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The Form of the Cloud: Kersten Geers's Architecture Without Content Caspar Schärer

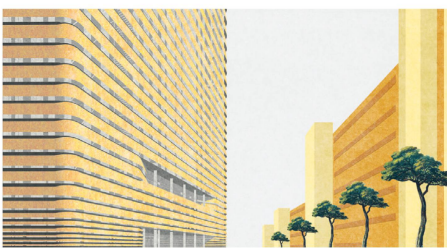
The cloud ranks as the most flowery term yet to have emerged from the digital world order. Undoubtedly there are more menacing weather phenomena brewing on the horizon, but the cloud's connotations are altogether positive – an intangible nimbus in which we are encouraged to store all our data. We are, of course, fully aware that this is not the whole story, since the ostensibly ephemeral cloud also has a physical manifestation. It is a machine, consisting of thousands if not millions of machines, bundled and pooled in data centers of grotesque dimensions. Exabytes (10^{18} bytes) of data flow daily through these machines, where they are stored and then dispersed throughout the world again.



In a manner of speaking the cloud casts a shadow on the earth's surface. These Internet big boxes belonging to Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon are scattered across the entire planet. They require vast sites, which is why they are located where land is cheap; they use up a lot of electricity, which is why the operators seek to place them near power plants; they have to be secure, which is why they are situated in remote parts of the globe, gathering in clusters in Sweden at the Arctic Circle, in Iceland, and in the US states of Nevada and

Oregon, where the data centers of Facebook and Apple stand on opposite sides of the same street on a plateau close to Prineville. This physically constructed Internet infrastructure is impressively large, and its organization highly efficient. It is, however, simultaneously largely hidden from view and so not perceived as such. Neither the standardized frame—the 19-inch rack for mounting the server and memory modules—nor their accumulation in data centers with dimensions of up to 500,000 square meters are anchored in popular consciousness as the cornerstones of the Internet. This is all the more remarkable when we consider that particularly on the Internet information is constantly being exchanged and disseminated on innumerable platforms: in other words, knowledge is being produced.

Machines that connect people in this manner should embody and emanate more architectural importance. This is the view of the Belgian architect Kersten Geers, who persistently tackles the topic of the big box in his design studios at Columbia University in New York, at the TU Graz, the Accademia di architettura in Mendrisio, and the EPF Lausanne. All the data centers, and likewise the logistical hubs, distribution centers, and waste treatment plants, form an enormous structural mass that arises bereft of any architectural detailing. Correspondingly, Geers has provocatively titled his seminar series "Architecture



Without Content" – the implication being that it must be possible to produce good architecture even minus a complex program and articulated spatial sequences. It may be that the content happens to not be irrelevant, according to Geers, but it lies beyond the architect's influence. Often the room program is quite simply banal, as for instance with an office building where the client precisely dictates what he or she wants executed. Working merely on the shell leaves many architects frustrated, or, conversely, they resort to designing demonstratively effusive façades. Kersten Geers takes a far more radical approach, encouraging his students to take a closer look and productively exploit the freedom this very lack of content provides.

The students investigate exemplars, so-called ancestors, such as Venturi and Rauch, Aldo Rossi or Andrea Palladio, in order to unearth their architectural quintessence. Armed with these proven principles and tools they work on their projects for a big box. By this means the architectural DNA of the ancestors becomes transferable to seemingly faceless infrastructure buildings, for instance data centers. The basis of the stance that Geers imparts to his students is a cold and yet fascinating vision of the urbanized world. He refers to an "even-covered field," a uniform carpet of development, somehow city, and somehow nonetheless not. In this "field" the buildings stand differently than in the



densely developed city. As a rule there is no front or back. Moreover, large structures have another significance: they act as moorings in the fabric of the unending agglomeration. For this specific reason they deserve more architectural diligence.

In this respect it is only logical that in some of the design semesters not even the urban-planning context is given – the only question is the building itself. At first glance this may seem irritating (Each project must respond to its context!), but on closer



consideration it is in fact perfectly consistent. On an “even-covered field” the immediate surroundings are sometimes really not that important. The big box is so large that it potentially defines the context itself, even when it has no public function. No content, no context, only architecture: together with his students, Kersten Geers delves to the core of the discipline that all too often lies forgotten beneath a tangled canopy of conflicting requirements. And it is precisely by freeing the disconnected big box from its isolation and by – with almost naive affection – maximally recharging it with architecture that he reestablishes its compatibility with a world where addresses have long since become virtual.

f.1/f.2 Kersten Geers, *Architecture Without Content*, vol. 4: *Necessary Architecture* (London: Bedford Press, 2015), n.p.

f.3/f.4 *Ibid.*, vol. 5: *Places of Accumulation* (London: Bedford Press, 2015), n.p.