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

Pablo Martinez Capdevila

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 71, is along with the Continuous Monument by Superstudio, the best-known and most studied and interpreted project of the Italian Radical Architecture. It should be noted that this is not a nontypical project with defined boundaries, but different crystallizations of an idea due to the different stages of its development and the occasion that motivated it (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 a/o Revolution, 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 embodied 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 broken to pieces. But the problem is not imagining new working-class neighborhoods linked to better typologies, but rather imagining amorphous or mammorphic structures, whose spatial 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” [1].

At the beginning of 1970, the members of the group begin to capture graphically the result of their thoughts about a quantitative city. Gilberto Corretti draws a continuous space supported by huge triangulated trusses inspired by Mies and a monumental and 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, forms of clouds, colonize areas of this space overlapping the isotropic grid. One of these diagrams has an enlightening label: Homogeneous Habitational Diagram, Hypothesis of non-Figurative Architectural Language.

The first publication of the project, with generous graphic content and an extensive text, happens 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 and the coast may contain its spread. Indoors, the horizontal continuity is interrupted, by landscape elements that occasionally emerge (rivers, rocks), or by straight and curved free standing walls or divisions between rectangular and pedestrian areas. In one of the plans there are even some double courtyards of clear Russian filiation even if, in this case, the patio is provocatively undeϐined facades and number of ϐloors. Sometimes it is

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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, homogeneous, infinite and pure background devoid not only of architecture but also of objects.

The No-Stop City, attempting to liberate man from architectural constraints, is understood as a continuous space, limited by no walls or barriers. The limits and shape they are defined are understood as trivial and inconsequential. A system of containment, these limits and shape they delimit the urban space, simultaneously infinite and pure background devoid not only of architecture but also of objects.

From the point of view of Archizoom’s young members, the anomalous would not be the typologies that take advantage of this new technological environment for becoming independent from the outside (the factory, supermarket, parking...), but those typologies that have not done that yet. The environment technification, taking its extreme consequences, allows the most remarkable and transcendent decision of the project and to which, in fact, owes its name: to establish an unlimited constructed depth, a potentially endless urban space.

The outer perimeter of the whole is not identical and inexorable. The intuition that the proliferation of systems and distribution (because it simply lacks them) of analysis of this project, if we stick to its graphic content, lies precisely in the fact that it is very difficult to understand 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 homogeneous 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 manifesto, and that the drawings and images of the proposal are, also, the illustration of its written content. Texts that very explicitly want to reflect the political activism of the members of the group in the field of Marxism. Field in which, on the other hand, were included most of their radical fellows and a good part of the Italian architectural and intellectual environment.

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 Risoluzione) until its last publication in which they claim: “infinite only possible utopia is quantitative”.

Through this concept the members of the group sought to develop a “non figurative” 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.

A very important influence in the work of Archizoom was the Oeuvres (7), 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 consignment of the parliamentary left parties and trade unions. For the Oeuvres, the labor force is the ultimate constructive force, a system of productive resources that seize the capitalist chain of value creation, and that should enable him to transform the system in his favor. The task is not to resolve the capitalist system contradictions, but to subvert the system and in order to take control of the economic cycle, compared with other contemporary projects, cannot be accidental. What Archizoom seems to be telling us with this operation, both simple and sophisticated, is that the system of technology and them a true innovative and provocative proposition: it would be enough to us with this operation, both simple and sophisticated, is that the system of technology and them a true innovative and provocative proposition: it would be enough to establish the technological order without necessarily changing the capitalist system.

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Through this concept the members of the group sought to develop a “non figurative” 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. The want to remember that one of the three laws of dialectical materialism stipulates, precisely, the passage from quantitative changes into 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 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 is generated in the city itself as we know them. This dissolution by hypertropy (as architecture grows, it loses its architectural character) represents a true quantitative resolution able to completely redefine the built realm. The mentioned use of a relatively low-tech construction, compared with other contemporary projects, cannot be accidental. What Archizoom seems to be doing with this operation, both simple and sophisticated is that the system of technology and them a true innovative and provocative proposition: it would be enough to establish the technological order without necessarily changing the capitalist system.

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The intuition that the proliferation of systems and technology could end up shaping a new type of habitat that would turn the traditional building into something superfluous and unnecessary was, somehow, in the air in the years in which the Radical was weaving in Italian universities, Rayner Banham said.

“When your house contains such a simple of piping, fluid, ducts, wire, lights, inlets, outlets, ovens, sinks, refill dispensers, hi-fi reverberators, antennae, computer, battery and a host of other unusual services that the hardware could stand up by itself without any assistance from the house, why have a house to hold it up?” 10

At the same time, Manfredo Tafuri and his fellows of the Architetti Urbanisti Associati (AUA) 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 1970, and it is the same in which La fabbrica è la società is published.

The city territory sought to advance toward a greater territorial integration that would transcend the city-county-district tradition and the traditional concentric arrangement of urban development, and it implied the inseparability of the productive apparatus, and the linkages caused by the rapid urban growth.

It was an "open" urbanism unconditioned about urban form.

The influence of these concepts in the work of Archizoom is easily traceable already in their student projects of mega-structures such as the 1964 Città Estranea. The name of the project refers to the estrangement of the city into a previously agricultural land (the Piano of Florence) that would allow its systematic conversion into "a true extrusion of the elements that constitute the current production system" ([18]). 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 1967, is, first and foremost, a political manifesto on the relationship between economic system, society and city, full of explicit references to Mario Tronti, Tafuri and other Marxist intellectuals, and significantly entitled, assembly line of social issues.

The city overflows 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 introduction of the project highlights the absolute ignorance of its exterior alternative, of the realm that the city has traditionally occupied. In fact, the lack of interest in the urban landscape is also ideological. Moving away from its Tuscan roots, Marxism sees the countryside and agriculture, rather than as a happy arcadia uncontaminated by industrial capitalism, as the harbinger of reactionary and conservative values. Marxism distrusts the countryside and the rural, and, as Berndtson wrote, an "escape of capital" in the interest of the city is also ideological. Moving away from its Tuscan roots, Marxism sees the countryside and agriculture, rather than as a happy arcadia uncontaminated by industrial capitalism, as the harbinger of reactionary and conservative values.

The influence of Pop is particularly evident in the project disereum. In what looks like the ephemera of a consumption paradise, and in sharp contrast with the absolute abstraction of the building, a flood of consumer goods saturates the representational space. In this sense, the contrast between the inexpressible stability of the building and the hyperexpressive transience 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 Branzi has always demonstrated an explicit admiration for Richard Hamilton, nor that his collage just what it is that makes today's homes as different, so appealing?, 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 premontion 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 content of commodity, transforms all spheres of life, including leisure and intimacy, into 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 Hamilton's collage, this global village, looks like a hegemonic 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. Instead of urban praxis, public imagination reads 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 presages the features 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 bears the reference to "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 consumer products, in the social phenomenon. The "future dimension of the metropolis coincides with that of the market itself".

The No-Stop City puts forward an infinite interiority because the urban has ceased to be a place, and has become a virtually ubiquitous condition. If the system occupies everything, everything is interior to the system and nothing is external to it. A project without limits and without outside for a system without limits and without outside. Or, as Branzi recently stated: "... a freed inside and outside at all scale."

[16] EFINZI DELONICTION POP MARXISM NEO-AVANT-GARDE
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