

# Industrial Economy and Agrarian Urbanism



Charles Waldheim

Industry will decentralize itself. If the city were to decline, no one would rebuild it according to its present plan.

—Henry Ford, 1922, as quoted by Ludwig Hilberseimer 1949

The proposition of a “horizontal metropolis” and this publication’s examination of radical projects for a horizontal urbanism recall the correlation of industrial economy and agrarianism evident in the work of many progressive urbanists over the past century. The agrarian and the urban are two categories of thought that have more often than not been opposed to one another. Across many disciplines, and for many centuries, the city and the country have been called upon to define one other through a binary opposition. This essay<sup>1</sup> revisits the history of urban form conceived through the spatial, ecological, and infrastructural implications of agricultural production. In the projects that form this alternative history, agricultural production is conceived as a formative element of the city’s structure, rather than being considered external to it (Fig. 1).

Many projects of twentieth century urban planning explicitly aspired to construct an agrarian urbanism. Often these agrarian aspirations were an attempt to reconcile the seemingly contradictory impulses of the industrial metropolis with the social and cultural conditions of agrarian settlement. In many of these projects, agrarianism came to stand as a progressive alternative to the dense metropolitan form of

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Ford’s precise formulation was: “Industry will decentralize. There is no city that would be rebuilt as it is, were it destroyed—which fact is in itself a confession of our real estimate of our cities.” (Crowther and Ford 1922, p. 192). Hilberseimer published his slightly amended version in “Cities and Defense,” 1945, and reprinted in Pommer et al. (1988), pp. 89–93.

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<sup>1</sup>Aspects of this argument were developed in Waldheim (2009, 2010).

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**Fig. 1** Ludwig Hilberseimer, the city in the landscape, aerial view, c. 1945

industrial arrangement that grew from the great migrations from farm village to industrial city in the nineteenth and early twentieth century cities of Western Europe and North America. The agrarian aspirations of many modernist urban planning proposals lie in the first instance in the relatively decentralized model of industrial order favored by Henry Ford and other industrialists as early as the 1910s and 20s (Crowther and Ford 1922).

The emergence of these tendencies in the twentieth century might be read through a range of projects advocating a decentralized agrarian urbanism: Frank Lloyd Wright's "Broadacre City", 1934–35; Ludwig Hilberseimer's "New Regional Pattern" (1945–49); and Andrea Branzi's "Agronica", 1993–94 (Wright 1958; Hilberseimer 1949; Branzi et al. 1995; Branzi 2000). While these projects were produced decades apart by three very different architects, taken collectively they illustrate the implications for urban form of agricultural production as inherent to the structure of the city. These projects also form as a coherent genealogy of thought on the subject of agricultural urbanism as Branzi explicitly references Hilberseimer's urban proposals, and Hilberseimer's work was informed by familiarity with Wright's urban project. Each of the projects presented their audiences with a profound reconceptualization of the city, proposing radical decentralization and dissolution of the urban figure into a productive landscape.

Implicit in the work of these three urbanists was the assumption of an ongoing process of urban decentralization led by industrial economy. For Wright, Hilberseimer, and Branzi, the prospect of a horizontal metropolis produced through the new industrial logic of decentralization came to depend upon landscape as the primary medium of urban form. These suburban landscapes were embodied and fleshed out with agricultural lands, farms, and fields. These projects proposed large territorial or regional networks of urban infrastructure bringing existing natural environments into relationship with new agricultural and industrial landscapes.

From the perspective of contemporary interests in landscape as urbanism, these projects offer equally compelling alternatives to the canonical history of urban landscape, from progressive garden city models to the tradition of urban parks as exceptions to the industrial city. These projects reconceptualize the fundamental distinctions between city and countryside, village and farmland, urbanism and landscape are dissolved in favor of a third term, a proto-ecological landscape urbanism for industrialized North American modernity.

The work of the Italian architect and urbanist Andrea Branzi might be found equally relevant to an understanding of the contemporary potentials for an agrarian urbanism. Branzi's work reanimates a long tradition of using urban project as social and cultural critique. This form of urban projection deploys a project not simply as an illustration or 'vision,' but rather as a demystified distillation and description of our present urban predicaments. In this sense, one might read Branzi's urban projects as less a utopian future possible world, but rather a critically engaged and politically literate delineation of the power structures, forces, and flows shaping the contemporary urban condition. Over the course of the past four decades Branzi's work has articulated a remarkably consistent critique of the social, cultural, and intellectual poverty of much laissez-faire urban development and the realpolitik assumptions of much urban design and planning. As an alternative, Branzi's projects propose urbanism in the form of an environmental, economic, and aesthetic critique of the failings of the contemporary city (Aureli 2008).

Born and educated in Florence, Branzi studied architecture in a cultural milieu of the Operaists and a scholarly tradition of Marxist critique as evidenced through speculative urban proposals as a form of cultural criticism. Branzi first came to international visibility as a member of the collective Archizoom (mid-1960s) based in Milano but associated with the Florentine *Architettura Radicale* movement. Archizoom's project and texts for "No-Stop City" (1968–71) illustrate an urbanism of continuous mobility, fluidity, and flux. While "No-Stop City" was received on one level as a satire of the British technophilia of Archigram, it was received on another level as an illustration of an urbanism without qualities, a representation of the 'degree-zero' conditions for urbanization (Archizoom Associates 1971).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For Branzi's reflections on the project, see Branzi (2005). For more recent scholarship on the project and its relations to contemporary architectural culture and urban theory, see Kazys Varnelis (2006).

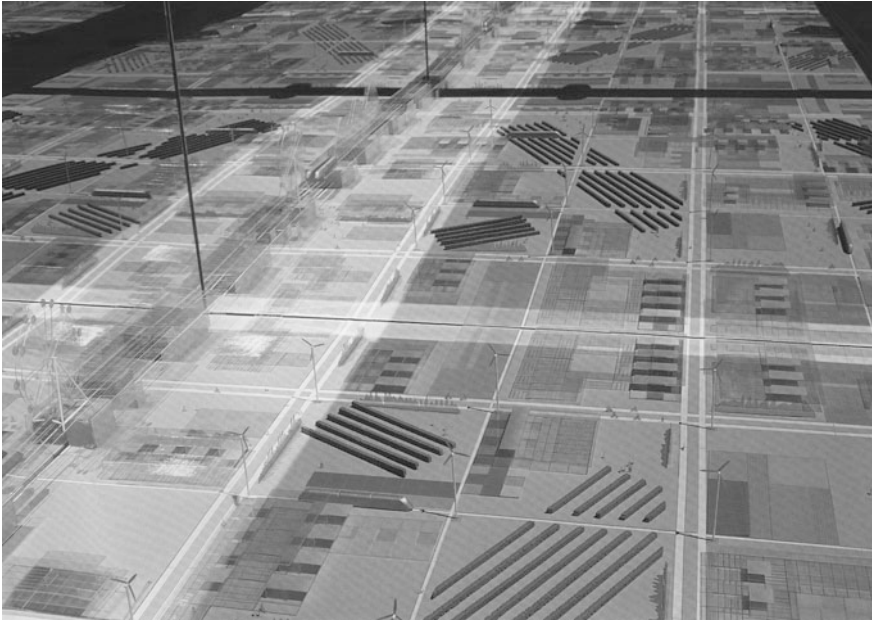
Archizoom's use of typewriter keystrokes on A4 paper to represent a non-figural planning study for "No-Stop City" anticipated contemporary interest in indexical and parametric representations of the city. Their work prefigured current interest in describing the relentlessly horizontal field conditions of the modern metropolis as a surface shaped by the strong forces of economic and ecological flows. Equally, these drawings and their texts anticipate current interest in infrastructure and ecology as non-figurative drivers of urban form.

As a form of 'non-figurative' urbanism, "No-Stop City" renewed and disrupted a longstanding tradition non-figurative urban projection as socialist critique. In this regard, Branzi's "No-Stop City" draws upon the urban planning projects and theories of Ludwig Hilberseimer, particularly Hilberseimer's "New Regional Pattern" and that project's illustration of a proto-ecological urbanism. Not coincidentally, both Branzi and Hilberseimer chose to illustrate the city as a continuous system of relational forces and flows, as opposed to a collection of objects. In this sense, the ongoing recuperation of Hilberseimer, and Branzi's renewed relevance for discussions of contemporary urbanism render them particularly relevant to discussions of ecological urbanism. Andrea Branzi occupies a singular historical position as a hinge figure between the social and environmental aspirations of modernist planning of the post-war era and the politics of 1968 in which his work first emerged for English language audiences. As such, his work is particularly well suited to shed light on the emergent discussion around ecological urbanism.

Branzi's Agronica project (1993–94) illustrated the relentlessly horizontal spread of capital across thin tissues of territory, and the resultant 'weak urbanization' that the neo-liberal economic paradigm affords. Agronica embodies the potential parallelism between agricultural and energy production, new modalities of post-fordist industrial economy, and the cultures of consumption that they construct (Branzi et al. 1995). Six years later in 1999, Branzi (with the Milanese post-graduate research institute Domus Academy) executed a project for the Strijp Philips district of Eindhoven. This project for the planning of the Strijp Philips portion of Eindhoven returned to the recurring themes in Branzi's oeuvre with typical wit and pith, illustrating a "territory for the new economy" in which agricultural production was a prime factor in deriving urban form (Branzi 2000).

Branzi's 'weak work' maintains its critical and projective relevance for a new generation of urbanists interested in the economic and agricultural drivers of urban form. His longstanding call for the development of weak urban forms and non-figural fields has already influenced the thinking of those who articulated landscape urbanism over a decade ago and promises to reanimate emergent discussions of ecological urbanism (Branzi 2009a, b). Equally, Branzi's projective and polemic urban propositions promise to shed light on the proposition of agrarian urbanism (Fig. 2).

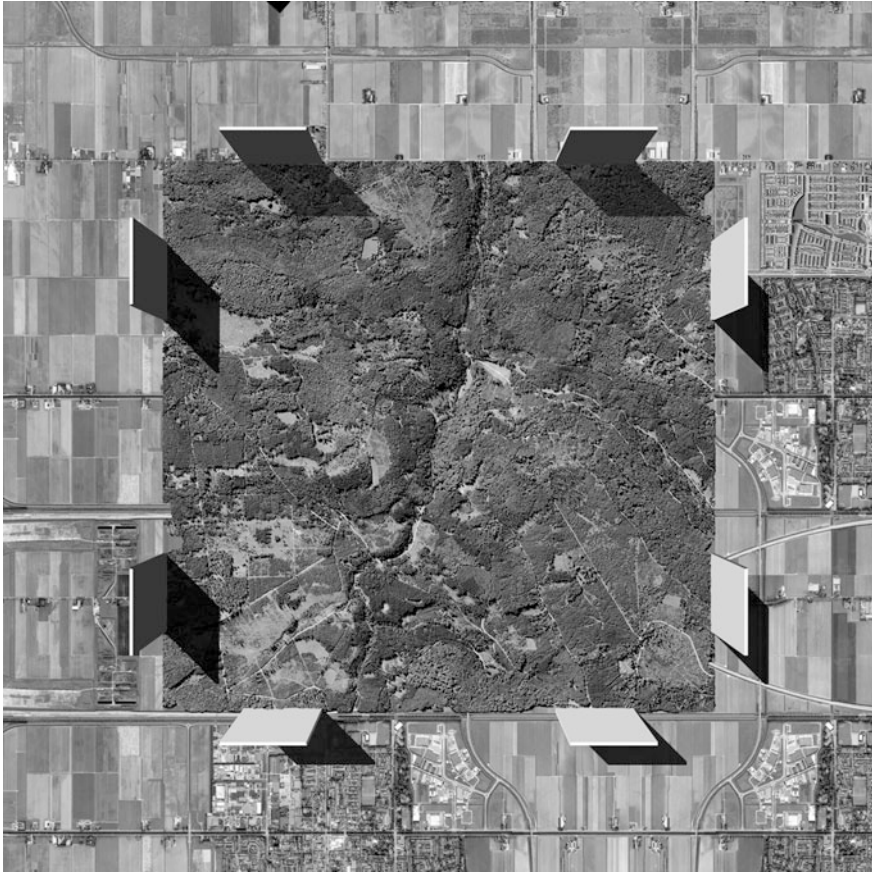
More recently Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara/Dogma's project "Stop-City" directly references Branzi's use of non-figurative urban projection as a form of social and political critique (Aureli and Tattara 2008).



**Fig. 2** Andrea Branzi, Lapo Lani, and Ernesto Bartolini, Masterplan Strijp Philips, Eindhoven, model, 1999–2000

Aureli's interest in autonomy in architecture brings him to the potential of the non-figurative, and a tradition of critical thought. Like Baird, Aureli has remained committed to a position of criticality through architecture as a political project, and has remained sceptical of the claim of landscape as a medium of urbanism. In spite of this position, and his concern that landscape is too often deployed as a medium of green-washing, Aureli too draws upon a European tradition of the project of the city as a political project. Equally he continues a longstanding interest in typology as a means of formal and morphological analysis in urban form (Fig. 3).

In this regard, the fact that Aureli was a student of Bernardo Secchi and Paola Paola Viganò is equally significant here. As Secchi and Viganò have articulated the concept of the *città diffusa* (Indovina 1990), they have reconciled a tradition of critical theory and architectural autonomy with the increasingly evident empirical facts of diffuse urban form. Secchi has referred to the '*città diffusa*' as the most important urban morphology for the twenty-first century. In this regard, Secchi and Viganò have articulated a theoretical framework, political position, and methodological approach using landscape as a medium of urbanism for the contemporary city (Viganò 1999, 2001).



**Fig. 3** Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara/Dogma, Stop City, aerial photomontage, 2007–08

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