

Review Article

'Des Yeux Qui Ne Voient Pas...' The smartphones

Luca Di Lorenzo

Three of the most influential chapters of *Vers une Architecture* are collected under the common title 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...': eyes which do not see. Searching out the common architectural edges, Le Corbusier introduces the aesthetics of the machine in the debate about the new style. Liners, airplanes, and automobiles are shown as the expression of the powerful beauty of practical form: honest, simple, functional and technological. An architecture that, coming from precise 'questions' and needs, is perfectly summed up by the revealing comparison between the Parthenon and the Delage Grand-Sport, both products of a selection applied to a standard. These very famous pages remind us that form is not only derived from precise typological choices or from reasoned morphogenetic diagrams, but it could also be a direct expression of the *Kunstwollen*: 'Our own epoch is determining, day by day, its own style. Our eyes, unhappily, are unable yet to discern it.'¹

What are the *paquebots* of the twenty-first century? Which buildings embody this new paradigm?

Since 2007, Apple has produced a new type of mobile phone, equipped with a high-resolution, multi-touch tactile screen, which has revolutionised the entire society: the iPhone. This graphic analysis starts from the statement that one of the 'not seen' features of this era is the smartphone, nowadays an indispensable companion to each of us. The

subject of the survey is the first BMW Guggenheim Lab, designed in 2010 by Tokyo-based firm Atelier Bow-Wow. The pavilion, built in 2011 in First Park, between the Lower East Side and East Village in Manhattan and then transported to Berlin, is an experimental, temporary and mobile carbon fibre structure that challenges the consolidated idea of public space. Described by the architects themselves as a 'travel toolbox' or 'pop-up fly loft theatre in the city', this compact architecture sums up and overlaps the function of a museum, auditorium and cultural centre in a single and compressed space, embodying three interesting formal qualities usually associated with smartphones: the clear division between the hardware and the ergonomic user interface; the possibility to operate different functions (or software) in the same space (or screen); and the real and virtual connection with different urban situations.

It is no coincidence that Atelier Bow-Wow's theories focus on the branch of semiotics that puts the user and his or her behaviour in the foreground: pragmatics. Learning from the *da-me* hybrid buildings of *Made in Tokyo* or the tiny *Pet Architecture* investigated in their two guidebooks, they have come to the definition of architectural behaviourism as the master key that allows them to deal with different urban spaces.² Always considering them as 'environmental units' bound to the urban spatial practice, the Japanese architects want to define 'devices that create social platforms'³, or 'various spirals, eddies

and flows where people converge and disperse ... [and where] daily life is thus reframed, as if by a film or theater director, into something light-hearted, sweet, or humorously self-evident.⁴

Hardware and Interface

The first series of diagrams shows the reciprocal relationship of three elements: the ethereal user's space of interaction, the communicative and/or interactive interface, and the solid and functional hardware. [Fig. 1] The most obvious formal feature of the New York Lab is the strong and clear division between accessible user space, that is the ground floor, and the infrastructural lid or 'toolbox' suspended above it. Screens, lighting technology, audio, curtains, furnishings, stages and other technological tools are crammed into the top half of the structure, hidden by two layers of semi-transparent mesh that create a rippled and lustrous effect. The apparatus of these tools can be, as in a theatre fly tower, lowered or raised to configure the playground below and create infinite functional scenarios in accordance with programme needs.

Viewing it next to the Football Hall of Fame Museum by Robert Venturi and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts by Norman Foster, we can graphically identify the two distinct spaces of infrastructure and interaction and analyse the role of the communicative diaphragm-interface between the two spaces that transforms the components behind it into visible and/or editable contents. Unlike the Venturi project, where the façade/screen, completely separated from the museum and reminiscent of Las Vegas billboards and decorated sheds, responds to the sole purpose of communicating the meanings of the hidden box behind it, in the Foster building, the interactive shell that envelops the highly flexible system of the centre, organises and filters both the technological components concealed in the thickness of the trilion truss, and the external inputs such as sunlight, ventilation and framed views of

the landscape. Like in the Guggenheim Lab, the Venturian passive spectator is now an active player that shapes his or her own malleable space.

This user-orientated approach is linked to two more key issues: accessibility, a physical and metaphorical openness to the public, and ergonomics, which deals with the human scale. If Foster opens up to the surrounding landscape only along the longitudinal direction, the Lab is potentially fully accessible on four sides thanks to the hardware volume that hovers undisturbed above what Atelier Bow-Wow frequently call 'lively space'⁵. The purpose is to produce a visible and welcoming atmosphere at the street level that can comfortably hold three hundred people and host every possible cultural urban function. This complete openness to the public is both formal and conceptual because all programmes are free and multidisciplinary.

Ergonomics in architectural terms can be translated into two qualities, spatial economy and human scale. The shape of a smartphone is the smallest parallelepiped possible, perfect for hand and gestures. Similarly, the silhouette of the BMW Guggenheim Lab aims at the maximum profit with minimal space. In *Graphic Anatomy* Atelier Bow-Wow, describing their house projects, declares:

We think that the characters of these small houses are like *nigiri* (hand-rolled) sushi. The compact format of a *nigiri* allows the flavors of all kinds of fish to be compared, and differences in the taste, shape, color, and texture of materials are converted into pleasure and richness.⁶

This can be easily extended to the Lab. The structure is, in fact, compact and perfectly wedged between two existing buildings. Its complex hardware system in the loft space is, moreover, fully visible and potentially open source. Venturi's vertical billboard/display is, in the case of the Lab, a virtual horizontal

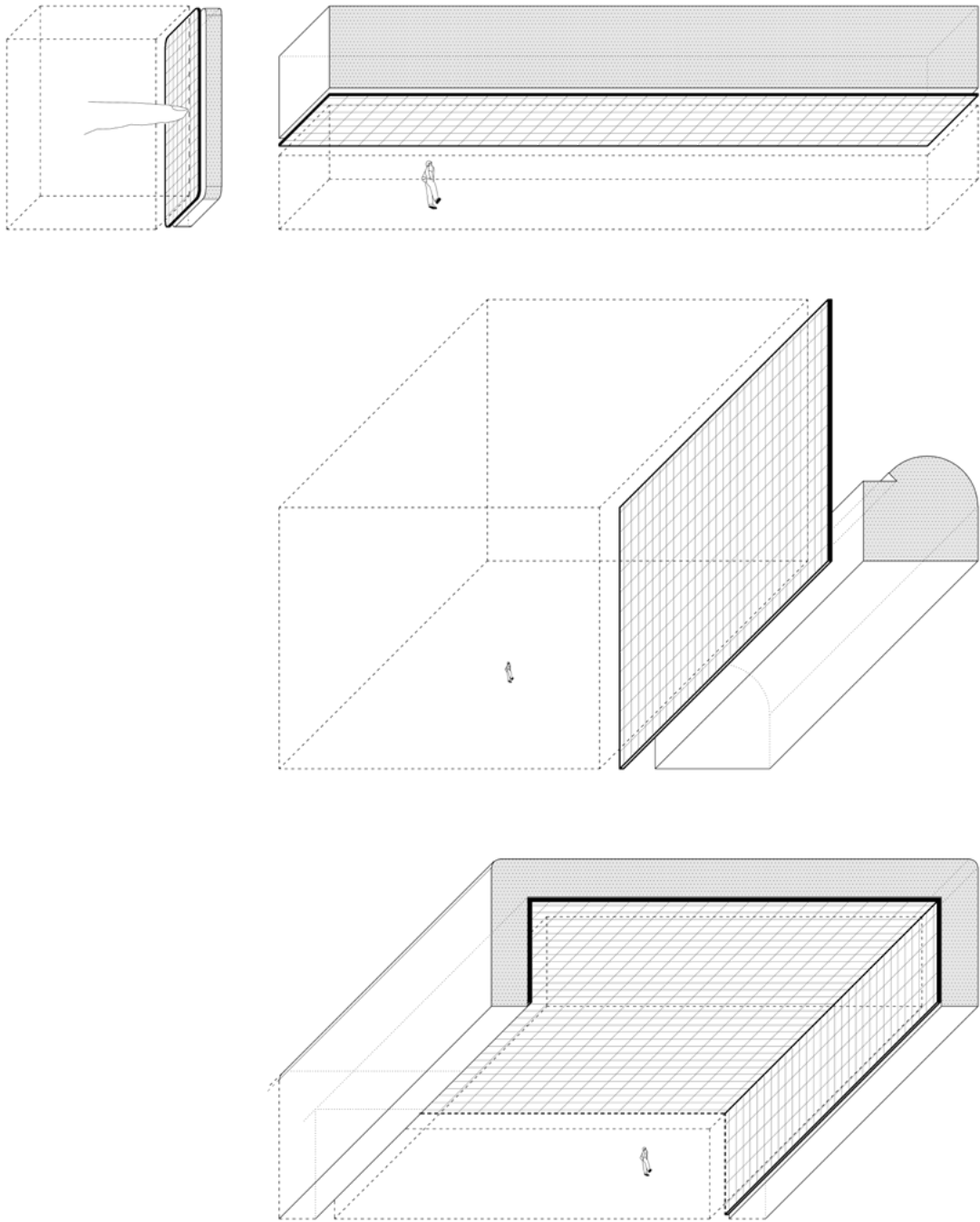


Fig. 1: From top to bottom: *hardware*, *interface* and *space of interaction* of the smartphone, of the BMW Guggenheim Lab, of the Football Hall of Fame Museum and of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts. Drawing: Author.

limit made of lights, screens and audio speakers at user's disposal. Interacting with it is simple and intuitive. As in a smartphone, where a user-friendly interface based on touch-screen technology and natural gestures, immediately reveal its working logic, this 'travelling box' helps the understanding of the space. As well as a device, a building could be designed for the user, making its aesthetic quality an integral part of its utility.

Space of Interaction

The BMW Guggenheim Lab is customisable and suitable to multitasking. [Fig. 2] It is a work-in-progress playground, easily configurable, where everyone creates their own experience. The user is like a child who can personalise his or her environment, like installing additional apps. The project must be neutral and leave room for the user to express himself as Atelier Bow-Wow stated during the New York presentation:

Rather than architects educating the public on how to behave within spaces, it is the public who should have the autonomy of spatial practice in their cities ... We have always been advocates of people regaining ownership in order to shape the city around them ... We always conceived the Lab as a public space without enclosure.⁷

The space they are interested in is what Henri Lefebvre calls 'social space'⁸, a space that is self-generated by 'spatial practice':

Space is produced neither by architects nor by city planners, nor by the users who live in space: space is not *consumer*-generated but *space*-generated. In other words, space is media-generated media.⁹

As in the first, the second diagram presents the Lab in relation to the paradigm of the smartphone and to two other case studies: Cedric Price's Fun Palace and OMA's Prada Transformer. The subject

in this case is the floor plan of the space of interaction. The same goal is achieved through an idea of a multitasking space in completely different ways. Price's project builds and demolishes its own space according to needs and using a series of cranes and a highly mechanized technological apparatus. The Transformer has only four pre-built configurations, constructing a radical multifunctional object that, rotating, can rapidly transmute itself into a cinema, a catwalk, an exhibition room, or a place for events.

The Lab goes further: it has everything it needs immediately available in the space above. The space of interaction is a flexible open space, configurable because of the tools contained in the floating 'toolbox'. Like the Fun Palace, Atelier Bow-Wow proposes overlapping sets of the same area defined not so much by the light carbon fibre structure, but by the rhythm of the on-going programmes. Like OMA's temporary pavilion, everything is ready to use and the space can change shape with little effort in a tiny interval of time. The Lab is a space (or screen) where several functions (or apps) can run and coexist: talks, lectures, performances, exhibitions, screenings, workshops, celebratory gatherings, think tanks, public forums, games, special events and city explorations.

Transportability and Connection

The last formal quality may be the most naïve, but unveils an architects' interesting stance on the philosophical concepts of space and time. [Fig. 3] Compactness, transportability, connection and synchronisation are features that deal with the two physical entities on a double semantic level.

The Lab is an autonomous object designed to be dismantled and reassembled in different parts of the world. This travelling pop-up structure was relocated first to Berlin, in Prenzlauer Berg in the Pfefferberg complex, and then to Mumbai, on the grounds of the Byculla museum and to other different satellite

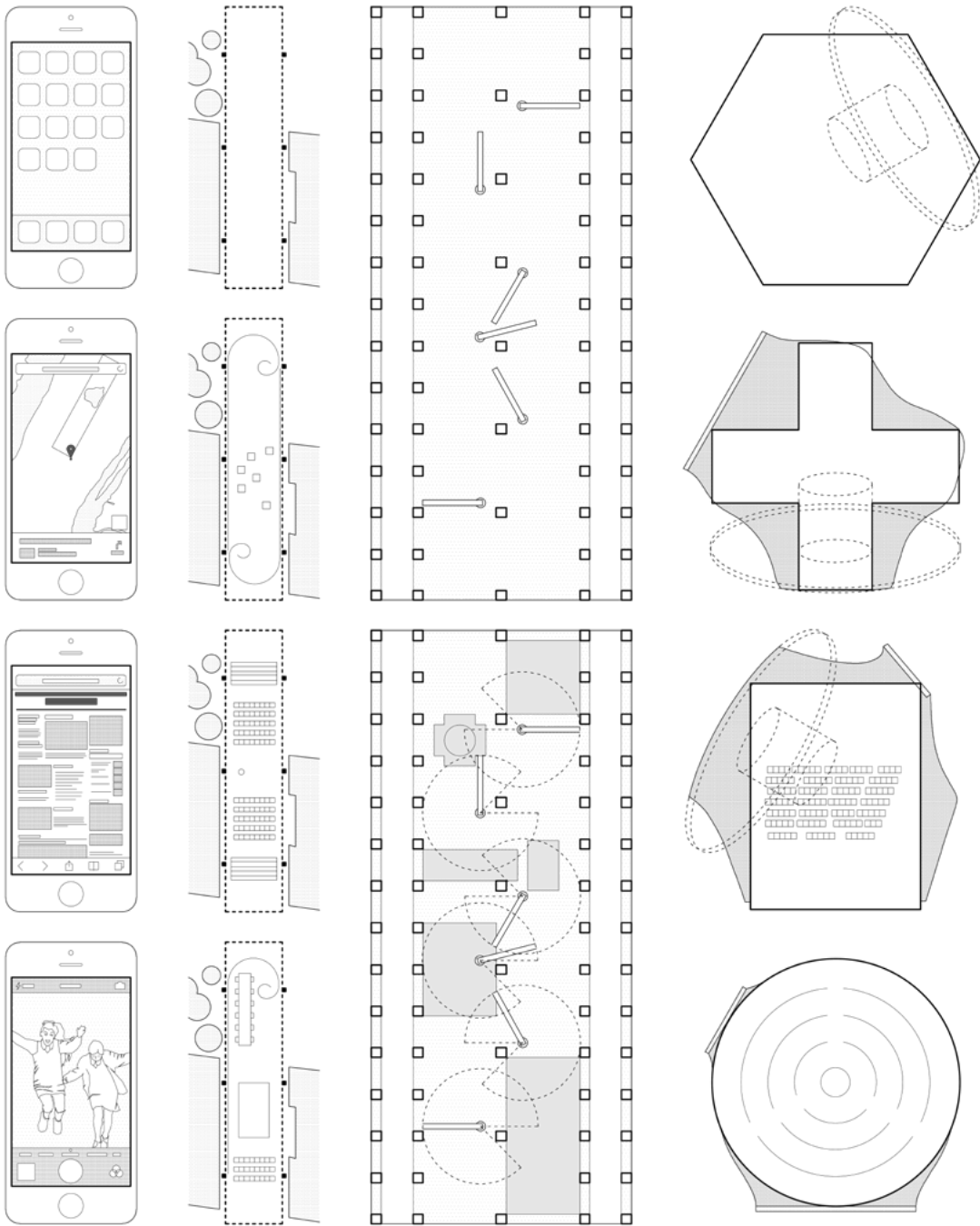


Fig. 2: From left to right: *space of interaction* of the smartphone, of the BMW Guggenheim Lab, of the Fun Palace and of the Prada Transformer. Drawing: Author.

sites throughout the Indian city. Here, together with SDM Architects, Atelier Bow-Wow designed a new, specific, low-cost, bamboo structure deeply linked to the densely populated environment and to the traditional *mandapa*. The abstract space conceived by Atelier Bow-Wow for a generic place is from time to time responsive to the cities it visits. Combining local and global, it could be a solution to the Kenneth Frampton dichotomy of 'place' vs. 'space':

[An] abstract connotation of space [is] opposed to the socially experienced nature of place. ... Place now appears as inimical to our received mental set, not only as architects but also as society. In our ubiquitous "non-place" we congratulate ourselves regularly on our pathological capacity for abstraction; on our commitment to the norms of statistical coordination; on our bondage to the transactional processes of objectification that will admit to neither the luxury nor the necessity of place.¹⁰

As an answer to this opposition, it is interesting to investigate the apparent lack of coherence of Atelier Bow-Wow's house projects. In *Graphic Anatomy*, they note that 'the differences in character are produced by basing the building behaviour on the place for which each house is planned', creating a new kind of building situated 'between architectural typology and urban morphology', that 'do not blindly follow the concrete surrounding environment and the principles of the city that generates it, nor do they disregard these and do something completely unrelated'.¹¹

Travelling around the world, the Lab creates, therefore, real community centres, establishing a public platform for inhabitants to connect and share ideas, but it is also an access point for a virtual net of websites, blogs and social networks. It becomes the neck of a sandglass that unifies a spatially and temporally defined place with an infinite and universal space outside the contingent space-time,

as when a physical device allows the user to access content on the Web or on the cloud storage. This multidisciplinary urban project offers a variety of ways to participate. Members of the public are invited to join the dedicated web-community where notable guest writers and regular interviews with the Lab's collaborators are reported. Interaction is also at the base of the game experience *Urbanology* that, with workshops, experiments, discussions and screenings played on-site, off-site and on the website, permits participants to decide about education, housing, health care, sustainability, infrastructure, and mobility of their own city.

Against the attitude that looks at the generative process of form as an autonomous entity that follows a strict internal logic and compositional rules, there could still be space for the idea that each age has its myths, produces its will to form, and expresses it in every field. Atelier Bow-Wow opens their *Graphic Anatomy* with an exhortation that reminds us of Le Corbusier's *yeux*. They promote an 'architecture that opens its eyes and strains its ears to this diversity of spatial practice, encouraging and assisting it; this is the rediscovery of architecture itself'.¹²

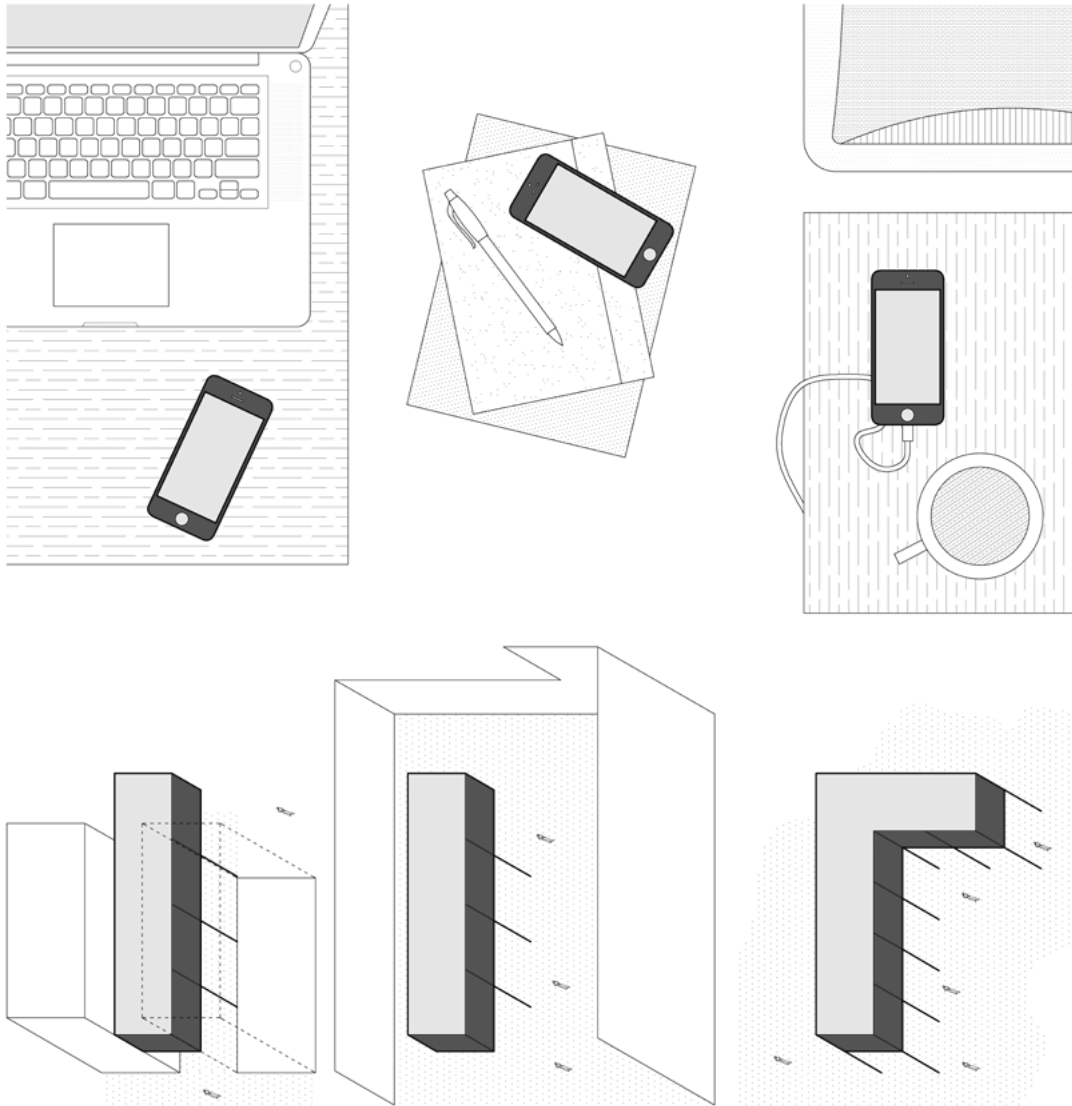


Fig. 3: Above: transportability and connection of a smartphone. Below, from left to right: the BMW Guggenheim Lab in New York, in Berlin and in Mumbai. Drawing: Author.

Notes:

This is a review article of the BMW Guggenheim Lab, designed in 2010 by Atelier Bow-Wow. The pavilion was built in 2011 in Manhattan, New York. Afterwards it has been transported to both Berlin and Mumbai.

1. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, ed. and trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986 [1923]).
2. Momoyo Kajijima, Junzo Kuroda, and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, *Made in Tokyo* (Tokyo: Kajijima Institute Publishing, 2015); Atelier Bow-Wow, Tokyo Institute of Technology, and Tsukamoto Laboratory, *Pet Architecture Guide Book* (Nakano: World Photo Press, 2005).
3. Terunobu Fujimori, 'The Origins of Atelier Bow-Wow's Gaze', in Atelier Bow-Wow, *Behaviorology* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 122–29.
4. Atelier Bow-Wow, *Behaviorology*, 8–15.
5. Recurring concept in both Atelier Bow-Wow, *Graphic Anatomy* (Tokyo: TOTO, 2015); and Atelier Bow-Wow, *Behaviorology*.
6. Atelier Bow-Wow, *Graphic Anatomy*, 107–19.
7. Atelier Bow-Wow quoted in Amy Frearson, 'BMW Guggenheim Lab by Atelier Bow-Wow', *Dezeen*, 4 August 2011, <https://www.dezeen.com>.
8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991 [1974]).
9. Meruro Washida, 'Atelier Bow-Wow as Artists: Changes in Art and the Potential of New Social Space', in Atelier Bow-Wow *Behaviorology*, 244–55.
10. Kenneth Frampton, 'On Reading Heidegger', *Oppositions*, no. 4 (1974): 1–4.
11. Atelier Bow-Wow, *Graphic Anatomy*, 107–19.
12. Atelier Bow-Wow, *Graphic Anatomy*, 4–5.

Biography

Luca Di Lorenzo (1987) is a PhD student of the Villard de Honnecourt international doctoral programme in architecture at the Università IUAV di Venezia, in cooperation with the TU Delft, the ENSA de Paris-Belleville and the Universidad de Sevilla. His PhD thesis, *Generation aXo: Modernist Legacy between Abstraction and Ideology*, focuses on the axonometric projection as modernist tool in relation to its anachronistic revival in the 2010s. He is part of the teaching staff of the Architectural Design and Architectural Theory courses at the University of Camerino.