision. Indeed, his first book on town planning, published in 1932, was titled *The Disappearing City*.

Wright continued to tinker with Broadacre City for the rest of his life, but to most architects and planners, whose allegiance was to the traditional central city, this proposal was a bit of an embarrassment, an old man's foible. It turned out that the old man was right—or, at least, mostly right. The latest census confirms that the United States has become a nation of suburbs—more people now live in the suburbs than in traditional central

cities. And these suburbs are no longer dormitory communities but self-sufficient metropolitan areas, with retail and entertainment facilities, and with employment opportunities. (Nationwide, only 19 percent of worker commutes are from suburb to city, while 37 percent are from suburb to suburb.) Moreover, the physical environment of these new suburban cities, or "edge cities," as Joel Garreau christened them in his book of the same name, resembles Broadacre City to an uncanny degree.

It seems likely that, in one way or another, succeeding generations will continue to find their own meanings in Wright's rich oeuvre. For example, his exploration of figurative ornament in the second and third decades of this century is surely something



A sketch from the plan for Broadacre City suggests why Wright is considered one of the foremost advocates of suburbia: Buildings scattered across a broad landscape are linked by roads and highways.

that current architects, many of whom are, once again, interested in decoration, would do well to emulate. Wright's use of stained glass, murals, and handmade furniture in his buildings also anticipates a contemporary concern with the crafts. His attempts to develop low-cost building methods for houses, while they may be technologically obsolete, remain a telling lesson that affordability does

not have to negate architectural quality. Perhaps most appealing is Wright's ability to combine individualism with a broader sense of humanity. In a period when the individual feels increasingly powerless in the face of corporate and governmental bureaucracy, Wright's valiant protracted struggle to affirm his—and others'—personal worth may be the most moving example of all.

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