

Stop City

1.

In a provoking text written few years ago, the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno¹ described contemporary fascism as the new ways in which economic power seizes and orchestrates the totality of subjectivities in order to reproduce itself – as having disregarded its prior image of “top down” power, and having instead taken the kaleidoscopic forms and sense of existential instability of metropolitan life. Virno describes contemporary fascism as the “twin brother” of the most radical instances of social newness that emerged within the crisis of modern forms of labour, namely Fordist modes of production. Fascism today takes the form of informal social behaviours that escape intelligible forms of political life. In Europe economic power extends its possibilities of management and reproduction within the most progressive forms of “bottom-up” creativity, participation and informality. It is by understanding the deeply political nature of this social context and the way that flexibility has become the most powerful way of mastering the city and its conflicts, that we may be able to explain the critical fortune of a concept such as *informal urbanism*. In this concept lies a mystifying rhetoric of power whose main ideological goal today is to render capitalism’s uneven geography of redistribution—its systematic de-regulation and laissez-faire policies— as the natural, “spontaneous” and thus acceptable evolution of the city.

As a critique of such rhetoric, and especially of the way it has been represented by architects and urban designers within the recent avalanche of so called “bottom-up” strategies for the “informal city”, we re-invest the architectural project with its (proper) mission: to establish a principle of *order* through which to frame and construct forms of inhabitation. Yet we understand the project of the city, not as the ubiquitous design and the managing of its inhabitation, but as the rethinking a controversial topic that in recent years has become a taboo: the definition of the form of the city. In the project that we present we understand the problem of city form not

¹ Paolo Virno, “Theses on the New European Fascism”, *Greyroom* 21 (2005), pp. 21-25.

only in terms of its morphological appearance, but also within the broader formal and political concept of form, that is the concept of *limit*.

Practicing the limit through the production of an architectural project acquires two levels of meaning: it first refers to the physical space of the limit, namely establishing constraints and processes of stoppage to the endless growth of the city; and, secondly, in more conceptual terms, it refers to the idea that architecture should turn its back to the drama of *newness* and define with conceptual clarity and formal exemplarity the prototypical forms of density: living and working spaces that would counter the lifestyle of individualism and laissez-faire propelled by neo-liberal urban policies.

The richness and multiplicity of meanings of the concept of limit finds its origin in the ambivalence of the simple act of marking a limit. If on the one the concept of limit represents the beginning of every human settlement, it is also – as Carl Schmitt affirmed in his seminal work on the “*jus publicum Eeropaeum*”, the starting point of the formation of any form of jurisdiction. Marking the land, tracing the limit are not only the primordial forms of establishing the settlement form, but their consequences reach the possibility of the coexistence of people, and power formations of every sort which are always “founded on new spatial divisions, new enclosures, and new spatial orders of the earth”.²

We have decided to address the possibility of the project of the limit of the city by means of our own tools: with drawings and with words. The proposal that we present here is an ongoing research for a city model called *Stop City*.

2.

Stop City is the hypothesis for a non-figurative architectural language for the city. By assuming the form of the border that separates urbanization from empty space, *Stop City* is proposed as the absolute limit, and thus, as the very form of the city. *Stop City* develops vertically. *Stop City* is an archipelago of islands of high density. The growth of *Stop City* happens by virtue of its limit, i.e. by the punctual repetition of the basic unit, which is a city of 500.000 inhabitants made of eight slabs measuring 500 by 500

² Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2003), p. 79.

meters, 25 meters thick. These eight slabs are positioned on the border of a square with side length of 3 kilometres, thus demarcating an “empty” area. Each slab is a “city within the city”, an *Immeuble Cité* that is in itself a self-sufficient city not characterized by any specific program or activity, being the support of multiple programs or activities.

Given the extreme height of each *immeuble cité* and the overall density of inhabitants, mobility acquires the complexity a traditional city. Several means of vertical and horizontal transportation at different speeds are deployed to allow for convenient movements between the city parts (floors) and among the *immeuble cité*. Similar to the city, transportation becomes the device to establish hierarchies, rhythms and possibilities in the way inhabitants experience urban space. The *immeuble cité* has no elevation: its face presents the vertical array of floor slabs with the free distribution and position of rooms in each floor. The square defined by the eight slabs positioned along its perimeter is empty, a simple urban void filled by a forest. This horizontal canopy of densely planted trees represents the limit against urbanization, and thus renders the very form of *Stop City*.

Stop city refrain from architecture; it is a model of a city in which there is no architecture as traditionally intended, but only the attempt to architecturally frame the city.

Our proposal pursues the idea of an *ohne eigenschaften* architecture – an architecture without attributes – in other words an architecture that is freed from image, from style, from the obligation to extravagance, from the useless invention of new forms. *Stop City* is architecture freed from itself; it is the form of the city.

3.

In the 1930’s at the time of the capitalism’s restructuring after the crisis of 1929, Walter Benjamin critically assessed an early form of capitalist power – the architecture of Parisian arcades—as pre-condition for class emancipation *after* the crisis of capitalism³. Writing on this *Arcade Project*, Susan Buck-Morss has said that “The *Passagen-Werk* is a historical lexicon of the capitalist origins of modernity, a

³ See: Walter Benjamin *Das Passagen-Werk*. (Frankfurt: Gesammelte Schriften, vol. V, Suhrkamp, 1991).

collection of concrete, factual images of urban experiences... [Benjamin's] method was to create from them constructions of print that had the power to awaken political consciousness among present-day readers"⁴ In the same way Benjamin appropriated a pre-existing architectural form such as the urban arcades in order to critically elucidate the terms of his own's present time capitalism, our project *Stop City* critically (and polemically) appropriate Archizoom's model of homogeneous urbanization - their *No-Stop City* (1968–72) - at the moment in which the premises to that project are no longer a (utopian) projection, but an acute and sarcastic analysis of the reality in which we live.

No-stop City reduced the capitalist city to a continuous urban field meant to dissolve the built structure of the city into its constitutive infrastructural elements – column, elevator, wall, etc., by envisioning the city as a vast, artificially lit, air-conditioned interior⁵. Differences such as inside and outside, landscape and city, production and consumption, living and working, were collapsed into one equipped surface that was meant to be extendable in all directions along its underlying grid, which represented the most generic order possible. Contrary to many utopian projects of that time, *No-stop City* was meant to be a hyper-realistic project: *The city is what it does*. The city is a continuous ambiance made by repetitive conditions of light, communication, air-conditioning, mechanized transportation, and all of the social connections – material and immaterial – that were needed in order to make a city works and reproduces itself. Thus *No-Stop City* formalized the conditions that make the city. Neither a proposal for a new city nor a utopian transformation of the existing city, *No-Stop City* was meant to be a conceptual X-ray of the existing capitalist metropolis, in which the conditions for reproduction were no longer localized in specific sectors, such as the factory, housing, and recreation spaces, but proliferated everywhere. In this scenario, the iconoclastic form of *No-Stop City* can be understood as a merciless *memento mori*

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 336.

⁵ The theses concerning what later Archizoom called *No-Stop City* were presented already in 1970 in the pages of *Casabella* with the significant title, “Città, Catena di Montaggio del Sociale” (City, assembly line of the social). The project was first published as *No-Stop City: Residential Parkings, Climatic Universal System*, in 1971 on the pages of the magazine “Domus”. See: Archizoom Associati, *Città, Catena di Montaggio del Sociale. Ideologia e Teoria della Metropoli*, *Casabella* n. 350-351 (1970); Archizoom Associati, *No-Stop City: Residential Parkings, Climatic Universal System*, *Domus* n. 496 (1971). For a detailed description of the project see: Andrea Branzi, *No-Stop City* (Paris: Editions HYX, 2006), which contains English translations of the magazine texts.

for architecture as a shape-maker and producer of difference. Within the objective conditions of the metropolis, formal complexity becomes ideological and a false consciousness that pretends to explain the functioning of the city with futile formal gestures. For this reason *No-stop City* was not an avant-garde project, nor it was an anti-modernist project, but a hypothesis that attempted to bring to radical terms the very premises of modernity: the project for a generic city in which living is reduced to biopolitical mechanisms of production and reproduction.

For this reason *No-Stop City* should be read as the continuation (and critical exaggeration) of the urban research tradition undertaken by planners such as Ildefonso Cerdà in the 19th century and Ludwig Hilberseimer in the first half of 20th century.

Instead of planning the city by means of architectural figures, Cerdà established his extension of the city of Barcelona, by focusing on the bio-political management of the city, such as demographic control, infrastructure, and zoning. This strategy resulted in a “non-figurative” design of the city⁶. City form was reduced into an isotropic and thus extendable grid, which articulated the equal distribution of services and roads throughout the city area. A religious center appears in every nine-block district, a marketplace every four blocks, a park every eight, a hospital every sixteen, and the formula continues. For Cerdà the city was *urbanization*: the potentially limitless growth of the city by means of production and reproduction⁷. Correspondingly the action of planning of urbanization became a reformist project in which amelioration of the workers living conditions inevitably coincided with the containment of their political subjectivity. This containment was defined as the possibility of urbanization to be a continuous process of expansion of its own logic that would progressively proliferate in any aspect of life. With his city plans and theoretical writings, Hilberseimer gave an even more radical interpretation of urbanization. He asserted that the effects of capitalism on the organization of the city were reformable only by assuming, as principle of urban design, capitalism most extreme cultural conditions: uprootedness and genericity of urban space. Hilberseimer manifested these conditions in his plans for territorial settlements – from his *project for a Vertical City* (1927) to

⁶ Which was exposed few years later in the fundamental book *Teoria General del la Urbanizacion* (1867). See: Ildefonso Cerdà, *General Theory of Urbanization* (Electa Spain: Barcellona, 1992).

⁷ Ildefonso Cerdà was the inventor of the term urbanization

his proposal for the American *New Regional Pattern* (1949) - by advancing an architectural form on the verge of its disappearance, made of generic and repeatable elements.

Archizoom's *No-stop City* was not simply a radical accommodation of this legacy but also its class-critique. Following the idea that the working class is strongest only at the level of its utmost level of alienation, Archizoom strategically adopted the radical reformism of Hilberseimer not as simply as amelioration, but as working-class appropriation of the urban condition. This "appropriation" consisted in the possibility for the inhabitants to be confronted not only with reform of the urban environment, but also with a straightforward and didactic architectural translation of such reform liberated from the rhetorical forms of humanitarian socialism and rendered in its literal terms of (political) framework for life.

5.

Almost 40 years after *No-stop City*, our proposal for *Stop City* appropriate and continues the non-figurative language developed by Cerdà, Hilberseimer and Archizoom, completely reversing their urban thesis. If Cerdà, Hilberseimer and Archizoom conceived the city as formless and limitless - as *urbanization* - our project, by assuming the form of a border that separates urbanization from void space proposes itself as an absolute limit, and therefore as the form itself of the city.

The main thesis of *Stop City* stems from the observation that today the relationship between those who live and work in the city and the city itself recalls the relationship that workers use to have with the factory during the era of industrial expansion⁸. If the factory was dominated by the spatially and temporally choreographed rhythm of the assembly line, today's cities are dominated by the pervasive informality of social relationships in which any aspect of human communication and cognition is expected to become a factor of production. In other words, the contemporary city in spite of its increasing complexities, contradictions, and informalities has become reduced to simply being the contemporary factory, and its inhabitants are (potentially) the new working class. This is evident if we consider the fact that capitalistic production has

⁸ See: Antonio Negri, *Dalla Fabbrica alla Metropoli* (Roma: DataneWS, 2008).

historically and radically evolved by expanding its domain from the manufacture of goods to production of services such as communication, education and cultural exchange. Production occurs not only in terms of what we traditionally understood as working activities, but tends to coincide with the whole spectrum of social activities as the ones related to culture, media, and education, and all the bio-political means of life (re)production. In this context the optimistic and harmonious representation of multiplication of identities and subjectivities that characterize the social and political landscape of post-Fordism and that sociologists, artists, and architects effortlessly map, analyze and celebrate as the triumph of diversity and of difference, represent a great mystification. Behind the superficial praise [and facile image of] for multiplicity, the mystification concerns the fact that the pervasiveness of work within the entire spectrum of social relationships implies an ethos made of increasing generic, uprootedness and abstraction with which contemporary forms of production actualize their processes within society. Urban theories and social analysis that overlook this reality produce the same kind of rhetoric rehearsed by images of the city as a site of value-free congestion, leisure, spectacle, and consumption.

Stop City is a model of the city where the ubiquitous attributes of contemporary production such as generic, uprootedness, and abstraction are not rejected in the name of some humanistic good intention, but are radicalized to the extreme: they become the “political, and aesthetic surplus” of the same attributes: their legibility aims at stimulating a new class consciousness that may introduce stoppages – i.e. a *limit* - within the continuous space of urbanization.

Our project for *Stop-City* maintains that to propose projects at the scale of the entire city is to address the *possibility* of a political subject. We maintain that political subjects are not the by-product of sociological identity: lifestyles, groups, communities, social targets, etc., but that political subjects are made of the balance of powers at stake. “Labor power” refers to the fact that anything that exists in society has to be productive and thus must be put at work, and the workers, those who find themselves shaped by this condition of work, can potentially express a subjectivity that exceeds such social, cultural, and political boundaries. This excessive subjectivity cannot be proposed through architecture, but architecture can provoke this

subjectivity to emerge and take a position. It is precisely in this framework that *Stop city* introduces the issue of *limit* as its main theme. Architecture no longer as what implies growth, extension, multiplication, flexibility, but as the practice that limits such possibility. According to this logic, architecture does not become the design of everything, but becomes what releases everything from being designed.

In 1970, *No-Stop City* prophesized total urbanisation of the city. Today, *Stop City* suggests the beginning of a slow but inexorable comeback of the city against urbanisation. If the urban perception of liberal democracy coincides with the theoretic premises of the *No-Stop City*, namely diffusion, ubiquity and individualisation, the form of *Stop City* suggests the possibility of a new communitarian life that introduces a renewed spirit of secessionism within the smooth and totalizing spaces of urbanization. To imagine a form of communitarian life as phenomenon of separation rather than one based on universality means to imagine the limit within which each of city life is constituted.

Against the taboo that form means to abdicate from a political vision of the city, *Stop City* intends to provide a *theory* (in the original, non-intellectual, sense of the word *vision*) of political organisation and of the city through the absolute form of an architectural project.