Notes Toward a History of Agrarian Urbanism

Charles Waldheim

The categories of agrarian and urban are usually understood as distinct. Across many disciplines, and for centuries, the country and the city have been defined in opposition to one another. But today, in striking contrast, design culture and discourse abound with claims for the potential for urban agriculture. As environmental literacy among designers and scholars has grown, so too has enthusiasm for agricultural production in and around cities. Fueling this trend is rising public interest in food and its production and distribution in a globalized world.

Contemporary interest in food is being shaped by various authors and interests, who argue for the more sustainable practices associated with local food production, reduced carbon footprint, better public health and the related benefits of pre-industrial farming techniques, including enhanced biodiversity and ecological sustainability. Among the strongest advocates for these goals are the slow food and locavore movements.

While much has been written about the implications of urban farming for agricultural production, public policy, and food as an element of culture, little has been written about the potentially profound implications for the shape and structure of the city itself. To date the enthusiasm for slow and local food has been based, on the one hand, on the assumption that abandoned or underused brownfield sites could be remediated for their productive potential; and on the other it has been based on the trend toward conserving greenfield sites on city peripheries — on dedicating valuable ecological zones to food production and to limiting suburban sprawl. But these laudable goals are not much concerned
with how urban farming might affect urban form. This suggests that we need to probe further into the possibilities of agricultural urbanism: so these brief notes outline a history of urban form perceived through the spatial, ecological and infrastructural import of agricultural production. The choice of projects is based on the idea of agricultural production as a formative element of city structure, rather than as an adjunct, something to be inserted into already existing structures; thus this tentative counter-history seeks to construct a useful past from three projects organized explicitly around the role of agriculture in determining the economic, ecological and spatial order of the city.

Many 20th-century urban planning projects aspired to construct an agrarian urbanism — in some cases 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 a counterpoint to the increasingly dense metropolises that grew with the great migrations from farm villages to industrial cities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in Western Europe and North America. Some early modernist proposals took their agrarian inspirations from the relatively decentralized industrial model favored by Henry Ford and others in the 1910s and ’20s — a preference that led to spatial decentralization and the abandonment of older, denser cities. A decade or so later, partly in response to the Great Depression, planners saw agrarianism as a kind of bridge between the rural practice of subsistence farming and the increasingly vulnerable urban workforce. Through mixing industry with agriculture, some modernist urban planners imagined a rotational labor system in which workers alternated between factory jobs and collective farms; usually these new spatial orders were conceptualized as vast regional landscapes, and their representations conflated aerial views and orthographic maps.

We can read these emerging tendencies through three unbuilt projects that advocated for 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), and its further development, "Territory for the New Economy" (1999). [1] Although produced decades apart by three very different authors, these projects, considered collectively, illustrate many of the implications of agricultural production for urban form; they also form a coherent intellectual genealogy, with Branzi referencing Hilberseimer, who earlier had been informed by Wright. Each of these projects proposed a profound reconceptualization of the city — a 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, replacing it with a conflation of suburb and region — a suburbanized regionalism. Given contemporary interest in urban agriculture, these propositions offer
Implicit in the work of these urbanists were two large assumptions: that cities would continue to be decentralized, and that landscape would become the primary medium of urban form. The suburban landscapes in the projects of Wright, Hilberseimer and Branzi were fleshed out with agricultural landscapes — with farms and fields; the projects encompassed large territorial or regional networks of urban infrastructure that brought existing natural environments into new relationships with planned agricultural and industrial landscapes.

Broadacres / Usonia

In the depths of the Depression, lacking good projects and reasonable prospects for the recovery of his once towering reputation, Frank Lloyd Wright persuaded his lone remaining patron — Edgar J. Kauffman, who would later commission Fallingwater — to fund a traveling exhibition of Wright's grand proposal for an organic American urbanism. Broadacre City consisted of a large model — 12 feet by 12 feet — and supporting materials produced by student apprentices at Taliesin in the winter of 1934–35. Although the intellectual premises of the project were evident in Wright's lectures as early as the 1920s, and fully articulated in his 1932 book *The Disappearing City*, the Broadacre model and drawings were not debuted until an exhibition in 1935 in New York City. Subsequently, the exhibition toured extensively, and the remarkably durable project was further disseminated in such publications as *When Democracy Builds* (1945) and *The Living City* (1958). [2] Broadacre City offered American audiences the clearest crystallization of Wright's damning critique of the modern industrial city; it posited an indigenous organic model for North American settlement across an essentially boundless plain of cultivated landscape. Eschewing traditional European distinctions between city and countryside, Broadacre proposed a network of transportation and communication infrastructures, with 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 decentralized settlement, and the closest built parallel for Broadacre can be found in Ford's instigation of what would become the Tennessee Valley Authority — the New Deal-authorized public agency that oversaw the construction of a network of hydroelectric...
dams and highways along the Tennessee River, enabling the electrification of the region and seeding its urbanization. [3]

With ownership of one acre of land per person as a birthright, residents of Broadacre (or Usonia, as Wright would later call it) would enjoy modern houses sited amid 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. Despite Broadacre'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 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 remained an open question; perhaps these would need to be abandoned in place, again following Ford's lead.

Wright's critique of private ownership, conspicuous consumption, and the accumulation of wealth associated with cities was no small part of the social critique embodied in Broadacre, which was conceived in the worst years of the Depression, when bankrupt family farmers were fleeing their mortgaged fields in the middle of the country and migrating to California. Ironically, given his anxiety over the corrosive effects of wealth and speculative capital, Wright found in Ford's notion of regional infrastructure the basis for an American pattern of urban development: Broadacre was intended to provide 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 highly capitalist strategies of Fordist production.

The New Regional Pattern / The New City
Another modernist architect and urbanist who grappled 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 (later Illinois) Institute of Technology in 1938. While Hilberseimer is most notoriously known for the strict, even totalizing rationalism of projects such as Hochhausstadt (Highrise City), Hilberseimer had in fact quickly abandoned those schemes in favor of projects that explored decentralization as a remedy for the ills of the industrial city. This was evident as early as 1927 in a sketch depicting "The Metropolis as a Garden-City" [4]; and in the 1930s Hilberseimer was increasingly influenced by European precedents for the garden city. His projects from that time deploy landscape and mixed-height housing to create low-density settlement; starting with his 1930 Mischbebauung (Mixed Height Housing), this pattern would inform his U.S. work over the next decades.

By the 1940s, Hilberseimer's concept of the "settlement unit" was taking clear form, especially in its anticipation of an interstate highway system and its precise articulation of relationships among transportation networks, settlement units, and the regional landscape. In the postwar years Hilberseimer's interest in organic urbanism was further fueled by civil defense imperatives that encouraged decentralization. [5] In this context — and influenced too by Broadacre City as well as the progressive TVA and its proponents in the Regional Planning Association of America — Hilberseimer developed his New Regional Pattern as a strategy for low-density urbanization based on regional highways and natural environmental conditions, and he disseminated his ideas in the 1949 The New Regional Pattern: Industries and Gardens, Workshops and Farms. [6]

As was Broadacre, the New Regional Pattern was organized around transportation and communication networks that unified an essentially horizontal, landscape-dominated suburban settlement. Housing, farms, light industry, commercial buildings, and civic space: all were located across an extensive territory. But the New Regional Pattern did not defer to the abstraction of the grid; it was informed by the natural environment — by topography, hydrology, vegetation, wind patterns, et al. It conflated infrastructural systems with built landscapes and used environmental conditions to produce a radically reconceived type of North American settlement. Although 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. [7] In this regard the project offers a profound critique of traditional 19th-century urban form, as well as the associated architectural and urban practices that have persisted.

**Agronica / Territory for the New Economy**

The work of the Italian architect and urbanist Andrea Branzi is equally relevant to the emerging discourse on agrarian urbanism. Branzi's work reanimates the long tradition of using the urban project as a social and cultural critique — of seeing urban design as an opportunity not simply to illustrate a
"vision" but also to demystify and critically describe ongoing social problems. In this sense Branzi's work is less concerned with utopian possibilities than with the critically engaged and politically literate delineation of the power structures, forces and flows shaping contemporary urbanism; and in the past four decades he has articulated a remarkably consistent critique of the failings — social, cultural, intellectual, also economic, environmental and aesthetic — of laissez-faire development and of the realpolitik assumptions of much design and planning.

Born and educated in Florence, Branzi studied architecture in the cultural milieu of the Operaists and the scholarly tradition of Marxist critique. He came to international visibility in the mid 1960s as a member of the collective Archizoom, which was based in Milan but associated with the Florentine Architettura Radicale movement. In projects such as "No-Stop City," Archizoom envisioned an urbanism of continuous mobility, fluidity and flux; indeed, though widely perceived as a satire of the British technophilia of Archigram, No-Stop City was really more an exploration of a kind of "degree zero" urbanization, an urbanism without qualities. [8] In their use, for instance, of typewriter keystrokes on A4 paper to represent the non-figural planning of No-Stop City, Archizoom anticipated contemporary studies in indexical and parametric formulations of the city. Their work also prefigured the current interest in mapping how financial and ecological flows shape the modern low-density metropolis; and it anticipates the focus on infrastructure and ecology as non-figurative drivers of urban form. A generation of contemporary urbanists — ranging from Stan Allen and James Corner to Alex Wall to Alejandro Zaera-Polo — has thus drawn from Branzi's intellectual commitments. [9] Still more recently, Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara's "Stop-City" project directly references Branzi's use of non-figurative urban projection as a kind of social and political critique. [10] Branzi's projects have also informed contemporary attention to such diverse topics as animalia, indeterminacy and genericity.

Just as he has influenced younger designers, Branzi himself was influenced by the leading postwar thinkers; in his focus on urban design as social critique, No-Stop City drew upon the projects and theories of Hilberseimer, especially the New Regional Pattern. [11] 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 — which makes them particularly relevant to contemporary discussions of ecological urbanism. What is more, Branzi occupies a singular historical position as a hinge figure between the social and environmental aspirations of mid-century planning and the politics of 1968.

Branzi's Agronica, of 1993-94, illustrates the relentlessly horizontal spread of capital across thinly settled territory, and the resulting "weak urbanization" that neo-liberal economics has enabled. Commissioned by Philips Electronics, and created in association with the Domus Academy — a research

institute Branzi cofounded in the '80s — Agronica explores the potential relationships among agricultural and energy production, new versions of post-Fordist industrialism, and the cultures of consumption they produce. [12] More recently, in 1999, Branzi extended this work in a project in Eindhoven; here too he shows, with typical wit, a "territory for the new economy," in which agricultural production shapes urban form. [13]

Branzi's "weak work" maintains its critical and projective relevance for a new generation of urbanists. His longstanding call for the development of what he defines as weak urban forms and non-figural fields — forms and fields that are flexible, mobile, open to change — influenced the formulation of landscape urbanism over a decade ago and promises to animate the emerging discussions of ecological urbanism. [14] And his projective and polemic propositions illuminate the possibilities for agrarian urbanism.

My brief pre-history of agricultural urbanism raises more questions than it answers, and it might not convince contemporary readers of the efficacy of organizing the city in this way — but it seems a useful step in understanding the larger implications of contemporary food culture for the design disciplines. Wright, Hilberseimer and Branzi each pursued agricultural urbanism as part of critical positions that engaged economic inequality, social justice, and environmental health. Each has contributed an important legacy for today’s agrarian urbanists.