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# The Antinomies of Usonia: Neil Levine's *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright*

In 1925 Frank Lloyd Wright introduced a neologism to readers of the Dutch journal *Wendingen*. This new term—*Usonian*—would soon become synonymous with Wright's late-career architecture and the socio-spatial regime he envisioned to encompass those works. He casually inserted his coinage into an essay titled "In the Cause of Architecture: The Third Dimension," which revisited the thesis of his 1901 "The Art and Craft of the Machine" to argue that if the Machine (always, for Wright, with a capital *M*) could be properly domesticated, it would become a means for overcoming the dehumanizing tendencies of industrialism and the stultifying effects of stylistic revivalism. After characterizing the Renaissance as a misguided project akin to aesthetic miscegenation—"a mongrel admixture of all the styles of the world"—Wright offered a prediction: "Here in the United States may be seen the final Usonian degradation of that ideal—ripening by means of the Machine for destruction by the Machine." [1] Without explicitly defining his novel modifier, Wright nevertheless elliptically clarified *Usonian's* signification. If American artists and architects eschewed their misguided fascination with "European backwash," he explained to a Western European readership, they would emerge as natural leaders of a Machine Age revolution because "America is a state of mind not confined to this continent—but awakening over the whole civilized world." [2] Wright's readers might therefore infer that *Usonian* signified a transformative potential inherent in but not confined to the United States.

The next time the term surfaced in Wright's writing, its connotations were clearer but conceptually circumscribed. As Wright continued to explore the machine's socio-aesthetic potential, he penned a 1927 article for *Architectural Record*, again called "In the Cause of Architecture," but this time subtitled "The Architect and the Machine." In the middle of the text, he briefly interrupted himself: "America (or let us say Usonia—meaning the United States—because Canada and Brazil are America too)—Usonia is committed to the Machine and is Machine-made to a terrifying degree." [3] If *Usonian* in its original adjectival form signaled an aspirational state of mind tinged with Progressive Era cultural imperialism, as a noun it seemed to become a conciliatory territorial colloquialism. Wright would subsequently misattribute the etymological origins of *Usonia* to Samuel Butler's utopian satire *Erewhon: Or, Over the Range* (1872). [4] As countless critics have discovered, there is no mention of *Usonia* in Butler's novel. From its inception, *Usonia* was fraught with conceptual, semantic, and

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[1] Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Cause of Architecture: The Third Dimension" (1925), in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings, vol. 1: 1894–1930* (New York: Rizzoli, in association with The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1992), 211.

[2] Wright, "In the Cause of Architecture: The Third Dimension," 211.

[3] Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Cause of Architecture 1: The Architect and the Machine" (1927), in *Collected Writings* 1, 227.

[4] See Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Organic Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy, The Sir George Watson Lectures of the Sulgrave Manor Board for 1939* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 27.

attributional misalignments.

*Usonia's* ambiguous import is best displayed in *The Disappearing City* (1932), a book-length explication of Wright's project for radical decentralization, Broadacre City. In it, the architect bemoaned "the rural youth of Usonia [who] longed for the activity, the sophistication and prizes of the City." "Centralization, by way of the Usonian city," he warned, "is not dead yet." He condemned American architects' interest in European modernism as superficial and "pretentious Usonian culture." And, finally, he anticipated that, in contrast to the vertiginous centrality of the existent "Usonian city," an authentic "modern Usonian city" would extend along "the horizontal line of Usonian freedom." The human subject emerging from this liberating dispersion "may be a manly man, in Usonia, living in manlike freedom." [5] Through sometimes confusing acts of semantic elision, Wright entangled *Usonia's* descriptive and projective qualities. It was the United States as it existed and as it might exist. It embodied the country's conflicted industrial present (as instantiated in its stratified metropolises) and a more equitable future (as determined by Wright, in gendered terms).

The "urban" has always played a critical role in clarifying Usonia's ambiguities. In most studies of Wright's work, critics resolve the disjunction between the existent "Usonian city" and the "modern Usonian city" by counterposing Wright's virulent anti-urbanism with his bucolic Broadacre City. Usonia, in its projective sense, would constitute an entirely new socio-spatial regime, superseding the multifarious forms of spatial and socioeconomic stratification that infected the descriptive Usonia. A recent publication by Wright scholar Neil Levine challenges this long-held understanding of Wright's relationship to cities. In *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Levine argues that Wright was deeply engaged throughout his career in the fate of the American metropolis. While it does not address the idea of Usonia directly, Levine's book does offer an opportunity to consider that broader issue anew. If Wright was, in fact, working to reform rather than abandon the modern American city, how do the fraught realities of twentieth-century urban history and the presumed equity of Usonia relate?

First, a word on Usonia itself, prior to Wright's discovery of it. A cursory Internet search will suggest that the term was coined in a 1903 poem by one James Duff Law. In an explanatory footnote to the elegiac poem, "The Sack of Auchindore," Law offered an anti-imperialist rationale for the appellation that prefigured Wright's: "We of the United States, in justice to Canadians and Mexicans, have no right to use the title 'Americans' when referring to matters pertaining exclusively to ourselves." He commended an earlier, unnamed writer's coinage of *Usona*—an acronym for the United States of North America—but found its "assonance" to be "distasteful," and so suggested *Usonia* as a "more euphonious" alternative. [6] Law was likely referring to a July 2, 1899, *St. Louis Republic* article by Sylvester Waterhouse, a classics professor at Washington University, who advocated that the United States adopt the name *Usona*, its citizens consequently becoming *Usonians*. Waterhouse's proposal received national coverage, but he did not originate the term. Sporadic incarnations of *Usona* can be found throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [7]

The term even appeared fleetingly in architectural discourse, before

[5] Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Disappearing City* (New York: William Farquhar Payson, 1932), 8, 32, 37, 38, 63.

[6] James Duff Law, *Here and There in Two Hemispheres* (Lancaster PA: The Home Publishing Company, 1903), 111, 112.

[7] These include Usona mining, manufacturing, and construction companies scattered across the West; Usona Hotels in St. Louis, Missouri, and Fulton, Kentucky; a Usona yacht in Massachusetts; a line of Usona pottery from California; and a Usona Book Company in Chicago; among others. A Usona Society for women students at Brigham Young College dated to at least 1895, while a South Dakota-based Usona Portland Cement manufacturer existed from 1892. In a July 20, 1918, letter to the *New York Times* editors, the logician and Esperantist (see below) Christine Ladd Franklin claimed that *Usona* "was first proposed by a Canadian, James P. Murray of Toronto, in 1885."

Wright's adoption of it, in a paper titled "American Methods of Erecting Buildings," delivered at a November 1905 meeting of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The author began by "presum[ing] that by 'American methods' is meant the methods of the United States, or [...] U.S.O.N.A." [8] He then defaulted to *American* for the remainder of the paper.

In the years surrounding World War I, as the United States became a major geopolitical actor, *Usona* became a standard-bearer in a nationalist cause. Advocates of the constructed language Esperanto led the charge, using derivatives of the Esperantist colloquialism *Usono* to distinguish the United States of (North) America from the neighboring *Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (another United States) and the newly formed Union of South Africa (another USA). [9] One obscure product of this short-lived campaign was a secular cantata, "Usona: A Paean of Freedom." The penultimate movement begins by despairing that "men, like the grain of the corn-field/Grow small in the huddled crowd" and concludes with the Wrightian exultation, "That man among men was strongest/Who stood with his feet on the earth." [10] Wright's own Usonia fits neatly into this fragmentary genealogy. Whatever its elusive origins (Wright only ever cited Butler as his source), his version of the moniker encoded the same Progressive Era desires and anxieties. It interwove description and projection to propose an alternating interventionist and isolationist course for an ascendant United States in a changing world.

Levine's *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright* is part of a renewed effort to recontextualize Wright's work. This effort encompasses other scholarly endeavors like Kathryn Smith's *Wright on Exhibit: Frank Lloyd Wright's Architectural Exhibitions*, exhibitions such as the Museum of Modern Art's *Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive* (currently on view at the time of this essay's publication), and activity across digital platforms related to the architect's 150th birthday in June 2017 (see also #flw150). Levine's contribution treats a relatively understudied aspect of Wright's career—his urban works—with a depth and nuance that challenges received understandings of the architect's relationship to the urban realm. As noted above, Broadacre City has often dominated considerations of Wright's attitude toward the twentieth-century city. In a brief chapter in the middle of his book, Levine recasts it as a fanciful, Depression-era distraction from a serious, career-long engagement with urban reform. While this revisionist agenda is mostly compelling, Levine does struggle to reconcile the architect's late-career efforts to reform cities with his fixation on Broadacre City until his death in 1959. *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright* otherwise offers readers detailed studies of site-specific projects, all of which were ultimately unrealized, from every decade of Wright's seventy-year career.

Levine begins in Chicago's suburbs in the 1890s and concludes in 1950s Baghdad. The book is organized into three parts, permitting a neat, tripartite periodization of Wright's work into a turn-of-the-century preoccupation with Midwestern streetcar suburbs (1896–1913), a decade of experimentation with skyscrapers (ca. 1925–1935), and a sustained late-career campaign to produce an architecture attuned to the automobile's ubiquity (1938–1957). Individual chapters focus on specific projects from each era with an impressive combination of breadth and depth. The two early chapters devoted to the Roberts Block Plan (ca. 1896, 1903–1904), to cite one example, contain

[8] R. A. Denell, "American Methods of Erecting Buildings: Read before the Royal Institute of British Architects, Monday, 20th November 1905," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, vol. 13, no. 2 (November 25, 1905): 29.

[9] Esperanto was invented by the Polish polymath L. L. Zamenhof around 1887. In 1905 the French Esperanto specialist Gaston Moch recommended *Usono* as the colloquial form of *Unuigitaj tataroj de Norda Ameriko*, with *usona* and *Usonano* as adjectival and pronoun derivatives. See Gaston Moch, *Historio Resuma de l'Arbitracio konstanta* (Monaco: Instituto Internacia por la Paco, 1905), 48. Thanks to George R. Collins's uncorroborated speculation, South Africa's consolidation into a unified, semi-independent Dominion of the British Empire in 1910 is often cited as a likely source for Wright's usage of the term *Usonia*. See George R. Collins, "Broadacre City: Wright's Utopia Reconsidered," in *Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture: Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Wright, Verbatim Record of a Symposium Held at the School of Architecture, Columbia University, March–May 1961* (New York: Trustees of Columbia University, 1963), 70–71.

[10] Willard Patton, composer, Sharlot Hall, librettist, "Usona: A Paean of Freedom" (Minneapolis: Lloyd, 1919).

detailed elaborations of the project's multistage development, consideration of Wright's other early domestic works within the context of suburban growth around Chicago, a survey of divergent *fin-de-siècle* planning traditions, an account of the grid in American planning history, and a brief excursus on the architect's novel use of graph paper. [11] Levine composes these varied and detailed analyses from information embedded in Wright's visually dense drawings, which suffuse the text, and a mountainous collection of archival and literary sources, as the copious endnotes attest. Over the course of the book's 388 pages, a surprisingly new Frank Lloyd Wright emerges.

The strengths of the case-study format and Levine's visual acumen are, however, betrayed at points. For example, Levine introduces a chapter on Wright's well-known "Home in a Prairie Town" for the *Ladies' Home Journal* (1901) by describing commercial, cultural, and civic activities unique to American downtowns before stating, "The suburb, by contrast, was almost exclusively residential. The center/periphery distinction became one of work versus domesticity, with the male defining the world of the downtown and the female that of the suburb." [12] Such a characterization overlooks the more nuanced understanding of social, functional, and environmental heterogeneity that suburban historians have developed over the past several decades. [13]

This oversight undermines Levine's ability to contextualize a project like Wright's entry into a 1913 City Club of Chicago competition, to which Levine devotes another chapter. The competition brief asked participants to combine housing for varying income levels with civic, cultural, commercial, educational, and recreational facilities, on a site within walking distance of nearby factory jobs and eight miles from the city center. This kind of social and functional diversity was not anomalous, as Levine suggests. [14] Wright himself averred that "this design introduces only minor modifications in harmony with the nature of [...] every semi-urban section about Chicago." [15] The City Club scheme was not a revolutionary departure from suburban conditions. It sought to manage growth by reforming existing variegations.

A different problem presents itself in the third part, where Levine treats a quartet of large-scale, late-career projects. Provocatively titled, "New Visions for the City Center: Urbanism under the Hegemony of the Automobile," this concluding section shows Wright to be deeply concerned with resolving programmatic and infrastructural exigencies precipitated by rapid suburbanization and widespread automobilization. Instead of the caustic anti-urbanist Wright is normally portrayed to be, Levine places Wright fairly convincingly

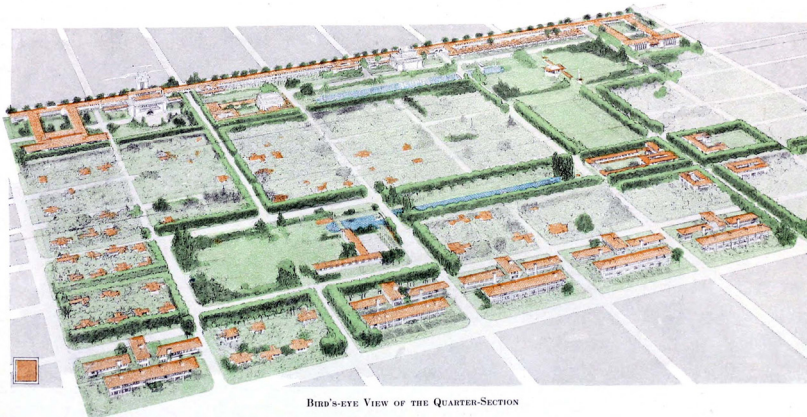
[11] See Neil Levine, *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–28, 48–76.

[12] Levine, *Urbanism*, 29.

[13] For a sampling of this literature, see Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the United States* (New York: Berg, 2003); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Robert Lewis, ed., *Manufacturing Suburbs: Building Work and Home on the Metropolitan Fringe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth Century America* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); Richard Harris and Robert Lewis, "Constructing a Fault(y) Zone: Misrepresentations of American Cities and Suburbs, 1900–1950," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 88, no. 4 (December 1988): 622–639.

[14] Levine characterizes the project's "variety and demographic mix [as] more characteristic of an urban situation than of the typically homogeneous suburban development." Levine, *Urbanism*, 113.

[15] Frank Lloyd Wright, "Plan by Frank Lloyd Wright," in Alfred B. Yeomans, ed., *City Residential Land Development: Studies in Planning, Competitive Plans for Subdividing a Typical Quarter Section of Land in the Outskirts of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), 96. Wright's project statement is also quoted at length in Levine, *Urbanism*, 108, 111.



Aerial perspective of Wright's entry in the 1913 City Club of Chicago competition. From Alfred B. Yeomans, ed., *City Residential Land Development*, 1916.

at the forefront of debates about determining an appropriate morphology for the deindustrializing postwar urban landscape. In doing so, he also crafts, inadvertently, what might best be characterized as an alternate history of urban renewal.

This adventitious alternative urban history is best exemplified by Wright's Point Park Civic Center for Pittsburgh (1947). An aerial rendering of the project fills the front cover of Levine's book (the above rendering of the 1913 competition project graces the back cover). The civic center was sited on the blighted, triangular tip of downtown. It would have combined an overwhelming programmatic variety with ninety-two acres of parking into a spiraling megastructure capable of hosting 123,000 people. As Levine notes, the vast interior could have accommodated over one-fifth of the city's mid-century population, while parking facilities in its helical exoskeleton would have exceeded planners' recommendations for all of downtown. [16]

[16] Levine, *Urbanism*, 305.

Wright later designed a scaled-down proposal for the same site, but he never understood the original scheme's overabundance of program and parking to be at all problematic. In fact, it was precisely calibrated to produce a renewed urban culture by reaching beyond its immediate environs to reintegrate suburbanites and their automobiles with the city. Levine contends, "In embracing the dynamics and diversity of the city and harnessing the automobile to that centralizing end, the earlier and later projects provide a forum for public gathering and communal activity in which the metaphor of the city as stage and the building as theater play a crucial role." [17] Wright's architecture would have drawn visitors to its festive environs from across the suburbanizing region, making them into "agents in the construction of the symbolic form signifying the city's role in the life of the individual and the collectivity." [18] In Levine's telling, the sheer quantity and variety of the civic center's cultural facilities, its amelioration of traffic congestion, and the permanent urban spectacle thereby created would have collectively averted the numerous, incipient upheavals awaiting mid-century American cities. In the imagined, Wrightian late twentieth century, Pittsburgh would have painlessly navigated the effects of white flight by accommodating to an extreme degree the very mode of transportation that enabled it while also accelerating the city's transition from heavy industry to culture industry.

[17] Levine, *Urbanism*, 331.

[18] Levine, *Urbanism*, 333.

At a certain level, one can imagine the successes of Wright's unbuilt urban works. Levine certainly encourages such speculation. The "spectacular and enticing" drive along the Pittsburgh civic center's "four-and-a-half mile long 'street in the air,'" he narrates in present tense, "allows people to look across the space and feel a sense of the community they are part of at the same time as it affords panoramic views of the city and surrounding landscape." [19] Similar scenes accompany other projects, producing a composite image across the book's chapters in which Wright's skillful hand would undoubtedly have solved the twentieth-century American city's most pressing architectural and infrastructural problems (if only fickle clients and meddling bureaucrats had not denied him the opportunity).

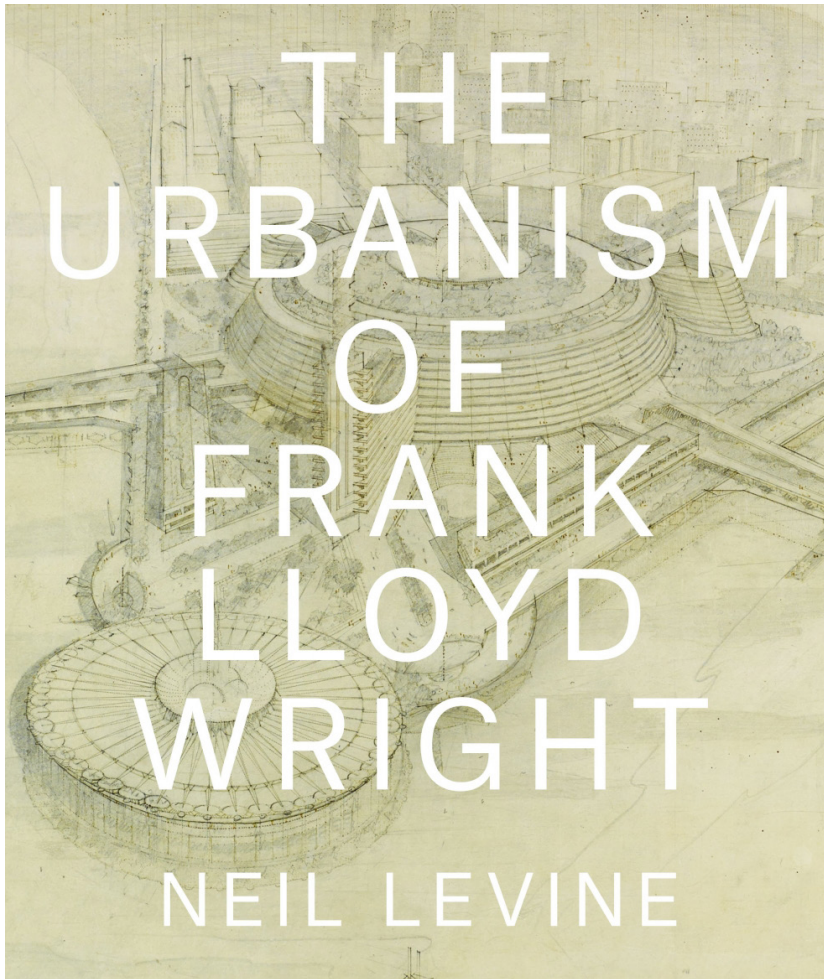
[19] Levine, *Urbanism*, 308.

Yet the same composite image merely disassembles other, more nebulous issues. Readers are encouraged to imagine the joys of driving through Wright's overwrought Pittsburgh project. They are not asked to consider its viability in terms of urban renewal's actual record. No mention is made of the

fitful success of actually built projects that, to borrow David Harvey's words, similarly used an "architecture of spectacle, with its sense of surface glitter and transitory participatory pleasure, of display and ephemerality, of *jouissance*," as "a means to attract capital and people (of the right sort)" back to American downtowns after the race riots, anti-war demonstrations, and countercultural events of the late-1960s. [20] In Levine's narration of Wright's alternative twentieth century, the reintegration of people and cars with the city produced only cultural cohesion, social stability, and economic equilibrium.

Here is where the question concerning Usonia resurfaces. If Usonia embodied Wright's effort to extrapolate an ideal American future from the fraught conditions of his present, Levine's history attempts the same operation in reverse, overlaying a sense of Wrightian resolution onto the complex realities of twentieth-century urban history. The historiographic dilemma of this result is clearest if one acknowledges an unavoidable specter haunting that history, namely, race.

Wright rarely addressed the question of race head-on, and Levine makes no mention of it. As mentioned above, the architect often euphemistically equated the U.S.'s ethnic diversity with other American architects' propensity for stylistic eclecticism before proffering his own "organic" architecture as a tool for cultural assimilation. He did design two, little-known projects exclusively for African Americans, the Rosenwald School in Virginia (1928) and the Jesse C. Fisher Houses in North Carolina (1957). [21]



[20] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 91, 92

[21] On the Rosenwald School, see Mabel O. Wilson, "Rosenwald School: Lessons in Progressive Education," in Barry Bergdoll and Jennifer Gray, eds., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 96–104. In print, the Fisher Houses remain obscure, aside from requisite inclusion in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer and Yukio Futugawa, eds., *Frank Lloyd Wright*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: A.D.A. Edita, 1988), 300–301; and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Complete Works/ Das Gesamtwerk/L'œuvre complete*, vol. 3 (Cologne: Taschen, 2011), 501. The Rosenwald School figures prominently in MoMA's *Frank Lloyd Wright at 150* exhibition, while the Fisher Houses are featured in the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture's fall 2017 exhibition *Living in America: Frank Lloyd Wright, Harlem & Modern Housing* at Columbia University's Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery. Wright did also include designs for a "negro cabin" as servants' quarters at his sprawling Auldbrass Plantation in Beaufort County, South Carolina (1939–1959), which was commissioned by a white businessman.

The image on the cover of Neil Levine's book is an aerial perspective of Wright's Point Park Civic Center project, first scheme, 1947.

Documentation and correspondence related to the Fisher Houses in the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives reveal little of Wright's attitudes toward race. In a 1929 letter to Lewis Mumford, however, Wright explained that designing the Rosenwald School was like "another modest excursion into the nature and feeling of an alien race such as was the Tokio [*sic*] hotel on a grand scale." [22] The utter foreignness of black Americans to Wright's experience of American society raises the question of what place, if any, they would have had in a project like the Pittsburgh Civic Center and, more broadly, in Usonia.

Would Wright have counted the residents of Pittsburgh's Hill District, a historically black neighborhood just east of downtown, among the "urban multitudes" for whom he designed? [23] His drawings and descriptions of the project show an unwavering focus on the creation of cultural and transportation infrastructures to draw, in Levine's words, "the ever-expanding masses of suburbanites [...] back to the city and to reidentifying with it." [24] No attention was given to facilitating movement across downtown. This may have been because in 1943, three years before Wright designed the civic center, a city councilman advocated the wholesale demolition of the Hill District on the grounds that "there would be no social loss if [the area's buildings] were all destroyed." [25] Wright's project was abandoned in 1948. Five years later, in 1953, Edgar Kaufmann (the architect's sometime patron and prime mover of the original civic center project) successfully lobbied for the opera and sports arena that was to have been included in Wright's design to be sited in the Hill District, permanently displacing eight thousand residents. [26] The stated ambitions of Wright's project were thus partially and belatedly realized: suburbanites and their automobiles were reconciled with the city. It happened to come at the expense of black Pittsburghers. While Wright's scheme would not have required such staggering displacement, neither he nor his municipal clients made any overtures to the city's minority population.

This should be read as neither a facile accusation of racism on Wright's part nor a suggestion that Usonia was, in the end, a segregated dystopia. It is instead an argument to more fully recognize Wright's entanglement

[22] Frank Lloyd Wright to Lewis Mumford, January 7, 1929, in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer and Robert Wojtowicz, eds., *Frank Lloyd Wright & Lewis Mumford: Thirty Years of Correspondence* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 60. Wright is referring to his Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (1919–1923; demolished in 1968).

[23] Wright quoted in Levine, *Urbanism*, 292.

[24] Levine, *Urbanism*, 331.

[25] George E. Evans, "Here Is a Postwar Job for Pittsburgh: Transforming The Hill District," *Greater Pittsburgh 24* (July–August 1943), [link](#).

[26] See Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 55–56.



A protest in Pittsburgh's Hill District, August 18, 1951. During the preceding month, speeding motorists killed two pedestrians, including six-year-old Andy Jackson. In 1943 a city councilman dismissed the neighborhood's "disease ridden slums" as unworthy of basic infrastructural investments like streetlights and stop signs, the lack of which residents of the predominantly black neighborhood blamed for the deaths. Photograph by Charles "Teenie" Harris. Courtesy of the Teenie Harris Archive, Carnegie Museum of Art.

with complex realities. His work and thought have too often been considered apart from the social and material conditions in which they were produced. Levine makes a strong case for the architect's active participation in modern urbanism's evolving discursive landscape. But Wright is also implicated in the multifarious forms of discrimination that underpinned that discourse. The challenge facing historians, critics, and admirers of Wright's work can therefore best be rendered in the form of a question that layers race onto Wright's gendered Usonian ideal: Would black residents of the "modern Usonian city" have enjoyed the same "manlike freedom" as their white compatriots?