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(UN)REAL ESTATE – ONLINE STAGING OF INVESTMENT-DRIVEN HOUSING PROJECTS IN VIENNA²

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ABSTRACT

If we want to understand why housing is increasingly becoming a global investment product and the subject of surplus consumption, we must also look at the advertising infrastructures and image products that have been profoundly transformed by new digital technologies. This article examines the promotional staging of luxury and investment apartments using the example of websites that advertise upscale new construction projects in Vienna. The central question is how, and with which forms of aesthetic staging, processes of emotional and temporal entanglement are set in motion. For the analysis, Gernot Böhme's theory of aesthetic economy and concepts of ANT-informed economic sociology are used. It is argued that breathtakingly realistic architectural renderings should not only be seen as representations, but as 'market devices' which, together with the technical-digital environment in which they are embedded, (co-)shape our affects, our desire and our consumer behaviour. The aesthetic work that is invested in the online staging of residential real estate does not simply serve to better imagine buildings not yet built, but rather to sell apartments at an ever earlier date – thus to accelerate the capital turnover.

Keywords: real estate advertising, digitization, financialization, architecture, architectural renderings, websites, aesthetic economy, Vienna

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, a number of scholars in the fields of cultural studies, sociology, and cultural geography (Featherstone 1991, Lash–Urry 1994, Lury 1996, Thrift 2008, Lash–Lury 2007) have pointed out that a central feature of the transformation of capitalist economies is the increasing ‘aestheticization of everyday life’, that ‘aestheticization’ plays an increasingly important role in the consumption, production and marketing of goods. ‘In a crowded market place aesthetics may be the only way to make a product or environment stand out from the crowd.’ (Thrift 2008:9) The German philosopher Gernot Böhme, in his theory of aesthetic economy, also starts out from the assumption that ‘a quantitatively significant sector of the total economy is devoted to creating show values, so that providing a commodity with show value plays a major part in the production of that commodity.’ (Böhme 2017:20) He speaks of ‘aesthetic capitalism’ because, on the one hand, aesthetics as a characteristic of products (the design) and the associated sign value has become increasingly important, and, on the other hand, the ‘aesthetic work’ of promotional staging is on the increase. This is especially true for the commodity housing.

The range of professional service providers involved in the aesthetic staging of residential real estate has become much more differentiated over the last ten years. There are home stagers, who spice up empty dwellings for the purpose of the sales promotion; virtual home staging agencies, which offer digital furnishing and the beautifying of properties in digital images; visualization offices, which specialize in realistic architecture renderings, animations and virtual 3D walkthroughs of objects not yet built; companies geared towards immersive image technologies which offer 360° cameras (for the 3D capture of physical spaces) and various apps and service packages that include the synthesis and individualization of captured image data as well as its publication (such as on Google Street View or real estate portals); as well as agencies for real estate marketing, which take care of all dimensions of a building project’s advertising appearance, including naming (branding), print material and web presence.

In view of this breath-taking development, driven by new digital technologies, for a sociology of architecture interested in the ‘visual’ and the ‘digital’ an examination of the aesthetic practices and products of ‘digitalized’ real estate advertising almost imposes itself. In the following, we will confine ourselves to ‘project websites’ – a new instrument of real estate marketing, with which (residential) building projects in planning or construction are advertised on a separate website on the Net. Project websites are of interest for a cultural-sociological investigation not only because they represent a young and hitherto unexplored phenomenon in the promotion and mediation of real estate, but also because ‘aesthetic (staging) work’ is concentrated here. As in no other advertising and coordination medium, several digital image products (renderings, animations, films, virtual tours, photographic images) appear here in combination. Under the aegis of marketing experts, the products of various ‘aesthetic workers’ (Böhme 2017) are brought together here. Not only web designers are involved, but also visualizers, architects and photographers, all contributing to the visual content of real estate advertising websites.

As research conducted in 2018 and 2019 with architecture students has shown,³ project websites are mainly found in the high-priced segment of the property market – i.e. where the biggest profits are to be made for the developers. For the present study, two examples were selected from this segment for their elaborate aesthetic staging: the websites of the large-scale projects ‘Parkapartments am Belvedere’ and ‘Triiiple’, both of which can be described as iconic due to their landmark character in the urban fabric, and which, as mixed-use projects with their 342 and (approximately) 500 condominiums, address both investors and owner-occupiers. Over a period of two years (from May 2018 to June 2020) the two websites were visited regularly, and growth of the websites and rapid development of aesthetic staging tools could be observed. Since project websites are a comprehensive medium in terms of content and provide a rich empirical data material, their analysis also requires a more precise determination.

While earlier approaches in advertising research focused on the advertising as a means of manipulation and evocation of consumer desires, the focus today is on how moods and affects can be intentionally created and managed, how ‘market attachment’ is produced, and how encounters and relationships between products and consumers are organized in a digitalized consumer society (Schmidt–Conrad 2016, Anderson 2014, Cochoy et al. 2017). Following this shift, the research question that arises with regard to the image-rich marketing tool ‘project website’ is what efforts are made here to activate our affects, and what visual means are used to initiate processes of emotional and temporal entanglement.

Even though there is an awareness that impressive or emotionally appealing architectural visualizations have become a ‘key marketing strategy for developers’ (Kaika 2011:985), online real estate advertising and the advertising culture associated with digital architectural images have hardly become the subject of (social science) research to date. Jacqueline Botterill (2013) provides one of the first contributions focusing on real estate advertising that has shifted to the Internet since the 1990s. Starting from the observation that real estate advertising has also become an object of consumption (‘property porn’), she analyses 600 property listings on various real estate search portals in London, Montreal and New York. Contrary to her initial hypothesis, Botterill concludes that competition in the housing market promotes homogenization rather than diversity of lifestyle representations. Her central argument is that the staging work of real estate agents, photographers and home stagers offers platform users above all a foil for lifestyle daydreaming, and that the consumption of real estate advertising is accompanied by a constant revision of lifestyle ideas and a progressive aestheticization of everyday life.

A further important contribution comes from a research team around the human geographer Gillian Rose, who conducted multi-site ethnographic research on the production of architectural renderings for a large urban renewal project in Doha/Khatar (Degen et al. 2015, Melhuish et al. 2016, Rose et al. 2014). On the one hand, they used Böhme’s (1993) concept of ‘atmosphere’ to address the affective dimension of images and investigated how digital visualization technologies (specifically computer graphics programs such as 3ds Max, Form-Z, or Rhino 3D) enable the engineering of sensory experiences using a wide range of graphic effects (Degen et al. 2015). On the other hand, based on a conceptualization of computer-generated images as ‘interfaces’, the complex process of creating these images by an international network of actors was investigated (Rose et al. 2014).

In contrast to this research, which addresses the production of architectural renderings (see also Houdart 2008), the present paper focuses on the encounter with such images in the everyday digital advertising context. In doing so, we do not draw (like Botterill) on listings from real estate search platforms, but on image-rich advertising websites of new housing projects. It would be obvious as well as tempting to analyse indi-

³ In the context of the research seminar ‘Architecture Sociology’ at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning of the Vienna University of Technology, conducted by the author together with Andrea Schaffar in 2018 and 2019, the aesthetic practices of promotional staging in the different sectors of the Viennese housing market were examined.

vidual images of these websites. However, a contemplative reading of images as static and isolated entities – as known from semiotic advertising research or from art historical and sociological image research – falls short. It would neither do justice to the practical dimension of images in the digital advertising context nor to their economic function. This is why a conceptualization of images and websites as ‘market devices’ is proposed here, based on pragmatic French economic sociology (Callon et al. 2007, Muniesa et al. 2007, Cochoy et al. 2017, Cochoy et al. 2020).

1. PROJECT WEBSITES AND IMAGES AS ‘MARKET DEVICES’

This sociological tradition emphasizes the participation of ‘non-human entities’ in consumer decisions and the emergence of markets. The central assumption here is that consumer behaviour and economic activities cannot be explained (solely) by the dispositions of social actors or the interplay of individual and market structures. Rather, it is assumed that economic behaviour is also shaped and framed by material things (whether the shopping cart in a ‘real’ supermarket or technical devices such as smartphones or PCs with application software on online marketplaces).

To understand images and websites as ‘market devices’ means to take them seriously in their immersive, search activity and consumer behaviour (co-)structuring dimension, to attribute to them ‘agency’, an action-organizing force: ‘whether they might just help (in a minimalist, instrumental version) or force (in a maximalist, determinist version), devices do things. They articulate actions; they act or they make others act.’ (Muniesa–Millo–Callon 2007:2) It is often the attractiveness of an image that makes us click on an offer on the Internet, we let ourselves be guided to unknown websites via pictures, compare and ‘remember’ offers via pictures, we scroll, zoom and click through pictures, take screenshots, download pictures and share them with others. In short: images on search engines, websites, search and booking platforms make us act, put us into action, connect us with products and make us spend more time than we like on the web.

Understanding images as ‘market devices’ also means questioning the normal case of contemplative image analysis in research practice. Gillian Rose (2016b) has already argued for cultural geography, ‘that the close reading of stable cultural objects is ill-equipped to engage with the defining characteristics of contemporary, digitally-mediated cultural activity.’ The fact that the digital practice of real estate search has little to do with contemplative image perception but more with navigating in a larger mass of images (‘keeping an eye out for where to move or what to do to next’, Verhoeff 2012:13), is not an argument against the slow and precise reading of images – against what Rose (2016a) calls in her methodological classification ‘compositional interpretation’ and ‘semiological analysis’, or what in German-speaking sociology is called ‘segment analysis’ (Breckner 2010) or ‘documentary method’ (Bohnsack 2011, Przyborski 2018). But the simple observation that images on the Net are not only something to look at, but also something to click at (and thus serve the on-going and in-depth exploration of advertising structures) leads us to the conviction that the practical dimension of the digital must be taken into account more strongly in (digital) image research.

Rather than treating images as static entities removed from their context, they are seen here as elements in a market arrangement involving human actors and technical devices, which aims to initiate market transactions (see also the concept of ‘market agencement’; Callon 2016, Cochoy et al. 2016). This perspective allows not only justice to be done to the (often forgotten or tacitly assumed) economic function of the images, but also to identify another (usually unnoticed) facet of the entanglement with products. In image research, it is primarily the pictures themselves (in what they show) – in their atmospheric effect and ability to directly influence human mood and thereby bypass intellectual (cognitive) filters – that have been attributed an ‘affective power’ (Biehl–Missal–Sarren 2013). But in addition to the seductive image content, we are also affected and drawn into the world of products by acting with images, by the easy-to-use interfaces of our Internet-enabled devices.

Therefore, starting from the question of how project websites are designed to affect us, we will distinguish four different dimensions of immersiveness or becoming (temporally or emotionally) involved: the immersive spatiality of the website, the affective-immersive effect of (interior) visualizations, image films and virtual tours. However, before we go into detail, here are a few key data and special features about the projects and their web presences.

3. THE WEBSITES OF 'PARK APARTMENTS AT THE BELVEDERE' AND 'TRIIIPLE' – IMAGE DOMINANT AND MULTIPLY IMMERSIVE

With 'Parkapartments am Belvedere' and 'Triiiple', two iconic new construction projects in Vienna are in the focus, which are exemplary for a late- or financial-capitalist housing production oriented towards investment and upscale living. Already the categories used – on the website of Parkapartments, the apartments are divided into 'Investment' and 'Selection' – make it clear that this is no longer about housing production that serves basic needs. Rather, we are dealing here with (luxury) products for the 'intensification of life' (Böhme 2017) and an investment product, where housing becomes a commodity as interest-bearing commodity capital. It is no coincidence that the dominant building type here is the high-rise residential building. In order to maximize profits and benefit from 'economies of scale', so-called standard floors are used in both projects – i.e. floor plans that are the same on as many floors as possible are stacked to form the residential tower, and a number of them are built.

The high-rise ensemble 'Parkapartments am Belvedere' was built near the new Vienna Central Station between 2016 and 2019 by Signa Holding (a real estate and trading company founded in 2000 by Austrian real estate tycoon René Benko). It consists of three approx. 60m high residential towers with a total of 342 apartments (with 46 to 300m² usable floor space) and two hotel towers. 'Triiiple' is a construction project developed by Soravia Group (a leading real estate project developer in Austria) together with Austrian Real Estate/ARE (a profit-oriented subsidiary of the Austrian Federal Real Estate Company/BIG). The building complex under construction in the 3rd district of Vienna along an arterial road in the direction of the airport consists (as the name suggests) of three residential towers (between 106 and 120 meters high) and an office building. In two of the three residential towers, almost all of the 500 apartments (with 35 to 165m² floor space) are for sale.⁴ The third residential tower with 670 micro-apartments (target group students and young professionals) was sold to a major investor immediately after the start of sales in July 2017. While units in the Parkapartments towers (apart from a few remaining items) have already been handed over to the owners, the Triiiple-apartment building, which was begun in April 2018, will not be completed until fall 2021.

A striking feature of both projects is the early distribution and sales process – which is causally related to the early appearance of the websites. Both projects are characterized by comprehensive real estate marketing that accompanies the development of the property from the very beginning. In this process, naming, the production of impressive marketing images and a web presence have top priority. For the websites, different (Austrian and German) companies involved in real estate marketing, visualization and data management were commissioned. Both websites, which can be found quickly on the net due to the identical domain name (<https://parkapartments.at/>; <https://triiiple.at/>), went online before construction began. The projects are thus characterized by a specific temporality. Apartments are already offered for sale at a time when they do not yet exist or are not even under construction. This works – not least because they are advertised with breathtakingly realistic visualizations. The aesthetic staging work can thus be seen (together with the digital infrastructure and general distribution of Internet-capable end devices) as an essential prerequisite for accelerating the sales process – at least under the current conditions of high demand. At a site inspection

⁴ 25 apartments are to be allocated as social housing by Caritas, a social aid organization of the Roman Catholic Church.

in early March 2020 (i.e. 1½ years before planned completion), 80% of the Triiiple apartments had already been sold.⁵

In the extensive package of marketing measures the advertising and marketing tool ‘project website’ occupies a special position in several respects. Compared to real estate platforms (like immobilienscout24.at, immonet.at or immodirect.at), where different providers offer individual dwellings, on a project website a single building project with many dwellings is presented. The mediation tool website is thus linked to ‘singularization’ (Callon et al. 2002) – not only in the sense that relatively similar, standardized products are individualized or made distinguishable by advertising design, but above all in the sense that a product is presented in isolation, i.e. it is not (as on platforms) to be seen next to and directly comparable with other products.

Compared to other advertising measures (print advertising, outdoor advertising on construction boards, construction fences or screens in subway stations, commercials in the cinema etc.), project websites also have a greater reach and represent the commodity housing in a ‘global infosphere’ (Sheller 2009:1397). They function as a round-the-clock online shop window accessible from anywhere. Since they are aimed at an international group of buyers, both websites are also accessible in English (in addition to German).

Since apartments cannot (yet) be bought with a click, project websites ‘only’ serve to initiate sales. In order to establish connections to potential customers, the providers offer opportunities for direct contact: with short contact forms; with icons that show telephone numbers or e-mail addresses when clicked on and that appear (as with park apartments) on every page of the website. In contrast to analogue one-way advertising media (posters, outdoor advertising, brochures), the interactive marketing medium website also allows providers to collect user data and to address and track users in a targeted manner – with electronic newsletters and, through the use of marketing cookies, with personalized banner advertising.

Compared to real estate listings, project websites are characterized by extensive product communication. They provide comprehensive information on the building project (location, architecture, special community facilities and services, etc.) and on the apartments (size, equipment, price). Not only different types of apartments are presented, but also the investment model ‘Vorsorgewohnung’ (literally translated ‘provision (for old age) apartment’; see Aigner 2020). On both websites, interested users can use the ‘apartment finder’ to find out which apartments are still available on which floors with which view and at what price. The apartments, which are more expensive towards the top, are advertised with appealing (interior and exterior) visualizations – which, however, after completion (as in the case of Parkapartments) can also be replaced or supplemented by photos (of the building and the furnished show apartment). Also available for download are floor plans and descriptions (‘exposés’) of the apartments as well as brochures with an overview of the apartment types.

Project websites represent not only a comprehensive, but also a relatively long-lasting medium in a process of transformation. During the observation period of a good two years, an increase in media content as well as the rapid further development of aesthetic staging tools could be observed. Both websites were enriched with new interactive image products (Triiiple included virtual tours of three digitally staged apartment types; Parkapartments a virtual tour of a ‘real’ model apartment that had been set up for visitors). In addition, ‘news’, films, media articles and advertising reports (on the progress of construction, the furnishings, the star architect, etc.) were continuously added (especially in the case of Parkapartments).

⁵ According to a broker in the sales pavillon.

3. DIMENSIONS OF INVOLVEMENT

The immersive spatiality of websites – navigating with images

As has already been emphasized in the field of media theory and visual culture (Verhoeff 2012, Elsaesser 2013, Ash 2015, Rose 2016b), with the digital change, vision has become an active engagement that includes the tactile. Searching and navigating on the Internet requires, to speak here with Latour (1986), ‘thinking with eyes and hands’. The performative nature of the encounter with digital user interfaces on our Internet-enabled end devices can also be seen as a reason for speaking less of ‘spectators’ and more of ‘users’. In order to bring together the visual and sensorimotor activity of the actors, Verhoeff (2012) also proposes the term ‘user-spectator’.

Also the encounter with websites is an undertaking less characterized by contemplation than by action. Their active exploration distinguishes the website medium significantly from traditional forms of product communication (such as posters or advertising films). While a poster allows the advertising message to be grasped at a glance, a website requires the activity of browsing. While the linear sequence of content is predetermined in an advertising film, visitors to a website must find their own way through the material. A website is not a ‘finished product’ that prescribes a certain path of navigation, but rather a space filled with image and text content, into and through which movement is expected, which demands to be accessed and explored.

Since a long length of stay is the goal of the providers, very specific techniques of entanglement are used. For example, images are used as links to guide us through all corners of the website. On both housing project websites navigation is not only possible via the menu, but also by clicking on linked images. Subtle hints (arrows, click symbols, colour change of keywords on images when the cursor is moved) suggest an intuitive clicking on the images. Already the header images on the entry page of both project websites are linked. If the user clicks on the ‘hero-shot’ (an impressive exterior rendering showing the project from the front and from a distance; Fig. 1), he/she is taken to the webpage of the ‘apartment finder’. All other images on the entry page (which have to be clicked through at the Parkapartment website) are also linked and lead to other website content (movies, show apartment, sales pavilion etc.). But also most (sub)pages of the websites are structured in such a way that the user is encouraged to be active, especially to ‘work’ with pictures. Here again, a ‘header image’ dominates, or more precisely, a picture field, in which three to five pictures can be clicked through. Since the image field takes up almost the entire user interface, little or nothing of the text below (depending on the terminal device, window settings and screen format) is visible. For experienced users, this is a prompt to ‘scroll’, i.e. to move the screen content to reach areas below the header image that have not yet been inspected. Once arriving at the bottom of the pages, one usually (on both project websites) finds a final line with three to five images, which again prompt to click and lead to pages announced in the menu (such as ‘smart services’, ‘location’ or ‘fit-outs’).

This internal linking is a central aspect of the immersive spatiality of a website. Each page is designed in such a way that there is always a ‘next’. This exploration, which is situated between targeted search and undecided browsing, runs criss-cross and in loops, and is thus also characterized by repetition and self-referentiality. What is essential here is that the user interface, which is designed for (inter)action and involvement, functions intuitively and that the action or ‘work’ of exploration is not experienced as such – which is why the media philosopher Alexander Galloway, in his meditation on the human-machine interface, also speaks of ‘the glow of unwork’ (Galloway 2012:25, see also Rose et al. 2016).

Beyond this practical immersiveness of a website, however, it is above all the image products themselves that have an immersive effect, operating more on the level of emotions. Even if visualizations, videos and virtual tours are not necessarily about the effect of total immersion in a virtual world, which is associated with computer games, the simulacra, i.e. the dream images and illusions of the real estate industry, must also

be granted a sensual seductive power. Which qualities are at stake here, which techniques of seduction and ensnaring (Thrift 2008 also speaks of a ‘technology of allure’) are used here, will first be discussed using the example of aesthetically charged interior visualizations.

Construction of exclusivity and feel-good pictures ‘Wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you’

When it comes to the presentation of the apartments, atmospheric interior images of tastefully furnished ‘dream apartments’ with breath-taking views of the city prevail (Fig. 3, 4). Regarding these aesthetic high-end visualizations, it should be noted in advance that the object in the picture has little or nothing to do with the apartments for sale. Contrary to what the pictures suggest, the apartments are being sold empty and unfurnished. Also, the breath-taking city view omnipresent in the interior pictures is only available in the apartments on the upper floors. We are thus dealing with ‘symbolic images’ that do not represent a specific apartment, but rather symbolize it, standing in its place. These images have a lot in common with the images on food packages called ‘serving suggestion’. Here, too, the manufacturer tries to show the product as appetisingly as possible, and the fictitious (proxy) images contain a number of ingredients that are not included in the purchased product (such as the furniture). To indicate this artifice the developers either opt for the note ‘symbolic pictures’ (as with Triiiple) or (as in the case of Parkapartments) for a disclaimer in the website imprint (‘any furniture or room divisions depicted in plans or drawings are meant to be suggestive only and do not form part of the contract’).

The engineering of the sensual appeal takes place on several levels in the interior visualizations. As early semiological advertising research has already shown, we are positioned as spectators in every advertising image: ‘it [the ad] projects out into the space in front of it an imaginary person composed in terms of the relationship between the elements in the ad. You move into this space as you look at the ad, and in doing so “become” the spectator, you feel that the “hey, you” “really did” apply to you in particular.’ (Williamson 1978:50f) The interior visualizations for Triiiple and Parkapartments are composed in such a way that the spectator walks through the represented space (and does not view the object from a distance as ‘audience’, as with hero-shots). The fact that no people are shown ‘while living’ is calculated. After all, we are not supposed to develop the feeling of having arrived at others’ homes, but rather at our own. We are not merely made visitors to the apartment but are already put in the position of residents. The glass of red wine waiting on the side table on the terrace, the opened notebook or magazine, the steaming coffee cup, the folded back bedspread, the blanket left behind when getting up from the sofa – an armada of little things that suggest that we have already moved in.

A further central point is that we are addressed emotionally with meticulously constructed atmospheres. According to Böhme (2003), atmospheres are to be conceived ‘as something that proceeds from and is created by things, persons and their constellations’. With marketing images, however, atmospheres and the emotional effects that emanate from them are produced actively and in a targeted way (Degen et al. 2017, Biehl-Missal 2012, 2013). The selected visualizations used to advertise the apartments are designed to enchant us sensually with a feel-good atmosphere and uplifting views of the urban space. Whether the apartments are large or small, whether they are called ‘apartments’, ‘studios’ and ‘lofts’ (as in Triiiple) or ‘selection’ and ‘investment’ apartments (as in Parkapartments) – their virtual staging always boils down to stylish ‘dream apartments’ for the upper middle-class taste, equipped with chic furniture, a large flat screen and artistic flatware – and, most importantly, a terrific view over the city.

The attribution of luxury and exclusivity takes place primarily through the staging of ‘being on top’. Although – in the sense of Luc Boltanski’s and Arnaud Esquerre’s economy of enrichment (‘Enrichissement’;

2017) – other strategies of upgrading are used (where the symbolic capital of the ‘star architect’ and of Vienna as a ‘city of culture’ with its sights and works of art are deployed), exclusivity in the renderings is produced primarily through rooftop scenes. Being on top, the view of the city lying at one’s feet has an elevating effect, triggers in the viewer a feeling of grandeur and (because it is only available for a view) also of superiority. While with Parkapartments the feeling of a privileged ‘living above the city’ is reserved for the buyers of the ‘Selection’ apartments, Triiiple provides for communal terraces. An in-house democratic luxury, so to speak, which also meets the need for distinction of neoliberal middle classes. Visual bait is laid out to fuel their lifestyle fantasies: glamorous atmospheric scenes of sunbathing at the rooftop pool, of chilling out or having an after-work drink with friends on the chic roof terrace with a beguiling view of a city bathed in warm evening light.

The seductive effect of the renderings has to do not only with the image content, but also with the quality of the renderings. The highly developed technical possibilities of digital simulation (shadow, reflection and depth-of-field effects) allow a style of representation that is described by professional visualisers as ‘photorealistic’. Even though from a media-theoretical perspective we should better speak of ‘digital realism’ (Richter 2008) than photorealism, the interior and exterior renderings are often hardly distinguishable from photographic images. The digital-naturalistic style of representation shows things in literally the best light. Light, color, and mirror effects are used to make objects appear more beautiful and glamorous than they could ever be in reality (which, in the meantime, also applies to photographs taken with smartphone cameras). Material textures are simulated so convincingly that they evoke a pleasant feeling when viewed. The fluffy blanket on the sofa is not only an invitation to take a seat but to snuggle up and settle down.

Moreover, the art of image synthesis has been brought to perfection. The normal case in architecture and visualization offices is the synthetic composite image. Here, in the final step of digital image production (where a 2D rendering is further processed in Photoshop), computer-generated and photographic image elements are combined. To increase the impression of reality and to make sceneries more lively, photographic material (‘footage’) is inserted into the computer-generated scene. This can be people, plants, clouds, etc. – or, as in the case of our exterior and interior visualizations, also photographic images of the urban environment. A central aspect is the skill of arranging the pictorial elements in such a way that together they create a realistic impression. Houdart (2008:56, 60) also speaks of realistic images in the sense of a ‘successful cohabitation’ of the elements.

The apartments are staged so realistically and attractively on all levels (furnishing style, lighting situation, simulation of the surfaces, embedding in the city panorama, etc.) that even at a fleeting glance they create a positive basic mood – and make you forget the (still) non-existence of the objects. High-end architectural renderings thus radiate ‘ontological security’ in their very own way. Even if this sociological concept refers to the stable being in the world of individuals (cf. Giddens 1996:117ff), it can be transferred to visual culture, to the working of images. Images can be understood as producers of trust, as a means to organize a relationship of trust (to the world as it is and as it can be, enriched with new building projects). What we are dealing with here is the emotional, cognitively rather inaccessible phenomenon that pictures are able to create trust in the (future) existence of what is depicted. To this end, the glamour factor, the aesthetic idealization, must be well dosed. Without doubt, the pictures go beyond the everyday – but not to the extent that it would no longer be possible to identify with the object. Finally, the virtually staged dream apartments are intended to make users dream and pick them up at their dreams of living (even if they only want to invest and do not live there themselves). An advertising expert sums it up when he says: ‘Advertising doesn’t always mirror how people are acting, but how they’re dreaming ... In a sense, what we’re doing is wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you.’ (Leiss et al. 1990:200)

Image films – multimodality, digital realism and affective symbol images

Where vanishing points and horizon are abolished, the camera is unchained and the position of the observer can be anywhere, movement itself can be represented at once – in a film or an architectural animation. In fact, not only architectural renderings but also so-called ‘image films’ were commissioned for both major projects before construction began. In the meantime, films have become such an important part of prestigious major projects that they are now gathered together on both websites under a separate menu item. On the Triiiple website, there is not only a (picture) link to the image film on the entry page, but also seven short videos are presented under the menu item ‘Video & Webcam’. The Parkapartments website offers six videos under the menu item ‘Filme’ (just available in the German site version). In addition to image films, there are videos on the construction progress, webcam videos of the construction site in fast motion, commercials in salesmen executives talk about the advantages of their project, a cinema spot and (in the case of the completed Parkapartments) a film in which the ‘Joyful Living’ (as the title suggests) of a newly moved-in couple is staged.

If we now focus on the elaborate image films, the emotional ‘immersion’ in and ‘being captured’ of moving images can be attributed to three main aspects: multimodality, spectacular camera rides and the use of affective symbolic footage. Multimodality means the simultaneous use of several media or sensory channels in a single media product (Kress–Van Leeuwen 2001). The audio-visual image films can be understood as a ‘semiotic landscape’ or as a ‘multimodal Gesamtkunstwerk’, in which spoken and written language is used as well as music and different kinds of visual material. Multimodality as an advertising communication practice is synonymous with an extensive occupancy of the senses, an intensification of the pure visual life. Just watching the image films without sound makes it clear how much the feel-good music used reinforces and positively colours the mood of what is seen.

On the visual level, viewers are gripped and impressed above all by spectacular scenes and camera movements that deviate from the normal mode of everyday spatial perception. In both commercials breath-taking ‘drone rides’ are undertaken. Since the spatiality of the visualization software is not limited by the materiality of a human body, ‘impossible’ settings and movements are displayed, which are most likely to be imagined as drone flights: flying towards a building from below above a water surface, flying between two towers, nosediving from the sky onto the buildings, effortlessly penetrating the façade, even cheekily escaping from the interior to the exterior space, including gliding along the façades and spontaneously entering another apartment – again designed down to the last detail.

But there are also ‘real’ shots of ‘real’ places and (represented) social interactions, which are used (in the Triiiple image film) as emotionally involving symbolic images and combined with (computer) simulations. Thus, the technique of montage is used, a technique, which is also seen in film and media theory as a ‘key technology of ideological manipulation’ (Manovich 1995), especially since a new context of meaning is constructed through the temporal sequence of ‘separated realities’. In the Triiiple image film, the ‘real’ film sequences are used to present a building project as an already inhabited and lively place. The myth of an all-round positive urban lifestyle is displayed. The film shows modern, young and young-at-heart, attractive, white people jogging in nature, cooking together in the ‘event kitchen’, at the computer in the ‘salon with library’, during conversations on the terrace with a breath-taking view (Fig. 5a) or in the friendly green and furnished urban outdoor space lined with restaurants. The fact that the film sequences are shown in slow motion intensifies the perception of emotionally touching interactions (the look two singles throw at each other in the event kitchen; the father lifting his little daughter into the air, etc. Fig. 5b, c).

With all available ‘semiotic resources’ (van Leeuwen 2005) an affective illusion of the good life at this place is created – which, however, is reserved for a purely white middle class that has outgrown the ‘taste of necessity’ (Bourdieu) and is occupied with intensification of life and accumulation. The ideal image of a decelerat-

ed urban lifestyle in harmony with nature is evoked. Thus, besides all-round happy people, atmospheric nature shots are also used (a film sequence of a flight over a forest, idyllic views of gently flowing water in atmospheric morning light). In the visualizations, nature is staged in such a manipulative manner that a plot on the edge of an industrial area, which is characterized by heavy traffic, appears like a quiet recreational area (Fig. 2).

Virtual apartment tour – an invitation to play

The virtual viewing tours work completely differently than the emotionally involving image films. They are not to be consumed passively, but require maximal (screen) activity from the users. They also come closest to what is considered ‘immersion’ in the gaming industry – with diverse possibilities for interaction as an essential quality criterion. While on the Triiiple website the user can navigate through the 3D model of three virtually staged apartments (with two, three and four rooms), in the case of Parkapartments it is the 3D model of an already completed and fully furnished model apartment. In both cases, ‘moving through’ means clicking on already given circles (on the floor or at eye level in the room). While in the case of Parkapartments, clicking on circular markers provides additional information on the fit-outs (floor, heating, cooling, safety concept, etc.), in the case of Triiiple, a 360° panoramic view can be initiated at any position with the autorotation function, and the 3D model (if this mode is available on the end user device) can also be experienced with virtual reality glasses.

It seems that developers in the high-price segment are competing with each other for the latest marketing tools. There is no technical innovation that would not be used – and that would not be worth a headline (see, for example, the report on virtual apartment viewing with VR glasses in the construction container of Parkapartments; *Der Standard* of April 15, 2017). In fact, the virtual tours (even without VR glasses) represent a new dimension of immersive experience. Not only are the sensual impressions increased once again (compared to a static visualization) – stepping out onto the terrace with a 360° panoramic view in slow motion creates a wow-effect, the feeling of floating above the city and of being in a superior position (Fig. 6). The practical dimension of navigating also has an even more involving effect.

The new interactive tools thus not only seduce as sensual-atmospheric representations, but also as interactive apparatuses – as toys that want to be playfully explored. Navigable 3D models (with or without VR glasses/Augmented Reality) are an invitation to play – and should therefore be understood as ‘attachment devices’ (Cochoy et al. 2017) which establish a connection with a construction project via a playful moment. What we are dealing with here is an organization of contact and involvement that goes beyond image content and aesthetics (in the sense of *aisthesis*) and aims at the ‘work of play’ on and with our favourite devices (PC, tablet or smartphone). This is why the call ‘Immerse yourself in the digital world of Signa’ in an advertising video for an augmented reality app (Fig. 7) is also to be understood as an indication of an increasingly entertainment-based real estate advertising, where the focus is no longer on conveying information but on attracting attention with technical gimmicks.

CONCLUSION

In view of the real estate websites overloaded with films and new interactive tools, it can be concluded that we are witnessing a shift from information-based to entertainment-based real estate advertising. This shift, based on new digital technologies, is most evident in the high-priced segment of the investment-driven property market. In a field, where the most powerful developers are tied are not only competing for the most affluent customers with their most prestigious (and ever higher) new construction projects, but are also tied to each other in a battle for the most impressive renderings and the latest marketing tools.

Introducing the concept of market devices, this analysis of the advertising websites of two major Viennese construction projects (Triiiple and Parkapartments at the Belvedere) is a contribution to both image

research in the field of architecture and the digitization of real estate advertising. In contrast to earlier approaches in advertising research and conventional image-analytical approaches (in art, cultural and social sciences), images were not treated here as isolated entities removed from their context, but as elements in a socio-technical arrangement designed to initiate market transactions. By applying the concept of ‘market devices’ to image-based online advertising tools, not only the (often forgotten) economic dimension of images is emphasized, but also their practical dimension that puts us into action. This theoretical perspective, based on ANT-informed economic sociology, also corresponds to a shift from the dominant category of representation to the practical dimension of the digital.

Starting with the question of which techniques and visual means are used on project websites to entangle us emotionally and temporally with products of the real estate industry, four aspects of immersivity or involvement were identified and examined more closely: the immersive spatiality of websites, where we have to work our way through the content – also with the help of linked images; the seductive attractiveness of symbolic images (interior and exterior renderings), that impress us and grab us with their impression and feel-good factor; the different levels of emotional involvement through multimodal image films which likewise flatter the (aesthetic and economic) dispositions of a privileged middle class concerned with lifestyle enhancement and investment concerns; and finally, the interactivity of virtual tours that aim to attract our attention as technical toys. There is no doubt that the affective power of all images used here is central to product communication in the real estate sector. But it is emphasized here that it is not only the images that affect people and connect them to goods, but also digital-material structures in which they are embedded.

We can agree with Botterill (2013) that new forms of aesthetic online-staging (co-)shape our housing ideals and contribute to the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’. Here, however, it is emphasized that from a political economy perspective, the argument that aesthetic staging work accelerates the sales process is more important. The elaborate digital image products do not only provide a foil for lifestyle fantasies and serve not only to convey information and to better imagine a not-yet-built, but above all to sell the apartments ever earlier – thus, to accelerate of capital turnover.

A further argument is that the aesthetic work of digital staging also contributes to the financialization of housing. Even if Böhme is right in saying that growth in advanced capitalism can essentially only be generated by surplus consumption, it must be added that the aesthetic work of digital staging is not only aimed at consumption for the ‘intensification of life’, i.e. the purchase of ever better equipped and more attractive apartments, but also at consumption for the purpose of financial investment, the purchase of apartments to secure and increase over-accumulated (monetary) capital.

If the aesthetic staging and brokerage tools driven by new digital technologies help the profit-driven construction industry to produce ‘desires’ (for more exclusive, stylish housing) and to absorb surplus (money) capital looking for investment, we can assume that they also co-shape urban housing markets. An insight that this article shares with a new strand of research in the field of housing studies coined ‘Platform Real Estate’ (Fields–Rogers 2019). Especially since ‘aesthetic work’ and the ‘visual’ have received little attention here so far, this article could be a stimulus to further explore these aspects in research on the digitization of the real estate industry.

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FIGURES

Fig. 1. Entry page, Website Parkapartments (Screenshot 20.6.2020)

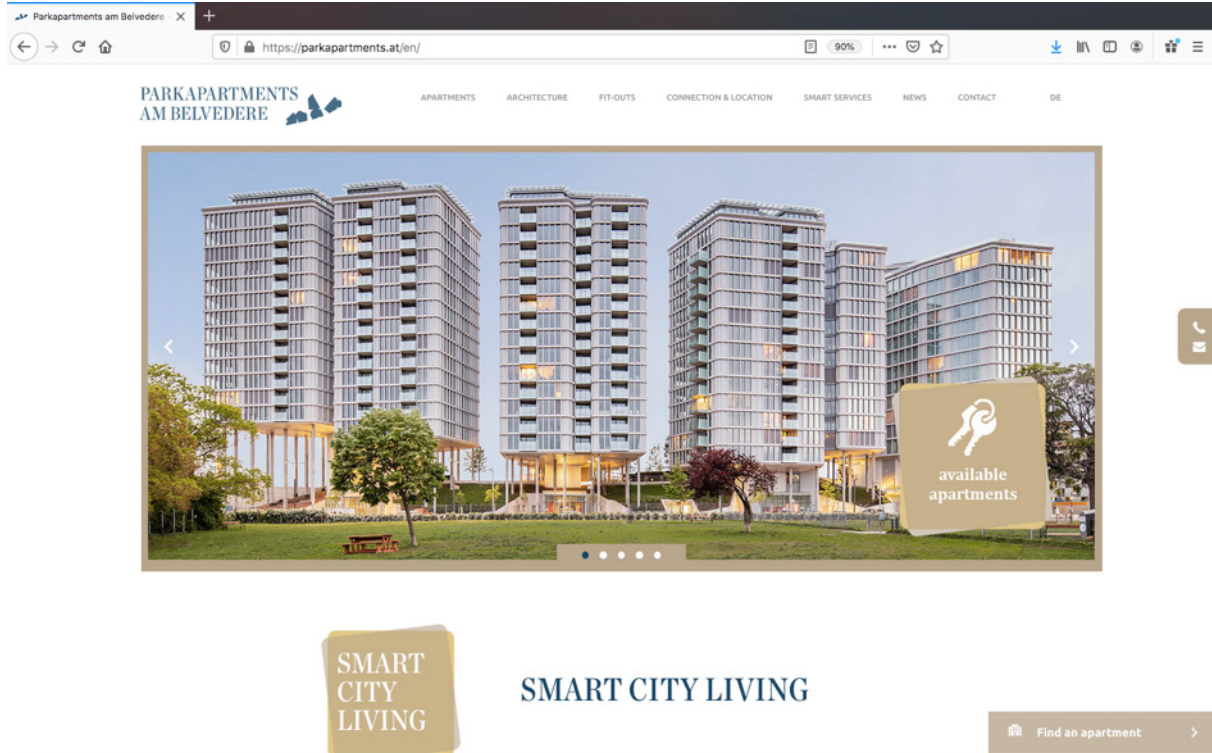


Fig. 2: Exterior Rendering, Website Triiiple (Screenshot 20.6.2020)

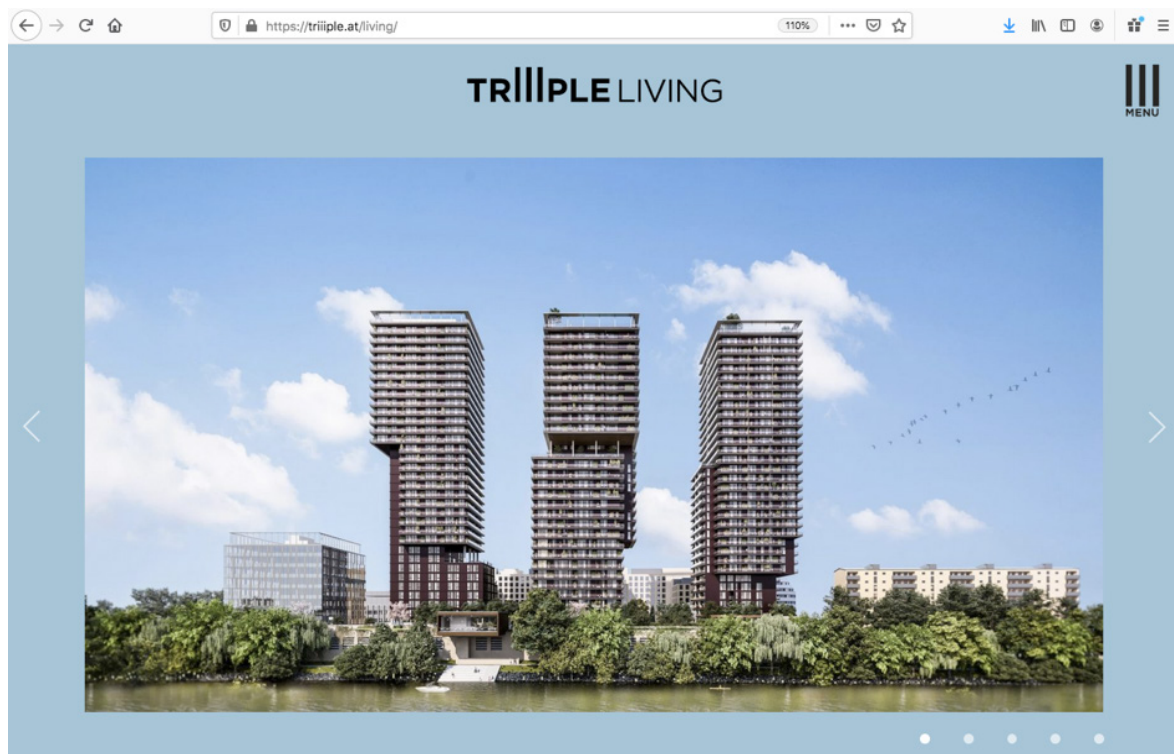


Fig. 3: Interior Rendering, Website Triiple (Screenshot 20.6.2020)

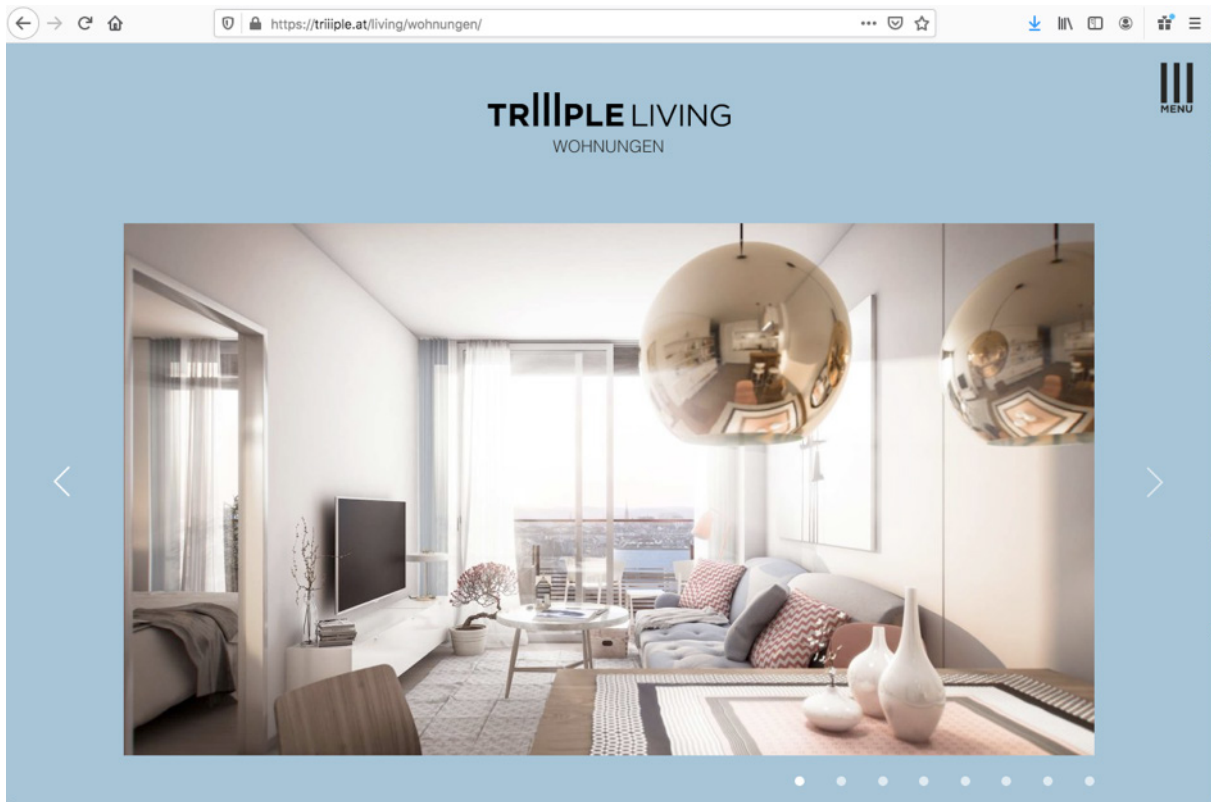


Fig. 4: Interior Rendering, website Parkapartments (Screenshot 20.6.2020)

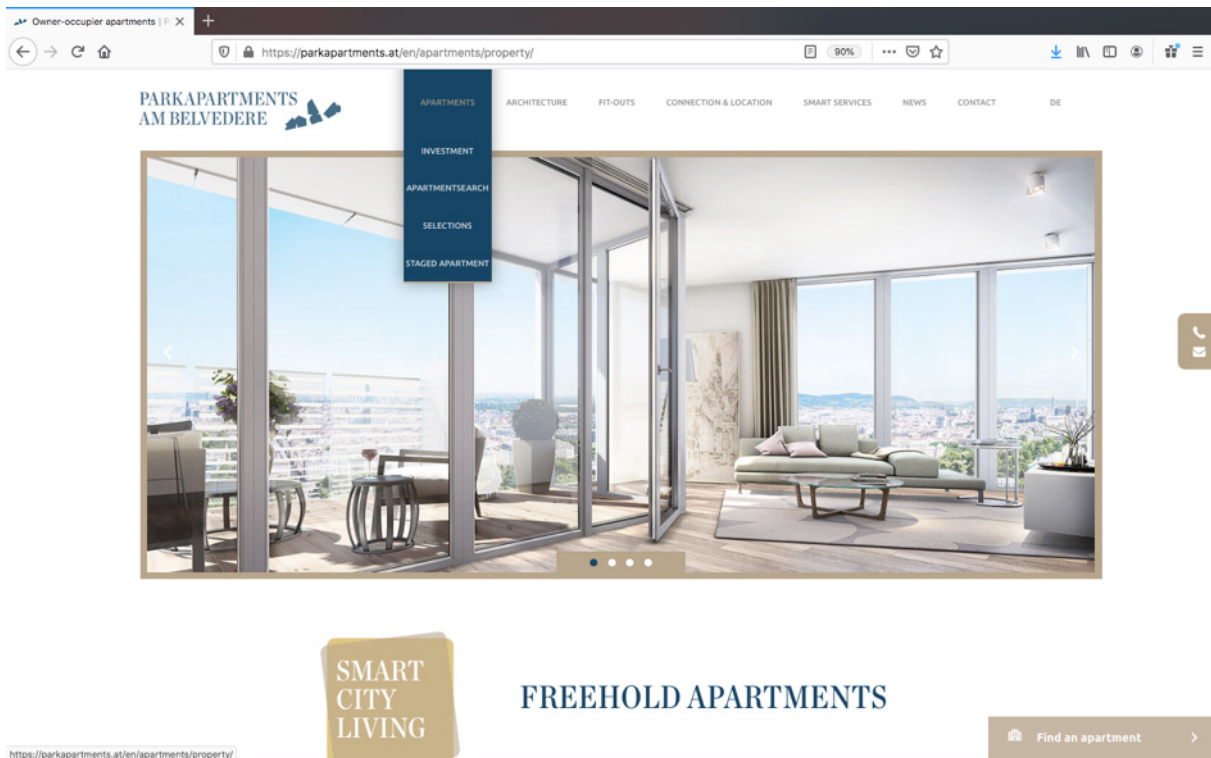


Fig. 5 a,b,c: (top) Imagefilm and other film material under the menu item 'video & webcam' on the Triiple website; (below) emotional symbol images, which are combined with animated visualizations in the imagefilm. (Screenshots 20.6.2020)

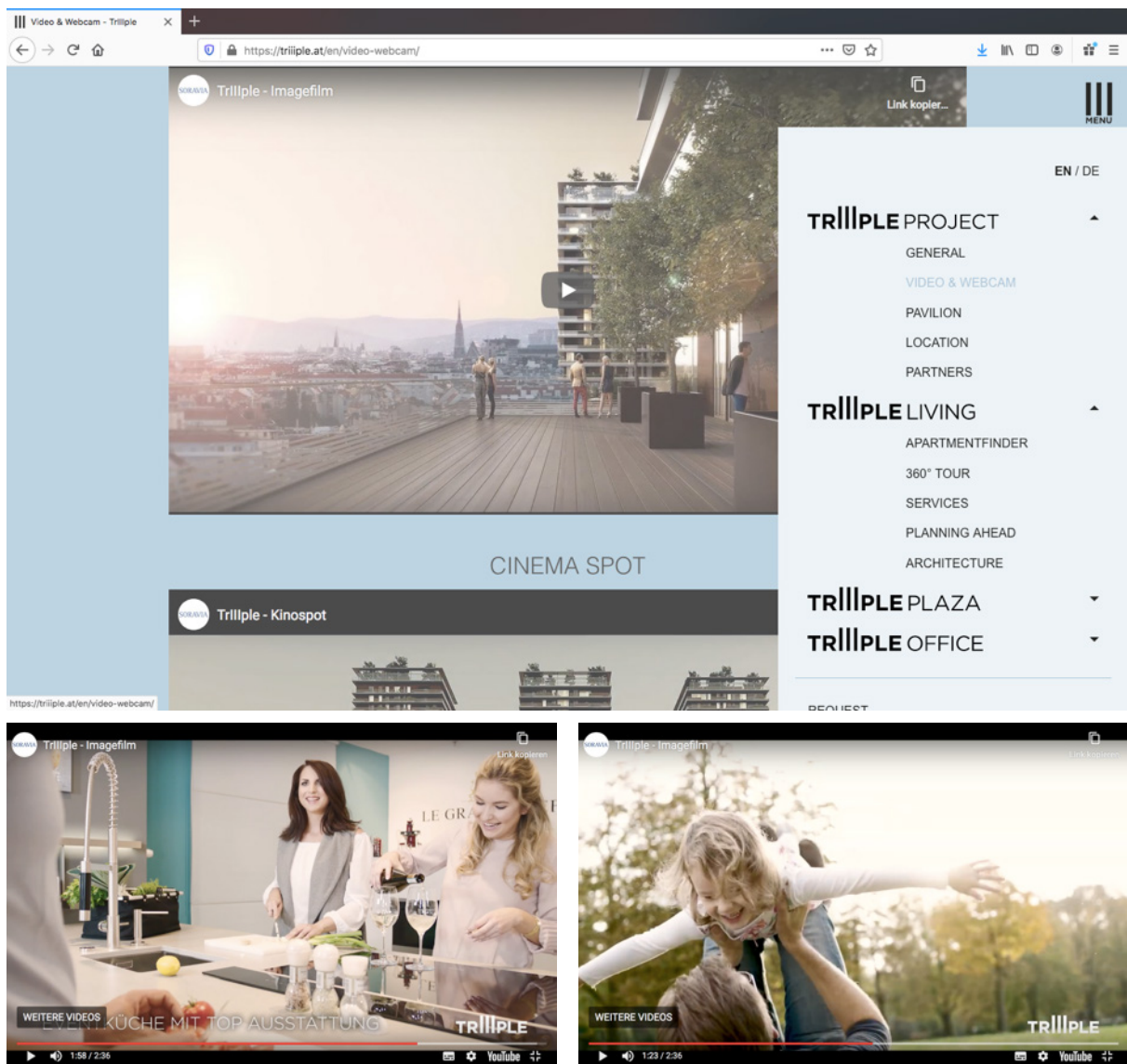


Fig. 6: interactive virtual tour through the 3D model of a virtually staged 3-room apartment, Triiple (Screenshot 20.6.2020)

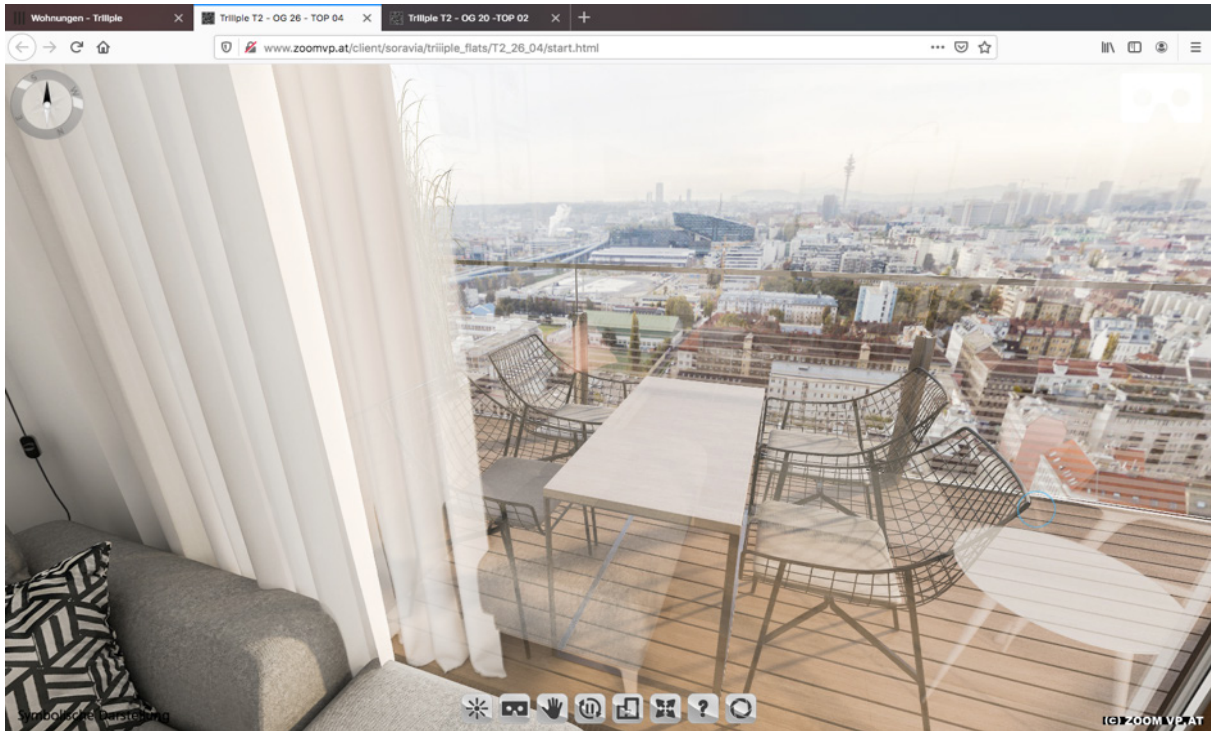


Fig. 7: Advertising video for an augmented reality app on the Parkapartments website (Screenshot 20.6.2020)

