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Architecture and Social Vision

Thomas R. Fisher

It is a commonplace that architecture is a social art. A building reflects not just the ideas of its architect, but the ideals of the clients who commission it and the communities whose representatives approve it.

The best architecture, though, does more than just reflect a society's ideals. It challenges the ideals with what that society could be. Such architecture is not just a social art. It embodies a social vision.

Consider the work of Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. Both architects had very strong opinions about the ideal society that ran counter to the dominant thinking of their time. And both made those ideas central to their work.

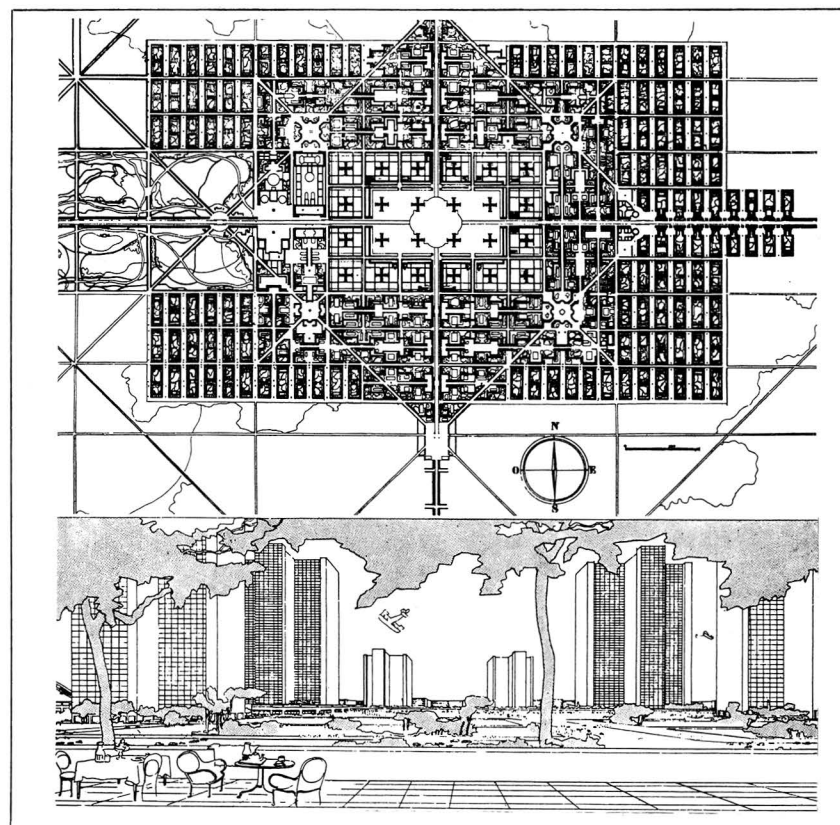
Le Corbusier, for example, saw human freedom as dependent upon, and inseparable from, authority. Most of his work is an exploration, in physical form, of that one idea. This is most apparent in Le Corbusier's urban design schemes.

In his various plans for Paris, for instance, Le Corbusier called for the demolition of most of the city's historic fabric and its replacement with super-blocks of apartments and highrise office buildings accommodating as many as 50,000 people (1). His intent was to liberate the ground for parkland and the free interaction of people. Such planning has been called anti-urban and inhuman.

But calling it so depends upon one's view of freedom and authority. Le Corbusier, by condensing Paris into towers, saw himself enhancing urban life and human freedom, not detracting from it. Were he to see what has come of his urban design ideas, where automobiles rather than people now occupy much of the land among our cities' towers, I suspect that he would attribute the failure not to his idea but to authorities unwilling or unable to assert the control necessary to make it work.

The juxtaposition of authority and freedom takes a different form in Le Corbusier's proposals for Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil (2, 3) and for Montevideo, Uruguay (4). In those schemes, the physical order comes not from the geometry of the plan as in his Paris proposals, but from the continuous structural frame within which apartments of varying configurations could be built. The sheer size of the structure would have required the coordination and control of a central authority. But the use of that authority to build such a structure also would have given individuals much more freedom in the design and arrangement of their living space than would ever have been possible at such densities.

Le Corbusier's views on freedom and authority may be most clear in his urban design, but they also inform almost every detail of his architecture. The expression of authority in his buildings included his use of proportional systems

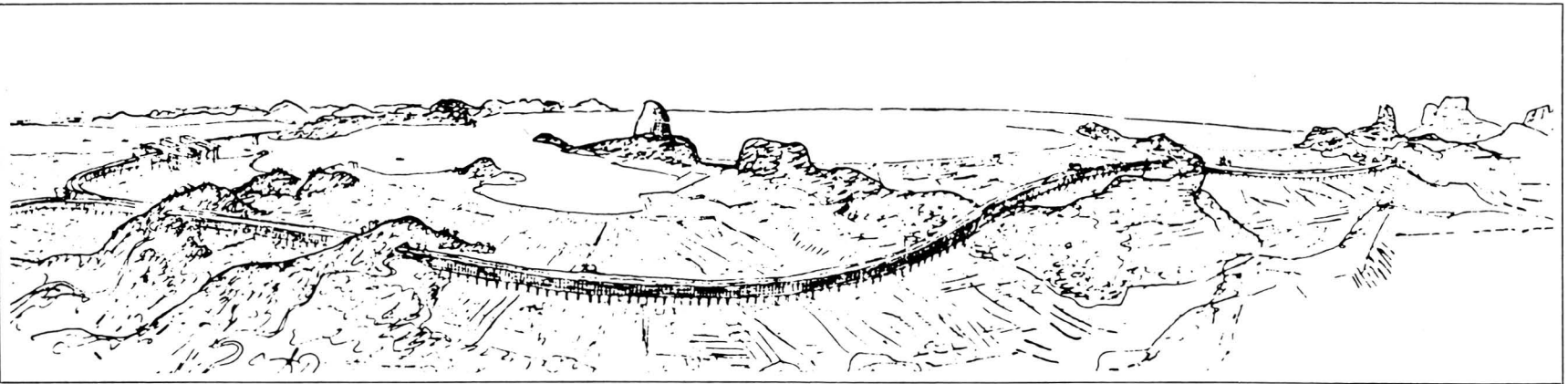


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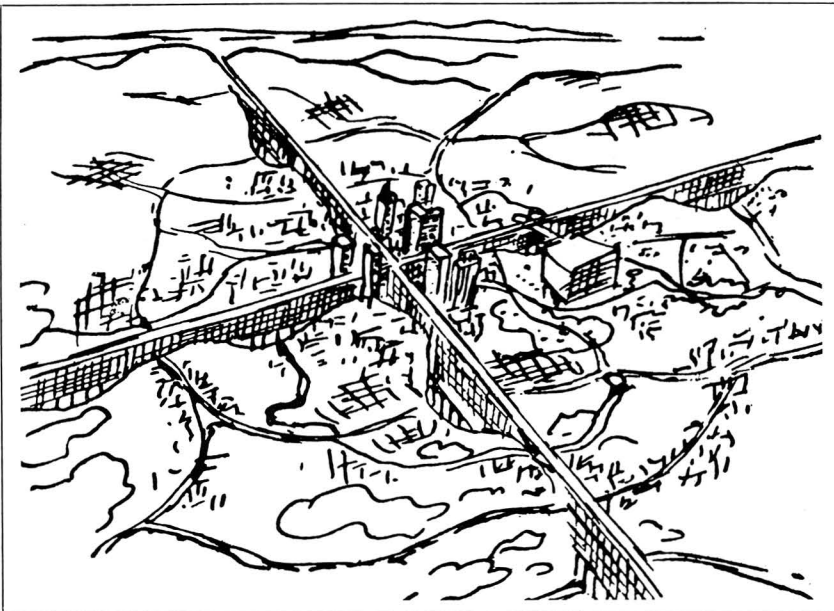
— such as the Golden Section proportions he used to regulate the placement of openings in the facade of the villa at Garche (5) — or his use of structural systems — such as uniform grid of columns that he carried through the Strasbourg Congress Hall project (6).

Le Corbusier believed the imposition of such order-giving devices enhanced his freedom as a designer as well as that of his buildings' inhabitants. That becomes evident in his often idiosyn-

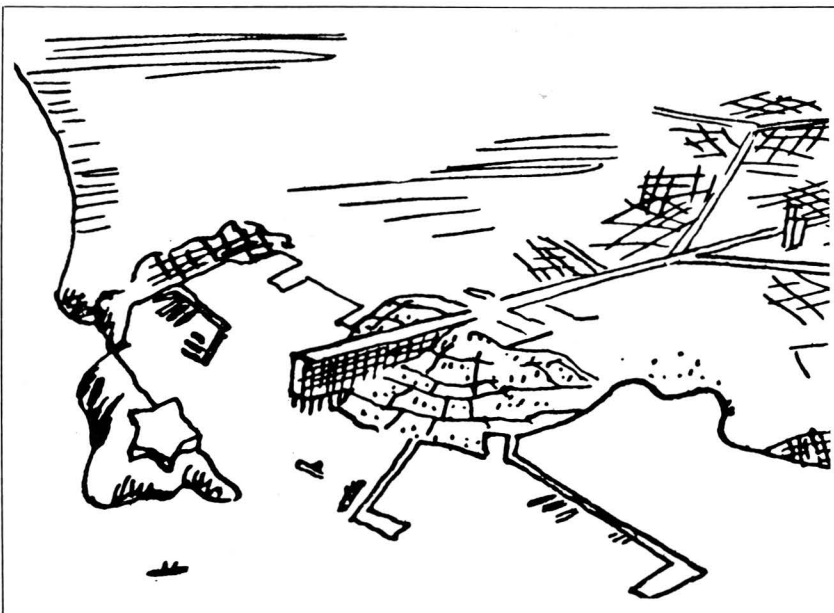
cratic arrangement of walls, windows and spaces in his designs. Partitions, for example, were often separated from the structure and given curvilinear shapes to emphasize their nonbearing role (6); windows were often asymmetrically placed, and varied considerably in size or type to emphasize the diversity of possible arrangements (5); and multi-level spaces were often cut in unexpected locations to heighten the sense of movement through, and relationships within, a building.



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This idea of freedom through authority did not end with Le Corbusier's architecture and urban design. He was, for example, a supporter of syndicalism — a trade union movement popular in France that espoused union control of the means of production.

While syndicalism was anarchistic in its rejection of parliamentary democracy, its adherents also supported fascist leaders — a belief in the coexistence of individual freedom and a strong, central authority that must have seemed as compelling to Le Corbusier as it has political philosophers for well over 2,000 years. From Plato's Republic, were the absolute rule of philosopher-kings was seen as essential to freedom, to Thomas Hobbe's Leviathan, where the absolute rule of a central authority was seen as necessary to civilized life, authority and freedom have long been linked by political theorists.

While Le Corbusier may not have been fully aware of the idea's lineage, he was certainly conscious of its architectural implications.

Frank Lloyd Wright's work stems from a very different social vision. But like that of Le Corbusier, Wright's social ideas infused almost every aspect of his urban design and architecture.

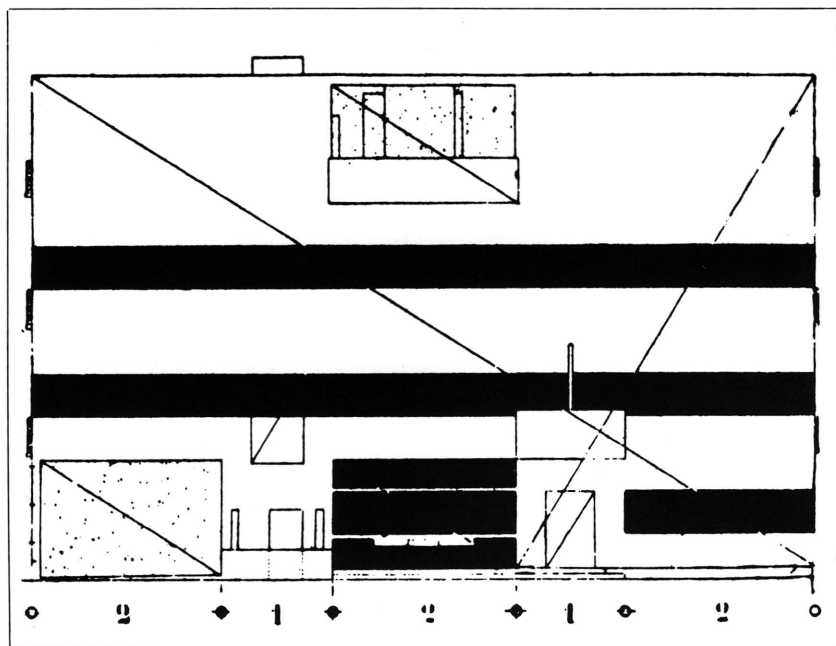
Wright's Broadacre City proposal, for example, gave form to the agrarian ideal of people living close to, and off of, the land. What made that ideal possible, in

Wright's mind, was technology such as the automobile and helicopter that would tie the decentralized communities together (7).

Just as Le Corbusier has been criticized for promoting the destruction of city centers, so too has Wright been criticized for promoting suburban sprawl. But both men envisioned a new social and political order as essential to their new urban forms. Wright saw individual freedom nurtured not by a strong central authority but by an intimacy with nature and by the small-scale institutions of family and community. Government for Wright, as for Thoreau, was best that governed least.

Broadacre City, with most of its housing standing as detached structures, has nature rather than community as the dominant element. Other planning schemes by Wright placed more emphasis on the latter, especially communities on the scale of a few families. His quadruple Block Project of 1902 (8), for instance, had four houses occupying the corners of a square block: each with its own driveway, entrance and backyard. A low wall, which enclosed the backyards and linked the houses, also distinguished the community of four families from the surrounding neighborhood.

Wright's social vision affected his architecture as much as his urban design. His respect for nature becomes apparent, for example, in his siting of buildings to disrupt as little



5 of the landscape as possible and in his use of glass walls and doors to encourage outdoor living (9).

Wright, however, did not value the preservation of the land above the freedom of the individual. He saw nature, instead, as a model of human society in which each individual, like a seed in nature, would be free to develop in his or her own way, unconstrained by received tradition and a central authority.

Such a society, Wright thought, should be composed of small-scale, consensual communities, the form of which he explored in his commercial and institutional buildings such as the Unity Temple (10) and the Johnson's Wax headquarters (11). Those buildings had few windows — expressive of the community's inwardness and necessary exclusivity — and had at least one, multilevel interior space — expressive of the community's dependence upon communication and openness among its members.

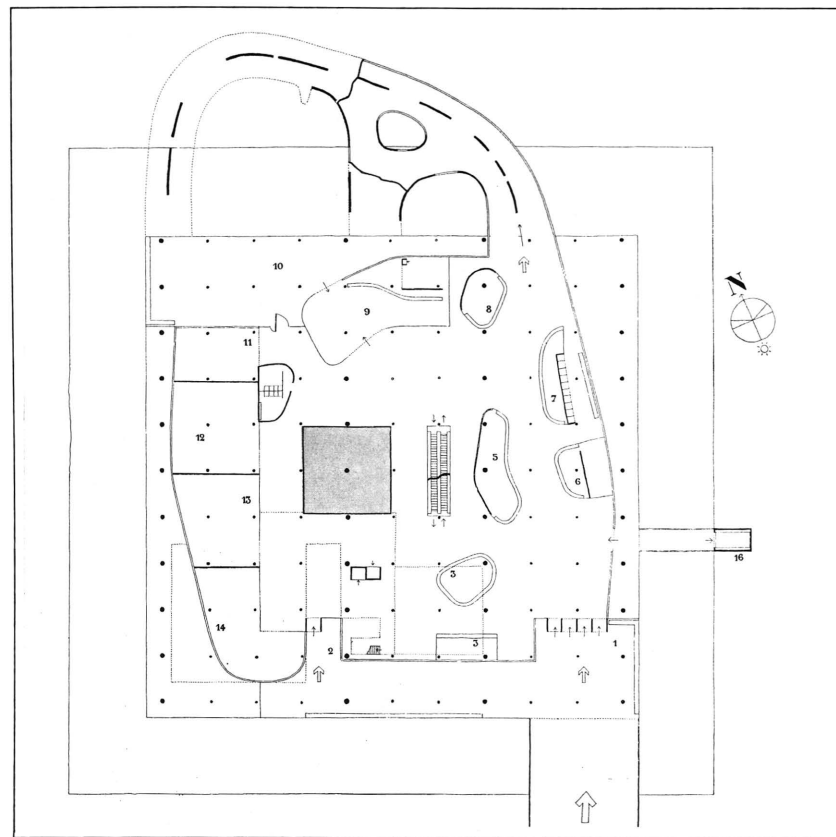
Wright's organic social vision also relates to his frequent manipulation of scale. He frequently lowered ceilings, raised windows, concealed entrances and distorted other dimensional cues

such as the size of a brick or the width of an eave. He altered our expectations of scale in this way as if to prepare us for a new scale of social life.

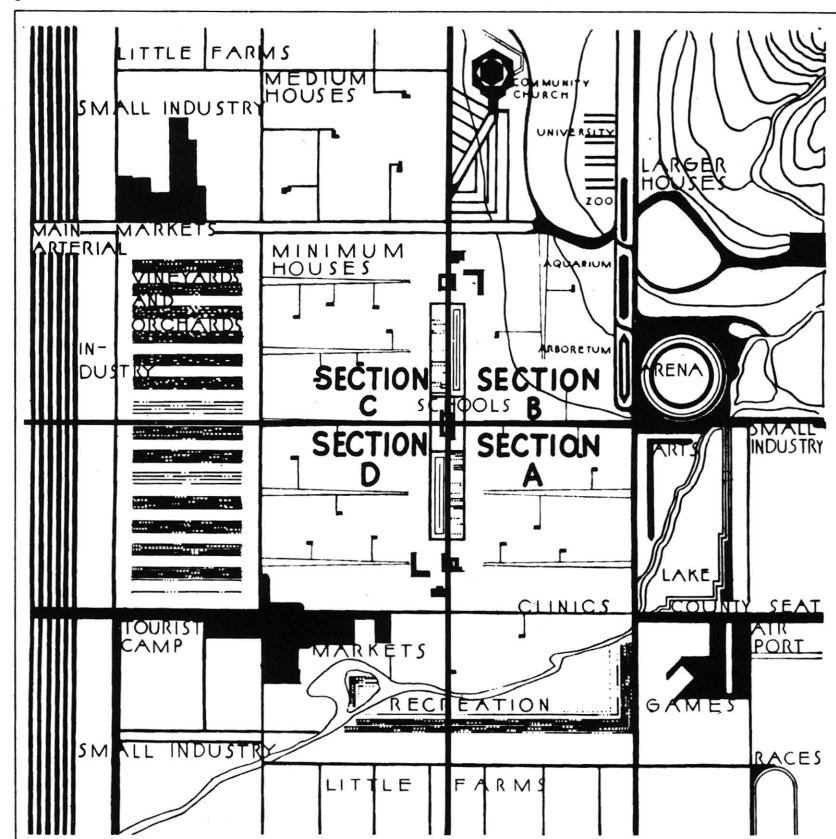
Wright's vision, like those of Le Corbusier, had a considerable ancestry. Jean Jacques Rousseau, for example, idealized life lived close to nature and societies in which consensus, rather than an absolute authority, ruled. Similar ideas motivated the democratic and agrarian ideas of Thomas Jefferson, and the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. While Wright never systematized his social ideas into a coherent theory, he was very much conscious of their roots, especially among American thinkers.

I mention this not to argue the merits or deficiencies of these social visions, but to show how central they were to the architecture of Le Corbusier and Wright. The genius of those two architects, like most great architects, lay not so much in the forms they designed, but in their ability to give form to a larger social ideal.

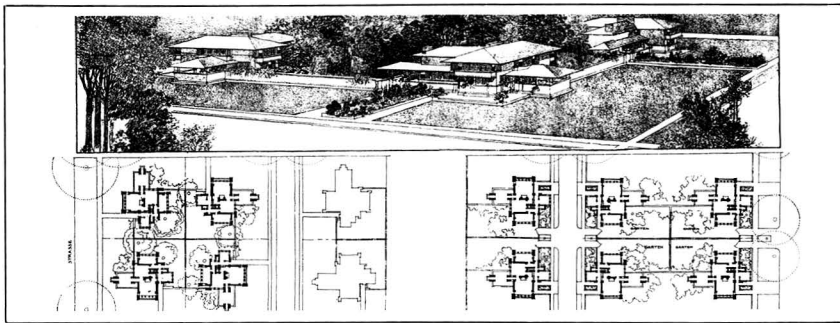
That runs counter to much of today's conventional wisdom. Architects such as Le Corbusier and Wright are now emulated, not because of their social



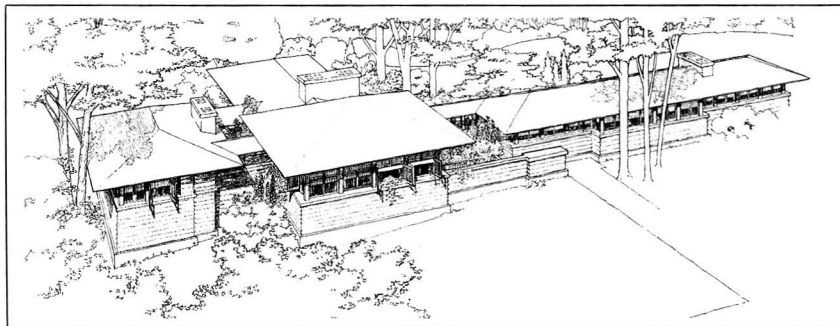
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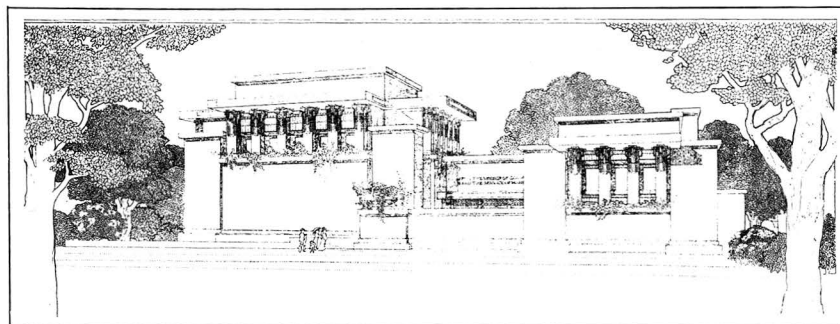
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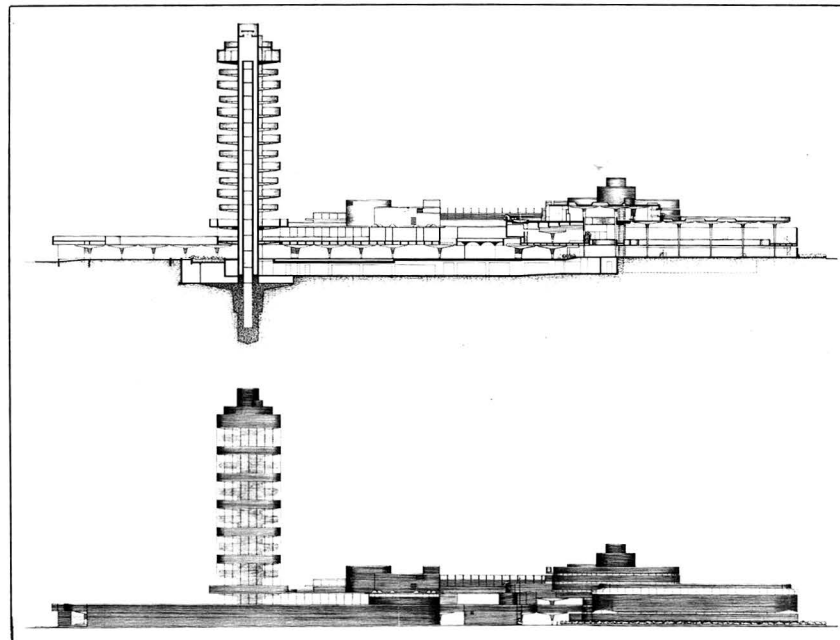
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theories but because of the form of their buildings. Indeed, social theory is largely seen, at best, as irrelevant and, at worst, as the basis for all that was destructive in modern architecture.

This rejection of visionary architecture has several motives. Some people have argued that, because architects as brilliant as Le Corbusier or Wright could not change the world to fit their social ideas, the possession of such ideas is itself pointless. That assumes, of course, that the reason for having such ideas is to change the world. Whatever Le Corbusier and Wright might have said or even secretly hoped, their social vision served not to effect social change, but to create better architecture — to guide and give meaning to form. Architecture purged of such vision becomes arbitrary.

Another common argument maintains that the responsibility of architects lies with their art, not with social theory or politics. Those who take this position offer a pragmatic argument: attention paid to social and political issues either distracts architects, taking too much of their time, or corrupts architecture, turning it into a vehicle of ideology.

The mistaken assumption is that architecture is somehow separate from the world, and that architects can somehow work unaffected by it. Were architecture indeed able to be isolated from society, it would become trivial, a matter solely of personal expression. If architecture is to remain a social art, then its practitioners cannot help but take a position regarding society.

Ironically, such arguments are the product of a social theory. To deny that architects have any responsibility to envision a better society is to accept society as it is. And to insist that architecture has no connection to social and political ideals is to create an architecture of the status quo, an architecture self-satisfied and complacent.

Social vision isn't the sole property of genius. While it characterizes the work of the greatest architects, it is the responsibility of anyone who attempts to give physical form to society — be they urban planners, architects or interior or industrial designers. While a coherent set of ideas can take time to develop, the process must begin in school.

Louis Sullivan, in a 1907 essay titled "The Young Man in Architecture," wrote that students must learn to develop independent judgments about the world around them before they begin the study of architecture. While Sullivan saw that as a way of countering the emphasis on the historical styles then current in architectural schools, his suggestion has as much validity now as it did in 1907.

Great architecture has always come from people who have thought hard about the world around them — about issues such as freedom and authority or privacy and community. The teaching and practice of architecture must begin in the same way: matters of form and function must follow philosophy. Such is the first step toward making an architecture truly worthy of the name.