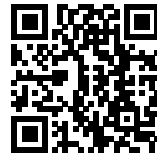


Notes Towards a History of Agrarian Urbanism. Charles Waldheim

NOTES TOWARDS A HISTORY OF AGRARIAN URBANISM

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Authorship: Essay by Charles Waldheim, excerpted from [Bracket 1: On Farming](#) by Mason White and Maya Przybylski, published by [Actar Publishers](#).

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 binary opposition.

Contemporary design culture and discourse on cities are, by contrast, awash in claims of the potential for urban agriculture. Enthusiasm for agricultural production in and around cities has grown through an increased environmental literacy on behalf of designers and scholars. Equally this renewed interest in the relation of food production to urban form has been made possible by increased public literacy about food and the forms of industrial food production and distribution that characterize globalization. This renewed interest in food production and consumption has been shaped by a variety of authors and interests, but has been most forcefully felt as a call for more renewable or sustainable agricultural practices associated with local food production, reduced carbon footprint, increased public health, and the associated benefits of pre-industrial farming techniques including increased biodiversity and ecological health. These tendencies have been most clearly articulated through the so-called 'slow food' and 'locavore' movements. While much has been written on the implications of these tendencies for agricultural production, public policy, and food as an element of culture, little has been written on the potentially profound implications of these transformations for the shape and structure of the city itself. Much of the enthusiasm for slow and local food in the context of urban populations has been predicated on the assumption that abandoned or underused brownfield sites could be remediated and repurposed with productive potential. Equally, this enthusiasm for urban agriculture has been based on the rededication of greenfield sites peripheral to the city, focusing valuable ecological assets on food production rather than suburban sprawl. While both of these remain viable and laudable goals, they shed little light on the implications of such transformations on the shape and the structure of urban form. For those interested in the city as an object of study and subject of design, this suggests the need for further inquiry into the possibilities for an agricultural urbanism. This essay proposes a history of urban form conceived through the spatial, ecological, and infrastructural implications of agricultural production. In the projects that form this tentative counter-history, agricultural production is conceived as a formative element of the city's structure, rather than being considered adjunct to, outside of, or inserted within traditional urban forms. While this may remain an alternative or even marginal counter-history, it may be useful as architects and urbanists grapple with the implications for urban form attendant to their renewed interest in the agricultural. This alternative history of the city seeks to construct a useful past from three urban projects organized explicitly around agricultural production as inherent to the economic, ecological, and spatial order of the city.

Many projects of 20th-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 offered an alternative to the dense metropolitan form of industrial arrangement that grew from the great migrations from farm village to industrial city in the 19th- and early 20th-century cities of Western Europe and North America. The agrarian aspirations of many modernist urban planning proposals originate in the relatively decentralized model of industrial order favored by Henry Ford and other industrialists as early as the 1910s and 20s. Following Ford's organizational preference for spatial decentralization, industrial organizations tended to spread horizontally and abandon the traditional industrial city. In part as a response to the social conditions of the Depression era, agrarianism came to be seen as a form of continuity between formerly agrarian populations based on subsistence farming and the relatively vulnerable industrial workforce of the modern metropolis.

By mixing industry with agriculture, many modernist urban planners imagined a rotational labor system in which workers alternated between factory jobs and collective farms. Most often these new spatial orders were understood as vast regional landscapes, and their representation conflated aerial view and orthographic map.

The emergence of these tendencies in the twentieth century might be read through three unbuilt 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) or "Territory for the New Economy" (1999).

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Ludwig Hilberseimer, “The City in the Landscape” (1944). Reprinted from Ludwig Hilberseimer, *The New City* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944) p. 55, ill. 33, Ludwig Hilberseimer Papers, Ryerson & Burnham Library Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.

While these projects were produced decades apart by three very different authors, taken collectively they illustrate the implications for urban form of agricultural production as inherent to the structure of the city. These projects also form a coherent genealogy of thought on the subject of

ISSN : 2575-5374

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. The dissolution of figure into field rendered the classical distinction between city and countryside irrelevant in favor of a conflated condition of suburbanized regionalism. From the perspective of contemporary interests in urban agriculture, both tendencies offer equally compelling alternatives to the canonical history of urban form.

Implicit in the work of these three urbanists was the assumption of an ongoing process of urban decentralization led by an industrial economy. For Wright, Hilberseimer, and Branzi, the decreased density 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.

Broadacres / Usonia

In the depths of the Depression, lacking reasonable prospects for a recovery of his once towering stature as the dean of American architects, Frank Lloyd Wright persuaded his lone remaining patron to fund a traveling exhibition of Wright's conception of an organic American urbanism. Broadacre City, as it was referred to, consisted of a large model and supporting materials produced by student apprentices at Taliesin in the winter of 1934-35. While the premises underpinning the project were evident in Wright's lectures as early as the 1920s and fully informed Wright's 1932 publication *The Disappearing City*, the Broadacre model and drawings were not debuted until a 1935 New York City exhibition. Subsequently, the traveling exhibition toured extensively and the remarkably durable project was further disseminated in subsequent publications including *When Democracy Builds* (1945) and *The Living City* (1958).

Broadacre City offered American audiences the clearest crystallization of Wright's damning critique of the modern industrial city, positing Broadacre as an autochthonous organic model for North American settlement across an essentially boundless carpet of cultivated landscape. Eschewing traditional European distinctions between city and countryside, Broadacre proposed a network of transportation and communication infrastructures using the Jeffersonian grid as its principal ordering

system. Within this nearly undifferentiated field, the county government (headed by the county architect) replaced other levels of government administering a population of landowning citizen-farmers. Wright was clearly conversant with and sympathetic to Henry Ford's notion of a decentralized settlement pattern for North America and the closest built parallel for Wright's work on Broadacre can be found in Ford's instigation of what would become the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). As an autonomous public agency, TVA was charged with the construction of hydro-electric dams and highways along the Tennessee River in the electrification of an entire region as a seeding process for future urbanization.

Enjoying ownership of one acre of land per person as a birthright, residents of Broadacre (or Usonia, as Wright would come to refer to it) were to enjoy modern houses set in relation to ample subsistence gardens and small-scale farms. This basic pattern of variously scaled housing and landscape types was interspersed with light industry, small commercial centers and markets, civic buildings, and of course the ubiquitous highway. In spite of the project's extremely low density, most of the ground was cleared and cultivated. Occasionally this constructed and maintained landscape relented in favor of extant waterways, topographic features, or other pre-existing ecologies. Presumably the extrapolation of Broadacre City from its chiefly middle-western origins to the margins of the continent would have been accomplished with varying degrees of accommodation to local climate, geography, and geology, if not cultural or material history. The status of previously urbanized areas existing outside of Wright's Broadacre remained an open question; presumably these would be abandoned in place, again following Ford's lead in this regard.

Wright's critique of private ownership, conspicuous consumption, and accumulation of wealth associated with cities was no small part of the explicit social critique offered by Broadacre, as the worst of the Depression forced bankrupt family farmers to flee their mortgaged farms in the midwest for protest in the east or California in the west. Ironically, given his anxiety over the corrosive effects of accumulated wealth and speculative capital, Wright found in Ford's notion of regional infrastructure the basis for an American pattern of organic urban development. Wright's Broadacre provided a respite from the relentless demands of profit associated with the industrial city, even as the American city was well on a course toward decentralization, driven by the tendencies of Fordist production.

The New Regional Pattern / The New City Another modernist architect/urbanist grappling with the impacts of decentralization on urban form was Ludwig Hilberseimer. Born and educated in Karlsruhe, Germany, Hilberseimer worked with Mies van der Rohe at the Bauhaus until the rise of fascism precipitated their emigration to Chicago and the Armour Institute of Technology (later IIT) in

1938. While Hilberseimer is most notoriously known for his earlier studies for totalizing rationally-planned schemes of modern urbanism from the 1920s such as Hochhausstadt (Highrise City, 1924), Hilberseimer quickly abandoned those schemes in favor of projects that explored decentralization and land- scape as remedies to the ills of the industrial city. This was evident as early as 1927 in a sketch titled "The Metropolis as a Garden-City." Hilberseimer's work over the course of the 1930s was clearly influenced by European precedents for the garden-city and evidenced a strategy for the use of landscape and mixed-height housing in a low-density pattern. This is a pattern that would continue to appear in his work in the U.S. over the ensuing decades. Particularly formative in this regard was Hilberseimer's project for Mischbebauung (Mixed-height Housing, c. 1930), the principles of which would inform the balance of his career. Hilberseimer during this period was committed to the inevitable decentralization of the traditional city as the resultant of industrial policy. This tendency was evident to Hilberseimer as early as the 1920s in Henry Ford's decision to relocate industrial production outside the city of Detroit in the previous decade.

By the 1940s, Hilberseimer's notion of the "settlement unit" took clearer form through anticipating the development of an interstate highway system and articulating precise relation- ships between transportation networks, settlement units, and the regional landscape. Hilberseimer's interest in an organic urbanism for North America was further fueled by civil defense imperatives encouraging decentralization in the years following the war. In the wake of Hiroshima, Hilberseimer adapted his proposals to anticipate the construction of the interstate high- way system as a civil defense infrastructure and an extension of Fordist production logics. In this context — and conversant with Wright's Broadacre City as well as the progressive TVA project and its proponents in the Regional Planning Association of America — Hilberseimer developed his "New Regional Pattern" as a strategy for the urbanization of a low-density North American settlement pattern based on regional highway systems and natural environmental conditions. Hilberseimer disseminated his proposals through a publication: *The New Regional Pattern: Industries and Gardens, Workshops and Farms* (1949). The principles and analysis informing Hilberseimer's project was published prior to the project itself in *The New City: Principles of Planning* (1944) and was disseminated a decade later in *The Nature of Cities* (1955).

As with Broadacre, the "New Regional Pattern" was organized around the distribution of transportation and communication networks across an essentially horizontal field of landscape. Within this extensive horizontal territory, housing, farms, light industry, commercial buildings, and civic spaces formed vari- ously scaled networks across a field of decentralized distribution. The organizational pattern of "New Regional Pattern" did not defer to the abstraction of the grid, but was

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<https://urbannext.net/agrarian-urbanism/>

informed by the natural environment; topography, hydrology, vegetation, wind patterns, among others. It conflated infrastructural systems with built landscapes and found environmental conditions to produce a radically reconceived settlement pattern for North America. While Hilberseimer's exquisite drawings (many are the uncredited work of IIT colleague Alfred Caldwell) did not make an explicit case for the kind of ecological awareness apparent in contemporary landscape urbanism, they clearly inflected urban infrastructure to ambient environmental conditions. In this regard, the project offers a profound critique of traditional nineteenth-century urban form, as well as the architectural and urban practices associated with that that persisted into the twentieth century.

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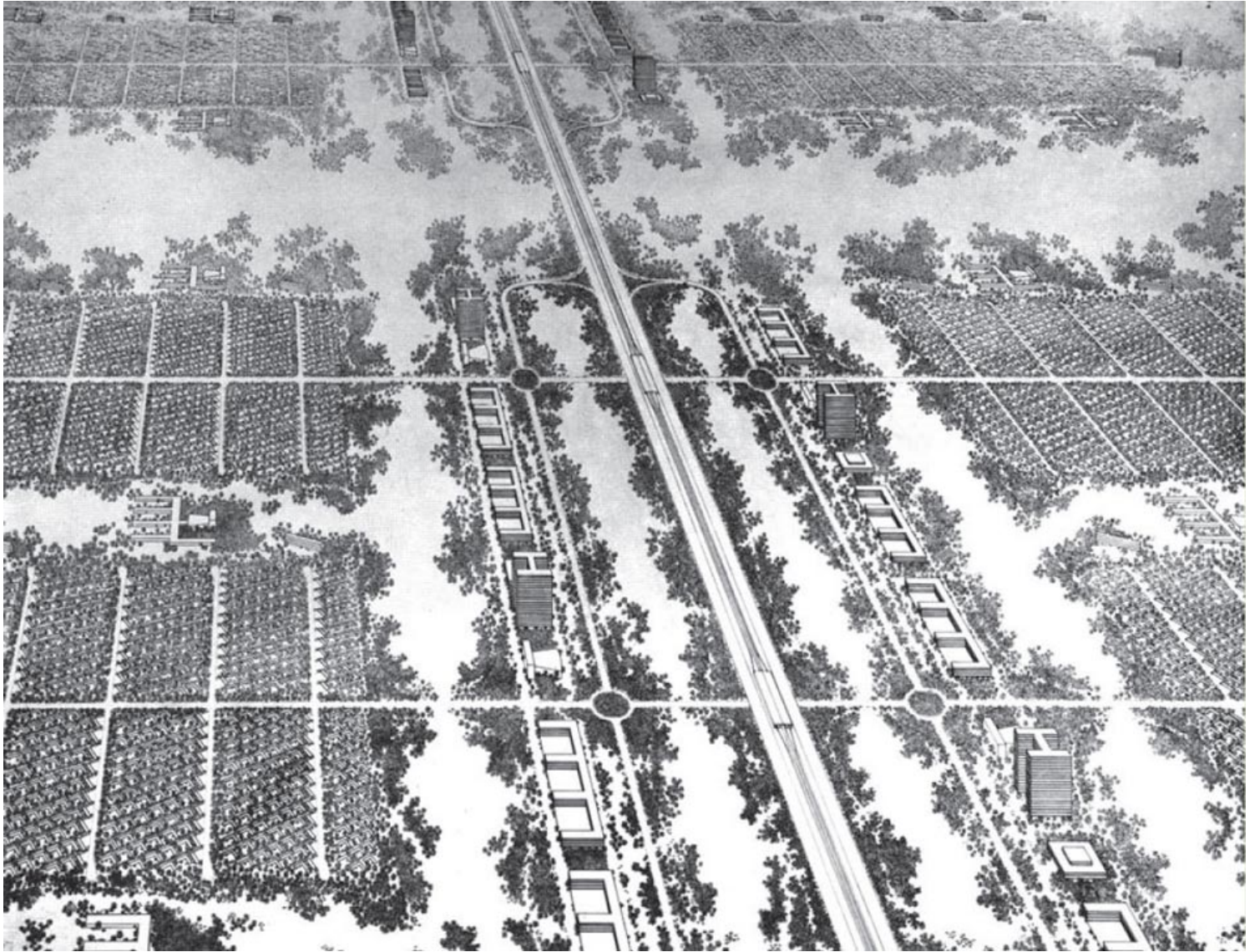
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Ludwig Hilberseimer, “Bird’s-eye view of commercial area and settlement unit” (1944). Reprinted from Ludwig Hilberseimer, *The New City* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944) p. 121, ill. 92, Ludwig Hilberseimer Papers, Ryerson & Burnham Library Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Agronica / Territory for the New Economy

The work of the Italian architect and urbanist Andrea Branzi might be found equally relevant to the

ISSN : 2575-5374

emergent discourse on agrarian urbanism. Branzi's work reanimates a long tradition of using the urban project as a 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, Branzi's urban projects can be read less as a utopian future possible world, and more as a critically engaged and politically literate delineation of the power structures, forces, and flows shaping the contemporary urban condition. Over the past four decades Branzi's work has articulated a remarkably consistent critique of the social, cultural, and intellectual poverty of 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.

Born and educated in Florence, Branzi studied architecture in the cultural milieu of the Operaists and the scholarly tradition of Marxist critique. Branzi first came to international visibility as a member of the collective Archizoom Associati (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 technophile of Archigram, on another level it was an illustration of an urbanism without qualities, a representation of the 'degree- zero' conditions for urbanization.

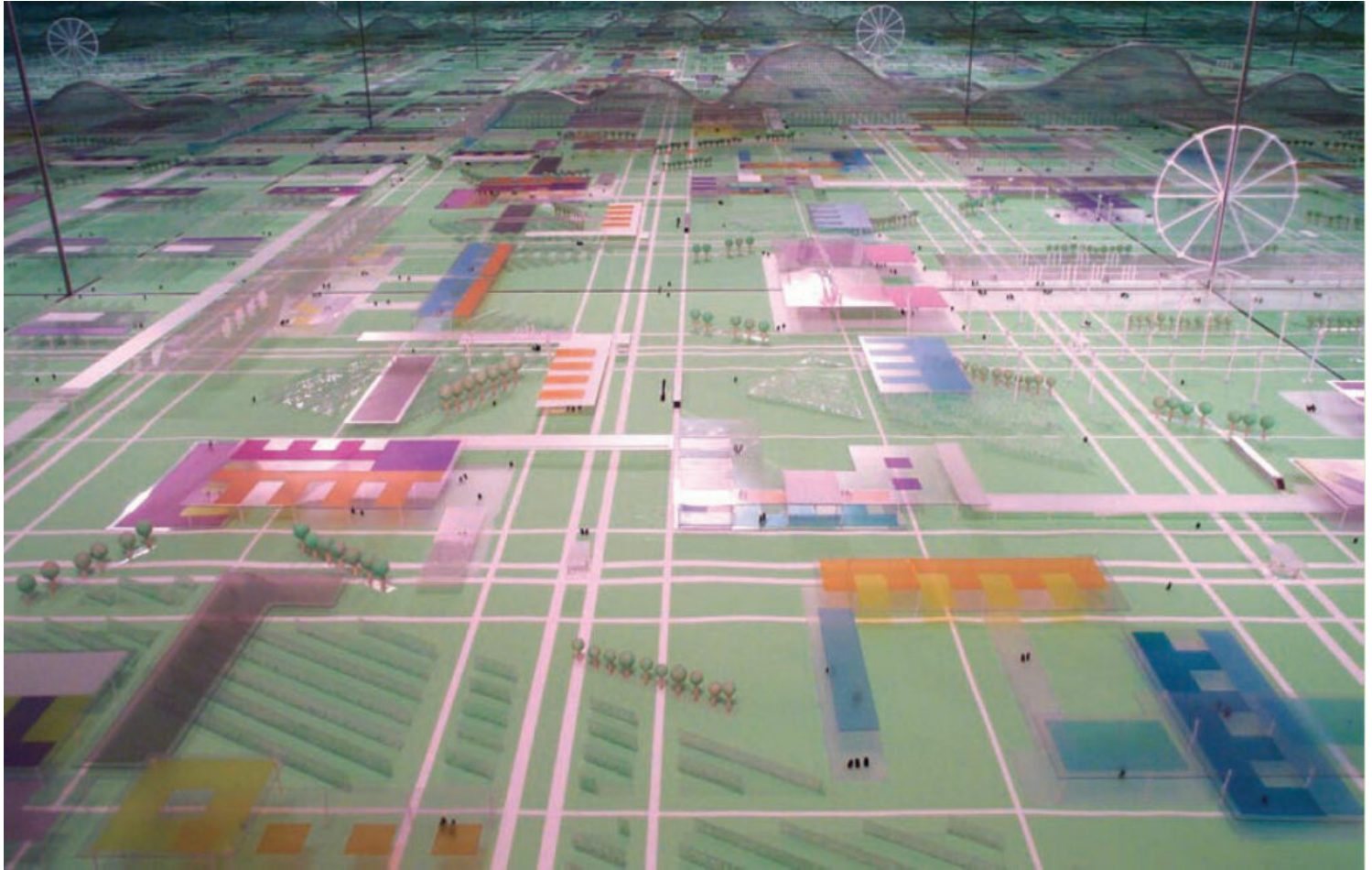
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Andrea Branzi, et. al., “Masterplan Strijp Philips, Eindhoven,” model view (1999-2000).

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 formulations of the city. Their work prefigured the 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 such, a generation of contemporary urbanists has drawn from Branzi's intellectual commitments. This diverse list of influence ranges from Stan Allen and James Corner's interest in field conditions to Alex Wall and Alejandro Zaera-Polo's interest in logistics.

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

Branzi's urban projects are equally available to inform contemporary interests within architectural culture and urbanism on a wide array of topics as diverse as animalia, indeterminacy, and genericity, among others.

Branzi's "No-Stop City" proposed an explicitly nonfigurative urbanism. In so doing, it renewed a longstanding tradition of non-figurative urban projects as a form of social 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 neoliberal economic paradigm affords. Agronica embodies the potential parallels between agricultural and energy production, new modalities of post-Fordist industrial economy, and the cultures of consumption that they construct. More recently in 1999, Branzi (with the Domus Academy, a post-graduate research institute founded in the 1980s) executed a project for Philips in Eindhoven. These projects 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 instrumental in deriving urban form.

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. Equally, Branzi's projective and polemic urban propositions

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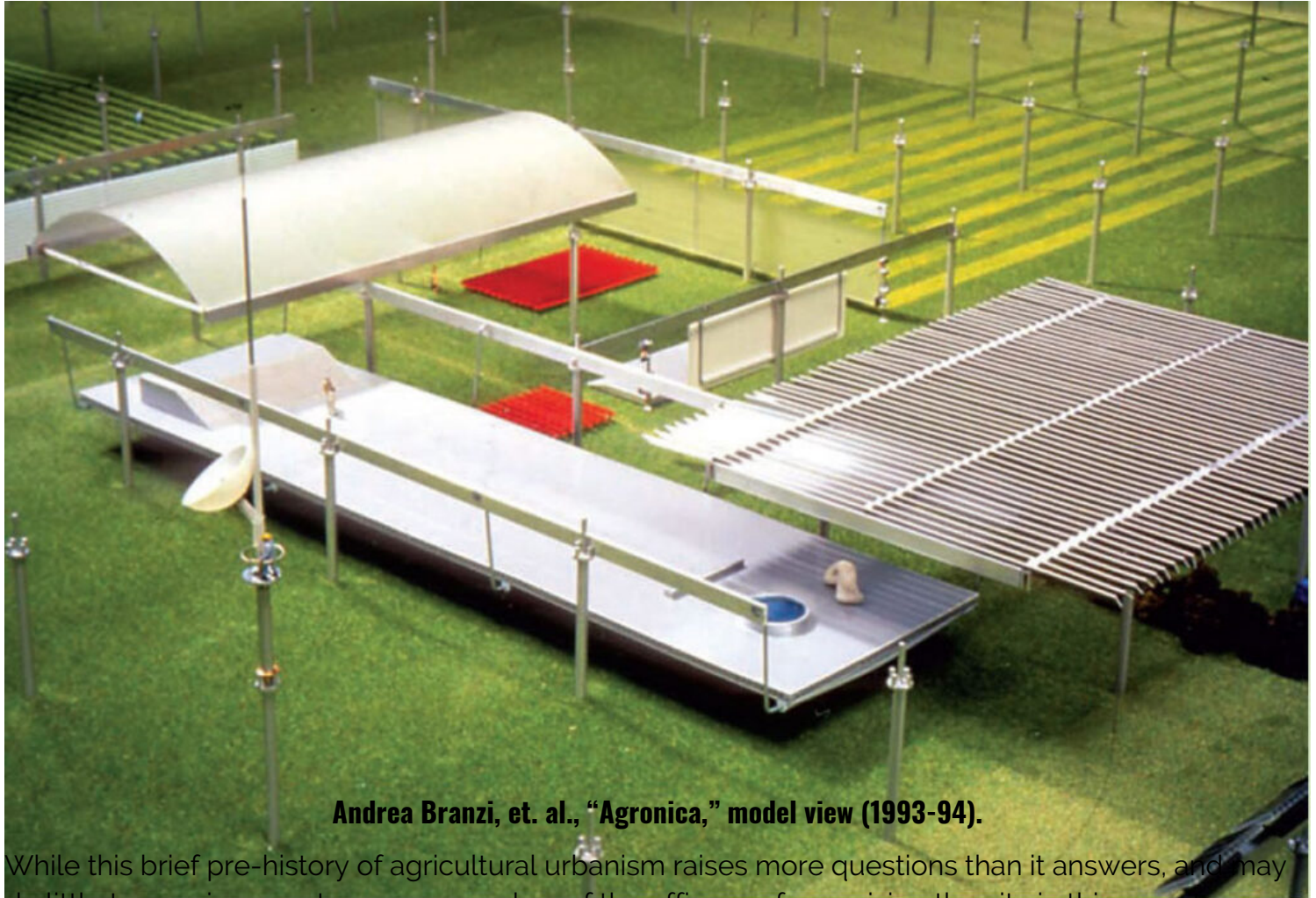
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promise to shed light on agrarian urbanism, and its potential for shaping the contemporary city and the disciplines that describe it.

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Andrea Branzi, et. al., “Agronica,” model view (1993-94).

While this brief pre-history of agricultural urbanism raises more questions than it answers, and may do little to convince contemporary readers of the efficacy of organizing the city in this way, it seems a useful (if not necessary) exercise in understanding the broader implications of contemporary food culture for the design disciplines. In this regard, it is significant that each of the three architect/urbanists presented here as pursuing an explicitly agricultural urbanism did so as part of a broader critical position engaged with economic inequality, social justice, and environmental health. Wright, Hilberseimer, and Branzi, each in their own way, embodied a longstanding tradition of using the urban project as a form of social critique in which the production and consumption of the city, its

economy and ecology, are available as tools of analysis and critique. While Wright, Hilberseimer, and Branzi were responding to different economic and ecological contexts, each of them found the urban project an effective vehicle for critiquing the form of their contemporary cities, and the economic, social, and political orders that produced them.

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