

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Glossy Urban Dystopias

a cura di / dossier coordonné par / edited by
Penny Koutrolikou & Cristina Mattiucci

Guest artist / artiste présentée / artista ospite
urbanAC

Editorial

Vicente Brêtas

Resuscitating downtown? Rhetorical Strategies and Racial Exclusion in Rio de Janeiro's Central Area

Francesco Amoruso

Dystopian Present-Futures: On the Unmaking and Making of Urban Palestine

Eleonora Nicoletti

Dystopian Transition?

Ifigeneia Dimitrakou & Julie Ren

Boring Dystopias in Fictional Geographies: Affective Atmospheres of Enclosure

Luis Martin Sanchez

Metaverse Cities. Deconstructing a Glossy Urban Dystopia

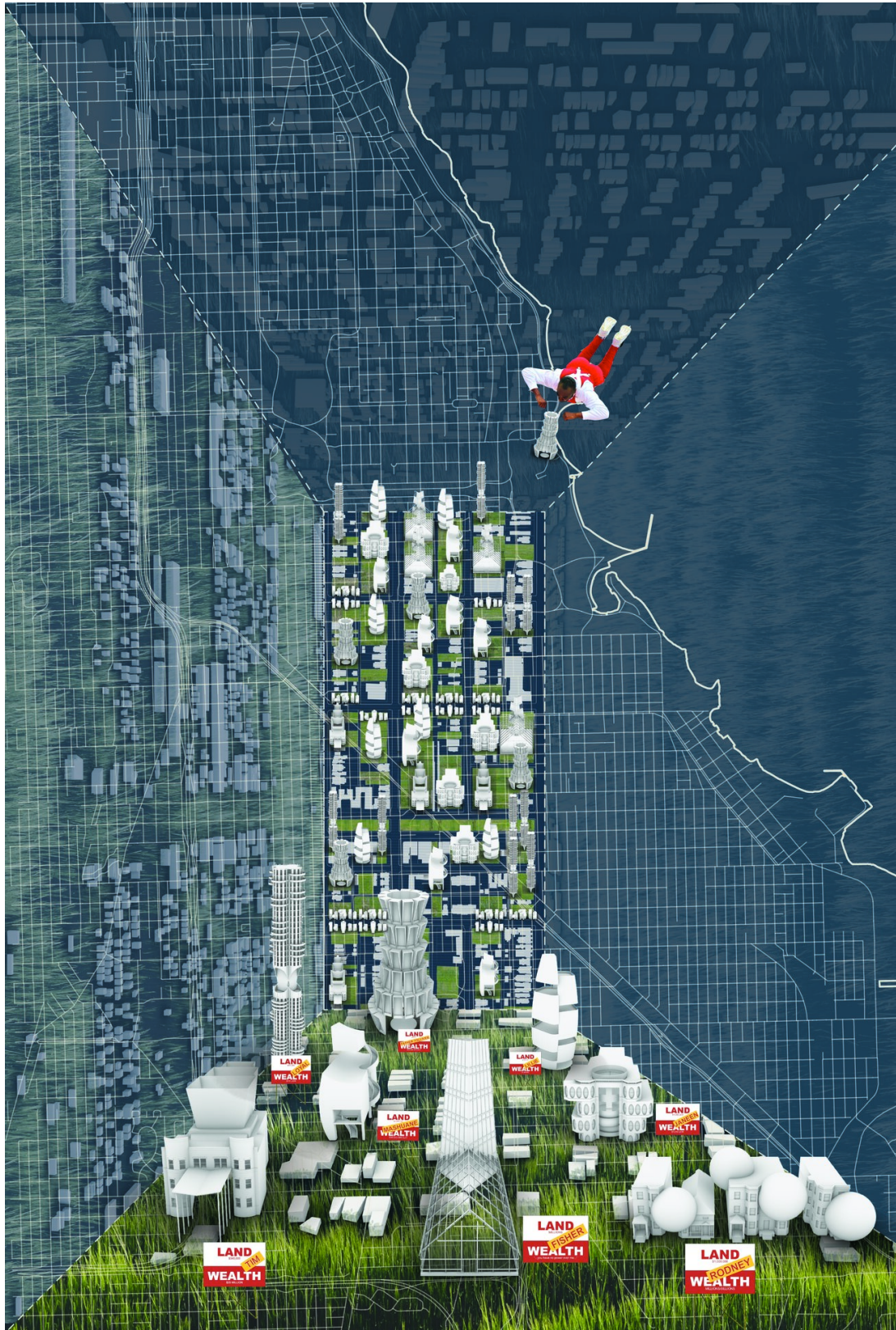
Scott W. Schwartz

Decolonize this Dystopia! Wealth Pollution on the Hudson River

Penny Koutrolikou & Cristina Mattiucci

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

Resuscitating downtown?

Rhetorical Strategies and Racial Exclusion in Rio de Janeiro's Central

Vicente Brêtas

a dystopi future. The paper explores how energy-focused renovations can negatively affect the sense of place, harming vulnerable population segments and exacerbating social inequality, pointing out the energy transition as an 'eco-dystopia', or a technocratic urban dystopia.

Opening another reflection path, the paper by Ifigeneia Dimitrakou & Julie Ren – *Boring Dystopias in Fictional Geographies: Affective Atmospheres of Enclosure* — investigates the relationship between spatial enclosure and dystopic everyday lives in fictional film. The focus is the representation of violent social and spatial enclosures, as well as the attempts to escape them, in the film *Parasite* (2019). The authors frame these experiences as boring dystopias, i.e., as dystopias in which horrible realities have been normalized as a part of everyday life. Beyond its spatial and material conditions, the paper also explores the affective atmospheres of enclosure, which render the hidden violence of enclosure tangible.

Luis Martin Sanchez's *Metaverse Cities. Deconstructing a Glossy Urban Dystopia* focuses on some attempts to construct virtual cities, affective utopias or dystopias in an embodied internet, which seems like the ultimate expression of the neoliberal model applied to the urban project, even if virtual. The paper presents some virtual cities as they seem to re-propose consolidated physical cities urban issues and well-rooted techno-capitalistic imaginaries and features of the contemporary neoliberal-model city, raising unavoidable crucial questions for architects and urban planners working in the not-virtual city.

Scott W. Schwartz's *Decolonize this Dystopia! Wealth Pollution on the Hudson River* analyses the luxury developments of Manhattan's Hudson River through the concept "wealth pollution". As the author stated, within this conceit, the ultra-wealthy are the rubbish bins of society,

receptacles of capitalism's unnecessary wealth, however they emerge as necessary to capitalism's reproduction. Beyond the case study, actually the paper let emerge and argues how these megaprojects foreclose the ability to consider a future outside the perpetual growth of colonial-capitalism itself.

The visual contribute is *Land Narrative | Fantastic Future*, a project for the 18th International Architecture Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia 2023 by urbanAC (Toni L. Griffin, Danny Clarke, Rashad Dorsey, Gabriel Soomar), a planning and design management practice based in New York. The work powerfully subverts any dystopia of everyday life in 'Black Belt' neighbourhoods of Chicago's South Side.

P.K. and C.M.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic sparked a wide array of calls for rethinking the city itself, and urban planning has been brought to the fore of discussions as a key tool for promoting a sustainable, resilient recovery. Central urban areas are an integral part of this debate: traditionally characterized by business and retail, these areas have been heavily hit by the crisis, with remote work and online shopping contributing to worldwide surges in office-space vacancy rates. This has triggered a new wave of city-center revitalization projects with the underlying goal of increasing residential density, mainly through the repurposing of empty and underutilized office buildings into mixed-use developments.¹

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the Reviver Centro Program constitutes the local government's response to this encompassing trend. While Downtown Rio has been facing a steady residential decrease since the mid-1980s, its position as the city's main business and retail hub allowed it to maintain a fair degree of dynamism.² The pandemic, however, shifted this balance: enacted in 2021, when the vacancy rate of commercial real-estate in the city center reached a record high of around 45%³, Reviver Centro's main goal is to attract residents as a means of breathing new life into the city's traditional economic node. By promoting the creation of a mixed-use neighborhood in the heartland of the city, the program caters to a mostly young, white and upper-middle class demographic seeking to live closer to the bustling cultural life of Downtown Rio. Other than that, it also comprises a series of additional interlinked priorities, such as the revitalisation of public spaces, the promotion of green infrastructure and active mobility, as well as the fostering of creative and cultural entrepreneurship. These efforts are based, as will be further discussed below, on the notion that the current state of the central area has reached a concerning point, marked by empty buildings and streets, which legitimizes calls for market-led revitalisation initiatives.

In order to achieve its main objective, the program operates on both supply and demand: on the supply side, a series of building code relaxations and tax exemptions to developers — many of which have already started to convert old office buildings into mixed-use condos — have already been approved; when it comes to demand, the local government seeks to shift public perceptions and col-

Vicente Brêtas is an urban geographer, born and raised in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He is currently a master student in Urban and Regional Planning at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Since his years as an undergraduate student, he has been deeply interested in the rise of new global frameworks for urban planning and management, particularly in the case of central and downtown areas. His main research topics revolve around the sociospatial and relational dimensions of city-center revitalization projects, as well as urban neoliberalization.

vicente.bretas@gmail.com

1 Florida, R. (2022) "Why Downtown won't die". Bloomberg, August 17. Available at: (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-08-17/as-remote-work-endures-downtowns-are-adapting>).

2 Sant'anna, M. (2007) A cidade-atração: patrimônio e valorização de áreas centrais no Brasil dos anos 90. *Cadernos PPGAUFBA*, 3.

3 Brito, C (2021). "Quase metade dos imóveis comerciais do centro do Rio está vazia, diz Abadi". O Globo, February 11. Available at: (<https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2021/02/11/quase-metade-dos-imoveis-comerciais-do-centro-do-rio-esta-vazia-diz-abadi-especialistas-creem-em-novo-perfil-residencial.ghtml>).



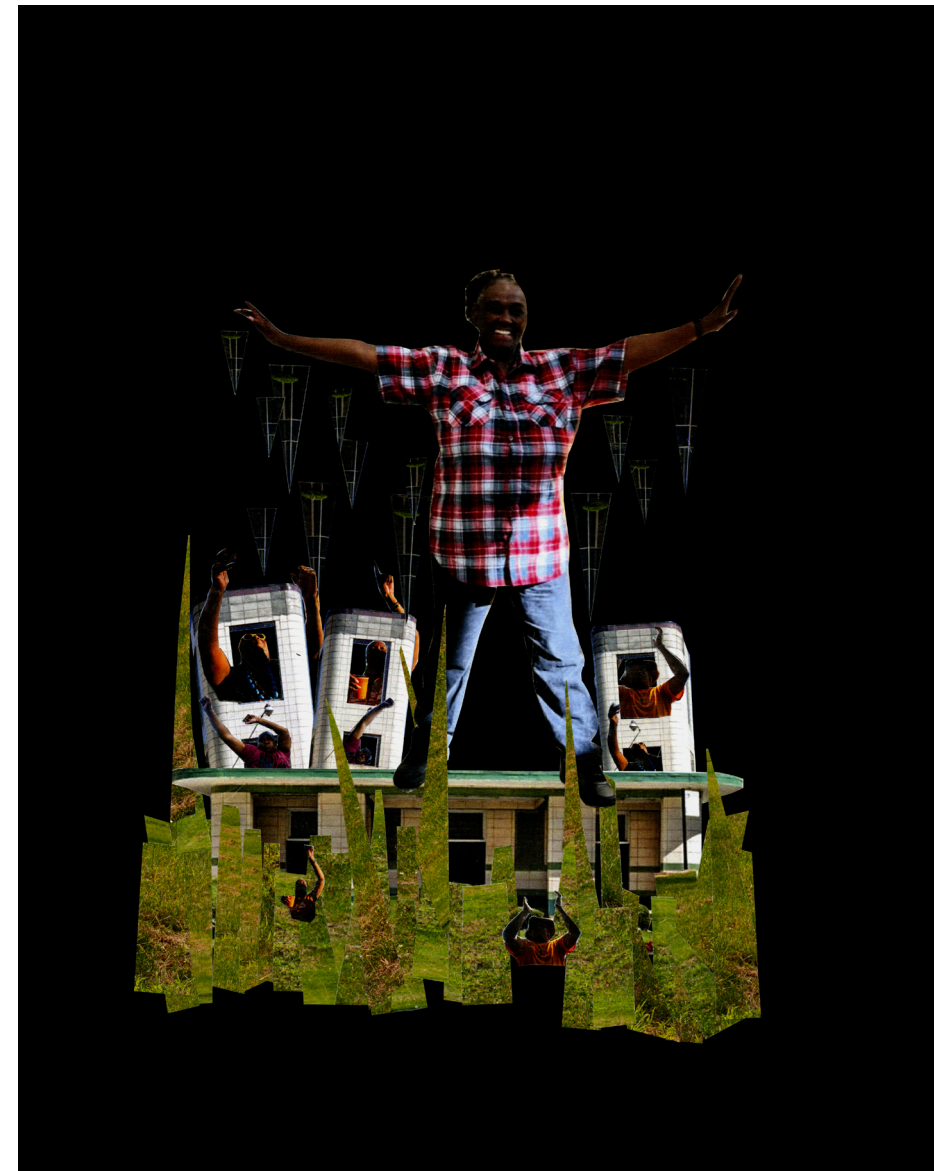
<https://urbanac.city/lillie>

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.

More Info | http://www.losquaderno.net/?page_id=2

Contact | losquaderno@gmail.com

