BROADACRE CITY / USONIA
The Ideal Community

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

The Manhattanville College Art Gallery, with The Studio: An Alternative Space for Contemporary Art
The Studio would like to thank Charles McGill, Director of the Manhattanville College Gallery of Fine Art, the Manhattanville College Studio Art Department and gallery assistant Saul Batier Perez, curator, Johanna Cooper, artist, William Meyer, Margo Stipe and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, The Framing Gallery and the following individuals for their support and contributions that have made this exhibition possible:

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Johanna Cooper, co-curator

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Broadacre City/Usonia: The Ideal Community

Through the suggestion of Katie Stratis of The Studio, the organizational talents of Charles McGill of the Manhattanville College Gallery of Fine Arts and Roland Reisley’s contribution of his experience and beautiful original color renderings and plans of his house, Frank Lloyd Wright’s courageous proposal for a truly democratic American city is presented in this exhibition, “Broadacre City/Usonia: the Ideal Community.”

First revealed in his book, “The Disappearing City,” 1932, then expanded in 1945 into “When Democracy Builds,” and finally in 1958 in “The Living City,” Frank Lloyd Wright’s thesis for the betterment of society became the core of his creative force, addressing concerns for the quality of life for the common man and the individual’s relationship to the environment. His vision spanned an astonishing range - from the most sublime ideals to the most practical objects for the rudiments of daily life. Some examples touched upon in this exhibition include: the reinvention of the newly industrialized city to provide freedom for the individual, the dispersal of organic structures throughout the landscape in order that the individual can experience “the ground” and thus nature, and the economically futuristic and remarkably prescient “new body car”, a hybrid powered by both fuel and electricity.

Combined with the artistic metaphor of “The Ideal Suburban Home” it is our hope that this exhibit will provide a view not only into Frank Lloyd Wright’s humanistic approach and its relevance to our contemporary society and environmental concerns, but also that it will elicit further interest, contribute to new directions, create innovative thinking and will inspire action.

With added thanks to Matthew Skjonsberg, architect and former Taliesin apprentice, for the production of this catalogue and to Margo Stipe of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation archives for the Broadacre City photographic material.
USONIA HOMES: A Realization of Broadacre City
Roland Reisley, author of Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright

Usonia homes - a cooperative - is a community of 47 homes on 100 acres near Pleasantville, New York, about 35 miles from New York City. It was created nearly 60 years ago by young, idealistic families who enlisted architect Frank Lloyd Wright to oversee their project.

The creation of Usonia is a fascinating and wholly American story. It is a romantic tale of a group of idealistic, young urban families, who, following World War II, pursued the American dream of owning a modern, affordable home in the country. It is the story of the unforeseen and nearly overwhelming investment of time, energy, and money that these young families expended to create the unique community in which they lived. They named their community "Usonia" in homage to Frank Lloyd Wright, whose ideas on the way Americans should live guided their plan.

Interest in Frank Lloyd Wright and in Usonia causes many people to expect that my book, ‘Usonia, New York - Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright’, is about architecture. Of course it is in significant ways - but it is mainly about the community itself, which has enjoyed a remarkable quality of life. In its first 40 years only 12 homes changed hands, six of them to second-generation owners. Over the years, when there was more money, or more children, members built additions rather than move. There were only two divorces (I think they could not decide who would keep the house). Most visitors to the community came to see the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. I always point out that there are several hundred surviving Wright buildings, but just one Usonia community.

Frank Lloyd Wright’s understanding of the impact of the built environment on the quality of human life is a hallmark of his life’s work. He was greatly influenced by Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman and others whose philosophical awareness of the significance of nature evolved to influence the establishment of National parks, protected lands and open space preservation. Though seen as aesthetic values they led to the environmental movement concerned not only with clean air and water, but with sprawl, crowding and the destruction of natural and built environment. In his Broadacre City proposals after 1930, he extended that understanding to American society in general. He planned, wrote, and lectured extensively on his ideas of how people should build and live in relation to each other. He often referred to Americans in that society as ‘Usonians’. The Usonian house is inextricably rooted in Wright’s Broadacre City concept of semi-rural communities of individually designed, affordable homes on one acre lots. He advocated democratic and cooperative structures and urged participation by residents in building their homes and communities. In 1940, an exhibition of Wright’s work at the Museum of modern Art included the unbuilt Usonia I project, the Broadacre City proposals and examples of built Usonian homes.
It was seen by David Henken, a young New York engineer, who, with friends, had dreamed of someday forming a cooperative to build affordable homes away from New York City. He asked Wright for assistance and soon became an apprentice at Taliesin where he secured Wright’s agreement to plan and supervise such a project — after Henken formed a group and acquired suitable land.

Henken returned to New York, and after numerous living room gatherings with friends and family, word-of-mouth generated considerable interest. Late in 1944 they organized as Usonia Homes a Cooperative Inc. Wright called it Usonia II. We and others call it Usonia. They proposed a true cooperative community - to build 50 affordable modern homes - designed or approved by Frank Lloyd Wright. Interest in the community reflected the experience and climate of the times. The great depression of the 1930’s led most Americans to support means to achieve greater social and economic justice. Consumer cooperatives, once mainly farm and industry groups, were growing. Despite the economic hard times - or perhaps in response - many young people coming of age somehow felt that life would be much better in the future.

Certainly for New Yorkers, who had easy access to it, the 1939 and 40 World’s Fair, with its futuristic theme and architecture, epitomized the optimism that a new, modern, better world was just around the corner. The major corporations unveiled all manner of technological wonders. Many buildings incorporated work of fine contemporary artists. The unparalleled highlight of the fair was the General Motors Futurama, a ride over a dramatic model of a future America - depicting decentralized cities, towns, and farms enhanced and connected by advanced superhighways. There can be little doubt that its designer, Norman Bel Geddes, was familiar with Wright’s Broadacre City proposed in 1932, in which Wright, among other things, projected automobile-owning families living on one acre plots accessible to multi-lane arterial superhighways. 20 years earlier Wright foresaw the significance of auto mobility. In fact, he knew Henry Ford and realized that autos for “everyman” would expand urban boundaries.

Architects were the catalyst to transform the new art and technologies into everyday lifestyle benefits. It was not necessary to know a lot about architecture to be aware of Frank Lloyd Wright and buildings like Fallingwater, Johnson Wax and Taliesin West - they received two-page spreads in Life magazine - and some knew he was designing small, affordable, Usonian houses.

With the war ending, members of this generation were ready to join the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, David Henken and others in the social, technological, architectural thrust to realize beautiful modern homes, now thought to be attainable and affordable in an idealistic cooperative community. There was soon a waiting list for membership.

Wright agreed to design a master plan of the roads, sites and community facilities. He said he could not design all of the homes but would design 5; and suggested a panel of apprentices and disciples from which members could select their architects - essentially the arrangement he had proposed for Broadacre City, of ‘county architects’ with regional responsibility.

Usonia, a community inspired by Broadacre City ideas 60 years ago, has been uniquely successful - and it continues to be appreciated by its members and admired by architects, historians and planners.
Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City (1932-1959), a visionary agrarian/urban model for decentralized development, is as interesting for what is omitted as for what is shown in the models and drawings - that is, the context from which the work emerged, beyond the models and outside of the drawings. This consideration is an exercise that requires ‘zooming out’, and taking into account the context in which the work was done. References to this may be found in Wright’s numerous texts, in which he develops what might be called his ‘radical humanism’. But relevant insights may also be found in the legacy of ideas, opportunities and personalities the project engages in its sociopolitical context over time - and in its spatial context, relating the geometry, proportion and anatomy of the strategy itself to its environmental framework.

Historically, academia and the professions of architecture and urban design have seriously considered little of Wright’s work in the extra-large scale — and when it has been considered it has been done so rather cursorily. Architecture critic Witold Rybiczynski summed up the view generally held by the establishment when he described the Broadacre City project as an ”embarrassing foible of an aging master.” Herbert Muschamp, before he was the architecture critic of The New York Times, concluded that the plan was “too real to be Utopian and too dreamlike to be of practical importance.” While author, historian and critic Lewis Mumford had early praise for it: ”On the whole, Wright’s philosophy of life and his mode of planning have never shown to better advantage,” 30 years later he criticized the plan’s ”sprawling, open, individualistic structure” as being ”almost antisocial in its dispersal and its random pattern.”

In light of the establishment’s consistent dismissal of the scheme, it is surprising to note that recent assessments of the scheme’s performative capabilities clearly show that rather than being a shortsighted if visionary model of automobile-induced sprawl, as has commonly been asserted, it emerges as a meticulously scaled diagram of a compact transportation corridor network, whose performance model could sustain the entire US population within a total footprint of 4% of the nation’s area — so arranged that half of that is agricultural land sustaining the urban half, creating what is effectively a self-contained agrarian/urban metabolism. In scale this is, conveniently, roughly equivalent to the length of the US Interstate highway system when 4 miles wide, two miles on either side of the roadway. Of course, in practice the Broadacre City strategy is unlikely to be either uniform or symmetrical because environmental and sociopolitical contexts will vary - and, as the Living City, it was conceived as responsive to these.

**LEVIATHAN – Wright’s Agrarian/Urban Ideal**

**FROM ‘ART AND CRAFT OF THE MACHINE’ (1901) TO ‘BROADACRE CITY’ (1932-58)**

Matthew Skjonsberg

“From the crooked timber of humanity, nothing entirely straight can ever be built.”

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
WHERE IT CAME FROM

As a biological analogy, with ‘the Living City’ Wright establishes an implicitly agrarian/urban metabolism — consistent with the image of the mechanized city as ‘leviathan’ he portrays in the dramatic conclusion of his 1901 treatise, ‘The Art and Craft of the Machine’.

...be gently lifted at nightfall to the top of a great downtown office building, and you may see how in the image of material man, at once his glory and menace, is this thing we call a city.

There beneath, grown up in a night, is the monster leviathan, stretching once upon once into the far distance. High overhead hangs the stagnant pull of its fatal breath, reddened with the light from its myriad eyes endlessly everywhere blinking. Ten thousand acres of cellular tissue, layer upon layer, the city’s flesh, outspreads ennemished by intricate network of veins and arteries, radiating into the gleam, and there with muffled, persistent roar, pulses and circulates as the blood in your veins, the ceaseless beat of the activity to whose necessities it all conforms...If the pulse of activity in this great city, to which the tremor of the mammoth skeleton beneath our feet is but an awe-inspiring response, is thrilling, what of this prolific, silent obedience? And the texture of the tissue of this great thing, this Forerunner of Democracy, the Machine, has been deposited particle by particle, in blind obedience to organic law, the law to which the great solar universe is but an obedient machine.

Thus is the thing into which the forces of Art are to breathe the thrill of ideality! A SOUL!

This analogy of the body of civilization as an obedient, pulsing machine frames the answer he gives as to the nature of the architect’s ultimate objective — to bring, through art, ‘a soul’ to the city-machine, the leviathan, rendering it empathetic and beneficial to humanity as a habitable artifact. In other words, not a city based on maximizing commercial efficiency, but on optimizing experiential effectiveness.

In 1901, when ‘The Art and Craft of the Machine’ was delivered by Wright at Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago, a center with a broad reputation for its advocacy of progressive social reform, the industrial age was in full force. Although benefiting some, capitalized industry throughout the world was creating a massive and often genuinely oppressed labor class, even while technologies to increase automated productivity were displacing artists and workers, and ever more powerfully impacting both agricultural and urban regions.

In his text, Wright acknowledges the difficulties arising from the machine’s implementation, asserting that they are not inherent in the machine, but are the result of greed and the misuse of a powerful tool — the machine is ‘the creature and not the creator’ of political iniquity. His open attitude toward the machine was not then common among artists and intellectuals, many of whom actively protested any collaboration with industry. By his own account, his optimism was motivated, at least in part, by his having read as a child Victor Hugo’s ‘Norte-Dame de Paris’ (1831) — the second chapter of which, usually excised when published in English, is an essay titled ‘This Will Kill That’. The essay describes, through a concise and remarkably insightful history of architecture, how in the Gothic cathedral one could see the culmination of architecture as the integration of all the arts: music, liturgy, textiles, carpentry, masonry, sculpture and painting. Hugo goes on to describe how, with the invention of the printing press, ‘the book will kill the edifice’ — because of the press, continuity of human thought no longer required a strategy of material permanence, of stone and wood, but alternatively the proliferation of inexpensive multiplicities sufficed. Hugo poetically describes the emancipated pages of the printing press blowing in the wind, ‘like birds leaving the cathedral at dawn’. Wright refers to this chapter in his text as describing for him ‘the grandest sad thing in the world.’

Architecture is dethroned. Gutenberg’s letters of lead are about to supersede Orpheus’ letters of stone. The book is about to kill the edifice. The invention of printing was the greatest event in history. It was the first great machine, after the great city.

It is human thought stripping off one form and donning another. Printed, thought is more imperishable than ever — it is volatile, indestructible. As architecture it was solid, it is now alive; it passes from duration in point of time to immortality.

When asked by apprentices in later years what they should read of the architectural classics, Wright invariably referred to Hugo’s essay, and to the work of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who in 1854 identified the machine as promising to fulfill the Gothic ideal in its ability to ‘express the qualities of materials and to transform static relationships into dynamic ones based on balances between opposing forces’. These optimized forces may be simply structural or material, but when correlated with our current computational technology at the scale of the city, they may also be, in the parlance of contemporary economics, PESTEL — the forces of Politics, Economics, Sociology, Technology, Environment and Law.
This year we entered the first era in recorded history where 50% of humans live in cities. It is an era when, because of the growing sophistication and accessibility of technology, these forces can more than ever before be truly inter-related and optimized in the form of the city and its architecture — qualitatively and quantitatively — creating buildings, environments and social infrastructure that are profoundly humane. Wright himself never explicitly illustrated Broadacre City in the broader regional context, but clearly the scope of his ambition encompassed not only the city, nor merely the reunification of the arts and crafts that were ensemble in the Gothic era, but the radical humanization of the entire ecology of forces that exist in our modern era and whose interactions transform the shape of society — materially and energetically. As evidence of this Wright also proposed, likely as agent provocateur, Broadacre City's opposite: building two of his iconic mile-high towers in Central Park to house the entire population of New York City, returning the city outside the park back into forests, prairies and meadows. So high-density schemes also clearly fit into the strategy where necessary or desired — the models merely illustrate it is neither inevitably desirable nor absolutely necessary that things be one way or another. Rather, in the spirit of the motto he was known to quote to apprentices in his Taliesin Fellowship, "If there is something worth doing, it is worth doing well." The way he framed it was in the deliberate clarity of intent — "Why not get serious about it, and go all the way? Instead you get not quite this and not quite that. It is a pity."

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The "Ideal Suburban Home" is the launch of an ambitious year-long project that reflects the growing interest in green culture in New York's Hudson Valley. It's an exploration of how the ideas of localization, energy efficiency, alternative energy, and water resource protection are being addressed in suburbia. Taking the form of a running rickshaw, this "Green Rickshaw" highlights what individuals, businesses and municipalities are doing to work towards sustainability in their communities. As it conceptually and physically navigates actions being taken - like organic farming, producing and buying local products and home energy audits - the Green Rickshaw builds a community of its own. Will the Green Rickshaw appear in your community next? When visiting the exhibition, answer the onboard questions and make a request to have the Green Rickshaw visit you. Launched together with the exhibition "Broadacre City/Usonia: The Ideal Suburban Community," "The Ideal Suburban Home: Green Rickshaw Project" builds on Frank Lloyd Wright's legacy of bringing nature into architecture and examines what is happening in the building of green communities today.

The Green Rickshaw community is forming and would not be possible without the following people: George Bliss and Matteo Martignoni, the human-powered vehicle design/build team of The Hub (Hudson Urban Bicycle) Station in lower Manhattan; Michael Tang of Tang Studios; Jerry Chiudina of Green Tree Energy; Amelia Amon, a solar energy designer, of Alt Technica; Erin Heaton, the Green Rickshaw librarian, and John Friede of Worldview, an ecological education non-profit. Components of the Green Rickshaw include a custom bicycle rickshaw chassis fabricated from recycled bicycle parts, a steel frame kiosk, reclaimed oak pallets, zero formaldehyde birch plywood, bamboo flooring, flexible solar panels, a cell phone recharge station, a green roof module, a traveling library and a drawing of the water basins that make up Westchester County. A series of 6 integrated panels will change over the course of the project vis-à-vis community input.