The Interior City. Infinity and Concavity in the No-Stop City (1970-1971)

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"Today, man is master over infinite space!" Hans Hollein

The project and its development

The No-Stop City, developed by the Florentine group Archizoom between 1970 and 1971, is along with the Continuous Monument by Superstudio, the best-known and more studied and interpreted project of the Italian Radical Architecture.

It should be noted that this is not a unitary project with defined boundaries, but different crystallizations of an idea due both to the different stages of its development and the occasion that motivated it (academic research, journal publications, competitions...). Even if the grouping of these proposals constitutes a single metaproject that can be discussed under the denomination of No-Stop City, quite often its pluralistic nature has not been taken sufficiently into account.

In the "political reference" submitted by Archizoom to the proceedings of the congruous Utopia e/o Rivoluzione, held in Turin in April 1969, the group tried to define its position in the intense debate about the relations between politics and architecture that was taking place in Italy. Many of the ideas that were later embedded in the project were already featured in this text:

"Until now, the depth of buildings and typologies remained anchored to the limits imposed by spontaneous equilibrium: natural lighting and ventilation, and surface per-capita are the result of an image of income and balanced life with general economic conditions that, definitely, needs to be blown to pieces. But the problem is not imagining new working-class neighborhoods linked to better typologies, but rather imagining amorphous or monomorphic structures, whose apetite content is performed only in quantitative terms, not imagining the organization of a different society, better and fairer, with more beautiful houses. At the moment, we are only interested in them being much larger."

At the beginning of 1970, the members of the group began to capture graphically the result of their thoughts about a quantitative city. Gilberto Correrì draws a continuous space supported by huge triangular trusses inspired by Mas and a massive and oblong obscure volume that fills a valley in the wake of the Continuous Monument by Superstudio. Andrea Branzi produces a series of diagrams with a typewriter in which the paper is patterned with a grid of exes and dots representing, respectively, the bearing structure and the dimensional grid of a continuous space without clear limits. Sometimes, calligraphic signs, forming clouds, colonize areas of this space overlapping the isotropic grid. One of these diagrams has an enlightening label: Homogeneous Urbanization Diagram, Hypothesis of Non-Figurative Architectural Language.

The first publication of the project, with generous graphic content and an extensive text, happened in 1970, in the July-August number of Casabella, with the title: City. Assembly Line of Social Issues. History and Theory of the Metropolis. The project shows already most of the items that will make it recognizable: an homogeneous structure of pillars, elevators and floor slabs with undefined facades and number of floors. Sometimes it is depicted as a series of massive prisms in the landscape, while other times it seems that only the orography or the coast may contain its spread. Indoors, the horizontal continuity is interrupted, by landscape elements that occasionally emerge (rivers, roads), or by straight and curved free standing walls or divisions between rectangular and pedestrian areas. In one of the plans there are even some Hundred houses of clear Russian filiation even if, in this case, the patio is provocatively covered. This is a catalog of different situations in which the project shows its absolute flexibility of both implementation and use. The object system, which will be so important for the image of the proposal, has not yet appeared, probably due to the fact that the scale of the plants is very small.

Following this publication, Archizoom focused on thinking how life and objects would be like in their new city model. They designed a set of clothes, adapted to life in a micro-conditioned environment, published under the name Nearest Futurist System. They also put forward the famous dictum, further enlarged and colored, according to the containing everything needed to dwell any point of their homogeneous city.

The next stage in the project development was the last publication in 1971 with its publication in the number 78-79 of Design Quarterly in charge of Peter Eisenman and devoted to conceptual architecture, and soon after in March of that year, in Domus. For the first time the name No-Stop City appears. The title in both publications is almost identical: No-Stop City. Residential Parkings, Climatic Universal System in the American magazine while in Domus the original formulation was replaced by Parkings. These publications include a new batch of graphic material and an essay in Domus. The study of possible ways of colonization by the inhabitants is further developed including habitats that are unfoldable from a continuous wall of large furniture that can be moved from one place to another using mechanical fork lifts. Forms of sedentary habitats are also proposed through dwellings configured by functional stripes that could be accessed, only, from the elevators. In Domus there are views of interior scenes of the No-Stop City, named Paesaggi Interni and Strutture teatrale continue, that are a particularly valuable contribution to the image of the project. They are dioramas of sectors of the city colonized by furniture and objects of consumption in which an illusion of infinity is achieved through the use of mirrors.

These publications were the last development of the project. Later on, Archizoom produced urban proposals and furniture, interior and clothing design that followed the wake of the No-Stop City and complemented it, which have been occasionally published as part of it. These includes Allestimenti di stazione (1971), Distrazione e Riproduzione della Città (1972) and Dreising design (1972).

A city without architecture

This is not, therefore, a conventional project but a generic habitat that has no precise function, location or form. The system is defined by the invariants maintained throughout its evolution: a reticular and isotropic structure of pillars and elevators holding

4. Ibid., p. 11.
5. ARCHIZOOM: Città, calarama dell’ortogonale sociale, ideologia e testa della metropoli, Casabella 350-1, July-August 1971, p. 33
9. For the anti-utopian pressure in the field of Italian Marxism see: GARGIANI, Roberto: Utopia, i Due Stati della Società, Electa, Milan, 1993.
10. TRONTO, Marco: La fabbrica e la società, in: OPERAI E CAPITALE, Derive, Capitalism, Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 2008. Many of the ideas that were later embodied in the project were already featured in this text:
11. BERBERE, Gilberto: Utopia e/o Rivoluzione, Domus 496, March 1971, p. 56
14. Ibid.
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Another even more extreme example of the solvent potential of technology on architecture is the science-fiction film THX 1138 by George Lucas, a speculation about a future society, marked by electronics, strictly contemporary with the No Stop City (it was filmed in 1969 and released in 1971). The film shows a space, in this case of imprisonment, which is a white, homogenous, infinite and pure background devoid not only of architecture but also of objects.

The No-Stop City, attempting to liberate man from architecture, the city that arises from this operation is, by no means, a conventional one. In the proposal, not only the hypothesis of the built environment is crucial, but also the fact that it happens in a continuous and homogenous way. By pushing out any interior void and ignoring the outside, a concrete city is generated. The definition of this model, by Andrea Branzi, as a “city without architecture” is best understood if we consider that it is also an “interior city”. The disappearance of urban fragmentation, of the succession of solids and voids that shapes the traditional city, deepens the crisis of representation pointed in the interior configuration of the proposal: the vanishing of the limit that was shaping the different elements and the whole city entails the vanishing of the meaning or, at least, of all meaning linked to architectural and urban form. We find ourselves in a city without qualities, devoid of any attribute other than the pure undifferentiated and homogenous extension.

Therefore, the infinity and concavity of the No-Stop City are, not only unusual and provocative traits of the project, but the essential characteristics that shape it and the key to its solvency and subversive potential for the architecture and the city. As we have seen, available technology allowed such a construction to be thought of: however, the pure technical feasibility does not fully explain the project. There are other reasons that explain Archizoom’s bet for an infinity and a concavity that are not accidental: we refer to Marxism and Pop art.

Marxist roots of concavity
Regarding this, it is essential to understand that we are facing a manifestation, that we consider, of a transformation of the economic system that is not only a transformation of the economic system but also of our ways of thinking about it. The crisis of capitalism is not only a crisis of the economic system but also of the political order, of the political system. This is the crisis of capitalism as we know it, the crisis of the economic system that has been transformed by the capitalist mode of production.

The “quantitative” concept appears recurrently in the project, from the time prior to its first formulation (in the group contribution to the congress Utopia e/o Reeducation) until its last publication in which they claim: “Boundaries only possible utopia is quantitative”. Through this concept the members of the group sought to develop a “new figuration” architecture and move away from figurative utopias and visionary architecture which had been condemned by influential figures of Italian Marxism like Mario Tronti, Manfredo Tafuri or Massimo Cacciari.[10] The want to remember that one of the three laws of dialectical materialism stipulates, precisely, the passage from quantitative changes to qualitative changes. The operation by which the No-Stop City is generated as an endless and interior city can be seen as a radical application of this principle of the “official” philosophy of Marxism. As we have seen, through the boundless increase of the built depth (a change, in principle, strictly quantitative) a number of radical qualitative changes are triggered: not only the architectural and urban form and the associated figurative load disappear but, ultimately, the architecture grows, occupying everything, the city is a white, homogenous, infinite and pure background devoid not only of architecture but also of objects.

A very important influence in the work of Archizoom was the Operaismo,[11] a tendency of the Italian “new left” that had Mario Tronti as its main ideologue. This trend intended to overcome the impasse that the workers struggle seemed to have reached with the connivance of the parliamentary left parties and trade unions. For the Operaism, the labor force is the ultimate contradiction of capital. The worker occupies the production space would take place.

At the highest point of capitalist development, social relationships become a “condition” of the relations of production; the entire society becomes an “institution” of production, which means that all society lives according to the factory, and the factory extends its exclusive dominion over the whole of society.[12]

Tronti formulated this analysis in highly metaphorical terms and without pretending that an alternative urban model should derive from it. However, and almost immediately, this principle of the factory system was taken by many young architects, orphans of alternative models in the bourgeois city, an appealing proposal for a new and genuinely Marxist urbanism in which the “civilization” of the no-man’s-land between the social space and the production space would take place.
At the same time, Manfredo Tafuri and his fellows of the AdA (Architettura Della Atitudine) were developing a concept, the "city territory", that was very close to the thesis of Tronti. The year in which this term is proposed is, in fact, the same in which Fausto Ceirano la societa is published. The city territory sought to advance toward a greater territorial integration that would transcend the city-country division and the traditional concentric arrangement of the city (a productive region and the means of the productive apparatus, and the immaterialities caused by the rapid urban growth. It was an "open" urbanism unconcerned about urban form.

The influence of these concepts in the work of Archizoom is easily traceable already in their student projects of mosaics-structures such as the 1964 Citto Estrana. The name of the project refers to the extrusion of the city into a previously agricultural land (the Piano of Florence) that would allow its systemic change. A true extraction of the elements that constitute the current production system[13]. The presence of these ideas is also evident in the No-Stop City. The text of its first publication in Casabella, in the summer of 1970, is, first and foremost, a political manifest on the relationship between economic system, society and city, full of explicit references to Marin, Tronti, Tafuri and other Marxist intellectuals, and significantly entitled, assemblage line of social issues.

The city overflow on the territory does not imply, in the case of the No-Stop City, the integration of the rural world but, rather, its exclusion. The introversion of the project highlights the absolute ignorance of its exterior alternative, of the realm that the city has traditionally ignored. The lack of interest in the rural area is also ideological. Moving away from its ruralistic roots, Marxism sees the countryside and agriculture, rather than as a happy arcadia uncontaminated by industrial capitalism, as the lair of reactionary and inconsequential for the urban form, the project equates these two moments of the economic cycle by being the simultaneous support for both, and poses a continuous and homogeneous system designed to offer no resistance to this cycle and to speed it up.

For the group, Pop turns everyday life into art accessible to everyone, being, in this sense, anti-elitist. This trend flattens reality and dissolves the categories of high and low culture. The resulting scenario is very similar to the undifferentiated homogeneity of the No-Stop City. In fact, this trait of the project reflects an egalitarian society freed from social hierarchies, something also expressed in the horizontal nature of the proposal, free of dilemmas, and in the absence of center and periphery.

The influence of Pop is particularly evident in the project diasystems. In what looks like the epitaph of a consumption paradise, and in sharp contrast with the absolute abstraction of the building, a flood of consumer goods saturates incomparably the space. In this sense, the contrast between the ineffectiveness of the building and the hyperrelevance of the mobile is striking. The tension between these two spheres reflects an increasing loss of prominence of architecture, despite the permanence of its presence and the provisionality of consumer products or, perhaps, precisely because of this. Faced with the growing complexity and constant renewal induced by the production system, the stability of the built proves problematic. It is this constellation of highly obsolescent and continuously renewed objects of consumption which, more than anything else, constitutes human habitat, involving an increasingly secondary role for architecture.

It does not seem accidental that Brauni has always demonstrated an explicit admiration for Richard Hamilton, not that his collage just what it is that makes today's home as different, so appealing,[16] considered one of the foundational works of Pop Art, appears illustrating several of his workings over the years. Let's compare this work of the British artist with the interior images of the No-Stop City: what we see is, in many respects, a premonition of the interior city without architecture proposed by Archizoom fifteen years later. Not only because it is a scene built from consumer products, but because the environment that houses them is a completely superfluous interior. What makes this house so "different and appealing" is, precisely, everything that is not home: the set of consumer goods ready to meet any need, any desire, in short, the market. A market that, as was felt even then, was beginning to have an unlimited dimension, to occupy everything. While Banham persuaded us that "a house is not a home", Hamilton, by presenting in his collage the commodification of all spheres of life, including leisure and intimacy, tells us a home that, dissolved in the market, has ceased to be.

Pop detects and, at the same time, encourages the dissolution of boundaries between public space and private space, between exterior and interior. If in Hamilton's collage, the global village acquires a domestic internalization of urban space and a simultaneous urban externalization of domestic space[17], in the No-Stop City it goes one step further by ending with the domestic as a category. What is in crisis in the project is not the nature of the home, but its own existence as a protective sphere of privacy: everything is a home and nothing is a home. The direct urban praxis of Archizoom induces the disappearance of the traditional interior space, that of intimacy, something evident in most of the project images that present living as a nomadic activity.

Somehow, the relationship that the No-Stop City maintains with the domestic space is parallel to the one maintained with the rural sphere: pure omission. This interior space, public and urbanized, doesn't accept competition and extends a panoptic domain over the whole of the existence that leaves no room for rural externality or private interiority. As the market does.

A project without limits for a system without limits

Ultimately, in their contribution to the project, Marxism and consumerism are not so far away. The materialistic and totalizing logic shared by both projects, the fusion of all built reality in an homogeneous continuum that, as these systems, lacks an outside, that is to say, alternative realities that limit and question it.

In this sense, the project reflects a profound change in the very nature of the urban reality that is not alien to the influence of Marshall McLuhan. It does not seem accidental that the text of its first publication already madness the "global village". The metropolis could be a "place", to become a 'condition': in fact, it is just this condition which is made to circulate uniformly, through all of built reality in an homogeneous continuum that, as this system, lacks an outside, that is to say, alternative realities that limit and question it.