

MERCADAL: A VISUAL CHRONICLE OF THE URBAN LIFE ABOUT A MARKET SQUARE

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a recurrent and obsessive look on a square as part of a broader research on the discursive capacity of the image as a narrative medium of the continuous transformation of the city. The Mercadal -or Constitució, República or España square- is located in Reus and has always been the market-square and the physical and vibrant heart of this industrious, liberal and commercial medium-sized Catalan city.

In this sense, this study focuses on the evolution of a specific urban reference and questions both the capacity of its image to build a historical narrative and its descriptive potential to reveal the specificity of the place despite its continuous transformation. For this purpose, it was decided to draw up a series of propositive cartographies elaborated from the detailed analysis of the urban images on the 111 postcards collected over more than a century (1902-2012).

Taking as a starting point some works based on intentional reading of the image -such as Aby Warburg's Atlas Mnemosyne, André Malraux's Le Musée Imaginaire or Michelangelo Antonioni's Blow Up-, each cartography has been entitled following a photographic technique (tripods, positions, openings or flashes), some manipulation process (overlays, blow ups) or different explicit research purposes (shadows, horizons or memory). In all of them, the image unveils the formal properties of the square as an inherent condition to its public vocation and privileged scenario.

The results are clear and eloquent showing a collection of cartographies that allows to condense the urban image as a sum of partialities and visual reiterations and find in the postcard a format capable of both producing the visual chronicle of a place and simultaneously revealing specific urban and social traits that consolidate the collective imaginary of this particular place.

KEYWORDS: Postcards, Cartographies, Collective Imaginary, Architectural Psychology, Memory of the Place, Historic urbanism, City Transformation, Urban images

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to be a tribute to postcard collecting. Therefore, the work intentionally emphasizes its main characteristics - monothematic, exclusive and localist- and proposes to understand them in a positive key. Like Orlando (Wolf, 1928), this research tries to reach, being close to obsessive collecting, the impossible desire to live many experiences at different times, but in one only location: the Mercadal square. This is the place of reference, the public realm from which we want to capture and condense all the images, deconstruct them thoroughly and reconstruct them in a systematic way to obtain, as a final aim, urban knowledge.

For this, 111 Mercadals: a chronological frieze proposes a reiterated look at a particular space of intense urbanity and recognizes it as the civic heart that gives form and meaning to the City-Market through a graphic -photographic, to be precise- methodology based on continuous observation around the marketplace in order to discover its constant transformation and its capacity to condense both time and memory. Thus, by adding a series of variables such as position, objective aperture, depth of field, relative height, focus or date, the object allows reading to reveal certain features of the place and structure its own evolution and identity. Thereby, the detailed study of the images of the Reus marketplace can reveal common issues and different affinities with cities such Vic, Balaguer or Ciutadella and marketplaces such the Italian Piazze delle Erbe, the German Mark Platz or the English Markets.

In parallel, although surely the collection of images used as a basis already has per se, a remarkable value as a research object, this paper is also based on the idea that collecting is only a preliminary and necessary step to investigate. In statistical terms, it would be to build the sample before being submitted to the thorough analysis of the possible correlations between its different variables. In this sense, the frieze, as a sum of visual objects, has been used as a source for a systemic reflection on the medium of the image itself. This work has been developed in two sub-chapters: Tripods and Manipulations. The first one reads the relation between the physical condition of the Mercadal square and the photographic technique used to capture it. Manipulations, on the other hand, reflects on the capacity of the image to understand the urban history and memory of the place through its pictures in postcards.

111 MERCADALS, A CHRONOLOGICAL FRIEZE

As in the images systematically obtained, gathered and collected by the Brooklyn smoker of the movie directed by Wang with a Paul Auster's script (1995), the chronological order prevails in this work. Thereby, the acquisition time has been imposed as the main coordinate axis although, from the postcard collector view, this variable is not immediate. What is the date that allows ordering the postcards: the edition, the writing, or the shipping date? Where to place an image of the fifty converted into a postcard forty years later? In this study, this doubt has been solved by allowing the postal criterion to prevail, that is: on the one hand, only postcards have been accepted (renouncing, with that, to mere photographs or posters) and, on the other hand, the imposed order has been the postcard edition date. With this, maybe the list of postcards presented as sample is not definitive and we hope to extend the research towards the origin, discovering -if there were any- of the pioneers and continue incorporating the new ones that will be published in the future.

In turn, the main source has been the J.M^a. Balañà's private collection gathered over more than thirty years extending the sample with other collections from Estivill, Pàmies and Zaragoza and incorporating 11 images edited in the Postcard catalogue of Reus that -supposedly- had collected all those postcards produced of the city of Reus until 1939.

Altogether, the frieze is composed of 198 images that are arranged in chronological order in a continuous series. Among them, there are postcards that maintain an obvious relationship and their images are of the same author, were taken the same day, represent the same activity or are even identical in black and white and colour. They have been considered postcards of the same moment, resulting in 111 moments that, as a whole, draw through the visual continuity of the square, a vitally intense space that provokes, generates and supports the progressive changes of the different pieces and uses that build. In other words, the frieze reveals a constantly changing urban reality from the first postcard -of 1902- until the last one -of 2012- following an irregular, hazardous and broken rhythm.

So, the first images of the Mercadal square - then called Constitution - are taken with a very open lens and have The Town Hall as a centre. The one of 1905 is the first one that looks toward the Navàs' House, still being under construction. Another, from 1906, collects the square as a base for a general look -almost aerial- of the city made from the Bell Tower. In 1908, the Casa Navàs seems finished. From then on,

the market, the party time and the two most significant buildings - the Town Hall and the Navàs' residence - establish a relationship and a counterpoint between the daily life routine and the exceptional celebration times. They are two good façades and two points of reference where to alternatively fix the look. In this age, the Mercadal is usually photographed full of people either on parties or on market days consolidating the square as a true vital centre of reference for the city despite the Prim square recently built northern. The postcards proudly show its renovated and decorated buildings. In architectural terms, Casa Navàs dominates being the sole protagonist. Its slender corner, crowned by the very light tower, gives vertical dimension to the image and a dose of modernity to both the square and the city.

As for the turbulent period of the Second Republic, the Mercadal is called Plaza de la República. It was, in fact, during the Spanish Civil War that the bombardment that took place -specifically at 8:45 am on March 26, 1938- and impact fully two buildings of the square destroying, in turn, the tower and the second floor of the Casa Navàs. Since then, the images have turned their backs on it and no other postcard have ever been made from outside. The focus has returned to the Town Hall, renovated with a clumsy clock tower that being neither Noucentist nor Fascist style has never reached comparable to the nostalgic memory of the fragile and longed tower of Casa Navàs. After the war, the daily market leaves the Mercadal in 1948. The image without number located between the 55th and 56th moment refers to the new market building. This critical moment represents the loss of the essential activity of the square and, above all, the sense of this marketplace. Thereby, the epicentre of urban energy definitely moved Monterols street up to the Prim square leaving a Mercadal - called Plaza España at this age-expectant. Those are years when Mercadal is full of cars and is speculated on and fortunately saved from being gutted to house an underground parking lot. Meanwhile, it specialized in government and festive functions. The trade faltered and the postcards, already in colour, are scarcer.

Finally, with the arrival of democracy, the square regains the name of Mercadal even if, in fact, the market function is no longer so in its memory. The party and the leisure are more and more dominant in the frieze and the awnings of the Market are progressively replaced by those of the bars.

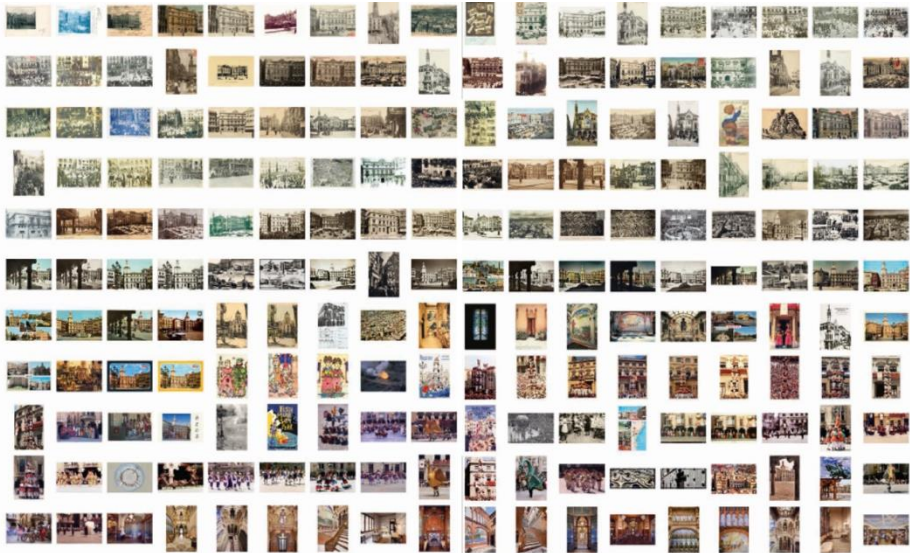


Figure 5: 111 Mercadals, a chronological frieze composed of 111 moments and 198 postcards.

TRIPODS

This section aims to measure the Mercadals square and appropriate it. Not from its materiality, but only under the photographic technique used on taking the pictures supported by the postcards. Thus, allows to reflect on the position of the camera, the opening of the shutter and the angle of vision, which establish, altogether, the depth of the gaze. In this sense, it is showed what the photographer wanted to show. Being 198 images produced over one hundred and ten years, the different interests and wills are added and superimposed, building the collective image of the square from many reiterated individual judgments. The sum reveals a Mercadals as the result of continuous glances that illuminate, flash to flash, certain parts and obscure others because of their technical difficulty or lack of interest. With this, a fragile consensus result is obtained.

Positions and openings

It is a cartography made with precise points and lines that determine the angles of gaze, referencing, on the plane of the square, the position of the tripod by means of its UTM coordinates - xyz - and the focal aperture of the shutter - in degrees - used by the photographer in every moment of taking. It also indicates the reference moment and

the height of the tripod - in red, those that are at ground level and in violet, those that have placed the tripod on balconies or roofs -.

This exercise explains that the photographer has felt, throughout history, a predilection for placing himself in the open corners allowing him or her to have a greater opening of angle of vision that confirmed the measures of the square -55 x 60 meters and diagonal of 85 and 70 meters - as ideal to capture the whole without losing detail. Although the optics would allow to force the opening or propose a greater focus, this does not seem to be the will of the photographers who have estimated a certain preference of neutral image -not open or closed- of the square taken from its southern angle that hardly has images of itself.



Figure 2: Study of the positions and opening angles of the photographs taken for each postcard.

Flashes

Starting from the affirmation that photography is nothing more than the capture of light, this study has also wanted to incorporate this concept as an analytical method. A first entry shows something that may seem obvious: this public space has predominantly dark and sunny façades. In this sense, the Town Hall is the best oriented building relegating those of the opposite angle, always in shadow, to the complex effect of the backlight. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the images have been made from this southern corner. Only the detailed ones have other backgrounds than the Town Hall main façade. When this happens, the Casa Navàs prevails although the photographer must master the rear-lit. In turn, surely the most interesting images are those that aim to take advantage of the porches that, used as a framing of the Mercadal square, reveal their condition of transitional spaces.

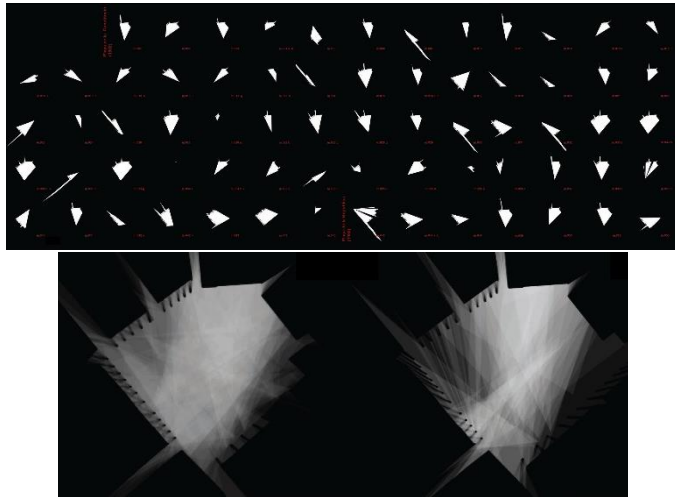


Figure 3: Study of the different visual field openings of each postcard.

In total, for this type of analysis, the same images from the previous section, arranged chronologically in two parts, have been used as a basis. The first part contains 68 flashes and includes from the first postcard until 1938, the moment of the bombing. The second one, despite assuming a longer period, contains only has 42 images. As a result, we obtain two apparent similar cartographies but with substantial nuances. The repeated look, turned light, shows the clear difference between both sides of the square. The one of 1902-1938 shows a

balance of light-images between the Town Hall, the Casa Navàs and the other buildings. In contrast, the one made with the images after 1939 shows a clear imbalance in favour of the Town Hall. Those of the Casa Navàs, scarce, always avoid the mutilated corner.

MANIPULATIONS

This is a generic title that, through cartographies, infographics and pictograms, seeks to obtain urban knowledge through the manipulation of the image, experimenting with its capacity for both spatial and temporal relationships. In this way, Horizons draws volumes and compares each image in relation to its horizon line and perspective vanishing points. Shadows, however, obtains a virtual image of the square redrawing the immaterial figure of the shade projection of its buildings. Memory, on the other hand, fixes its attention on the different names that the postcard makes explicit to establish their own toponymy. Finally, Overlays, proposes the degree of permanence and transformation from the repeated image overlapping.

Horizons

This is a subtle work that has been constructed with 71 images chosen according to their narrative condition of the shape and complexity of the square. For each image, the general lines that determine the main volumes have been drawn with dotted lines. In turn, the verticals ones are accentuated by the intensity of the line value. The purpose is to recognize the Mercadal as a set of fragments and, on them, to determine the horizon of the image. Two cartographies have been made. In the first one, it is observed that most of the images are general and contain enough information to establish their horizons with some ease. This condition gradually disappears in the evolution of the image that centres its interest in details or festive moments.

In the second cartography, all the previous drawings are superimposed, establishing a sum of volumetric lines and horizons. As a result, an eloquent portray that, despite avoiding all rigid ordinance or a unitary project, confirms a certain harmony in the heights of the square and allows to observe the photographer's predilection for some perspectives. The most repeated point of view is fixed in the Doctor Fortuny street. In turn, this cartography reveals that the horizons are concentrated on certain levels being lower in the Town Hall pictures than in the Casa Navàs' ones. In the first case, the image is intended to explain the value of the door, always open while, in the second, the elements of greater ornamental value such as the balcony, the tower or

the tribune place the photographer's interest in the high planes of the façade.

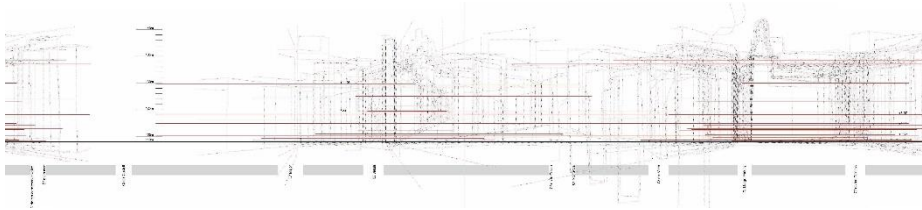


Figure 4: Study of the different visual horizons of each postcard and general overlapping result.

Shadows

This graphic exercise is constructed from the shadows that, as inevitable as clearly perceptible, project the buildings that are behind the tripod on the square plane. Through these, the absent buildings become apparent and draw, by this, a potentially complete image of the Mercadal square. Here, the sample hovers only to fourteen copies that reached the imposed conditions of perceptive clarity. However, the sum of them manages to reveal the shape and properties of the square and confirms the Casa Navàs as its main and most photogenic element.

Likewise, the perfect, flat, and continuous pavement proves capable of reflecting the dark façades, resulting in an inverted but unmistakable Mercadal, hard as stone and simultaneously transparent. As if it were a pond. In the same way that before, the repeated image of the portals signifies and gives value to the interstice, that particular space between light and shadow. Finally, the complete cartography shows how the Town Hall building, always in the sunny part, as if it were a vampire, lacks shadow.

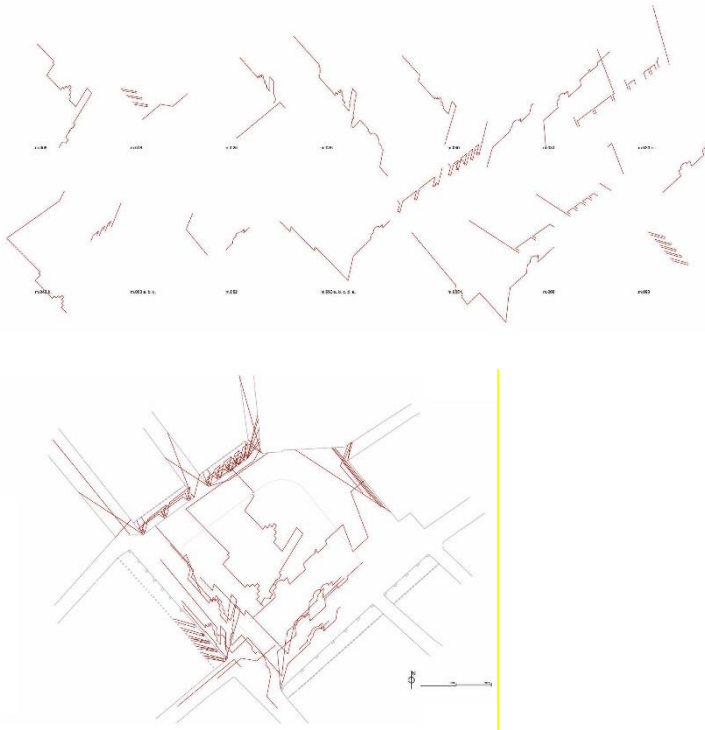


Figure 5: Study of the different shadows of each postcard and overlap of the set.

Memory

This section proposes a verification of the referential value of the square through the identity conferred by the sequence of names of the activities contained, throughout history, in the Mercadal. It is an artificial toponymy, linked to the desire to present each of its pieces from the commercial name used as a claim. In this way, the common name specifies the use while the proper name identifies the owner. In order to do this, the collection of postcards-images has been explored to find the captured names in the form of a poster, a bandolier, anywhere on the façade, hanging on balconies, stamping awnings, on shop windows or lintels of doors. Once gathered, those names have been grouped under the four different ages that named differently the square: Constitució, República, España, and Mercadal.

For this, a sample of 109 images has been used. In the first cartography, announcements are sorted and quantified, arranged in columns. The oldest supports the following. Simultaneously, the name is transcribed, and a color is associated to each age being the most recent the clearest. The size of the letter is related to the size of the advertisement and the frequency with which it appears. The proper names have been transcribed in capital letters, the commons, in lowercase.

In turn, with this material has been built the toponymy tree of the memory of the square, split into two halves. On the left, the names are arranged in chronological order. On the right, the sum of the four periods in black and white is repeated resulting, by this, the onomastics of the square modulated both by the will of the commerce to be showed and by the implicit chance to be captured in the series of postcards collected.

Finally, advertisements have been turned into luminous images on a night background to verify that, by deconstructing and reconstructing Mercadal square in the manner of Piccadilly or Las Vegas (Venturi et al., 1977), can be identified by their names. The subsequent frieze is not homogeneous. The names accumulate, reiterating the value of some houses. But others, such as the Town Hall that surely maintained slogans, due to their ephemeral condition, did not leave any mark on the postcards. The overall look emanates that the names identify, differentiate, point out, discriminate and, reunited, explain and reconstruct the memory of the square.

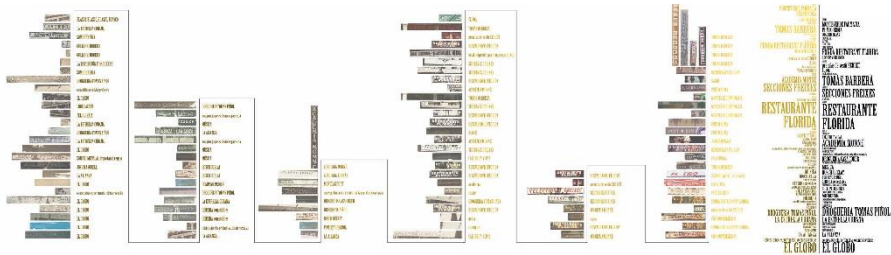




Figure 6: study of the different businesses that have been part of the historic urban landscape represented on the postcards of the Mercadal Square.

Overlays

This last graphic exercise has focused on the study of a single focal point, the Town Hall, in order to determine the degree of permanence of the place and its intrinsic correlation between the identity of the space and the architectural object that confers it. For this, two series of moments have been determined. The first one groups the images prior to the reform. Most are still with the original Renaissance palace or in works. The second moment presents the modified building and its current image. One series has fourteen images and the other, seven. There are, in turn, three of the building under construction that could be shared by both categories. Although the sample could seem scarce, the set of overlaid images is enough to reveal an image that superimposes the static and dynamic conditions of the place.

Its execution has been based on scaling the images and fixing the points of view to assimilate them. In statistical terms it would be normalizing the images of the sample. To do this, double reference has been taken combining the linear dimension (vertical directive) of the

edge between the Town Hall and Doctor Fortuny Street and the City Hall door as the centre of coordinates due to its permanence condition.

The result is not a series of images like those of C. Monet painting 31 times the cathedral of Rouen but a single and latent image which refuses to be revealed as such. Their thin superimposed layers, closer to the frames of a film, manage to condense time as suggested by the Swiss photographer C. Vionnet's photo opportunities work (2011) that uses the same mechanism of superimposing images of known monuments found on the internet -in bulk- that, as J. Fontcuberta (2011) says, her images explain "(...) the rod of the hyper-synchronized imagination of the tourist". The effect achieved here seems to be the same: the vibrant monument, almost in motion, although it raises nuances. The overlays of the Mercadal postcards want to recognize the square, its activity and its transformations, perceptible even in the most iconic buildings, and, in turn, show the properties of any urban space: continuity and change.

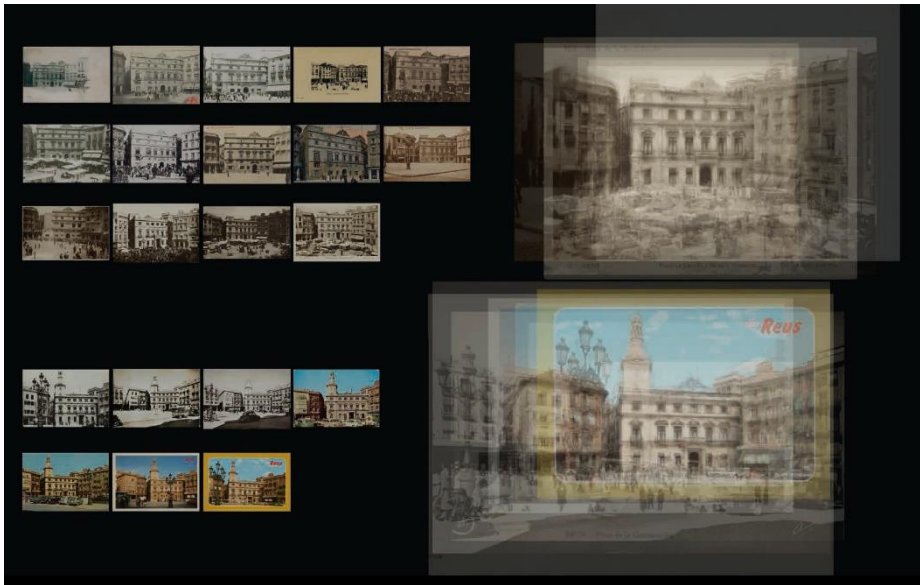


Figure 7: Overlays of the different postcards representing Mercadal Square through history.

CONCLUSION

Today, the city of Reus continues to edit postcards. Some of them are from the Mercadal and show the square as a party, always keeping

the Casa Navás or the Town Hall as a background and confirming this public realm as a place of urban value and civic and popular reference. The sequence of these new images and postcards, added to the partial conclusions obtained through each presented analytical cartography, reveals, to our understanding, the narrative capacity of the postcard, in its descriptive vocation of an urban set or an architectural detail, to be considered as a document and vehicle of urban knowledge in both the academic and social dimension.

Finally, in order to strengthen this argument, two possible new lines of research are currently being worked on. The so-called Blow-ups (Antonioni, 1966) proposes to deconstruct the pieces of the image to reconstruct, in a fragmentary way, a new image that confirms the square archetypes. The other one, entitled Post-postcards, reflects on the current virtual format of the old postcard by exploring the capacity of individually uploaded photographs in environments such as social networks to build and consolidate a new urban imaginary. However, these are subjects for other papers to come.

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