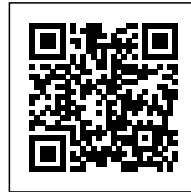


## Transurban Sex

Andrés Jaque / Office for  
Political Innovation  
Miguel Mesa

## TRANSURBAN SEX: THE ARCHITECTURALIZATION OF ROMANCE

*Posted on October 2, 2018 by martabugas*



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**Authorship:** Research by Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation and Miguel Mesa.

In the last decades, four simultaneous phenomena have revolutionized the way architecture participates in the making of sexuality: 1. The development of location-based dating media (such as Grindr); 2. Monopolized control of the distribution of adult films (MindGeek); 3. The financial crisis; and 4. The money-storing condominium towers with "helicopter views". These four emerged in 2008 as a coordinated process that produced an unforeseen outcome: a shift from the desire for true sex to the collective assessment of verified sexuality. Post-2008, sex has progressively stopped being an interpersonal human transaction (in the US, interhuman intercourse has decreased at a consistent rate of 5% per decade; in Japan, half of the adult population claimed not to have engaged in interhuman intercourse in the past month) and has instead become an architectural business. This started as a process of urban atomization. At the height of the HIV crisis, humans were distributed in bubbles of comfortable prophylactics, and risk was surrogated to pockets of recorded promiscuity. Thirty years later, this has resulted in a process in which romance has progressively been embodied in architectural devices that no longer provide accommodation for sex, but have become sex itself.

## **0. Antecedents: Air-Filled Urbanisms: Surrogating Risk Into The Unlabeled**

Sexuality was changed radically by the 1984 Betamax Case, and so was its urbanism. That year, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of Sony Corp. that VCR users had the right to make copies of complete TV shows as a way to achieve a new media experience: "television time shifting". In four years, the percentage of US homes equipped with VCRs grew from 19% to 88%, as revenues from film studios drastically shrank. VCRs allowed many people stay to at home instead of going to the movies.

Something was already happening to the architecture of homes. In 1969, the Monroe, Michigan-based company La-Z-Boy patented the first upholstered reclining chair. Promoting the predominance of latex-made rubber foam in domestic furniture, in a single year the company absorbed many of its competitors in the US furniture market by massively rendering domestic interiors upholstered. Its sales grew from 150 million in 1981 to 500 million by 1983. A year later, General Mills developed the first mass-produced microwave popcorn with butter flavoring, which shifted the \$53 million home-popcorn market of 1983 into a \$250 million market 10 months later. VCRs and couches came with fat. In 1985, Tom and James Monaghan's Domino's Pizza opened franchises in Japan and the UK in a transoceanic expansion that, 10 years later, brought their "mouth watering" meals to five continents. The transnational retreat of the social into fat-retaining homes synchronized with the transnational HIV crisis, which resulted in the disappearance from cities of

spaces where sex was staged and negotiated, a regime that established the fear of fatless bodies. The architectural socialization of movies left theaters to circulate within the connected but isolated, sweet, homey couches of the living room, where hyper-caloric food was delivered.

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**Air-filled-latex-couches make love sex go home. La-Z-Boy. A chair by any other name is just a chair.**

Whereas Weegee's photographs exposed the bodily experience of sex as something happening in the collective spaces shaped by projection beams, in the VCR era, sex was surrogated to a distributed architectural network of foam rubber fluffiness, time shifting and fat gaining. Since the 1920s, most condoms have been made of latex. So, too, is foam rubber, whose air-filled matrix is made of latex and is the same material used in furniture upholstery. Architecture brought prophylactics and comfort together. Where latex condoms were used to introduce a clinical regime of sexual vigilance, it was also latex – air-filled latex – that isolated homes in their access to fictional media and body-transforming fat.

The use of the two latex byproducts – condoms and upholstery – grew exponentially at a time when the architecture of sex was spatially becoming an air-filled matrix. It was not an urban phenomenon – because it shifted from urban to rural and suburban – but a transurban evolution, by which the greatly rhetorical architecture of big spaces for social summing evolved into a prophylactic, networked architecture made out of something different from construction: it was the creation of a network of homes, territorially dispersed and working as an air-filling strategy through which a different form of sex was enacted.

Facing the big studios' massive firings (desperately intended to reduce their profit drain), the unemployed technicians and independent companies that depended on the film industry found a fresh place to work in the San Fernando Valley. In 1984, the first non-professional camcorders, JVC GR-C1 and Sony Betamovie-100P, rapidly propelled the adult video industry. Director Harold Freeman, accused of pandering, won the appeal to the California Supreme Court in what was, in fact, the legal recognition of adult filming in California as a practice detached from prostitution. The then-depreciated real estate market of suburban San Fernando Valley made it possible to deploy a mirrored transurbanism: a film industry that, rather than occupying monumental architectural compounds like Universal and Disney studios did, could be enacted through the architecture of a constellation of interconnected small warehouses and reappropriated dwellings.

In a mix of subversion and service to the 1980s latex prophylactic reurbanization of sex, San Fernando became a non-latexed community, living out collective forms of non-latexed sex. It was the milieu to which the air-filled transurbia surrogated its risk. In 1998, a former adult film actress, Sharon Mitchell, founded the Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation, an organization that, each month, tested an average of more than 1,000 actors working in San Fernando, as a means to keep industry workers safe from HIV, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Latexed prophylactics were both responded and served by a trust-based love-making community.



Monthly tests and strict protocols produced a database that comprehensively accounted for 13 years of intercourse within the adult entertainment industry. An invisible reality, only visible through fictional sexualized video-recorded scenes developed to collectively manage a surrogated risk, had been constructed. No single case of HIV contagion was reported for more than four years. Community-making and laboratized bodies were simultaneously forms of counter-latex resistance and allies in the making of the air-filling society. Politics were contained in a mirrored risk-zoning society.

## **I. The Network is a Rapist. Urbanism Goes Genital**

In September 2016, a person registered as "N. P." sued Standard Innovation Corp., alleging that its collection of "sensual lifestyle products", in particular its latex-free We-Vibedigital dildo, "secretly collected and transmitted highly sensitive personally identifiable information about the consumers using them". The product could only operate if paired with a smart phone with the company's *teledildonic* software, We-Connect, and it is through the phone that orders, data and videos were transmitted between distant devices. The online mediation was built as a space that convened companies, multiple users and infrastructures in a shared interaction. A form of collective saloon made of loving and connected genitals, mediated by digital technologies. Being online made it possible for sensual lifestyle products to be hacked. According to John Banzhaf, a law professor at George Washington University, "Unauthorized entry into a vagina may be rape even if she cooperates, provided that her consent was obtained by fraud or trickery." N.P. claimed that it was the networked collective space itself, controlled by Standard Innovation Corp. that was emerging as a rapist subject, by collecting and filing intimate data. Aside from the legal judgment, the argument succeeds in detecting how sex is no longer accommodated, but mediated. The urbanism of *teledildonic* is no longer made out of space, nor can it be described as a "city", "landscape" "room", "building" or "typology". It has become a subject in itself: a non-human subject, founded in the connection of distant interacting genitals, in the search for an ethical constitution.

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## **We Vibe 4 Plus app for smartphones. 2016**

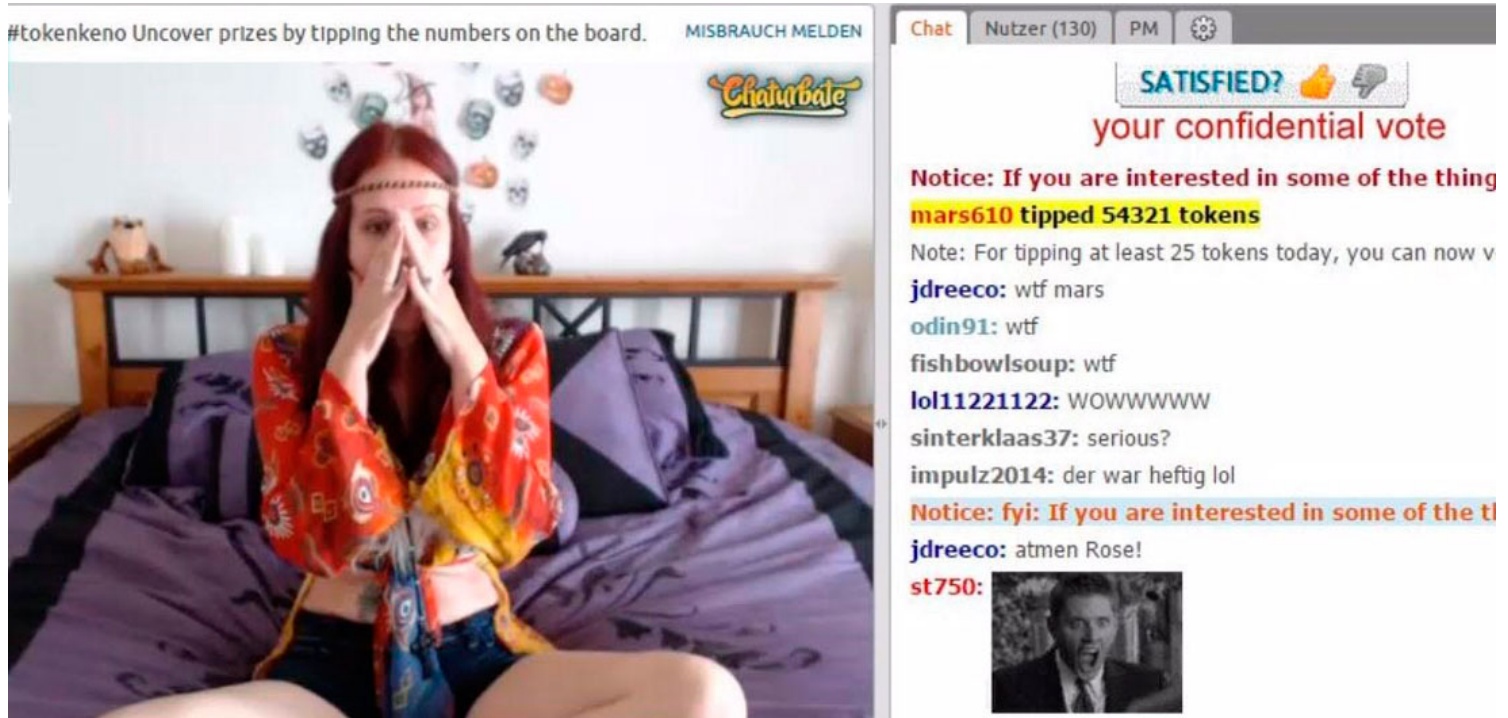
Launched in 2011, Chaturbate, with 4 million visits per month, has become a voluntary space for sex to circulate in the form of orders, data and videos. At every moment, thousands of amateur models expose themselves from the upholstered intimacy of their post-VCR homes. Many have temporarily inserted devices similar to We-Vibe into their bodies that allow anonymous cybernauts to have access to their bodies and to activate their teledildos at a distance. Thirty-three years after VCR urbanism, a new latex-free society of connected-at-a-distance domesticities has been added together in platforms of sensual life and shared risk.

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**Cam-girl Germanflavor2 performing atChaturbate from her home. 2017**

## II. Sex Is Bodies Rendered Architectural

The average number of time American adults spend engaging in sexual intercourse per year has dropped a whole 15% since the 1990s. It is even more pronounced in those born after 1990, among whom the number of non-active adults doubles the figures for previous generations at the same ages. Even though it is generally assumed that sexual intimacy among young people has multiplied in an era of digital interaction, social media and location-based apps, that is definitively not the case. In the US, the number of 18-year-olds who have never experienced intercourse has consistently grown, by a total of 13% since 1991, and only 43% of college students claim to engage in genital penetration in their sporadic relationships. This phenomenon is even more extreme in Japan, where, in 2016, half of the adult population claimed not to have engaged in bodily love in the previous month. Ai Aoyama, a Tokyo-based expert on relationship counseling, said: "come to me because they think that by wanting something different, there is something wrong with them." But it evinces a significant shift in contemporary modes of constructing sex and desire.

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Landis Smithers, Grindr's marketing strategist, said: "I was looking at my Tumblr feed and I realized that it is basically fashion, fashion, porn, porn, interior design, art, porn, porn. This is just how we absorb things these days. And I would like to find a tool where I can do that in real life." Sex is no longer genitally constrained, nor happening among univocal bodies, but an activity that registers and promotes subjects as multiple – composed from the association of numerous versions of beings, constellations of heterogeneous entities. Since the 1980s, sex is no longer happening just among people; it is also the interaction of multiplicities composed by clothes, art, images, technological mediation, architectural settings and interiors. In the urbanism of sex, it is sex itself that has been urbanized. Sex is no longer a body-constrained business, but rather an architectural setting.

### **III. Locative Media, or the Birth of The Alkali- Aluminosilicate Zone**

Joel Simkhai was born in Tel Aviv in 1976 and soon migrated with his family to the conservative New York suburb of Mamaroneck. As a teenager in the 1990s, he started participating in what was the then-emerging world of online chat services, which he would use to meet guys. In the dark of his bedroom, with his parents watching TV in the next room, he would access the CB simulator's multi-user chat channel 33 and AOL's instant messaging service to immediately connect to a multitude of distant gay guys. "I was gay-born online," Simkhai said. "It was great, but most of the time I would end up talking to guys in places like Wyoming, Minnesota or Washington, D.C. It was impractical."

When he was 21, and still closeted, he lived in Paris for a year as an NYU exchange student. Disappointed by the limited options he found at the gay bars in Tel Aviv, where he spent his summers, he was amazed at the effect that a pioneering communication system called MINITEL had had on Paris, where the population density is 21,000 inhabitants per square kilometer, about 27 times the density of Mamaroneck. With 9 million users, MINITEL, the French predecessor to the Internet, had already produced a digital language for online dating. It consisted of a videotext system that provided interactive content that was displayed on a video monitor. Even though it required its users to engage with an unwieldy device that had to be wired to a fixed phone line and placed in the user's room, the high number of MINITEL users made it possible to extend the text-screen conversations into offline encounters and sexual intercourse.

Spending his summers in Tel Aviv, Simkhai had the chance to learn about WAZE, the location-based social media service developed to help drivers avoid bad traffic on the congested Israel road system. What WAZE had done for lost drivers, he could do for lost gay men in the search for sex.

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In 2008, as cell phones with GPS were being launched by Apple, Samsung and Nokia, over six months Simkhai, Morten Bek Ditlevsen and Scott Lewallen developed the first version of a location-based application that they called Grindr, a portmanteau of *guy* and *finder*. It was designed to help gay men easily find other gay men in close proximity. In June 2009, on the BBC-2 show *Top Gear*, the British actor Stephen Fry showed Jeremy Clarkson how easy Grindr made it to cruise nearby gay men. A week later, 40,000 men had downloaded the app. For Jaime Woo, "It was like gaining Superman's X-ray vision and suddenly being able to peer through brick and steel to reveal all the hungry men around. People use the term 'gaydar' to refer to a queer man's ability to sense another man as a fellow queer. Grindr felt like a literal radar..."

In its free version, Grindr opens with a display of 12 photographs of the closest individual users, with their names in the lower left corner. The profiles shown can be filtered by age, body metrics, ethnicity, relationship status, and also by how users define themselves as aligned with one of 12 "tribes": bear, clean-cut, daddy, discreet, geek, jock, leather, otter, poz, rugged, trans, twink. Scrolling down reveals up to 100 nearby users.

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## **Intimate Strangers by Andres Jaque, Office for Political Innovation**

The alkali-aluminosilicate glass screen of cell phones provides a texture similar to smooth skin, so that as you rub your thumb down the display of Grindr users, it is like touching the young, hairless skin of a naked body. The display promotes interaction: blocking, favoriting, and messaging are the next steps. When a user's picture is tapped, his profile grows to occupy the whole screen. A user's profile consists of the guy's distance, his age, body metrics, and intentions, a headline, and a 120-character "About Me" section. These are the features guys use to construct themselves on Grindr (or that Grindr uses to construct them online). Photographs mainly show sexualized versions of users, in desirable interiors, with carefully selected outfits. Less than 5% of the conversations that take place

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on Grindr end up in offline encounters. Grindr provides a new mode of romantic experience, not intended to promote sex forever or genital interaction, but rather the desire-driven journey from profiled assemblages of porn, fashion and interior design. The bodily experience of the finger-scroll on the alkali aluminosilicate surface is a tiny gesture, repeated all over the world for an average total time of 90 minutes every day, that requires and triggers important architectural transformations.

What's up? What're you up to? What u into? Where u at? Trying to meet people. Are u interested? What are you looking for? Visiting. Looking for someone to show me around. Have more pics? How old are you?



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## **Intimate Strangers by Andres Jaque, Office for Political Innovation**

As one Grindr user put it: "Nothing matters on Grindr besides the picture." Grindr conversation tends to be simultaneously casual and intimate. It accelerates sexual serendipity by creating a space of *visually driven* pre-agreed normativity. The 3.0.9 version of the app, released in October 2016, removed the orange frame in its interface to avoid users being exposed when checking Grindr by the orange glare coming from their cell phone screens, coloring their faces. Grindr is an online architecture that enables offline spatial over-layering.

Grindr is a zone of its own, one different from cities, enacted more than constructed, but one that is also part of how our offline world is happening now. Predictions made in the 70s about how digital interaction would result in the unimportance of proximity have been proven false. Rather, proximity has become multiple and technologically manageable. With 10 million users in 192 countries, and growing at a rate of 10,000 daily downloads, Grindr produces a flow of more than 70 million messages a day. It is not only in the dark of bedrooms, but in offices, bars, streets, trains, factories, gyms and colleges that people inhabit it.

User Jeff Ferzoco said he needs Grindr to have a sense of who is in the room. For people like Ferzoco, architectural experience is no longer possible without the x-ray vision locative media provides. Grindr is the contemporary melting of architecture and urbanism. Where places (bars, clubs, saunas, cruising spots, etc.) used to be what produced LGBT scenes, it is now the self-reconstruction of subjects, through online editing and circulation, that host gayness.

Grindr constitutes a transnational urbanism, made in the intersection of bytes and flesh, that comprises 5 trillion bytes of data in use, stored in servers located in 23 sites in only two countries: the US and China. The management of functional dispersion and bodily reconstruction is actually concentrated in a binational location. Grindr pioneered what became a diverse context of proximity-based social media, including Badoo, Blender, Blued, Down, Glimpse, Happn, Hinge, Jack'd, JSWipe, Nuh Lang Nah Lang, Pure, Tinder, and Scruff, among many others, that have not only radically changed the way sex and love are currently understood and experienced but have also enrolled, altogether, more than 360 million people around the world in a process by which self-construction replaces building, and intimacy among strangers reinvents urbanity.

Similar to what happened in the 1980s to movie theaters with the emergence of VCRs, cruising spots and dark rooms all around the world have seen their constituencies reduced and aged in recent years, as younger generations have abandoned them and found digital spaces to flirt and negotiate

sex. In London, historical gay venues like Black Cap and Joiner's Arms awoke media concern when they were demolished to make room for apartments. In New York, the West Village's Westway club closed in 2015 to be replaced by condominiums. Sayvon Zabar, owner of the Latino gay club La Escuelita, claimed that his club had been shut after 45 years because "minorities did not fit into the gentrification plans of the city." In 2016, the apartment towers of Chelsea, East Harlem and Greenpoint were Grindr users' favorite locations to find lovers worldwide, and Saturday noon was the preferred time of the week. Historical 1980s and 1990s match-making disco venues, such as La Escuelita, were replaced by apartment towers, just as smoky, lofty, night interiors were replaced by open-plan apartments as the number one desired architecture for sex. Whereas the erotic industry used to occupy economically depressed parts of a city, now places like rent-spiking Greenpoint and Chelsea have become the place of popular adult studios like Burning Angel and Cocky Boys. These are gentrified parts of the city that have attracted investment, while at the same time becoming a laboratory for sex among urbanized multi-bodies.

In May 2015, Grindr went through a 10-month integral reconstruction, orchestrated to turn the app into an expanding milieu for a total experience. Step one: Grindr hired Raine Group LLC to find a buyer, so the company could raise capital to develop. Eight months later, Grindr sold 60% of its stake to the Chinese gaming company Beijing Kunlun Tech. Step two: Lukas Sliwka, Grindr's chief technology officer, launched a new Grindr software stack. Initially, Grindr's digital infrastructure was composed of customized solutions, which kept their in-house engineers' time fully occupied, since only they could do the updates. The new stack used off-the-shelf components, which made updates easy to outsource. This way, Grindr's engineers could concentrate on expanding the app by finding new ways to cater to its users. Whereas apps like Uber, which had 8 million active users in 2016, are valued at more than \$25 billion, Grindr, with 10 million users, stays within the \$155 million range. For the programmers' forum Venture Beat, this is how Grindr continues to expand, by introducing value-adding services, transforming itself into a broader gay lifestyle platform. Step three: In September 2015, Smither was appointed as Grindr's vice president of marketing. During London fashion week in January 2016, Grindr gave its users a code to access an exclusive live-stream of JW Anderson's Fall/Winter 2016 menswear show, in an act Smithers described as "pok fun at the fussy establishment a little bit." In April 2016, *Paper* magazine announced that the male models for its summer issue would be cast from Grindr. Fashion magazines became an extension of Grindr's trans-media urbanism. Many potential young, fit, healthy, affluent models were right there, a few feet away from users' cell phones, where they might be available for chatting or even for sex. Nicola Formichetti, Diesel's creative director, who decided to advertise on Grindr, believes that

"social media is where people are now. We live on our phones. I want to go where people are. Tinder, Grindr and Pornhub might appear a little left-field. But it's Diesel. We are not scared of these places. We are street."

Cities do not accommodate Grindr; Grindr is the city itself. It is an actor as much as the effect of night venues being replaced by condominium towers. It is composed of the way apartments, clothing, pornified versions of people, and urbanized bodily assemblages are mobilized through the sexual activity of swiping fingers across cellphone screens. It is the mode of sexually urbanized bodies play, at a time when social media is "street." It is in itself a form of architecture, one based on the collaboration between diverse technologies at different scales. One that has redefined what being in a room means, the notions of proximity we live by, what density is about. One that requires aesthetics, interfaces and memberships to be sensed. One so successfully integrated in daily life that is often not even paid attention to.

Where clubs and gay venues in the 1980s provided sex experience, condo towers and fashionable profiling add value. The architecture of contemporary sex is no longer intended to maximize experience but to maximize added value. Sex is not lived but assessed.

## **IV. Real Estate Becomes Sex. How Sex Becomes Real Estate in the Age of Value Addition**

In 2007, Stephane Manos and Ouissam Youssef founded the Canadian company Manwin (later renamed MindGeek), which would soon become the world's biggest adult online platform. Perceived as a fragmented context of more than 100 competing "tubes" (Pornhub, YouPorn, RedTube, Tube8, XTube, ExtremeTube, SpankWire, etc.), Mindgeek operated as an aggregator platform providing free adult video content in a way that was previously unavailable. It rapidly mobilized more than 100 million visits per day, far bigger than Amazon, Facebook and Twitter, as the world's third-biggest concentration of bandwidth.

Progressively, the MindGeek platform grew as social media. Pornhub made it possible to follow the professional evolution of models and enabled users to produce their own movies and even to animate their bodies with Snapchat-like features. MindGeek has also been seen as the promoter of a new accessibility to adult movie models, in what is a growing practice for adult film models to work as escorts through online agencies, where they link their personal profile to MindGeek-hosted adult movies in which they have starred.

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MindGeek and the 2008 financial crisis are simultaneous phenomena. The financial crisis happened while senior staffers at the Securities and Exchange Commission were surfing pornography when they were supposed to be policing the financial system. A senior attorney was reported to be spending an average of eight hours per day browsing and downloading porn. This was not an exception in the commission. The extent of the activity forced the SEC to install a blocking system for sexual content, and one of their employees was reported to have been blocked more than 16,000 times in only one month. Between 2007 and 2008, 17 high-profile senior employees were

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admonished for this reason.

In the early 2000s, a combination of, one, a new way for air-rights to be traded between lots with at least a 10-foot adjacency; two, the public acceptance of the use of limited liability companies in New York as shell companies to hide the identity of real estate owners; and, three, the 421-a New York Exception Program, which reduced the tax imposition of top-prized apartments to 1/100 of the average New York property-tax payment brought a new typology of residential towers to New York City: super slender residential towers (reaching a slenderness rate of 1:14) with "helicopter views" meant to take advantage of the post-2008 difficulty in find financially stable locations to secure investment portfolios. In 2013, New York mayor Michael Bloomberg stated: "If we could get every billionaire around the world to move here, it would be a godsend."

432 Park Avenue can be seen as the most refined outcome among these towers. Its design is the result of the collaboration of three architectural firms: Rafael Viñoly Architects (in charge of the overall structure), Deborah Berke and Partners (apartments layout), and Dbox (similar to Grindr in rendering 432 Park Avenue as a broader lifestyle platform). According to *NY Magazine*: "In the past few years, architecture has become the sexiest of arts. Keith Bomely and his colleagues at Dbox are its pornographers." They were hired by CIM Group and Marklowe Properties to develop, through movies, photography, and online circulation, a post-2008 fictional society for the 432 Park Avenue high-end condominium tower.

In their four minute, one million dollar movie *Before Night Falls*, there is a scene where the 2016 *Sport Illustrated* bathing-suit model Christina Makowski travels from the UK to be introduced by Philippe Petit at a party at a 432 apartment wearing an Armani version of Kim Kardashian's famous Lanvin shirtless suit. According to Mathew Bannister, founding partner of DBOX, the important part of the scene is in the background, in that of a male character in his 70s called by Bannister and the DBOX team "the Danny-DeVito-Guy", who is not played by an actor, but by a New Jersey-based businessman who is close friends of the towers' co-developer Harry Marklowe. The movie presents this character as someone who, through the mediation of the tower, could sexually engage with Makowski's character. Bannister meant to channel through architecture a form of sexual achievement and the confirmation of self-value through acquisition.



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**Romantic scene between the triple composed by Sport Illustrated model Christina Makowski (wearing an Armani version of Kim Kardashian's Lanvin shirtless), the Danny DeVito Guy and the 432 helicopter views. New York.**

In 2004, George W. Bush stated in front of the US National Association of Home Builders that "creating an 'Ownership Society' in this country, where more Americans than ever will be able to open up the door where they live and say 'welcome to my house, welcome to my piece of property.'" "Owning a home is part of the American experience". According to Michel Feher,

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contemporary love is shaped by the way financial strategies jumped into the making of subjectivity. Financial credit become more important than commercial revenue. Rating agencies epitomized neoliberalism. For Feher, "Tinder is the Standard and Poor of love." The enactment of credited value has become the ultimate form of sex. In the post-2008 era, sex-yearning subjects, looking for satisfaction, have been replaced by vulnerable subjects dependent on the permanent capturing of self-esteem.

In the post-2008 era, verifiable sexuality, replaced true sex.

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