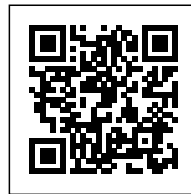


Pure Imagination!
Marson Korbi

PURE IMAGINATION! THE CRISIS OF SPACE IN COGNITIVE LABOR, FROM BIGNESS TO SMALLNESS

Posted on May 28, 2020 by martabuges



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Authorship: Essay by Marson Korbi.

*If you feel God is following you, you are a believer;
what are you if you know that satellites are following you
... an actor?*

—Rem Koolhaas, "?" in Countryside: A Report

Every day we deal with the problem of space. The concept of space has gone in recent times into a deep crisis. As we think about the way we inhabit the contemporary city, the concept of space has been reduced to a mere problem of container vs. content, from big to small scale and from material to immaterial things.

Let's think about problems like the urbanization/*cementification* of natural territories, the scarcity of land in cities, public space related to politics and economic crisis, and the housing shortage. Moreover, let's consider the surplus of material produced in offices and in daily life (i.e., architects produce models and digital files that will be used only once, journalists produce draft papers that will never be published), as well as the daily flow of images and texts on social media, fake news and funny memes. If we think about all those things, we will realize the uncalculable amount of time and labor spent to 'produce' them.

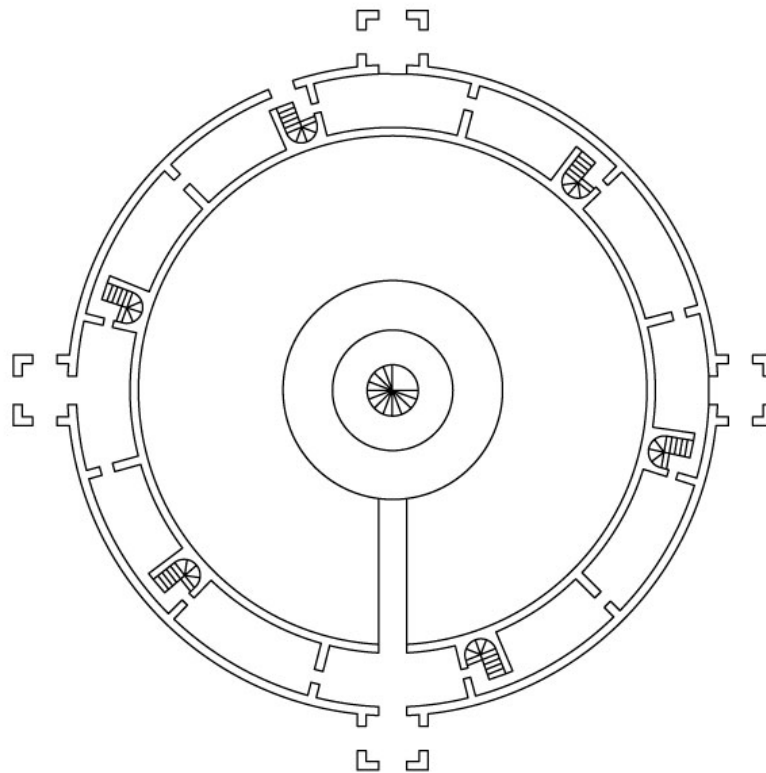
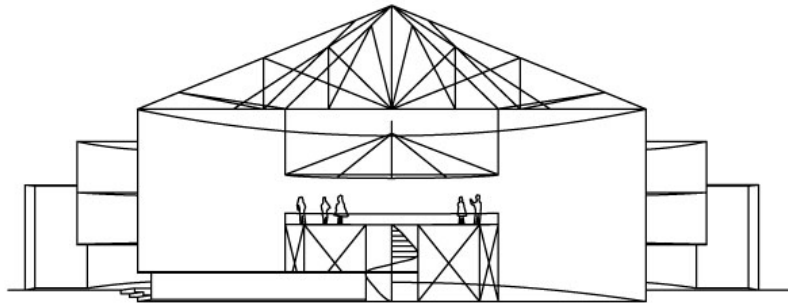
While, from this point of view, space appears only in quantitative terms, dealing with built/unbuilt and economic questions only, focusing on the mechanism of hyper-production, I argue that the crisis of space should be read by analyzing the productive processes of capitalism in order to address other spatial paradigms for architecture and urbanism.

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10 m

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1839, Panoramas Champs-Élysées, Paris © Roberta Gaetani

In his *Grundrisse* notebooks, Karl Marx delves into the problem of space associating it with the exchange market in a process which is still clearly a part of the productive process as a whole. According to Marx, the productive process also include the process by which products are transformed into commodities – that is, the process of circulation and exchange of capital, money and products. For Marx, thus, space is defined as the place where this specific exchange occurs – the global market – arguing that capital, through *time*, destroys spaces by penetrating everywhere: “Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus, the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it.”

Considering space as a sort of universal concept, and accounting for the different definitions that space has assumed in specific disciplines (i.e., physical vs. mental space: scientific vs. philosophical), in his book *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre introduces the notion of *social space*. According to Lefebvre, “(social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder.” More specifically, for Lefebvre space is produced in the act of social production and, therefore, through the relationships between humans and things which occupy it.

Following Marx and Lefebvre, if we therefore consider space as an accumulation of things and social activities (ideas, love, labor, commodities, constructions, cities), we can understand even better the scale of Rem Koolhaas's *Bigness* in space. In his seminal manifesto of 1994, *Bigness or the Problem of Large*, Koolhaas pointed out this new spatial subcategory, which was the result of accumulative processes of complex spaces, programs and iconographies, without any architectural canons (composition, aesthetics, rationality) or urban planning: “It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is *fuck* context.” Through his theorem, Koolhaas exalted a type of architecture – a metaphor of the city within the city – born in the USA, modernized in the second half of the eighties, and theorized by Europeans in the form of the megastructure: Yona Friedman's emblematic “metallic blanket” over Paris “promising unlimited but unfocused potential renewal of ‘everything’.”

- “*Bigness* destroys, but it is also a new beginning.”
- “Only *Bigness* can sustain a promiscuous proliferation of events in a single container.”

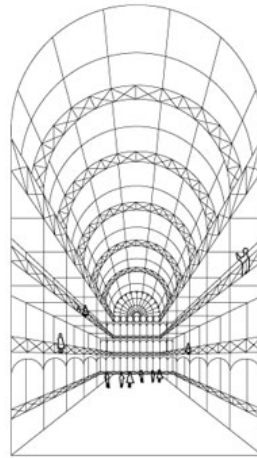
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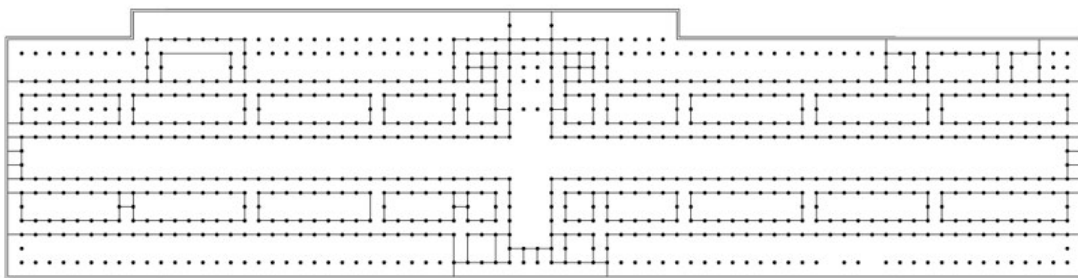
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The destructive character of *Bigness* has been evolved and abstracted today into a new one, identified by Koolhaas in the form of the generic box: an immense space without qualities (still without architecture) occupied only by machines and robots. In his recent work collected in the pocket-catalogue *Countryside: A Report*, there emerges an obsessive attention focused not only on countryside itself, but rather on a new way of building – reminiscent of the *Typical Plan*, but arguably beyond a mere typological question. His declared love for Walmart, Google, Amazon distribution centers and Tesla gigafactories, especially those in the Nevada desert, is addressing something new to look at: "What happens if there is a Walmart next to an Amazon, next to Apple, next to Tesla, next to Google; in a simple agglomeration of boxes?"



5 m



20 m

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1851, Crystal Palace, London © Roberta Gaetani

In the context of the many questions raised in Koolhaas's essay "?", written in the form of short questions, "Is the countryside shed becoming a model for *all* construction?" seems, similar to 80% of them, like an affirmation, while others question the role of architects and human interactions within these boxes. "How do you design space if it no longer is for human interaction? Are data centers more impressive than pyramids? The world as a gated community, everybody protected against everybody else?"

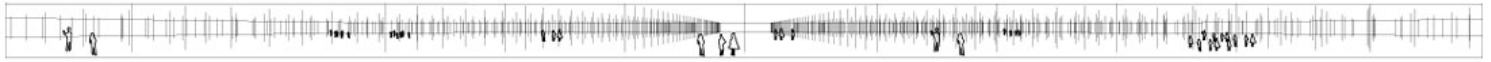
Inside one of those boxes, built in the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center (TRIC), there are myriad of servers for the accumulation of big data and robots that will produce Tesla's self-driving cars. "There are no users", no workers, just a few security guards patrolling the area. With no planning, designed without architects, through codes and algorithms, their form is generic. And yet, their interiors reveal a clear invitation to occupy a kind of space which, speaking in Lefebvre's terms, is arguably not a produced one.

Going back to the city, space is produced within the logics of cognitive capitalism's accumulation, where intellectual labor becomes dominant. As pointed out by Andrea Fumagalli, bio-cognitive capitalism requires cognitive and relational labor, including here professional and tacit knowledge and creativity. The rise of an entire generation of freelance workers, as well as the invention of new jobs (influencers, YouTubers, travel bloggers, etc.), joining the existing multitude of self-employed journalists, architects, lawyers, etc., represents not only a necessity to adapt within the capitalist economy for surviving precariousness; considering technological hegemony, it also requires inventing always new ways of life, like a TV actor inhabits different personalities and characters.

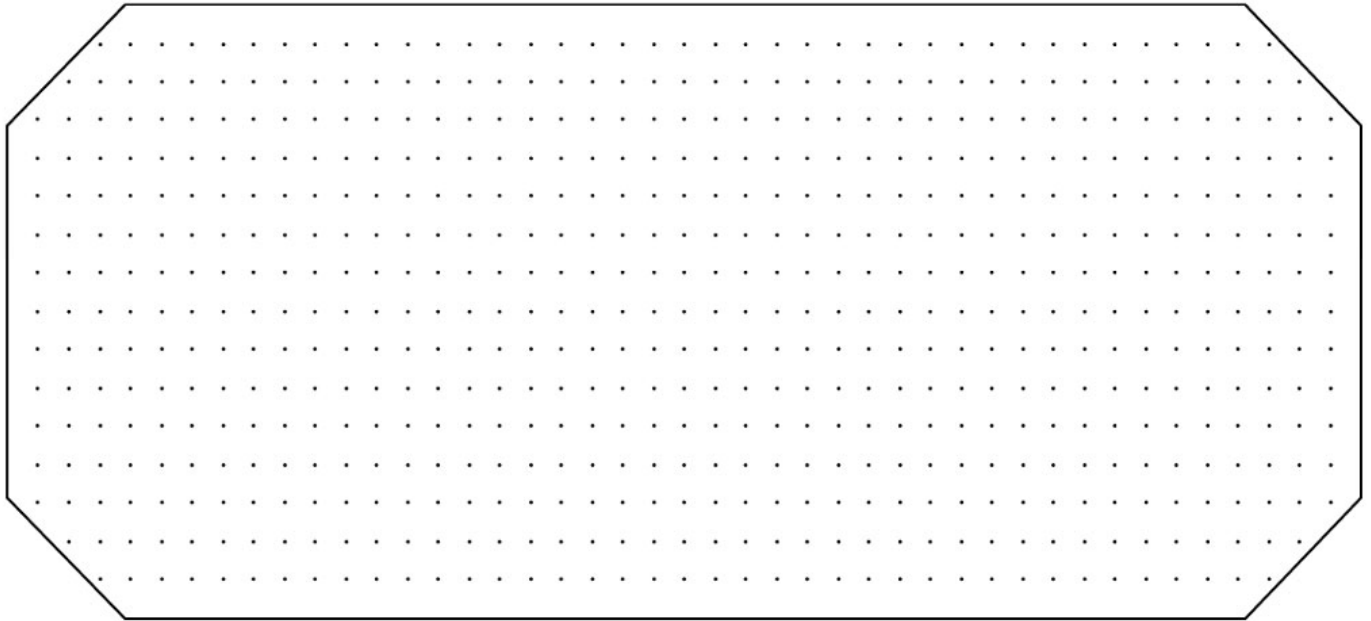
In his essay *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Walter Benjamin depicted the French capital at that time as at the apogee of the accumulative process of inventions in infrastructures, boulevards, metros, arcades, housing buildings, as well as in creativity, literature, painting, photography and cinematography. Following Benjamin's observations, positing Paris as the capital of Europe, like London, meant understanding it as a spatial model of how Marx theorized circulation within the productive process. Marx's understating of circulation and capital breaking any spatial barrier was even more clear, as highlighted by Benjamin, in the Parisians' fascination with panoramas.

Invented in England by the Irish painter Robert Barker in 1787, and proliferating later across European cities, panoramas found their most expressive *ethos* in Paris during 1802-1840, becoming

“the scenes of a perfect imitation of nature”. Through an apparatus of imagination and creativity, they anticipated contemporary circulation of people and, to some extent, mass tourism and traveling. A typical panorama was a circular domed space with a detached circular terrace placed at its center, where visitors could stand close enough to the painted sidewalls to admire them from different perspective points of view which were faithful to reality. On the walls, large-scale paintings depicted panoramic views of other cities or landscapes, simulating a sort of virtual reality. In Paris, examples such as the two panoramas on the Passage des Panoramas, the one near Place de la République, the one at the Champs-Élysées, and many others, soon became generic spaces spread across the city, where *flâneurs* and middle-class families could feed their imaginations by virtually traveling to places they had been or never visited before: Rio de Janeiro, Naples, Athens, Constantinople, etc. Many artists specialized in panoramas engaged in research and made site visits to make this mediums as credible as possible during its temporary exposition.



12 m



100 m

2014, Tesla Gigafactory, Reno (Nevada) © Roberta Gaetani

While thinking about the surplus of production and the accumulation of capital around the London-Paris axis in the 19th century, one can easily understand the fetishistic desire to exhibit it and therefore understand the *ethos* of the bourgeoisie for Universal Exhibitions. In 1851, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London, embodying such a capitalistic euphoria, produced its maximum spatial form: the Crystal Palace. Apart from the romantic scenography depicted through historical images, the Crystal Palace can be considered as the emblem of broader research into space and cognitive production.

Joseph Paxton, who was also a horticulturalist, and other landscapers such as John Claudius Loudon, William Jackson Hooker and many engineers, gardeners and medical scientists, can be considered as the inventors of the Victorian "horticultural glasshouse". Apart from their magnificent scale and forms, these spaces embodied the quintessence of the human attempt to simulate environments and generate artificial climates. They also incorporated experiments in botany and medicine, and the invention of technical systems that were later used in hospitals, housing and office buildings. Within these 'basilicas', as highlighted by Dustin Valen, Loudon tried out formal arrangements of plants and flowers, promoting scientific study on gardening and botany, uniting architects with other scientists who conducted there their experiments on grafting and other artifices for the manipulation of nature.

In colonial times, exotic plants, water lilies, fruits and vegetables from all over the world were brought into imperialist England and assembled in spaces like the famous Palm Room at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew or at the garden in Chatsworth (where Paxton was head gardener). Fabricating indoor landscapes similar to Claude Monet or Henri Rousseau paintings, glasshouses contributed to Paxton's vision of the Crystal Palace. The latter, along with the Victoria Regia House, and the Crystal Sanatorium, all designed by him, should be seen as objects where architecture and space coincided in one single element: the roof.

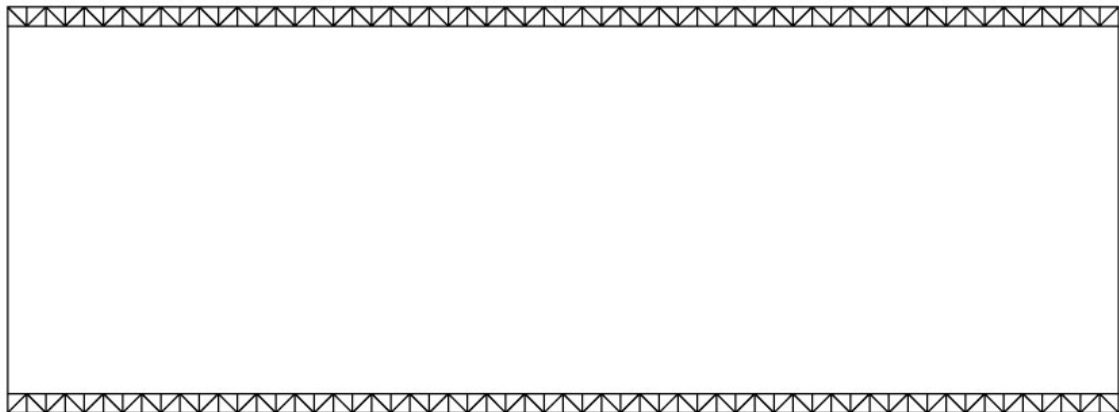
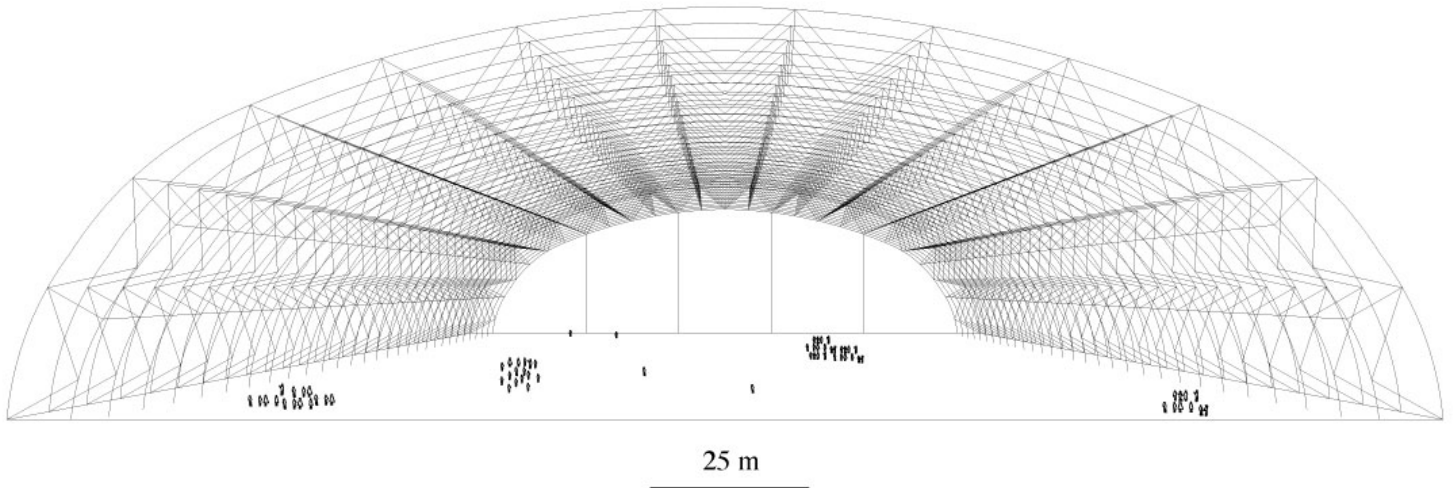
If one were to look at a storyboard of European bigness, it shows megastructures or buildings oscillating between the L-XL scale. Apart from Koolhaas's vision, while some contemporary megastructures – such as the mega-roofs of the ILVA Mineral Park in Taranto and the NSF Shed over Chernobyl – address a possible remedy for capitalistic horrors, and examples like the Seagaia Ocean Dome hide the obscenity of human consumerism, they all reveal a concrete abstraction of the contemporary production of space, useful in explaining the bigness of creative labor.

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2018, Roof of the Ilva Mineral Park, Taranto © Roberta Gaetani

While TRIC's model of post-human architecture as read by OMA, on par with the Soviet *disurbanists*, Le Corbusier's linear city and, most emblematically, Superstudio's Continuous Monument propose an escape from and a destruction of the capitalist city, the city remains a non-ignorable mechanism of production, still expanding, or even worse, imploding. I argue for the necessity of a new spatial paradigm in the dialectic between a new *Bigness* and *Smallness*.

Smallness represents the myriad of things, ideas and communications that are produced by humans daily in the form of cognitive labor. Smallness is a concept equal and opposite to bigness; equal in power, opposite in scale. It depends on the *general intellectual* capacity to invent and imagine new things.

Smallness is social labor. And it needs a scenario in which everything imagined becomes an ephemeral small-space, room, bed-place, 3d-printing, scenography, commodity without an *exchange value* and full of *use value*. What already happens in Amazon and Netflix Studios (myriad of actors, TV series, scenography, fake environments) as well as in many precarious architects' lives (producing only collages and small-scale installations), can be applied to real life: extending life to pure imagination. Thus, space could be produced and reproduced only through intellectual labor – machines will do the rest?

Perhaps, in a space where the market economy, the economy or capitalism will no longer exist, under a *Roof* called communism.

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