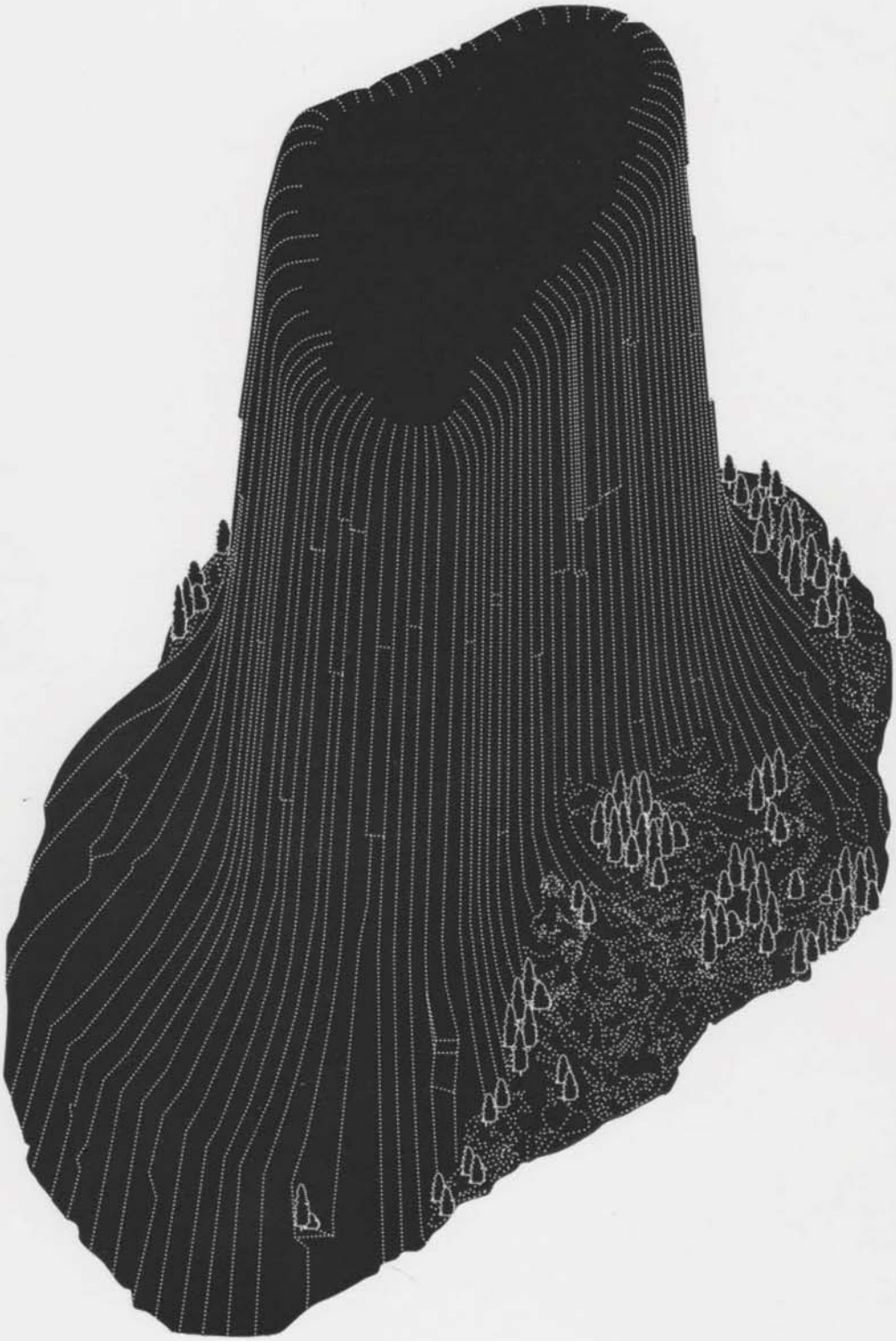

FLAT PRIMITIVE

Neyran Turan

Horizontality is usually associated with the idea of the non-figurative field in architecture. From Mies van der Rohe's infinite extension of the ground to the horizon, to Ludwig Hilberseimer's transcription of the region as a horizontal field of landscape, flatness has embodied the fundamental modernist conceptions of universality, infinity and abstraction. As part of this lineage, Archizoom's "No-Stop City" project of 1969 has always been regarded as the ultimate origin of what is considered to be the contemporary flat-horizontal city, a relentless and homogenous spread of capital, infrastructures and ecologies. According to this formulation, the contemporary city is a vastly stretched horizontal plane of *field conditions* rather than a collection of vertical figures or singular buildings. Currently, in a period when the world has once more been pronounced *flat* due to globalization, the horizontal plane has been the perfect metaphor of a seamless ground where everything is connected via information flows and various forms of networks.[1]

In architecture, a lot has been said about flat-horizontal urbanism during the 1990s, and the emergence of this idea was, of course, by no means innocent. An era marked by a protest against postmodernist urban *form* produced a fascination with the generic horizontal *space* of global capitalist development. Think of the recent interest in mat buildings, landscape urbanism, infrastructures, mapping research, etc. – in all of these instances the surface is appreciated for its organizational or programmatic attributes, not for its figurative qualities. The argument behind all this was that the semiotic tendencies had stalled architecture's transformational influence on reality during the 1980s and that the instrumental attributes of the flat needed to be exploited

1
Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005); Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).

instead of resorting to mere figurative investigations. Accordingly, a sweeping tone of instrumental solutions pervaded everything, from abandoned airfields to contaminated waterfronts to obsolete landfills. For the flat-horizontal, formlessness was better than form. Flows were more fun than boundaries and objects. The preferable terms were flexibility and indeterminacy. These tendencies have recently gained impetus due to the current environmental problems and the ubiquitous topic of sustainability, and problem-solving has become the normative justification of an architectural project at the risk of falling prey to extreme pragmatism and neo-environmentalist do-goodism.

Ninety Degrees

Originally, the non-figurative language of Andrea Branzi's "city without architecture" was perceived as the primitive form of the contemporary investigations of the flat-horizontal city.[2] According to Branzi, in an age of capitalist development, objects are only relevant as they would be perceived in an agricultural field – i.e., as floating autonomous interiors on a non-figurative, flat field – and not for their vertical figurality. Branzi writes:

> [W]e find the theme of architecture as an activity which is less figurative and more enzymatic, i.e., which transforms territory horizontally; architecture that is closer to agriculture than to the exhibitionist buildings of today. An agricultural landscape is extraordinary because it is a culture that is horizontal, spread out, that does not a definitive boundary that can change. It is a territory that is almost infinite and that changes over time, but which has never produced a "cathedral," in other words, a powerful symbol.[3]

This raises a question: rather than using the "No-Stop City" project as the most primitive flat form of the non-figurative horizontal, what happens if we take another Branzi project as a point of origin? The project in question is Branzi's rather little known New York Waterfront project for the west side of Manhattan (1988). For the international ideas competition organized by the Municipal Art Society, Branzi's project proposed an artificial park for the entire west bank of Manhattan, which is connected to the large existing green areas of New York, i.e., Central Park and Riverside Park. Consisting of a nine-floor-deep underground building with eleven million square metres of artificially lit and ventilated interior space, the project accommodated parking, offices, museums, stadiums, restaurants, etc. The New York Waterfront

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Andrea Branzi writes: "'The city without architecture' is the city whose functions no longer occur through the devices of architecture, but now occur through systems of electronic instruments, products, information, and above all through the componential approach to interior design, which permits the re-functionalization of its interior spaces in real time. This is, therefore, a city whose external image no longer corresponds to the activities carried out in its internal spaces; such activities are now done in an independent fashion, separated from the architectural backdrop." Branzi, "City Without Architecture", in idem, *Weak and Diffuse Modernity: The World of Projects at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Skira: Milan, 2006), 69.

3
Andrea Branzi, *Open Enclosures* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2008), unpaginated.

project was, of course, a deliberate choice for Manhattan, an island of vertical icons. Branzi's polemical protest against the vertical figure was apparent in the project via his articulation of the building as a horizontal platform. The project statement asserts:

> [The project] constructs new horizontal territories that . . . no longer belong to the excessively exhibitionist and vertical tradition of modernity and the cathedrals or powerful symbols. . . . This design responds to New York's need for growth and life, while at the same time hopes to go beyond the mental and constructional limits of the composite tradition of modern architecture and its (fragile) myth of vertical development that was so well represented by the Twin Towers.[4]

Despite Branzi's condemnation of the vertical figure, however, there was a slightly different nuance in this project. In contrast to Branzi's other projects that focus on the horizontal field ("No-Stop City", "Agronica", "Architectural Pine Forest"), what was peculiar in the New York Waterfront design was the way the project actually wrestled with the question of the figure, which it embraced and transformed through the flattening of the image. While giant graffiti murals (along with a park comprising hills, forests and lakes) were stretched horizontally on an artificial "geologic platform", the project clearly aimed to flatten the figural into the horizontal, almost as if the large vertical billboard (or the "Bill-Ding-Board") of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's National Football Hall project had been rotated ninety degrees. For Branzi, the platform proposed for the New York Waterfront would "become a sort of tectonic plate of a new geology upon which an artificial landscape with large figurative signs is propped".[5] Branzi then goes on to say:

> We want, in fact, to furnish the banks of Manhattan for the new frontiers of the third millennium: a great horizontal platform open to sun, that emits signs towards skies, representing man living in the artificial nature of New York in the twenty-first century, a sign like that of the Statue of Liberty, which for this century has represented America to the world.[6]

This act of a ninety-degree rotation of the Venturian billboard into a territorial canvas begs the question of what happens when we start to understand the horizontal project in terms of not only its organizational and non-figurative characteristics, but also its figurative attributes? After an era of extreme obsession with urban analyses and singular icons, how does one speculate about the iconicity of the

4
Andrea Branzi, "New York Waterfront: Architecture as New Territories", in idem, *Weak and Diffuse Modernity*, 91. See also "Andrea Branzi: Progetto Manhattan Waterfront", *Domus*, no. 696 (July/August 1988), 1–2.

5
Branzi, "New York Waterfront", 91.

6
Andrea Branzi, *Complete Works* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 177.

horizontal? While the writings of both Venturi and Branzi associate the figure with verticality, the graphic quality of the horizontal suggested by the New York Waterfront project might, in fact, re-open a conversation about various as yet unexploited histories and aesthetic potentials.

The first theoretical prompt that we can extract from this is the relationship between territory and form. That is, one could argue that territories, in fact, do have forms, and that they can offer a very different type of legibility and iconicity. Think of the massive shapes on Google Earth: can we talk about territorial monumentality on that kind of scale? In contemporary architecture, iconicity is reduced either to the fantastic Bilbao effect or to the more general degradation of the icon. The figurative flat would not only help us to scrutinize further the intricate relationship between the aerial view and the construction of subjectivity; it would also allow us to think about the relevance of icons on the scale of territory.

Recent work in geography warns us that globalization cannot be theorized merely as de-territorialization with flows and networks, and that territory is more than the managerial and economic conceptualization of land on the one hand or the exposition of power relations of terrain on the other.[7] This is a relevant notion that can also resonate in architecture. That is, a territorial legibility of the flat would comprise investigations of the histories and projections of those productive relationships between territory and form through architecture. Moreover, if one considers the strong relationship between the Suprematist non-figurative language of Kazimir Malevich and his abstraction of aerial views/photography, for instance, it could be speculated that the respective limits of abstraction and figural representation are more closely related than previously imagined.[8]

The second theoretical prompt that arises from the ninety-degree rotation of the Venturian billboard is the broader set of aesthetic questions raised about the two-dimensional versus the three-dimensional. Rather than associating horizontality with the ideas of open-endedness, limitlessness, continuity and fluidity, and associating verticality with the notion of object, we would instead start to see the horizontal dimension of the environment more in terms of its object-like qualities. Interesting conversations arise, for instance, when the field slows down or even stops momentarily, or when a field is collapsed into a wall and changes its pace of repetition. John Hejduk's Diamond House, OMA's Agadir Convention Center and Herzog & de Meuron's Barcelona

7
Stuart Elden, "Missing the Point: Globalization, Deterritorialization and the Space of the World", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (March 2005), 8–19.

8
For an elaboration of this relationship, see Christina Lodder, "Malevich, Suprematism and Aerial Photography", *History of Photography* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 25–40. See also Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1959).

Forum emerge from discussions about these kinds of slowing fields and their transforming intensity, all of which have been enabled by the introduction of the notions of the limit and the object. Limits are serious. They make you aware of an inside/outside dichotomy and point to the alternatives.

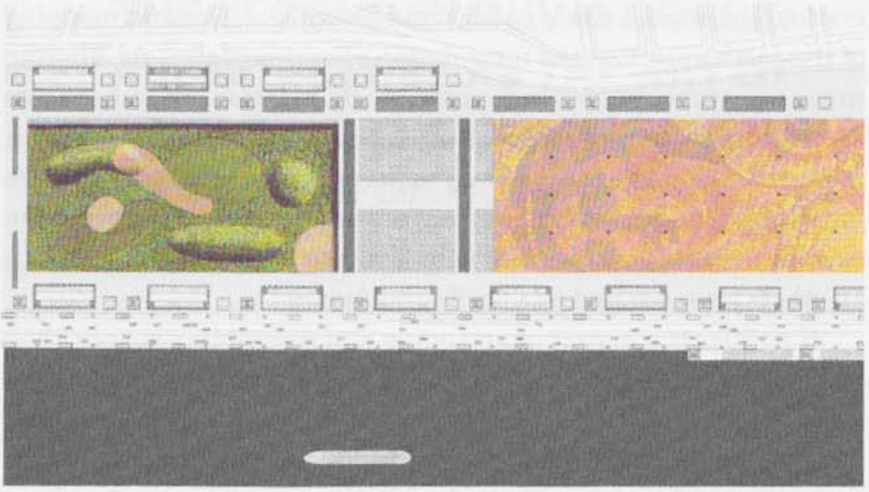
Furthermore, one can think, for example, about the productive confusion between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional that can be observed in the flattened figures of Swiss artist Felice Varini. Varini's large-scale projection of primitive geometric forms onto interior and exterior surfaces makes us believe that what we call "figure" is nothing more than a temporary registration of flatness and totality through a process of reduction and abstraction. As opposed to an architectural representation, which aims to represent three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, Varini's work flattens three-dimensional space. While various parts of Varini's projections are orchestrated to create a flattened effect on a two-dimensional level, multiple readings of the space in three dimensions generate very different conversations about the local scale. In contemporary investigations of the flat-horizontal, the figure is a moment of intensity or a thickening of a surface rather than a demarcated object, and the overarching geometric scheme is the consequence of the relationship between the parts (the figure comes after the fact). In contrast to these tendencies, in Varini's geometric forms, everything derives from the figure and revives discussion about totality and part-to-whole relationships.

Robert Venturi's concept of the "difficult whole", which aimed to create a unity through inclusion rather than through the easier approach of exclusion, proposed the notions of complexity and contrast as opposed to the easy totality of the abstract box. Resorting to neither a "false complexity" (chaos, incoherent arbitrariness) nor a "false simplicity" (boredom), Venturi warned us that "an architecture of complexity and contradiction has a special obligation toward the whole: its truth must be in its totality or its implications of totality".[9] Perhaps the promise of the horizontal flat is found precisely here, in a striving for a new aesthetic language amid the *chaos* of vertical icons and the *simplicity* of the non-figurative.

Postscript

A contemporary reconceptualization of the "horizontal flat", or the surface of the earth, might easily be equated with an ability to see the world in its totality, especially when ecological crises and new visualization

9
Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 16, 54.



Drawing by the author of a portion of the plan of Andrea Branzi's New York Waterfront proposal

platforms like Google Earth and the Geographic Information System (GIS) all seem to point in that direction. This reminds us of two important ideas that emerged during the 1960s when the world was visualized for the first time as a totality following the publication of the "Earthrise" and "Blue Marble" photographs taken by Apollo 8 and Apollo 17. The first was the idea of "one world", which spurred concepts of a new humanistic universality, and the second was the idea of the "whole earth", which viewed the planet as an organic unity of terrestrial life.[10] These ideas not only acted as driving forces for the environmental movement but also enabled the development of a technocratic and managerial understanding of ecology. Not surprisingly, for architecture in the 1960s the representation of the totality of the world (resembling "one world" thinking) as well as its comprehensive resource management (resembling "whole earth" thinking) would create the "architect as world planner" via figures such as John McHale, Constantinos Doxiadis and Buckminster Fuller.[11]

While similar frameworks continue to formulate much of the contemporary discussion on horizontality today, it may no longer be enough to theorize contemporary globalization as an absolute totality, or as flat – as neither a site of universality ("one world") nor a single terrestrial formation ("whole earth"). In his writings, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk constructs a similar dual formulation while reflecting upon two past concepts of the globe and proposing a third.[12] According to Sloterdijk, the "Metaphysical Globe", similar to the "one world" formulation mentioned earlier, marked the first phase of globalization, which led to the idea of the *world-as-cosmos* and spurred cosmopolitanism. Similar to the "whole earth" formulation, the "Terrestrial Globe"

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For more on the topic, see Denis Cosgrove, "Contested Global Visions: One-World, Whole-Earth, and the Apollo Space Photographs", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84, no. 2 (June 1994), 270–94. See also Wolfgang Sachs, "The Blue Planet: An Ambiguous Modern Icon", *The Ecologist* 5 (1994), 170–74.

11
Buckminster Fuller, "Architect as World Planner",

Architectural Design 31 (August 1961), 69.

12
Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III: Schäume* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), 11–29.

marked the second phase, with explorers' discoveries and mapping of the earth as well as the formulation of nation-states, etc. Finding these two globe models inappropriate descriptions of our current age, Sloterdijk instead proposes seeing our contemporary condition as one of "Global Foams", or as a society of aggregate microspheres or "worlds" in which each bubble is a world or a room. According to this framework, each *world* is simultaneous with and connected to all others yet separated by a flexible boundary.

If politics is a matter of arranging and assembling spaces, then rather than indulge in an architectural nostalgia for projecting "one world" or a "whole earth" (in other words, projecting a limitless non-figurative field), where insides and outsides collapse into one another to create a total environment or drastically separate themselves from each other via floating autonomous interiors, we need to explore architecture's ability to imagine new forms of collectives as multiple yet distinct totalities – that is, *whole worlds*. To do this, we must discover more about the role of the horizontal figure.