

**Zeitschrift:** Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich  
**Herausgeber:** Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich  
**Band:** - (2020)  
**Heft:** 37

**Artikel:** Cognitive canvas  
**Autor:** Grambow, Julius  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-981473>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 16.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# COGNITIVE CANVAS

## Julius Grambow

*There was a talented young architect named X once, who was extremely well-rounded in translating concepts to clients, friends and everyone interested in X's work. When I admired X's work on Instagram the other day, I could not but ask her for advice on how to produce these beautiful situations. X kindly wrote down the well-kept secret for a delightful image: First, take an absolute form. Square, triangle, circle would do. Add some plants, preferably from a Matisse painting, some Spanish impressionists or from one of Schinkel's sections. Put these plants in the middle; this is a courtyard now. Sprinkle some house shapes or round windows along the courtyard. Always, and without exceptions, use coloured concrete. Finish with semi-transparent curtains hovering just above the floor in the background.*

In Cognitive Capitalism, an approach to specify Post-Fordist capitalism, the immaterial profit of a service is more valued than the service itself. Thinking of X, the former medium is reduced to a necessity, either becoming completely clichéd or taken to underpin the small intentions of an architectural depiction.

Throughout the past years, the recent history of global architectural production has successfully installed imagery primarily as a means for market-adaptive stimuli. Or, to put it differently: current imagery is the highly complex process of selling an ideology. To continue, two observations are required: first, culture is an inevitable part of the free market economy. Second, as every act in space is political; politics is part of modern culture. The combination of both results is a method to keep the overstimulation of the immediate future alive. On social media, such as Instagram, this overstimulation is achieved by producing and repeating seemingly customised schemes. To name a few, these include formalist concrete visions in an artificial landscape or the inclined corrugated steel panels and sheets of polycarbonate, which are held by a concrete steel structure with circular windows. They hardly miss out on the desaturating concrete-dust-filter on top, blurring the known elements together like a best-of puzzle from diploma studios of the past decade.

The origin of such schemes is at the same time its result. In contrast to the European bubble of architectural production, international capital is more interested in the Hudson-Yard-ascetics. Developers like to see the endless repetition of floors filled with cable and antenna, bringing the conveyor belt of machine-hall Fordism to verticality. In such situations, architecture does not even hide being a tool to commerce. It would just have to signify an uncanny local identity; to make capital a home. In times when we are fully aware of the

impact of architecture on the ecological, social and political dimensions on a global scale and we know about the urgent necessity to change this behaviour, how come that media platforms are still swamped by such uniformity?

Branding has been natural to neoliberal economy for decades. Accordingly, architecture companies have learned how to adapt to the conditions of the globalised spheres of branding, by merchandising their product – the (un-)built environment. A culture of speculation can only thrive by growth. It craves to have more availability on social media, to have more icons, to get another big name. There is an incessant drive to create more desire.

Therefore, the psychological foundation of cognitive capitalism has created such a passion for architects to adapt and justify behaviours from the service economy. The artificial shortage of time is due to the ethics of virtual capital and the incessant need to expand. After assembling and evaluating the perennial research of *Elements of Architecture*, Rem Koolhaas stated that «architecture is thoroughly permeated and undermined by the means of digital culture and capitalism». His partner Reinier de Graaf has made a concomitant comment: «Where other professions operate on a basis of maximizing financial return while minimizing labor, architecture is predicated on the reverse. When it comes to money, architecture has developed its own theory of relativity. Einstein offered the possibility to become younger with time; architecture offers the possibility of becoming poorer by working. Still, we shouldn't complain. The box is the product of both much and little work. If we can't change the reward for our labor, we can always reconsider how much of our labor we reward with it. We do have a choice.»



Several points on this quote from de Graaf's *Four Walls and a Roof* are remarkable. First, his precise observation of the inverted wage system of architecture which can be described with  $\lim_{x \rightarrow \infty} 0$ : the more one works, the less one earns.

Second, the schizophrenic aloofness by which de Graaf describes this inverted system as being one of free choice. His company has famously been practising this exact scheme for decades already, while working for the likes of Dubai or Qatar and increasing the number of icons of wealth in the CBDs of the global elite. This leads to the last, most horrifying misinterpretation of the otherwise clear observation: Still, we shouldn't complain. The combination of ignorance and arrogance towards our own future and the future of our environment is unequalled in the service sector of today. When architects boldly claim their all-concrete structures to be sustainable because «they would last for 1,000 years», there is no denial of a painstakingly delusional practice. When lobbyism in international juries observes the same projects winning repeatedly, we might shrug it off as an inevitable evil. When students are educated to strip the act of making architecture of its hypercomplex liabilities, this might be seen as a provocation to critical ability. In the end, we know of agencies that have done so and will continue to exploit their workers and their surroundings alike. For the sake of high-paced realisation, they destroy environments and eschew their required compensations. In the age of information, we can now see in real-time how these companies, despite their awareness, continue with their misconducts. We cannot but think of such behaviour as deliriousness. Although this imputation would describe most of the modern global enterprises, it is just as fitting with most of the major companies of global architecture. Our profession is not only part of, but a substantial compound to such irresponsibility. So, Yes, Mr. de Graaf, we should complain.

Why is this so important when talking about the effects of visual work? Imagery as an actant is rooted in supranational economy, whilst being channelled into its own virtual infrastructures. Its effects are thus conveyed in prosumers' media and directly manipulate clients' preconceptions.

International architecture, congruent with international financial markets, greatly relies on externalisation to uphold its increasing exploitation of resources. Externalisation hereby occurs in different shades: first, within our profession as spatial planners, e.g., when young practitioners get systematically exploited in their first years, or when gender pay gaps and hierarchies are upheld for decades. Secondly, since the content of our work is chained to detrimental habits which reinforce the injustice done to our environment, e.g., the insane exploitation of human and material resources for phallic projects in the UAE and Singapore or infrastructure projects such as the upcoming Football World Cup in Qatar.

We therefore arrive at the conclusion that work ethics and imagery are directly interwoven. Yann Moulier Boutang pointed out that «Finance has become the nervous system of production because the centre of gravity of value has shifted to the positive externalities that are produced by productive territories – that is, social cooperation among living beings. Classic finance [...] has become the governance of an economy fragmented by externalities. In an information society, in an economy based on know-how, the potential of economic value contained in an activity is a matter of attention, intensity, creativity and innovation.»

This is only made possible by the shared schizophrenia which was indirectly rendered by Reiner de Graaf earlier. The image an office creates of itself – branding – and the images which an office creates go hand in hand. During the age of industrialisation, linear economy has systematically introduced power structures of exploitation and externalisation of effects. The two world wars and post-war periods took this to an unprecedented extreme. To enable another future based on sustainability to the greatest possible extent, the sequence of take-produce-use-waste is re-united by the concept of recycling. In circular economy, the contrast to the prevailing linear economy, every part of the system must be equalled in importance.

If not critically adapted, imagery then contributes to the devil's circle of such «fragmented economies». When building practices surrender to the crooked standards of cognitive capitalism and even defend this as a crucial sacrifice to continue, they enforce the dependency of architecture on neoliberalism. Students, when embedding such ideology in academia, are willingly ignoring the consequences of the mishaps of architecture and therefore contribute to its dependency in the earliest possible phase.

Imagery comes from and goes far beyond pure visualisation. It begins with the decision to finally leave the disastrous impact of an architecture driven by ideological cults and infuriating capital. The images we conceive, produce and sell are the beginnings and endings of possible solutions. Our intellectual and spatial surroundings are the most common circumstances to which the trajectories of our lives adapt to. The greatest chance we have is to be well aware of the consequences our ideas will have on these surroundings.