

TAKING THE COUNTRY'S SIDE
AGRICULTURE AND ARCHITECTURE

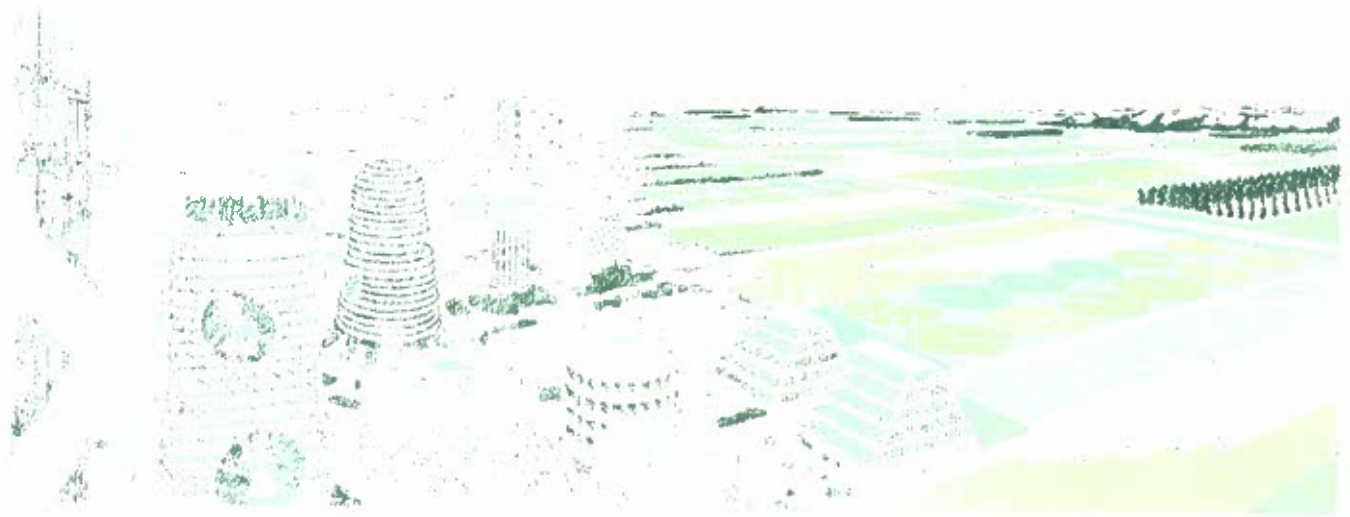


SÉBASTIEN MAROT

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URBI
ET ORBIFOUR COMPETING
NARRATIVES
ON THE FUTURE
RELATIONSHIP OF
CITY AND COUNTRY

In which the now informed reader, equipped with a reasonably good rearview mirror on to the parallel histories of agriculture, architecture and urbanism, is finally introduced to a wind rose representing opposite scenarios in the type of relationship that city and countryside might develop in the near future, and gently invited to wonder which one (or two) of them she or he, in good conscience, could actively endorse.



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INCORPORATION

THE HIGHLY CAPITALISTIC METROPOLIS ABSORBS AGRICULTURE

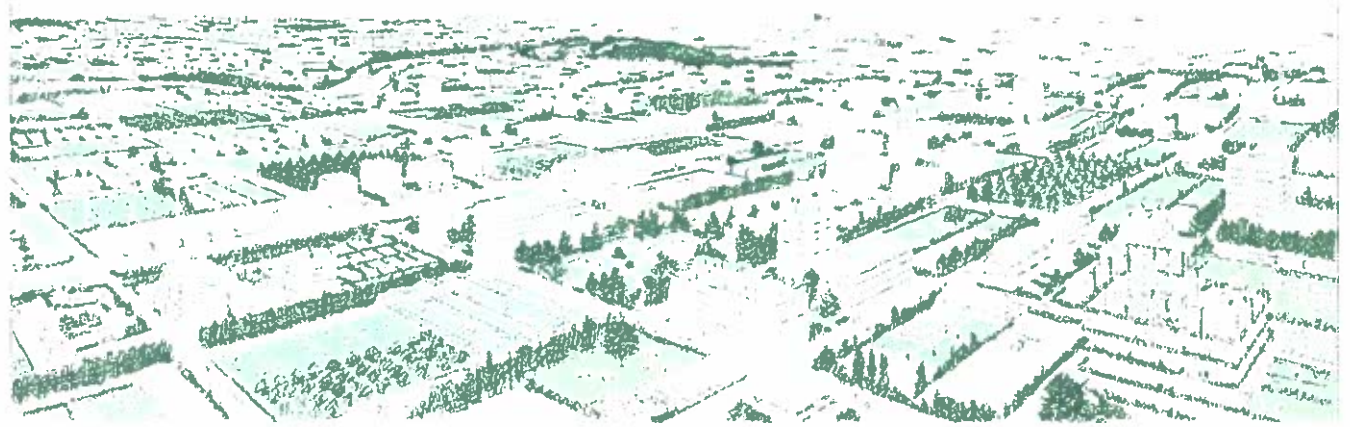
What if the industrialisation of agriculture and its subjection to capitalism were logically leading to its urbanisation, or *incorporation* by the metropolis? Such is more or less the common accelerationist belief of those who, confronted with the dire environmental consequences of industrialised agriculture, imagine that the remedy is in the poison, and that only a flight forward into high-tech innovation and concentration may hold the key to a globally livable future. Mega glasshouses, vertical farms, high-rise feedlot buildings: thanks to the breakthrough and disruptive technologies of soilless culture, hydroponics and closed-system recycling, agricultural productions liberate their vast outlying peri-urban footprints to concentrate into biological reactors or fast-breeders, agri-buildings of agri-cities which turn synanthropic plant and animal species into cohabitants of the metropolitan Noah's Arch.

In this perspective, much embraced by the champions of eco-modernism, eco-pragmatism and agri-tecture (who are also clearly experts in hybrid linguistics), the metropolis is obviously envisioned not just as the *manifest destiny* of mankind, but also as the ultimate condition of our whole biosphere. Meanwhile, the dense city acts as a control tower surveying Countryside 2.0 consisting of a grid of robotised *latifundias*, interspersed with patches of productive forests, mines, natural preserves, and escapist leisure resorts, all scientifically managed by an army of experts. This ethos of concentration is well expressed by Stewart Brand in his *Whole Earth Discipline* (2008): "One emergent principle might be that deleterious elements should be concentrated. Concentrating people in cities is good. Concentrating energy waste products like nuclear spent fuel in casks is an improvement over distributing the greenhouse gases from spent coal and oil in the atmosphere. Concentrating our sources of food and fibre into high-yield agriculture, tree plantations, and mariculture frees up more wildland and wild ocean to carry out their expert Gaian tasks."



GI

Many architects (to say nothing of engineers) seem tempted by this flight forward into what critic Peder Anker calls "cabin ecology", and dream (like its prophets, such as Buckminster Fuller) to precipitate the metabolism of calories in systems and circuits as closed, looped and controlled as possible. The term incorporation connotes the sur-rationalist absorption of agriculture by architectural and urban engineering as well as its ultimate subjection to the economic models of concentrated investment and management of hyper-capitalism.



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NEGOTIATION

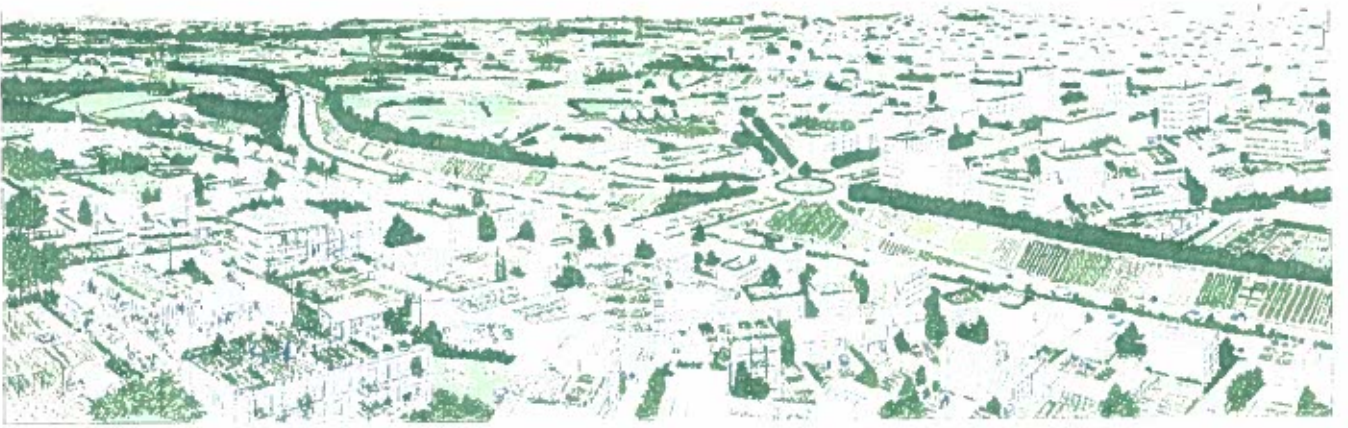
AGRICULTURE BECOMES AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF URBAN EXTENSIONS

This is the latent narrative of what we might call agricultural urbanism (in counterpoint to urban agriculture). Cities and metropolises take up spaces and species of agricultural production as integral components in the design of their margins and extensions. In this perspective, which challenges the modern demarcation line between urban, natural and agricultural zones, the latent capacities of agriculture, husbandry, horticulture and forestry to evolve arenas of consociation are hired by planning to foster an evolution of urban forms, syntaxes and modes of production. Park-orchards or park nurseries, market-gardens, housing developments, open campuses which mix education, agroecology and various activities, eco- and agro-districts, greenbelts or corridors of agroforestry, etc.: the list goes on and on of the new hybrid species that combine the best interests of cities and agriculture. These counter the deleterious dynamics of the metabolic rift between city and country and might also erode the persistent frontier between main job, secondary occupation and leisure activities.

Whereas this scenario may appear to be in its infancy today, it can claim some precedent in contemporary agro-ecology, and indeed there is a whole history of jurisprudence in the tradition and models of pre-modernist urban design: the agro-urban ideas and experiments that once converged around the concept of *civic design*. Weren't Olmsted's park systems, Howard's garden cities, Migge's Siedlungen, Geddes' Biopolis, Wright's Broadacre, etc., attempts at defining the figures and structures of an *agropolitan* future (to use a term that geographer John Friedman coined to describe certain regions of Asia)? Might it be time to resume their efforts by devising new contracts at all scales, "new deals", new forms of negotiation between urban and rural practices, that could restructure and give resilience to the *citta diffusa* that has spread and keeps spreading over entire regions?



Unsurprisingly, several of today's most influential approaches and trends in urban design, such as "landscape urbanism" or "ecological urbanism", more or less embrace this narrative of negotiation. They thus promote the idea of a horizontal metropolis which, far from containing and densifying the city against a backdrop of nature and agriculture, strive on the contrary to integrate and nurture the latter within the metropolitan fabric and field. Whether this narrative will succeed in de-simplifying urbanism and evolving more varied and polycultural syntaxes of coexistence, or will be merely hijacked as an alibi for the greedy and relentless growth of urbanisation, is an important, open question.



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INFILTRATION

AGRICULTURE AND HORTICULTURE
INVADE THE CITY

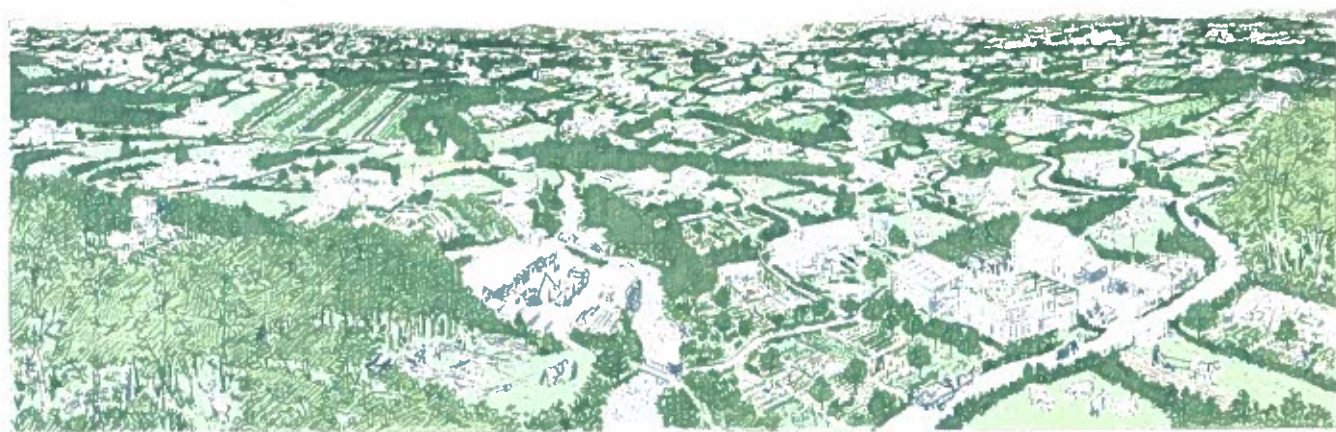
There is an underlying narrative to the work of those who take advantage of the neglected surfaces of cities and metropolises — such as roofs, terraces, vacant lots, median strips or sidewalks — to reintroduce horticulture and feeder gardening within the urban landscape; but also those who, reviving the practices of market gardening, build-up local networks that bypass the circuits of large-scale food business and retail. Without undermining the logic and realities of the urban condition, but rather by exploiting the latter's numerous niches, gaps and discrepancies, these varied initiatives take hold of food cultivation and consumption (and of their reintegration in local or short supply chain) as a means of building up collectives and solidarity-based practices in the uprooted territories of the metropolis.

Whether they proceed through direct integration with the fabric of the city, or through subscription to mixed-farming ventures and co-ops in the hinterland, these approaches all tend more or less to stimulate a higher degree of local interaction in urban territories which might evolve into a constellation of commons. Although it may be encouraged or faked by local authorities, infiltration is essentially a bottom-up phenomenon, an opportunistic and ad-hoc logic of self-organisation that does not pertain to planning or urbanism but blossoms here and there, like weeds, in the faults and gaps of urban territories. However, in contexts of severe economic decline or breakdown — such as the ones faced by La Havana (and Cuba in general) during the Special Period, or the City of Detroit after the collapse of its automobile industry, this phenomenon may obviously take on the dimensions of a landslide and significant recapture of urban plots by individual or collective food cultivation practices.

Since economic and energy crises are likely to strike a growing number of large metropolises and urban regions in the near future, and expand the amount of fallow urban areas, one may expect this scenario of infiltration (i.e. unplanned agricultural reclaiming of



urban ecosystems and their suburban extensions) to become less and less like acupuncture and increasingly spread over larger metropolitan territories where it would evolve a variety of "rurban" fabrics, forms and syntaxes. How those will coexist with the palimpsests of surviving species and figures of the metropolis, and their struggle for existence, is anyone's guess.



SECESSION

“IL FAUT CONSTRUIRE
L' HACIENDA”

This is the more radical perspective of those who question the current hegemony of metropolitics, and hence the ability of urbanism to organise and maintain the eco-political conditions of resilient and satisfying worlds. From the overwhelming evidence gathered on the dire environmental, climatic, energetic and social consequences of consumer society and capitalistic concentration — of which metropolises and their touristic satellites are both the magnets and the most obvious products — the critics of the current politics of urban governance conclude that metropolitan territories are fundamentally unsustainable, doomed to collapse sooner or later, and that what is needed is for communities, by freeing themselves from their orbit and modes of “governance”, to anticipate (if not accelerate) their progressive marginalisation and dismantling.

In this narrative of decentralisation, geared toward building means to achieve a significant degree of local autonomy, the principles of coexistence and the techniques of design and cultivation that enable people to tend a living landscape, a resilient community of interdependent humans, plants and animals, *supplant* urbanism. Alongside several other movements hinted at in this exhibition, from agrarianism to libertarian municipalism, permaculture is among the most disciplined expression of the agenda that would turn territories into confederations of self-managed communes or worlds.

Designating these experiments of non-urban foundation or re-foundation as *secession* may seem excessive. Many of these experiments are not necessarily framed as the antithesis to the metropolitan ethos but sometimes as simple offshoots or havens of “transition”. Most, of course, must accept a certain compromise or *modus vivendi* with the rules and mechanisms of metropolitan governance. Besides, all of them may be more or less tolerated as “enclaves”, or even hijacked and promoted as the prodigal offspring of a metropolis always eager to absorb contradiction by celebrating its own ecumenism. But three things must be here underlined. Firstly, there is a growing conviction



with which these initiatives are dissociating themselves from the narrative of urbanisation as the manifest destiny of humankind. Secondly, there is a strong curiosity amongst participants in these initiatives in how to learn from one another, which turns them into the most active and prospective research centres. Finally, there is an intelligence and energy that participants manage to draw from the positive faith (or at least from the suspension of disbelief) that other natural covenants are eminently desirable, possibly achievable, and absolutely necessary.

In other words, what unites them in their very diversity, is their collective intuition that salvaging the idea of *civitas*, and giving it a new meaning, now badly requires a sub-version of and an exodus from the metropolis.

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