

Metaverse Cities. Deconstructing a glossy urban dystopia

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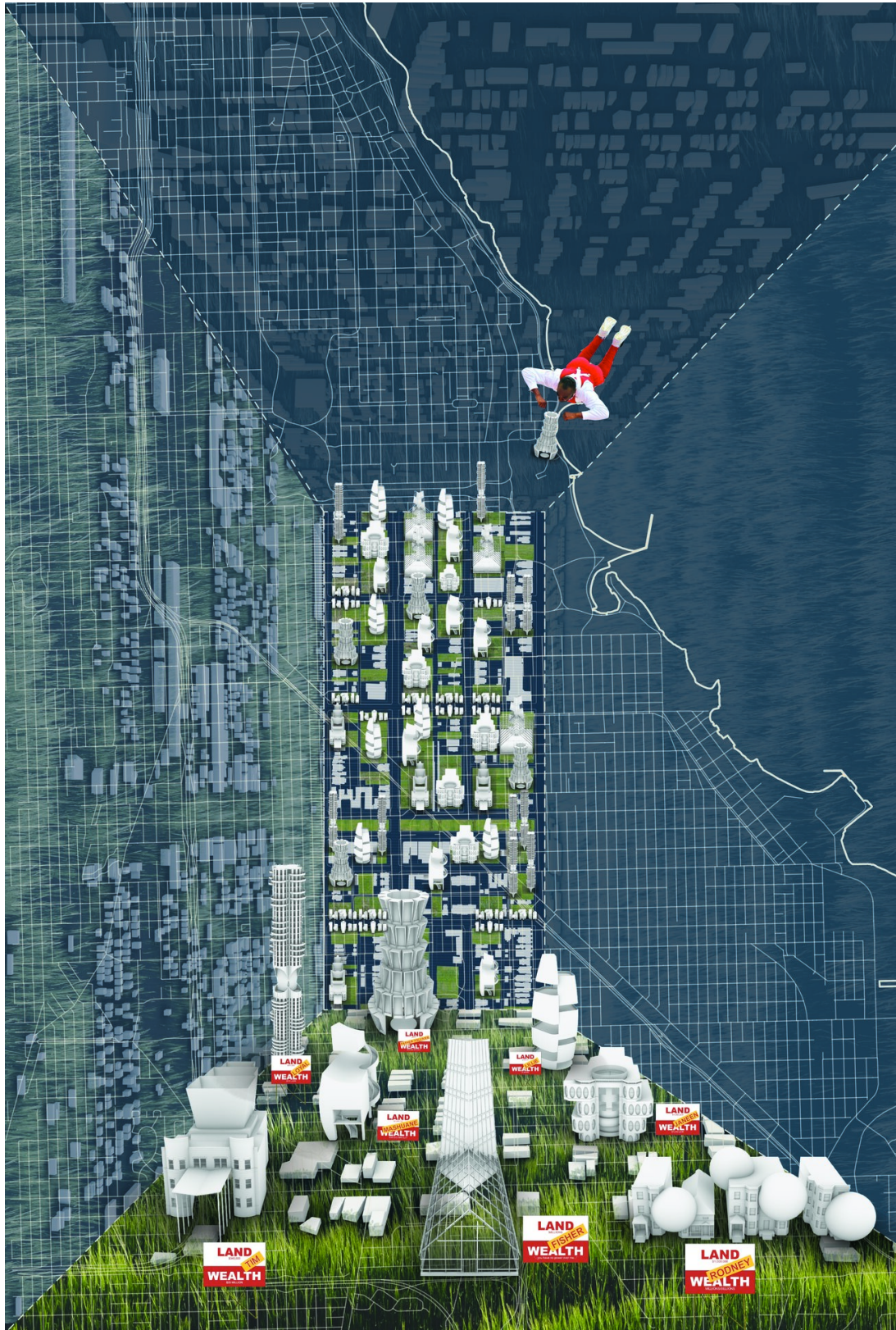
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Through the Lens of Glossy Urban Dystopias

EDITORIAL



This special issue has called for collecting reflections and critical discussion about glossy urban dystopias, which is proposed as a lens to understand urban transformations built via alluring, enticing renders and images, to face – or better hide – problems and conflicts in contemporary city.

Narratives of urban decline, or simply the everyday urban complexity stated as problem, are often contrasted by narratives and representations of regeneration and rebranding of the city and problematic neighbourhoods. The hypothesis the issue aims to explore is that the urban dystopias radiate ‘happiness’ rather than fear, contrary to the post-apocalyptic dystopic futures forecasted by classic science fictions or any apocalyptic scenarios. Understanding and discussing – as well unmaking – such ‘happiness’ is crucial to bring out the most controversial features of urban imaginaries and policies promising it.

These ‘glossy attractive urban dystopias’ do not warn about the dangers that their given underlain socio-political trajectory might entail, as the exclusion and inequalities that they can drive. Rather they pacify any doubts and fears by providing a ‘picture perfect future’ which becomes imprinted into social imaginaries with a positive association, albeit with no questions asked.

According to what we more extensively argued in the last paper – *Through the Lens of Glossy Urban Dystopias* – this lens is both interpretive and methodological and allows us to understand critical issues, as the rising tendencies of governments and institutions to face potential future urban emergencies or problems by means of regeneration projects to justify further securitization, pacification coercive governmentalities and injustices.

Somehow, the topics of this issue reify processes that substantiate (also) the rhetoric of glossy

urban dystopias, and they somehow update the open reflections that the Io Squaderno hosted in 2012 (S.I. *Urban Rhetorics*), critically analysing the discursive dimension of the imaginary that such rhetoric nurtures.

Vicente Brêtas’ paper – *Resuscitating Downtown? Rhetorical Strategies and Racial Exclusion in Rio de Janeiro’s Central Area* – focuses on the Reviver Centro program, critically discussing its idealized images of lively streets in mixed revitalized central neighbourhoods against the dystopian concrete reality facing old time city-center dwellers, as they were new utopias of downtown life. While planners resort glossy concepts – as walkability, sustainability or inclusivity – they dissolve any political connotations behind them, and they promote a politically void notions of urban life, where a racialized dispossession and ontological erasure in central Rio de Janeiro is de facto provoked.

Francesco Amoruso’s *Dystopian Present-Futures: On the Unmaking and Making of Urban Palestine* is unavoidably challenged and updated (as well suspended) by the current situation in the Gaza Strip. The paper points out how the new Palestinian city of Rawabi in the West Bank shows the intersection of ‘glossy’ urban representations with the geographies and political economies of Israeli settler colonialism. Rawabi’s developers promise a bright urban future of economic prosperity planned urban development despite the ongoing Israeli military occupation, while the paper shows Rawabi framed as a capitalist land grabbing project which allows a small class of Palestinian capitalists to benefit from the Israeli colonialism and promotes pacification and de-politicisation among the city’s middle-class residents.

Eleonora Nicoletti’s *Dystopian Transition?* discusses how tackling the climate crisis has prompted urban regeneration initiatives for the renewable energy transition which can offer

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Luis Martin Sanchez

Metaverse: a glossy utopia in a polycrisis scenario?

On 29 October 2021, after almost two years of pandemic crisis, Facebook Inc., the famous multinational technology conglomerate, announced at the company's annual conference, the immediate change of the corporation name to Meta Platforms Inc. The announcement marks a change of strategy of the first social network towards the construction of the 'Metaverse', beginning what many consider a further revolution towards Web3.0. However, the issue of building virtual 'worlds' was certainly not new. Already by the end of 2021, there were at least 160 companies dedicated to the 'construction' of Metaverses. However, the change of name of an important multinational as Facebook, as well as the announcements of huge investments in this disruptive technology (software and hardware) had the effect of putting the topic of the controversial 'Metaverse' at the centre of public and academic debate.

Although relatively recent, the term Metaverse is certainly not new either. It has been used for the first time by writer Neal Stephenson in his novel *Snow Crash* (1992, 35),¹ a post-cyberpunk science fiction novel about a dystopian late-capitalism America, where the Metaverse is an escape route from the "precariousness of being in the world" (Butler 2013). A situation very similar to the pervasive 'polycrisis' (Zeitlin et al. 2019) that contemporary territories are experiencing today. In fact, the Metaverse is seen by many as a glossy refuge² for an elite class in an 'end of the world' scenario. Rather than elitist and glossy virtual utopias, the hypothesis of this text is that many of the most problematic dynamics of neoliberal cities emerge in a radical way in many of the early experiments of virtual cities. And precisely because of this, they are a privileged observatory in which to investigate certain tendencies of contemporary territories. Although there is an extensive disciplinary literature on the relationship between planning and virtual or augmented reality (linked mainly to the gaming industry), this often avoids design issues and ethical values. For this reason this text attempts to construct a radical critique of virtual cities, with the idea that it may be useful to improve urban policies and projects in virtual and non-virtual worlds.

¹ Stephenson writes: "As Hiro approaches the Street, he sees two young couples, probably using their parents' computer for a double date in the Metaverse, climbing down out of Port Zero, which is the local port of entry and monorail stop. He is not seeing real people of course. This is all part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to the specification coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars."

² Perhaps the most popular recent reference point for the Metaverse is *Ready Player One*, the novel by Ernest Cline (2011), adapted into a film directed by Steven Spielberg in 2018. Cline's Metaverse is symbolically named the "Oasis," an utopian virtual world where people plug in in order to escape from the real dystopian environment.

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Crisis and new urban issues: the rise of virtual cities during pandemics

Although the first virtual worlds preceded Covid-19 pandemic outbreak by more than twenty years (Active World and Second Life, for example),³ and without wishing to diminish the role played by technological advances, it is evident how the sudden arrival of the pandemics accelerated a process that had been underway for years. The pandemic, and the various lockdowns associated therewith, by increasing social anxiety, fear of contact, and the absolute desire for immunisation (Iman, Smaraki and Rumela 2022), created the ideal conditions for the take-off of the Metaverse, which allows forms of non-bodily socialisation in conditions of mandatory physical distance.⁴

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the topics of virtual reality, for years neglected by urban planners (Hudson-Smith 2022), forcefully enter the disciplinary debate during pandemic crisis. As Secchi (2013) suggest, crises and urban issues often coincide in history and often bring to light new themes and forms of design, new subjects and new conflicts. With the pandemic, issues such as virtual cities, which were marginalized before the crisis, became intrinsically relevant in the architectural and urban debate and future projections, accelerating and transforming the smart city paradigm, one of the core urban planning questions before pandemics (another glossy dystopia of recent years).⁵ For sure the violent arrival of the pandemic crisis and its intertwining with the environmental crisis has forcefully brought back to the centre of our disciplines the need to rethink in all its complexity the relationship of the human with the more-than-human, category that includes an infinity of subjects, from non-human animals to the new digital technologies.

In such a perspective, 'virtuality' is not considered in a binary perspective as an 'other' to 'reality' but as an integral part of which is 'real'. In our everyday life the interrelationships between bodies, software and machines, the symbiosis between users and devices and the algorithmic autonomies cancel out the perception of differences between human and more-than-human actions a condition that Jessica McLean (2020) calls "more-than-real". The advent of the Metaverse further stresses this relationship between virtuality and reality and opens up new issues for the design of the more-than-real spatialities.

What are we talking about when we talk about Metaverse?

The Metaverse can perhaps be defined as a digital space with an economic structure, occupied by avatars, sometimes mirroring the 'real' world, but with multiple representations of the physical world and the ability to change time, physics and space (Hudson-Smith 2022). According to Radoff (2021), the Metaverse is "the collective set of online and connected experiences one can have. The common theme is that the 'player' is connected to an online structure that allows them to change content live, connect to social live, or monetise live. The key word is 'live'. The Metaverse is a living multiverse of worlds." Ball (2021) for his part defines the Metaverse as an extended network of persistent, real-time rendered 3D worlds, simulations that support the continuity of identity, objects, history, pay-

³ Active Worlds is an online virtual world, developed by ActiveWorlds Inc., and launched on June 28, 1995. On the other hand Second Life is an online multimedia platform, developed and owned by the San Francisco-based firm Linden Lab and launched on June 23, 2003, that allows people to create an avatar for themselves and then interact with other users and user-created content within a multiplayer online virtual world.

⁴ In her poem 'The Fifth Wall', written during pandemic, the German moving image artist Hito Steyerl (2021) writes: "Pandemia has pushed many people into another dimension of time space — a next level of screen-based extraction. People were shocked to find the walls shutting them in had become means of communication. Their enclosures were laced with cables leading into a maze of plugs, wires and radio connections. A space of strings, proprietary infrastructure and code, separating humans and filtering communication. Fenced off by access codes, log-ins and mandatory isolation pandemia left people little choice but to perform on corporate stages, and in the process become readable and transparent to them."

⁵ On this topic, see: Ben Green (2019) *The Smart Enough City: Putting Technology in Its Place to Reclaim Our Urban Future*.

ments and rights and that can be experienced synchronously by an effectively unlimited number of users, each with a sense of individual presence. Robertson and Peters (2021) note that the Metaverse is an aspirational term for a future virtual world more tangibly connected to our real lives and bodies.

Despite the concept of the Metaverse is still under development and there is not yet a complete and definitive implementation, the economic pressures from big tech and other large technology companies as well as large investment funds to adopt virtual reality and enter Web3.0 are enormous. The advent of the Metaverse represents a fundamental shift in today's notion of digital presence, a shift that cannot be ignored for long by the disciplines that deal with the design of cities and territories.

Old urban issues in new virtual cities

The following paragraphs examine, without the ambition to be exhaustive, some urban issues that have emerged from observing some of the most mainstream virtual city experimentations and that approach, in different ways, the Metaverse concept, including software such as Decentraland, Horizon Worlds, Minecraft, Liberland Metaverse and Qtopia.

Metaverses as private cities: the neoliberal dream

The first urban issue concerns the private character of these virtual cities, ultimate expression of the neo-liberal city project. In fact, in these first experiments, consolidated urban problems of the contemporary city seem to reappear: from financialisation and privatisation processes, to spatial and socio-economic inequalities, to redlining and touristification processes, just to name a few.

One factor that should not be underestimated is that, unlike the World Wide Web or the Internet itself, which were financed by large public institutions, the funding for the development of Web3.0 comes from large private multinationals. The major player in the Metaverse race is clearly Meta, but it is not alone. Other big technology companies such as Microsoft, Roblox, Decentraland, and Epic Games are also major players in the Web3.0 big race. The completely private character of the cities of the first Metaverse experimentations stands as the ultimate expression of the neoliberal-era city. Not surprisingly, many of the urban issues that plague the contemporary city emerge radically in the cases observed.

For example, strong processes of urban financialisation that can already be seen in platforms such as Decentraland,⁶ where in recent years there has been an incredible increase in the prices of plots sold in the form of NFT.⁷ The price of lots from the launch of the platform (2017) to today has increased by about 60.000 per cent, generating a big public interest. In the virtual city of Decentraland, as in contemporary metropolises, centrally located plots have higher prices than peripheral ones. As Goldberg, Kugler, and Schär argue (2022), location matters even in a virtual world with negligible mobility costs like Decentraland. It emerges how new virtual cities incorporate traditional real estate market dynamics and thus it is no coincidence that virtual real estate agencies have arisen in recent years, such as the very popular Metaverse Properties. In this way, it would seem that the cities of the Metaverse designed for a glossy elite are avoiding, or worse, normalising, some of the most problematic contemporary urban issues such as spatial inequalities, redlining and the exclusion of minorities and vulnerable groups.

⁶ Decentraland is a virtual reality platform powered by Ethereum's blockchain where users can create, experience and monetise content and applications. The grounds of Decentraland are permanently owned by the community, which thus has full control over its creations. Here, users claim ownership of a virtual land on a blockchain-based ledger and land owners control what content is published on their portion of land, identified by a set of Cartesian coordinates (x,y). Land is a non-fungible, transferable and scarce (90,000 plots circa) digital asset stored in an Ethereum smart contract and can be purchased by spending an ERC20 token called MANA (Ordano et al. 2017).

⁷ NFT stands for 'non-fungible token'. A non-fungible token is a unique digital identifier that is recorded on a blockchain, and is used to certify ownership and authenticity.

Also issues related to the digital divide posed by the Metaverse diffusion cannot be left aside. Despite the fact that many of these experiences emphasise the potential of accessibility to services even in isolated situations – e.g. the Seoul Metaverse, which provides access to many public services and was launched during the pandemics⁸ – it is clear that it poses accessibility problems for people without the possibility of acquiring or using hardware and software that allow them to take advantage of the Metaverse experience, potentially generating dynamics of economic, ableist and/or generational inequality.

Design imaginaries in virtual cities: the dictatorship of neoliberal realism

The second issue has to do with the urban design and its imaginaries, which often re-proposes rooted and highly traditional techno-capitalistic scenarios – despite the potentially high degree of creative freedom of the virtual medium – without producing particularly innovative design experimentation.

There are two main trends, which are not mutually exclusive, that highlight the strength of the ‘dictatorship of realism’ in the practices and imaginaries of virtual urban design. On the one hand, there are widely popular aesthetics related to the gaming industry imaginaries as in Second Life, Roblox and especially Minecraft. Minecraft,⁹ described by many as a kind of digital Lego (Olmedo 2013), is exemplary of this type of aesthetic. It is an open ‘sandbox’ game in which players build textured cubic constructions, block by block, in a world with its own physical laws (Overby and Jones 2015).

On the other hand, there are aesthetics drawn from the neo-liberal ‘smart’ city imaginaries, and among the cases investigated the best example is the Liberland Metaverse.¹⁰ Designed by the famous Zaha Hadid studio, the forms and spaces of this digital city are not particularly different from the studio’s designs in the Far East or the Gulf countries. The forms and spaces are more or less the same (i.e. emphasis on fluidity and continuity of forms), issues and obsessions of contemporary design are repeated (i.e. very traditional techno-ecological scenarios).

With the grand narratives of the 20th century gone, it would seem that the imaginaries of urban design are abandoning their utopian (that turned out to be modern dystopias more than once) instances, “that insolent claim to change the world” (Hirschmann 1982). The design imaginaries of the Metaverse virtual cities are very distant from the ideological, formal and spatial tensions of the two dominant urban models of the Modern Movement, Broadacre City and Ville Radieuse, but also from the radical high-tech urban and architectural experimentation linked to the emergence of cybernetic systems (Schoffer 1969) in the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

Virtual cities regulatory apparatus: between surveillance capitalism and a bubble-city scenario

A third urban issue has to do with the regulatory apparatus of virtual cities, which struggle between the desire for freedom and the need for regulation challenging norms, rights and values rooted in liberal democracies. An issue that also has to do with the excessive dominance of private corporations and which poses the question: who sets the rules of the game in the Metaverse? A question that leads us to reflect on governance, decision-making issues, power and exclusions in the virtuality.

The issues with sensitive data management (and data extractivism) and content regulation of major social networks are infamously well known (Urman and Makhortykh 2023). These factors are taken

⁸ Seoul Metaverse offers government services such as tax assistance, 3D environments, user-based avatars, virtual multi-office communication tools, urban gaming, and virtual touristic programs.

⁹ Minecraft is one of the key tools for citizen engagement in UN-Habitat urban projects used as a community participation tool for public space design.

¹⁰ Liberland Metaverse is a virtual city created as an extension of the Free Republic of Liberland, a libertarian micro-state founded by right-wing Czech activist Vít Jedlička in 2015 on a swampy plot of land only three square miles in the border between Croatia and Serbia. Not being officially recognised by any nation, the libertarian experiment decided to move to the virtual domain. To date it counts, according to its promoters, more than 700,000 applications for citizenship.

to the limit in Web3.0, where the experience of immersion and presence (La Trofa 2022) is more pervasive. For instance, important biometric data, from retinal dilation to heart rate, may be collected for population profiling and regulation has to deal not only with fake news or hate speech but also with acts, movements, and gestures.

In this regard, some cases of sexual harassment on Horizon Worlds (Diaz 2022) raised numerous questions about the interrelationship between the ‘real’ and the virtual field. Meta’s response to these cases has been the creation of the ‘safe space’, conceived ‘as a personal security bubble’, which recalls Peter Sloterdijk’s anti-modernist metaphors in the Spheres trilogy (1998, 1999, 2004).¹¹ Andrew Bosworth, Meta’s Chief Tech Officer, admitted in an internal memo (Murphy 2021) that moderation in the Metaverse “on any meaningful scale is virtually impossible”. The report ‘Metaverse: another cesspool of toxic content’ (2022) developed by the non-profit organisation SumOfUs shows, among many other alarming data, how regulated spaces on Horizon Worlds are very limited.

The idea of building spaces of freedom in utopian worlds – even in the anarchist and libertarian matrix – have always been part of the architectural and urban design culture, becoming spatial manifestos of ambitious ideological instances of change.¹² On one hand, the Metaverse, as a blank land yet to be discovered, has the potential to become a free space for creative thought and action, as demonstrated by some early experiences in the field of visual arts for example.¹³ On the other hand, however, the current dynamics in mainstream platforms show how there is a dystopian risk of them becoming places of exclusion and violence for minorities and marginalised groups. News about first Interpol office opening in the Metaverse that aims to ‘combat online crime of any nature’ (Interpol 2022) would seem to propose a scenario where traditional regulatory apparatus, control and state-corporate surveillance (Zuboff, 2019) tools will try to reproduce themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, also in virtual cities.

Another scenario could be, instead, the multiplication of meta-worlds created for specific communities as a protective response in an unsafe arena. Is that already the case of Qtopia¹⁴ which presents itself as “the first Metaverse by and for the LGBTQ+ community”. As stated on their website “the Qtopia Metaverse aims to provide an inclusive virtual space for the LGBTQ+ community, friends and allies to connect, while giving back to LGBTQ+ causes. Qtopia is being created with an emphasis on equality, diversity and sustainability.” In this way Metaverse’s potential to create an infinite multiverse could lead to a fragmented socio-spatial scenario, built over different identities in a sort of a virtual identitarian panarchy. The question is how such an anti-enlightenment and anti-modernist bubble virtual landscape, taking up again Sloterdijk’s metaphor,¹⁵ could be governed and designed to avoid a dystopian scenario.

Towards a radical project for virtual cities

¹¹ The trilogy written by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk deals with the human conception of inhabited spaces. The three volumes are entitled Bubbles (1998), Globes (1999) and Foams (2004).

¹² In this respect as well, the radical architecture of the 1960s and 1970s was emblematic. In France, the G.I.A.P. (Group International d’Architecture Prospective): Paul Maymont, Yona Friedman, Walter Jonas, and Nicolas Schöffer. In Italy, Superstudio and Archizoom Associati. In the United Kingdom, Archigram. In Japan, the Metabolism movement including Kenzo Tange and Arata Isozaki.

¹³ Cf. Federica Patti (2023) ‘Performatività postumana e dinamiche del Metaverso: A Matter of eXperience’.

¹⁴ See: <https://alphaverse.com/qtopia/#>.

¹⁵ Sloterdijk (2015), quoting Jakob von Uexküll’s reflections on the foundations of theoretical biology, states: “it was a mistake to believe that the human world constituted a space shared by all living beings. Every living creature has its own particular space that is as real as the space proper to human beings. This perspective offers us a completely new view of the universe as something that does not simply consist of a soap bubble that we have inflated to such a size that it goes beyond our horizons, assuming infinite proportions, but rather is made up of millions of distinctly distinct bubbles that overlap and intersect everywhere.”

Glossy contemporary utopias or dystopias, what are these new virtual cities? The construction of 'better' cities and 'better' worlds has always obsessed designers and urban planners (although who defined what better is, for whom and how it would be realised remained obscured). The digital field gives us this possibility but it would seem to re-propose, at least on mainstream big tech platforms, well-rooted imaginaries and issues of contemporary neo-liberal cities.

Early experiences in the Metaverse highlight dynamics of exclusion and state-corporate surveillance as well as the intrusive reach of marketing that uses adaptive algorithms to personalise artificial intimacy and the perpetuation of domination imaginaries (Patti 2023). At the same time, the great powers "of finance and big brands are already colonising the dynamics, imaginaries and very essence of digital virtuality" (Ivi) and re-proposing an advanced, extractivist, neocolonialist,¹⁶ and unequal techno-capitalist vision. Seems clear that Metaverse virtual cities pose ethical questions of inclusion and decentralisation, of norms, rights and values, of economic, social and, last but not least, ecological sustainability and equity, which must be addressed immediately. The advent of the Metaverse, a fundamental shift in today's notion of digital presence, calls for serious reflection on the need for new imaginaries on the digital field, a radical 'politics of the imagination' (Didi-Hubermann 2010), as some activists, artists and designers have just begun to do.¹⁷ Also in the architectural and planning disciplines.

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¹⁶ On this topic see for example: <https://longreads.tni.org/digital-colonialism-the-evolution-of-us-empire#>.

¹⁷ See: <http://meta-manifesto.com/>.



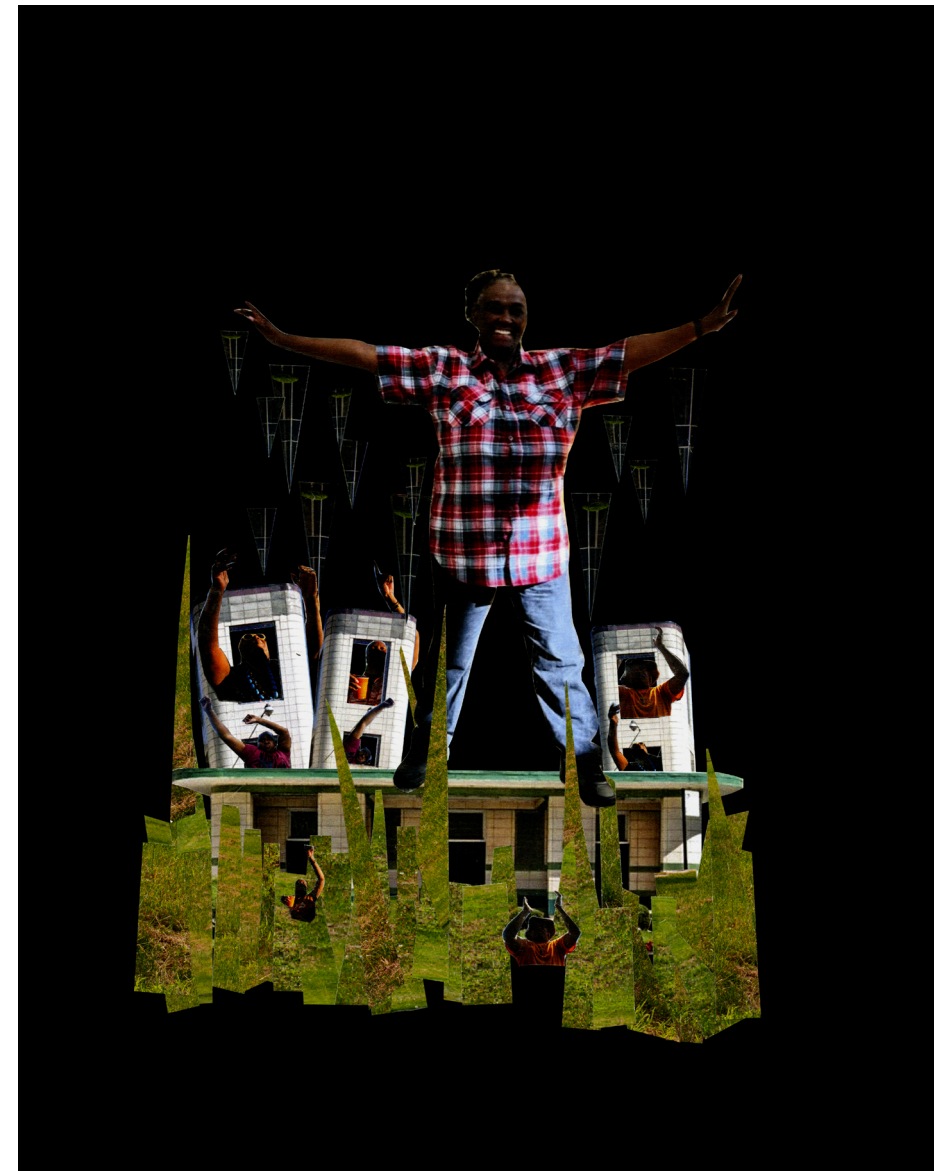
<https://urbanac.city/lillie>

Io Squaderno 66

Glossy Urban Dystopias

edited by // Penny Koutrolikou and Cristina Mattiucci

Guest Artist // urbanAC



Io Squaderno is a project by Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Cristina Mattiucci & Andrea Pavoni.

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In the next issue:
Interstices, Liminality and Boundaries

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