

Walt Disney and the Theme Park City:

The Development and Decline of the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow

The reputation of Walt Disney as eccentric innovator of the animation, film, and theme park industries is well known, yet lesser so is the story of Walt Disney as midcentury urbanist. An autocratic thinker who rubbed shoulders with the likes of Robert Moses and Ray Bradbury, Disney believed that technology backed by a strong capitalist backbone would bring about a new era of prosperity in America (Thomas, 2011). Increasingly disillusioned with the failures of urban governance after World War II, he became infatuated with the idea of an urban planning that could be applied to a corporate rather than a bureaucratic process (Gennaway, 2015). When Walt Disney Productions began working on a Disney World theme park on the East Coast in 1959, Disney seized the opportunity and pushed a new concept into the plans: the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, or EPCOT. Partly an operating company town of 20,000 people and partly an educational model for tourists, EPCOT was the manifestation of Disney's planning knowledge and personal ideology, a plan bearing the signature of one of the century's largest cultural icons. Yet despite the power and promise behind Disney's name, the inherent contradiction between an economic model dependent on tourism and an ambition to be a replicable physical model for American cities would lead to the design's implosion.

Disney's EPCOT cannot be understood isolated from the Disney World masterplan, its infrastructure and economy intrinsically linked to the larger site. The masterplan was sited on 27,400 acres straddling Osceola County and Orange County, with a single entryway off

Interstate 4 (Fig. 1) (Patches, 2015 and Sklar, 1966). From the highway exit, a linear succession of elements was laid out along a central monorail axis: first, an entrance complex with 11,000 parking spaces, an airport, 16 motels, a camper area, and a trailer park; then a 1,000-acre industrial park; then EPCOT itself; and last the theme park, with five golf courses, several themed resorts, and a 10,000-car employee parking lot. A second private entrance off the highway led to an executive residential area with its own golf course, included because, as a close colleague would confide, “Walt wanted a place for his friends to live” (Gennaway, 2015).

EPCOT itself was composed in a radial pattern bisected by the axial monorail (Fig. 2). The center was demarcated by a 30-floor ‘Cosmopolitan Hotel’ rising out of a 50-acre enclosed ‘urban center’ (Fig. 3), stacked vertically to include a pedestrian shopping mall themed to a world bazaar, a transportation lobby with transfers from the monorail line to local electric ‘WEDWAY People Mover’ lines, and below a separated highway and automobile parking level and a truck highway and loading docks (Fig.4) (Sklar, 1966). Radiating out of the central mall were smaller towers of high-density housing and then the greenbelt, with sports fields and civic institutions enclosed by an automobile bypass. Beyond the highway, the ‘WEDWAY People Movers’ moved radially out from the ‘urban center’ to neighborhoods of low-density housing, arranged with houses surrounding pedestrian-oriented superblocks of green space (Fig. 5).

The EPCOT plan was the manifestation of Disney’s lifelong struggle with ideology, reflecting his thoughts on governance, economy, and nation. His early animation work established him as a leader in sentimental modernism, merging minimalist compositions with deeply psychological representations, and his cartoons carried a populist sentiment representative of his small-town midwestern upbringing by a socialist father (Watts, 1995). However, a labor strike that broke out at his studio in July 1941 revealed an innate paternalism in Disney’s

managerial style. Embarrassed at the workers' refusal of his offer to form a company union, Disney took out a full-page advertisement in *Variety* magazine accusing covert Communists on his payroll of instigating the strike. His troubles worsened soon after when the United States Army commandeered his studio for the war effort, and the government failed to pay for several propaganda pieces the studio made over the course of the war. The result of these incidents was a dramatic shift away from the political left, with Disney's deep hurt and suspicion of socialists and the government molding him into a Goldwater conservative over the course of the 1950s.

This ideology can be seen clearly in the design and planning of EPCOT. Disney distrusted the notion that America's cities could be saved, and he saw the explosion of post-war corporate technologies as evidence that American capitalism could create its own systems of living independent from the outdated taxes and regulations of the old, socialist America (Arnold, 2002). EPCOT would be controlled and financed by corporations, with Walt Disney Productions owning and operating the city according to the internal logic of its capitalist functions, predominantly via tourism. Additionally, the paternalism that underlined Disney's politics manifest in EPCOT as a reliance on technocratic solutions to the social problems of midcentury living. The spatial separation of functions was meant to clarify and organize the daily work of residents' lives, rendering them more fulfilled and productive for the company, while the hierarchy of transit systems would avoid the cluttered chaos that slowed the old city.

The plan exhibited a significant knowledge of midcentury planning theory regarding the utopian city. He was first exposed to city planning literature in 1959 when he was propositioned by billionaire John McArthur to build a large real estate project in Palm Beach, Florida (Gennaway, 2015). Though the deal would fall apart during negotiations, Disney became engrossed with the writings of Ebenezer Howard and the formalism of his function-separated

radial garden cities (Fig. 6). Further, during his work on the 1964-65 New York World's Fair he was introduced to the work of Victor Gruen, who had designed the fair proposal for Washington D.C. Gruen's 1964 *The Heart of Our Cities* became Disney's textbook, and EPCOT included literal translations of Gruen's proposals, including an enclosed shopping center acting as a community center and the physical separation of all mechanical and utilitarian functions from the public realm, among others (Fig. 7) (Gennaway, 2014). Though Disney saw public transit as the most efficient method of moving human capital in the service of corporate productivity, he was a firm believer in automobile infrastructure, counting on Disney World's siting along Florida's interstate highways to provide access to the tourist markets that would finance his experiments. The plan's reliance on hierarchy and movement also recalls Le Corbusier's Radiant City, which suggested that the "hierarchy of administration has replaced the state" (Fig. 8) (Butakman, 1991). And Disney's rhetorical weaving of the American Way into the fabric of his tabula rasa utopia reflect Lewis Mumford's writings on socially engineering the "culture of the folk" (Watts, 1995).

Though dominated by his personal beliefs and idiosyncrasies, the design of EPCOT was not the solely the creation of Disney himself. He enlisted a select group of trusted employees from WED Enterprises, the company he founded to help design Disneyland when Walt Disney Productions wanted to free themselves from liability. The site was selected from fifty possible properties by Buzz Price, whose firm Economics Research Associates was funded by Disney himself following Price's site analysis work on Disneyland (Emerson, 2009). Price would also complete the economic master plan, cash flow analysis, and economic impact study for the Disney World project (O'Brien, 2007). Environmental and site planning was conducted by WED Enterprise planner Marvin Davis, and artist Herbert Ryman produced much of the project's iconic concept art (Gennaway, 2015). Additionally, contemporary perceptions on Disney's

narrative logic for the project are the product of work by Marty Sklar, who wrote alternative scripts for EPCOT's promotional video for public versus corporate audiences (O'Brien, 2007).

The Disney World project was born first under the moniker 'Project X', reflecting the secrecy that surrounded it leading up to its announcement in 1965 (Emerson, 2009). Frustrated at how the rapid commercial development that spread around Disneyland in Anaheim distracted tourists from his theme park, Disney understood that his tabula rasa vision of a corporate utopia could only succeed so long as he could avoid the inevitable land speculation attached to his built projects. A number of shell companies acted on behalf of Walt Disney Productions to purchase the land piecemeal, predominantly from farmers confused why groups with names like Ayefour Development and Latin-American Development wanted their swampy land. Disney's anxiety extended to the project's site planning, selecting land bounded by two large swamps so, in his words, "One thing we don't need is a fence to protect us from trespassers" (Sklar, 1966).

In addition to land sufficiently detached from existing or future development, Disney's tabula rasa vision required as much political detachment from state and federal governments as possible. In May 1966, Disney successfully petitioned the government to transfer municipal responsibilities to the newly-formed Reedy Creek Improvement District to create an autonomous collection of land holdings all owned by proxy by Walt Disney Productions (Emerson, 2009). Still active today, the District is governed by a five-person Board of Supervisors, all senior members of Walt Disney Productions, elected by the landowners of the District. With the entirety of the District's land owned by Walt Disney Productions minus five-acre parcels given to the five senior members on the Board, the company effectively manages the democratic processes within the region. This gives Walt Disney Production control over the land use,

zoning, building code, utilities, roads, fire protection and emergency medical services, bond issuance, and power production permissions including nuclear fission.

To fund the Disney World project, Disney turned to his corporate partners (Thomas, 2011). He had mastered the process of using corporate sponsorship to fund capital projects with Disneyland and perfected it on behalf of Robert Moses in his help with the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. While Disney World's theme park was to be financed similarly to these previous attractions, EPCOT was unique in weaving the operations of the corporate sponsors directly into the functioning of the project. Sponsoring corporations would occupy the industrial park, advertising their projects to the tourists passing through to the theme park, and their employees would be residents of EPCOT alongside the workers of the theme park and tourism-support functions (Gennaway, 2015). Walt Disney Productions was in the process of securing a six-month trial 'sabbatical' with General Electric and its employees when, after a short and desperate battle against lung cancer, Disney died on December 15, 1966 (Patches, 2015).

The sudden death of its co-founder and leading visionary shook Walt Disney Productions and forced the company's other executives to reassess their priorities and capabilities. Though the Disney World project continued under the freedoms of the Reedy Creek Improvement District with the theme park and resorts breaking ground in 1967 and opening in 1971, Disney's EPCOT design staff became increasingly frustrated and worried by the task of solving the various logistical questions left unanswered by his death (Patches, 2015). Recognizing that the root cause of the company's hesitation was in knowledge gaps in transitioning from entertainment to municipal governance, Marty Sklar, under his new role as Vice President of Concepts and Planning for WED Enterprises, initiated a series of meetings with energy, healthcare, and transportation experts from industry, government, and academia on how to

translate Disney's ideas on tourism-based education into a theme park model (O'Brien, 2007). The success of these meetings led to several high-profile corporations signing on to sponsor major attractions, and the EPCOT Center theme park opened 1982, featuring an open-air World Showcase reminiscent of the original's themed pedestrian mall and a Future World demonstrating the visions of various corporations in their technologies solving questions of energy independence, environmental systems, transportation, and innovation.

Was EPCOT a failure? In as much as Disney desired his corporation-run residential community to serve as a typology for future urban development, it is hard to say that the EPCOT Center theme park is a proper manifestation of his proposed educational model. Yet the collapse of the original plan for EPCOT after his death is likely more a sign of the inherent contradictions in his proposed solutions to midcentury America's social ills than a failure of managerial procedure by Walt Disney Productions. Disney saw EPCOT as a model for tourists to learn about the newest planning technologies and take them home to their own communities, yet economically EPCOT was hardly an average American town. The site selection for the Disney World project was driven by a need for a blank slate on which to construct a standardized plan; though EPCOT required connections to a national market of tourists, the plan did not require spatial relationships to waterfronts, natural resources, or topography, elements that would constrain the site selection of other corporations. The plan's 'urban center' was a glorified shopping mall meant largely for the tourists whose voyeurism would fund the city's more pragmatic operations, and the theme park was assumed to be a significant employer for the population of 20,000. Additionally, the residential structures were to be owned by Walt Disney Productions, not the residents, under the presumption that they would occupy the town only so

long as they were of working age; questions of schooling, retirement, and residential succession were avoided entirely in promotional materials (Gennaway, 2015).

If EPCOT's success were to rather be measured as an isolated entity, however, then the prognosis is more optimistic. Walt Disney Productions today operates its Disney World properties independent of standard municipal and regulatory procedures, owning the land rights to its democratic processes. With over 20 million people visiting in 2016 and an entire industry of destination entertainment spawned from its economic mechanics, the Disney World project has been an unparalleled success in demonstrating that a corporation can effectively hold comprehensive control over a city-sized parcel of land with city-sized populations participating in its functions (Bevel, 2017). It's authoritarian methods of control, whether in image, safety, cleanliness, or crowd movement, has been cited among planning scholars, bringing the Disney-planning relationship full circle (Shearing and Stenning, 1985). The EPCOT Center theme park has even been associated with dozens of published academic papers, its facilities perhaps just as productive for research as the original plan's tourist-filled industrial park may have been.

This final point illustrates the fundamental takeaway from the development and decline of the original EPCOT plan: with an economy dependent on tourism, a residential population that would serve as prop workers until they were forced to retire out of town, and a construction budget requiring high-profile sponsors only signing on for the promised foot traffic, EPCOT was never a plan for a city and always a plan for a theme park. Disney saw EPCOT as a playground in which the cutting edge would be tested in real time, with city life as the showroom floor for his corporate partners. He relied heavily on his knowledge of the economics of entertainment, and entertainment was the only source of funding on which he could draw to test the ideas outside of his industry. It was in part his celebrity as an entertainment icon that gave him the

leverage to win political favors leading to the establishment of the Reedy Creek Improvement District and free him from the confines of the American political system; yet perhaps rather than freeing him, such a move only put him further into a bubble of isolating circumstances limiting the replicability and influence of his work. Perhaps the Disney World project in its contemporary state is the true manifestation of Disney's ideological values and circumstances.

In any regard, the influence of the original plan for EPCOT and Disney World pales in comparison to the influence of the constructed project that has grown over the past 45 years. Hundreds of millions of visitors have paid to see the follies Walt Disney Productions has carved out of space, and this author is among the millions who have taken away significant inspiration on how to view the world around them. It was through the gaudy Future World of the EPCOT Center theme park that I discovered my love of architecture for its emotive powers, carrying me to my place today in graduate school where I approach the park's sights with a significantly more critical eye. Whether good or bad, the impacts of Disney World on the global cultural consciousness is in competition with sites like Rome, Paris, and New York as some of the most iconic and recognized landscapes ever constructed. Though the aesthetics and functions of the site differ dramatically from the plans initiated by Disney in the 1960s, the mechanics that drive its performance are essentially the same; and though we will never know Walt Disney's opinion on the matter, that may very well be enough to call Project X a success.

Works Cited

- Arnold, M.C. (2002). A Commodified Utopia. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/theoriginalepcot/a-look-back>
- Bevil, D. (2017, June 1). Disney World Attendance Down in 2016, Reports Say. *The Orlando Sentinel*. Retrieved from <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/business/tourism/os-bz-disney-attendance-down-20170601-story.html>
- Bukatman, S. (1991). There's Always Tomorrowland: Disney and the Hypercinematic Experience. *October*, 57. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778872>
- Davis, M. [Artist] (1966). [Image of EPCOT Radial Plan]. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/theoriginalepcot/epcot-and-the-heart-of-our-cities>
- Emerson, C.D. (2009). Merging Public and Private Governance: How Disney's Reedy Creek Improvement District 'Re-Imagined' the Traditional Division of Local Regulatory Powers. *Florida State University Law Review*, 36(177). Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B0YsdP6AEODhazR1Wm1YVWFUR1U/edit>
- Gennaway, S. (2015). Walt & Epcot Master Plan. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/theoriginalepcot/walt-epcot-master-plan>
- Gennaway, S. (2014). EPCOT and the Heart of Our Cities. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/theoriginalepcot/epcot-and-the-heart-of-our-cities>
- Gruen, V. [Artist] (1964). [Architectural drawing from *The Heart of Our Cities*]. Retrieved from <https://ahcwyo.org/2015/02/03/victor-gruen-architect-of-urban-renewal/>
- Howard, E. [Artist] (1902). [Illustration of the Garden City concept]. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Garden_City_Concept_by_Howard.jpg
- Le Corbusier [Artist] (1922). La Ville Radieuse [Illustration]. Retrieved from <http://jhenniferamundson.net/arc-331/arc-331-images/neues-bauen/>
- O'Brien, T. (2007). *Ripley's Legends Pioneers of the Amusement Park Industry: Volume One*. Nashville, TN: Ripley Publishing.
- Patches, M. (2015, May 20). Inside Walt Disney's Ambitious, Failed Plan to Build the City of Tomorrow. *Esquire*. Retrieved from <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/news/a35104/walt-disney-epcot-history-city-of-tomorrow/>
- Shearing, C. and Stenning, P.C. (1985). From the Panopticon to Disney World: the Development of Discipline. In Doob, A.N. and Greenspan, E.L. (Eds.) *Perspectives in Criminal Law: Essays in Honour of John Ll. J. Edward*. Canada Law Book Inc.: Toronto, Canada.

Sklar, M. [Writer] (1966, October 27). Florida Project [Film]. *Walt Disney Productions*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLCHg9mUBag>

Thomas, G. (2011). Walt Disney's EPCOT: The City of Tomorrow that Might Have Been. *The Objective Standard*, 6(1).

Watts, S. (1995). Walt Disney: Arts and Politics in the American Century. *The Journal of American History*, 82(1). Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2081916>

Appendix A: Figures



Figure 1. Disney World Masterplan, with EPCOT near top (Source: Gennaway, 2015)

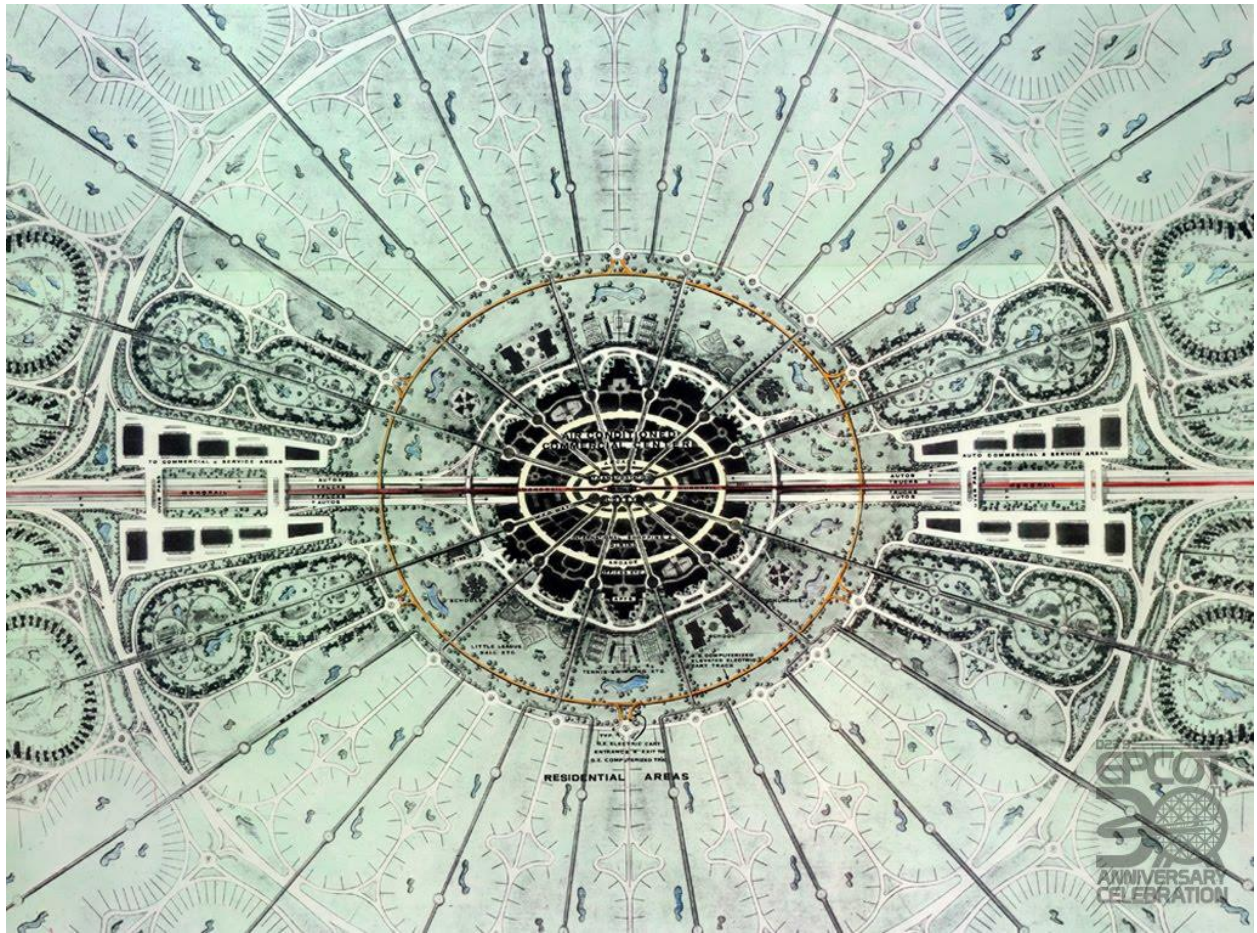


Figure 2. EPCOT radial plan, with monorail axis at center (Source: Davis, 1966)



Figure 3. Enclosed 'urban center' of EPCOT, with 'Cosmopolitan Hotel', themed mall, high-density housing, and greenbelt extending outwards. Note 'WEDWAY People Mover' lines radiating from center (Source: Sklar, 1966)



Figure 4. Transit hub located beneath EPCOT's 'urban center', stacking truck and automobile routes, 'WEDWAY People Mover', and monorail tracks vertically (Source: Sklar, 1966)



Figure 5. Low-density residential housing superblocks, with 'WEDWAY People Mover' lines and pedestrian-oriented green space separated from automobile traffic (Source: Sklar, 1966)

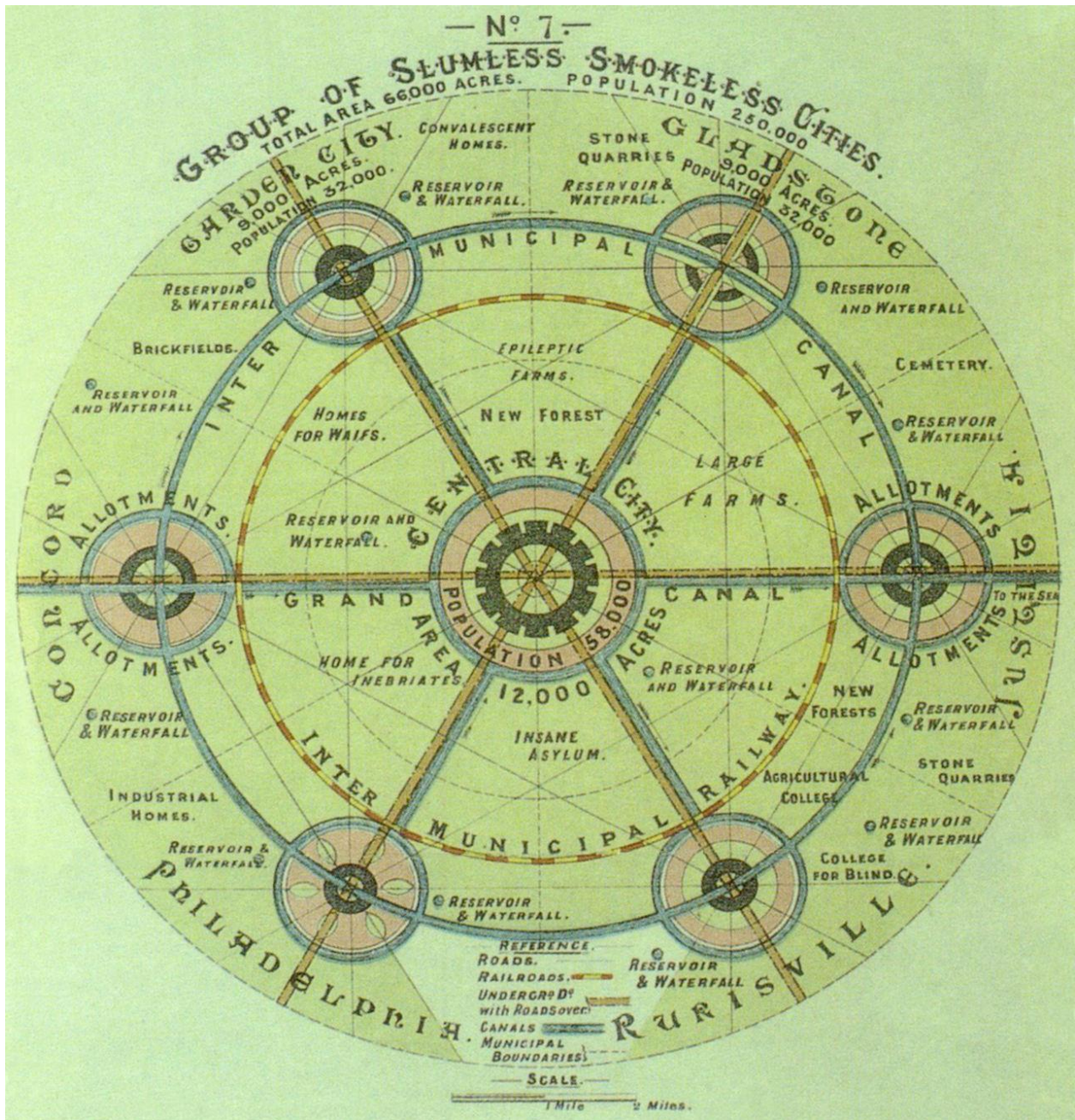


Figure 6. Ebenezer Howard's radial Garden City concept, with spatially segregated functions and regional connections between communities of capped populations (Source: Howard, 1902)

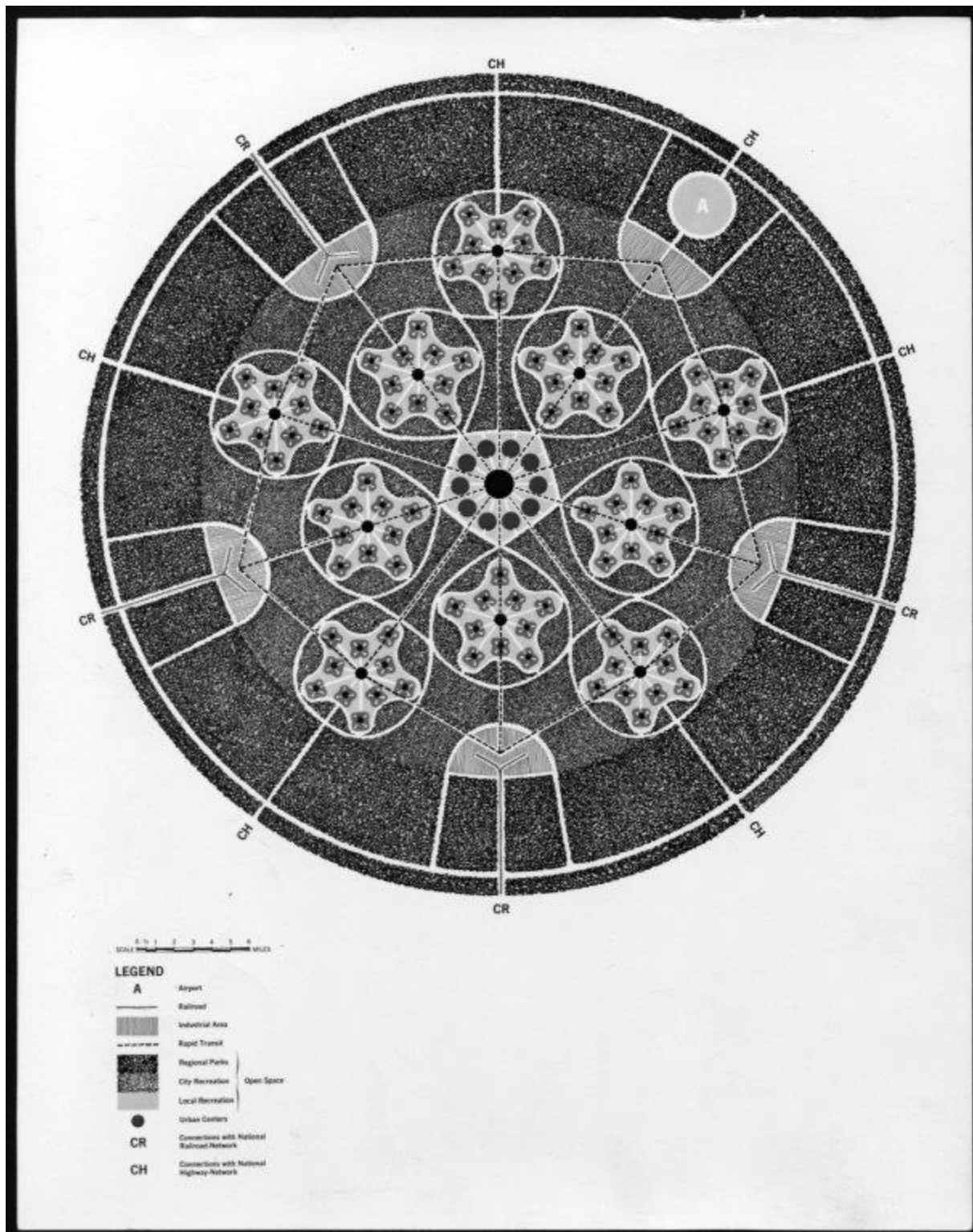


Figure 7. Victor Gruen's radial plan from *The Heart of Our Cities*. Note the location of urban centers at the geometric center of the plan, surrounded by transit lines to residences and green space (Source: Gruen, 1964)

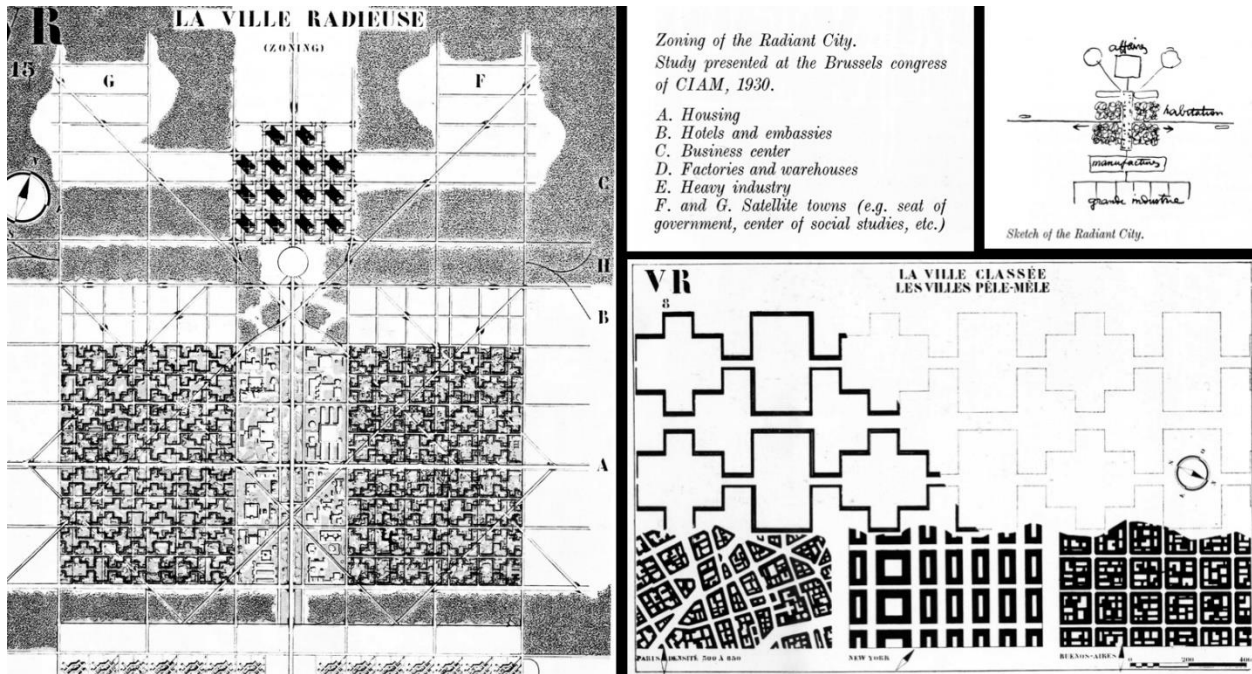


Figure 8. Le Corbusier's *Radiant City*, with clearly demarcated geometries of function and mobility arranged in visual hierarchies (Source: Le Corbusier, 1922)