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Research Proposal:

ABSOLUTE ARCHITECTURES OF PLATFORM URBANISM

An enquiry toward platforms and architecture in Bologna

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STATE OF ART

In the past two years, the contemporary health crisis due to Covid-19 has recently shifted our attention toward the private space of our intimate bodies, mind, and architecture. But, since the world was shaken by a virus that caused millions of deaths, death has never been as discreet as before, wrote novelist Michel Houellebecq. We experienced the perplexity of a world strictly contained into two ecologies: the self-personification spaces of our digital platforms (Spencer, 2021) and the private space of our raised architectures. The intermesh of one into the other has contributed to the discreet yet suffering experience of solitude.

We now know how life in an island is. As the urban turned itself into a set of spatialized immune systems and security architectures of existence (Sloterdijk, 2009), we experienced what life is into a hybrid archipelago of hyper architectures (Cuppini, 2021).

Today, with climate change and geopolitical reshuffling at the door, we are now moving toward changes of epic proportions without knowing the end (Babina, 2021, 40), but still, some of us will remember these times as riches in their capacity to teach us. (ibid.)

If Covid-19 demonstrated how life is constitutively supported by architecture and digital technology, now, as social scientist, we need to bring the two things together: we are living in the hyper-urban (Cuppini, 2021).

Still, addressing our society to the global infrastructure of the digital may be not sufficient. In fact, as citizens, users, or habitants we constantly *navigate* the contemporary hyper urban scape (ivi.) but without knowing where, when, and how the intermesh between capital, technology, and urban space is designed. We need to start visualizing how hybrid our society is. (Hui, 2021)

Infrastructures act like laws (Winner, 1986) wrote STS¹ scholar P. Edwards (2001, 190). They create both opportunities and limits, enabling and constraining a combination of systemic, technologically supported social possibilities (ivi, 191). As well as laws shape the *right* to our cities (Lefebvre, 1978), platforms infrastructures shape the space of the hyper-urban through politics of *access*. (Mortembock, Moshammer, 2021). But what is access?

Access is capital, wrote Moshammer and Mortembock (2021) during the last Venice Biennale of Architecture. But access is still more. The concept of access relies on the existence of borders. In other words, access is manifest when its opposite occurs: exclusion.

As the war in Ukraine may dramatically inspire, today we all know how Russians citizens are dealing not with a generalized black out of the world wide web, but with a punctual exclusion from a set of digital environments, from internet banking to social network spaces.

There is my hypothesis: if we are wondering to know what access to platforms may be, it may help to just think about closed spaces. As well as for the built environment, the digital world in which we live in is marked by closed spaces whose access is to be addressed.

Let's now imagine that as well as for the built spaces where we rest, work, or have fun, the hyper urban is a place made of closed architectures in which we spend our time, our money, our feelings. This is my point: platforms need to be imagined as they were architectures.

They are, according to the Centre for Global Architecture of the Technical University of Vienna, because we are already habiting into a set of multiple addresses.

But which is the form of platforms?

Aside from the vertical plasticity, we must understand that, today, many of our platforms are willing to an absolute form. Being absolute means to be without any constricts. In this context, Amazon embodies a more general trend of platforms: the ambition to build their own expanded, hierarchical ecosystem (Into the Black Box, 2021).

As platforms become absolutes, they start competing not *in* the market, but *with* the market (ivi.). But, if platforms ambition is to be *the* capital, we need to ask- citing Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas project for a dystopic utopia- if we will be the *voluntary prisoners of their architecture* (1973).

There is my second point: architecture.

¹ Science and technology studies (STS)

If the project of architecture needs to be always considered as project of work, as Manfredo Tafuri wrote in 1973, my interest is to understand, when and how our architectures can become *absolutes* (Aureli, 2015) and start acting as platforms for extraterritorial capital investment, seduction, and accumulation.

According to Pier Vittorio Aureli, the possibility of an absolute form aims to dissolve raised buildings from constricts of the nearer environment. As *islands*, wrote Aureli, absolute architectures can separate themselves from the urban *sea* (2015). In my master thesis I observed how, once the absolute form is designed, vertical luxury architectures can *secede* and start acting as *platforms* for capital accumulation in the hyper-built space.

There is my conclusion: How can we visualize the hyperurban? In my opinion, the hyper urban is a planetary built sea in which we *navigate* and in which we *habit*.

As well as for architectures, platforms-by their definition- can vertically elevate from the sea. In this context, platform urbanism can be imagined as a hybrid archipelago whose access, form and design need to be faced within a look over platform and architecture spaces.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In the context of Bologna, my aim is to analyze the unevenness of contemporary platform urbanism through a theoretical and practice-based visual research. Platform urbanism is the last coalescence between two processes: the ultimate spatialization of the capital and the last capitalization of the space (Into the Black Box, 2021). How can we visualize the phenomenon of a hybrid coalescence?

My aim is to demonstrate that platforms are hybrid and *vertical* architectures (Mortenboeck, Moshammer, 2021) for the spatialization of capital. In this context, platforms as Amazon (AWS) are competing for the *possibility of an absolute architecture*. In fact, Amazon Web Services infrastructures are fundamental not only to other private competitors (such as Netflix for video streaming or DropBox for cloud storing services) but even for public institutions (just to give an example, in Italy: C.R.U.I; Università di Trento, PoliMi, PoliTo, UniPD) and public administrations (In Italy: Comune di Codogno², Comune di Cagliari, Regione Autonoma della Sardegna³, SIAE) as well as different private businesses (Again, in Italy: Enel, Musixmatch, Nexi, Mondadori, Gedi, Iveco, Sara, Eataly, A2aSmart City, Pam, Siemens, Brico, RDS, Vodafone)⁴

² During the first time of the pandemic influence by Covid-19, AWS has been fundamental to the Municipality of Codogno.

³ During 2019 elections, with the rental of AWS infrastructure, Regione Sardegna spent only 125 euros to manage 7 millions accesses to its sites. To rent a server from Aws costs from 50 to 200 euros per month.

⁴ These results are part of an enquiry I did for a collective research project about Amazon presence in Italy. Results have been shown during the 8/6/2022 at University of Bologna (Department of Arts)

In the first year of my research, I will firstly analyze platforms as vertical architectures, and secondly, I will be focusing on how Amazon Web Services platform is competing for the possibility of an absolute form.

But if platforms can act as absolute architectures, can absolute architectures act as platforms?

During my second year I will try to give an answer.

In my opinion, the *absolute form* is the key to understand how, on the second hand, vertical so called absolute architectures (Aureli, 2015) - as the luxury terraced P Tower, The Student Hotel and Unipol complex in the north of Bologna- can act as platforms for a vertiginous capitalization of the space.

After the work of an enquiry through the absolute form of Amazon Web Services architecture, my research will be focusing on three case studies: The Student Hotel⁵; P Tower⁶; and the Unipol Tower complex⁷ in the North of Bologna.

Looking at the metropolitan city of Bologna, I will consider how in the Bolognina neighborhood, a splintering form (Graham, Marvin, 2001) of the urban may origin from architectures subject to contemporary redevelopment processes as the project for the Student Hotel, a luxury urban campus of 30.000mq with coworking and co-living facilities. The project of its architecture (that includes a raised swimming pool and a luxury terrace) will be analyzed in its ability to produce border ecologies of exchange for who is in as well as hostile environments for whom who are not included into.

In the same neighborhood, “P Tower” luxury terraces play the same seductive role of the student campus. Thirdly, it is in the neighbored San Donato that the project for vertical absolute architectures (Aureli, 2015) can be clearly visible. In the raised complex of the Unipol Tower, “Egosistema” is the Prime Tower program able to “exploit every detail -architectural and technical- to bring the customer into perfect harmony with his or her body”. The name of the luxury experience, “Egosistema”, suggests the border ecology of an *absolute* yet exclusive spatial experience in the middle of a low-wage neighborhood.

Differential access will be the first degree by which to evaluate architecture as an *island*, that is, as a platform for capital valorization. Once the vertical splintering occurs, raised luxury architectures such as the Student Hotel, the P Tower, or the Unipol skyscraper in Bologna became vectors for an uneven urban development (Brenner, 2014). During my research I will analyze how the building of these three architectures has influenced a rise over the general rent price in the neighborhood.

Secondly, I will analyze how the capital that inhabits the architecture of the buildings relies, as with digital platforms, on deregulated and de-taxed international private investment.

5 In Via Aristotele Fioravanti 27

6 In Via Donato Creti 32

7 In via Larga 8

Thirdly, I wish to understand how violently the fruition of such spaces can be based on access policies like those of platforms, because *access is capital* (Mortenbock and Moshhammer, 2021).

EXPECTED RESULTS

During my first year I wish to help the visualization of the hyper-urban. In this context, my intention is to figure how the hyper-urban can be imagined as planetary built infrastructure where platforms should be investigated as vertical architectures. Trying to bring the two things together, my aim is to help visualizing platform urbanism as an archipelago of hybrid objects: platforms and architectures. Within this context, during the last part of my first year I will concentrate on the *absolute* form that platform architectures may wish to have. As well as absolute architectures studied by Pier Vittorio Aureli, today, many platforms (firstly Amazon), aspire to an absolute form. By looking at Amazon and its digital infrastructure Amazon Web Services, I wish to demonstrate how the willing to be *the* capital, and to compete not *in* but *with* global market (Into The Black Box, 2022), can be visualized not just through architectures, but with *the possibility of absolute architectures* (Aureli, 2015).

In fact, because its existence is fundamental to other platforms, AWS is not *a* platform, but *the* platform. I will try to understand if Amazon can be considered an absolute architecture, able- in the definition of Aureli- to elevate itself vertically from the rest of platform urbanism.

On the other hand, in my second year, I hope to demonstrate that *absolute architectures* can act as platforms.

In relation to architectures of The Student Hotel, P Tower and Unipol complex in North Bologna, I wish to demonstrate how:

- 1) Absolute architectures, as well as many platforms, are based on transnational, un-regulated, volatile private investments.
- 2) Dealing with desire, the aesthetically seductive symbolic content of absolute architectures is very similar to platform self-personification (Spencer, 2021) gazes. As for platforms, absolute architectures are economies of scale based on aesthetics, logistics, and verticality.
- 3) In the buildings, the access policies are typical of a border ecology like those of platforms: access is economic/ symbolic capital. They can act as hostile environments.

PROJECT ARTICULATION AND TIMEFRAME

Year One: *Platforms are vertical architectures*

I am part of a multidisciplinary research group⁸ based at the University of Bologna. During 2021/2022 we worked at the realization of an academic enquiry based on the analysis of Amazon (and Amazon Web Services) at three scales: global, national, regional. Preliminary results have been showed and discussed the 8 June 2022 at the Department of Visual Arts of the University of Bologna, but our research will continue next year.

Within a mixed methodology⁹, I would like to pursue my analysis of Amazon digital infrastructure (AWS) through the continuation of our *transcalar* and transdisciplinary enquiry.

a) In the first part of the year, I will realize a series of interviews conducted *with* amazon workers¹⁰ and clients of the regional metropolitan area. As I did during a precedent bourse research with the University of Bologna¹¹ (project BRIC), in the first part of the work I will focus on individual interviews while in the second part I will continue the analysis through the qualitative based focus group' participatory technique (Cipolla, De Lillo, 1996; Parmiggiani, 2003).

The aim is to break barriers between different roles as well as rigid elements power of knowledge (Foucault, 1966). Participatory qualitative methods will be considered to trace a multi situated enquiry over the *absolute form* which, in my hypothesis, Amazon aims to have.

b) During the second part of the first year, I will work at the realization of a textual and visual content to help visualizing archipelago's platform urbanism and its architectures in the hyper-urban sea. Secondly, I will be focusing on the Amazon possibility of an absolute form (AWS).

Two years ago, in Berlin, I exposed for Silent Works, a Winter School Program of the Berliner Gazette in Hauss Der Statistik (Alexanderplatz). My contribute was a textual and photographic work based on an Amazon delivery worker labor condition in Emilia Romagna. The project was part of a collective work organized by Into The Black Box¹² researchers.

In 2021, with a work called *Platform Architecture and Collapse of Scale*, I worked at the realization of another exhibition named *Platform Urbanism*. With the same research collective, the exhibition and roundtable took place at the AGHCT Summer School 2021 Edition. The work saw the

⁸ Researchers are from University of Bologna, University of Bergen, University of Florence, University of Turin. Disciplines are sociology, global history (GLOC), anthropology and information technologies studies. The group originated from a cycle of seminars organized by Into The Black Box at the University of Bologna. Title: *I forum urbani per la partecipazione civica*.

⁹ Theoretical, Qualitative (interviews, visual maps) and Quantitative (data mapping) research based enquiry over the Amazon platform infrastructure.

¹⁰ There are different kind of amazon workers: from dealers to customs servicers.

¹¹ A research bourse between University of Bologna and the City of Rimini. Research Tutor: prof. Federico Chicchi

¹² Niccolò Cuppini, Carlottà Benvegnù, Maurilio Pirone, Floriano Milesi, Mattia Frapporti.

<http://www.intothelblackbox.com>

collaboration of professor Sandro Mezzadra, Lucia Babina, researcher Carmen Hines and professor P. Mortenbock and H. Moshhammer, heads of the Global Centre of Architecture and curators of the Austrian Pavillion at the 2021 Venice biennale with the project *Platform Urbanism*.¹³

In the last part of my first year, I will produce a visual and a textual work to help visualize:

1) platforms as vertical architectures, 2) Amazon ambition to an absolute form.

Visual methods are essentials to my research because I strongly believe that, if posited in the right way, they can offer a more accessible knowledge to scientific or academic contents. Beside of lexical jargon and the economic accessibility of the academic infrastructure, exhibitions help sharing enquires to wider and multifaced audiences.

Year Two: *Vertical architectures are platforms*

Through participative immersion in the Bolognina neighborhood, a sociological work through mixed methodology will be framed to visualize how the The Student Hotel, the P Tower and the Unipol complex in via Stalingrado can act as platforms. I will focus my attention on the three peculiarities of a digital platform: the attraction of international investment, the seduction of symbolic capital and economic accumulation through economies of scale. Participatory immersion in the indicated areas will be accompanied by photographic work. The aim is to help visualize the phenomenon under study: the absolute form. The sociological enquiry will be structured through interviews and qualitative methods that will be addressed to residents of Bolognina neighborhood such as neighborhood committees. The goal is to demonstrate how architecture can and is playing the role of a platform for the capitalization of the splintered urban space in Bologna North.

Third year: Platform Urbanism: *Navigating in the contemporary hyper urban scape*.

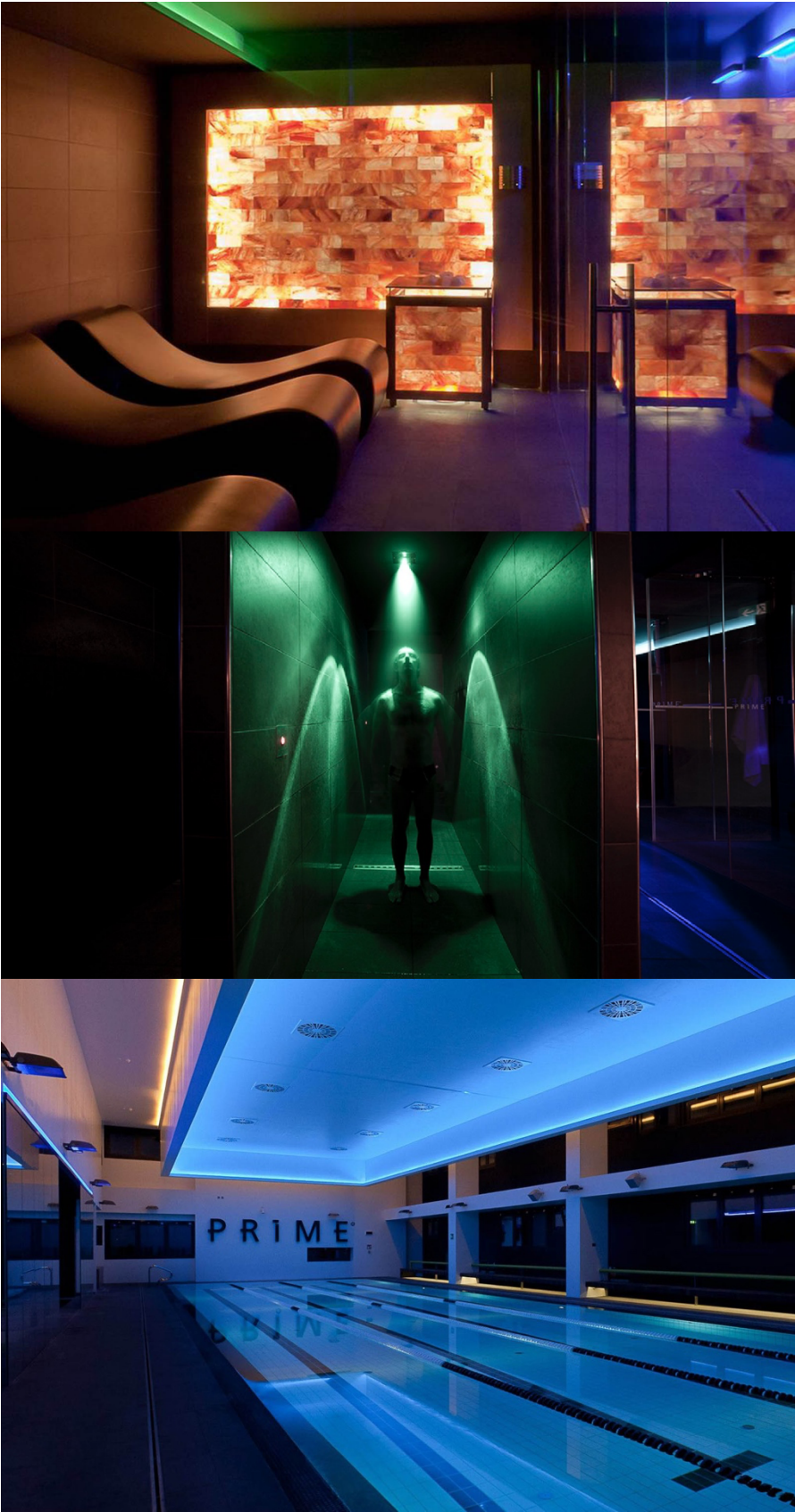
The final year will see the completion of a doctoral dissertation in which the expected conclusions will be systematized. How can we visualize the hyper-urban? How can we understand the role of platforms and that of architecture within the production of contemporary space?

The contemporary urban experience is an experience of navigation. While navigating the hyperurban, users traverse information corridors, hybrid infrastructures, and inhabit islands: platforms.

The representation of platform urbanism as an archipelago of platforms/architectures will be implemented through visual and photographic art to enable a transdisciplinary outcome and universal legibility of the research project. Visual methods help to return the research work to those subjects who participate in it as interviewees/objects of analysis. Aside from an idea of social sciences made by experts and made for experts, visual methods help realize knowledge research as a *langue vivante*

(Bourdieu, 1984). Finally, visual art enables a scientific reproducibility which is more accessible to those people who remain excluded (for reasons of economic, cultural, or social capital) from access policies of the architectures in study as well as the academic language of the social sciences. (Queirolo Palmas, 2018)

Attached: Example. Photographs from Unipol Tower Complex: “Egosystem”



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