

DESERTS
and OASES

HOW PLATFORMS
UNDERSTAND
THE URBAN FABRIC.

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Platforms have the capabilities to change our perception of cities and the built environment; to alter the urban fabric itself.

This axiom can be understood as a common ground in our collective effort to understand the effects of Platforms on the city. An effort to get a vague premonition of what Platform Urbanism might be.

I want to understand my contribution to this collective project in a broader sense of basic research. By taking the perspective of platforms, this project strives to analyze what kind of definitions of cities platforms operate with. How these definitions are defined and by whom.

Understanding the actors, mechanisms and motivation of these definitions might be a crucial fragment of understanding the Platforms mentioned and supposed abilities to alter our own definitions of cities.

Using the example of Mobility Platforms the following pages show an attempt to trace those definitions and mechanisms. An attempt to offer a tool to decipher the city definitions that are used by platforms.

OF
DESERTS
AND
OASES

desert

/ˈdɛzət/

noun

noun: **desert**; plural noun: **deserts**

a waterless, desolate area of land with little or no vegetation, typically one covered with sand.

“the desert of the Sinai peninsula is a harsh place”

a situation or place considered dull and uninteresting.

“a cultural desert”

Middle English: via Old French from late Latin *desertum* ‘something left waste’, neuter past participle of *deserere* ‘leave, forsake’.¹

oasis

/əʊˈeɪsɪs/

noun

noun: **oasis**; plural noun: **oases**

a fertile spot in a desert where water is found.

“a country of oases and burning desert sands”

a pleasant or peaceful area or period in the midst of a difficult or hectic place or situation.

“the park is an oasis of calm in the centre of the city”

early 17th century: via late Latin *oasis* from Greek *ὄασις* *óasis*, apparently of Egyptian origin *ouahe*.²

The word *oasis* appears in the English language in the early 17th century to complement the much older word *desert*. Together the two words form a distinguished binary pair, with their poles describing a contrast comparable to other strong binary pairs as:

Day and Night.
Black and White.
Zero and One.
True and False.
Life and Death.

A contrast as articulate as *Life and Death* itself. *Desert* describes an abandoned, desolate and often arid place³, a surrounding that inevitable leads the unintentional traveller into a struggle for life. *Oasis* describes the absolute opposite: a peaceful and fertile surrounding for life to flourish.⁴

In the late 20th century the word *desert* was increasingly used to describe phenomena in urban geography. In 1973 John Baines wrote in his book *The Environment*: “the large suburban estates that are a recent feature of the townscape are epitomized by the regular rows of similarly styled houses that have earned for themselves the title of suburban deserts. They often lack the shops, churches, public houses and social centers that allow a community life to develop”.⁵ Later on the term was used in more specific ways by adding a prefix. The term *Food Desert* was used in 1996 by the Low Income Project

Team in the United Kingdom to describe “areas of relative exclusion where people experience physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy food”.⁶ The catchy term quite quickly found its way into popular media, exemplified in the British newspaper *The Observer* in 1998: “many poor housing estates were left as food deserts by the closure of local food shops”.⁷ Another example for such a specific use would be the term *Money Deserts*. As Hillary John Shawn explains in her 2004 dissertation *The Ecology of Food Deserts*: „...the term arises in 1999 referring to areas of east London where the major banks had closed many branches, leaving local people without easy access to banking facilities”.⁸ Contemporary examples of such specific urban deserts would be *Transit Desert*⁹ or *Book Desert*¹⁰. The examples show that in an urban context the term *desert* is used to describe the absence of essential infrastructures.

Platforms act as interfaces to provide services or to enable services. Significant with platforms is the way the service is made accessible, rather than the actual and concrete service itself. Similar to a marketplace, where products and services are exchanged, a platform is the imaginary place where a seller and a buyer meet to conduct a business. Platforms place themselves at the intersection of supply and demand offering users on both ends convenient and direct access. Presently we know platforms for a wide variety of services; including, but not limited to: food, transportation, accommodation, working

environments, storage spaces, financial services, healthcare, romance and sexuality, sports or general sales services.

While certain platforms operate in a mere virtual context some platforms are bound to the real world, the built environment, our cities. In order to be able to offer a service it is necessary to define where the service is offered. These definitions strictly divide the physical world in areas with or without a certain accessibility to a certain market.

The proposed terms desert and oasis aim to describe the relation between the absence and presence of such markets for services. Condensing the before mentioned specific deserts into a more universal term; in need of a distinction to the climatic and geographic phenomena called desert and in lack of a better word, lets - for now - call them Service Desert and Service Oasis. A Service Desert is the absence of a before mentioned market, with Service Oasis being its direct opposite: the presence of such a market. While Food Desert describes the absence of an otherwise sufficient network, Service Oasis contrarily describes the presence of something that is not existing on a regular basis.

The question arises whether Service Oasis and Service Desert form a binary pair where one necessitate and condition the other. Or if they, on the contrary, can exist as independent phenomena. To make this clear

with an obvious and simple example: when electric scooters arrived in Vienna in 2018, there was no comparable service. The scooters were established in a defined region, making this region an Oasis. The rest of the city and its surrounding stayed unaltered. Did it become a Desert? Can something become a Desert without changing? Or was it a desert all along? When did it become a Desert? When did it start to be a Desert? The Oasis was enriched, changing the relation of saturation between Desert and Oasis. Even though the Desert was not desaturated, the contrast between the two rose.

This binary system of Oasis and Desert is a an absolute concept, a dichotomy. The veracity or mere possibility of these extremes is of no greater importance. Rather than dividing and classifying everything in either one of the two polar opposites, this binary system should be understood as a scaffolding; an auxiliary construction. By defining two absolute poles, a gradient spectrum emerges. It is within this gradient spectrum that we are able to locate and contextualize our observations by describing their relations to the poles.

Understanding the relation of regions with an increased supply of services to regions without this supply, may be a crucial fragment of understanding the ability of certain platforms to change our perception of cities and the built environment and alter the urban fabric itself.

HOW TO
READ
PLATFORM
CITY MAPS

DESERTS AND OASES

GENERIC DEFINITIONS

SPECIFIC DEFINITIONS

DYNAMIC DEFINITIONS

SEASONAL DEFINITIONS

PULL MECHANISMS

PUSH MECHANISMS

ADDITION MECHANISMS

EXCEPTION MECHANISMS

EXPANSION MECHANISMS

REDUCTION MECHANISMS

PRIVATE INTERESTS

MUNICIPAL INTERESTS

COMMERCIAL INTERESTS

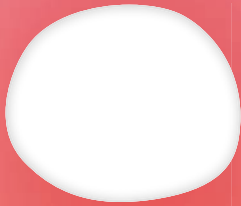
VANDALISM

HOW TO READ PLATFORM CITYMAPS

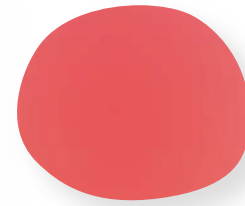
The following pages are intended as an attempt to understand and explain the observations that were made when comparing different Mobility Platform city maps in the previous chapter. The comparison revealed diverse phenomena within the city map definitions. Abstracting and isolating these phenomena allowed to identify various different definitions, mechanisms, actors and interests that inform the city maps.

Based on interviews with Mobility Platform representatives in Vienna, these abstractions should serve as a tool to decipher city definitions that are used by Mobility Platforms.

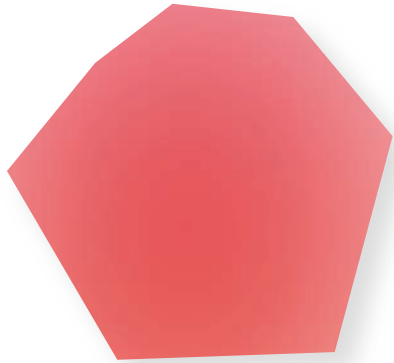
The findings of the following chapter implicate that the definitions of cities - the city maps - used by Mobility Platforms are predominantly representations of the particular city rather than an artificial construct introduced by a platform. Uber constitutes the only exception by using a static and generic definition. All other researched platforms use specific definitions that are highly adapted to Vienna and in a state of constant development. These definitions are informed by the same actors that define the city of Vienna as such. Similar to cities in general, there is a traceable attempt to integrate the vast sum of plural and diverse interests in a certain area of land. The motivation of platforms to do so is delibartely left open for future research.



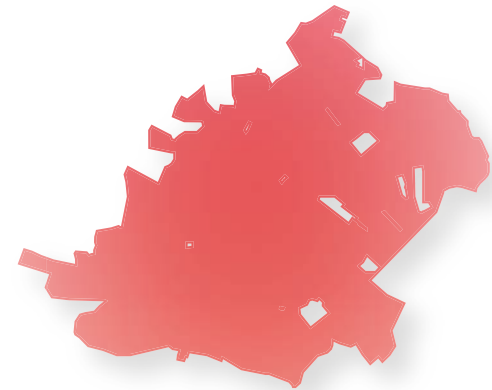
SERVICE DESERT describes the absence of something within an otherwise sufficient



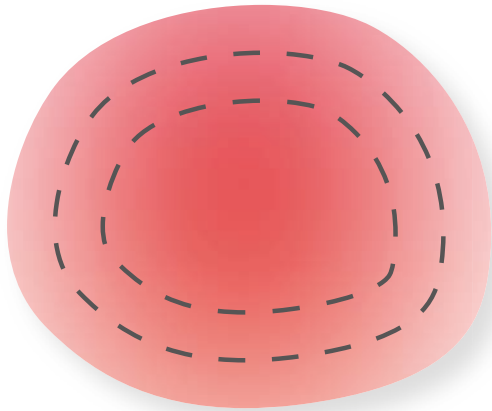
SERVICE OASIS contrarily describes the presence of something that is not existing on a regular basis.



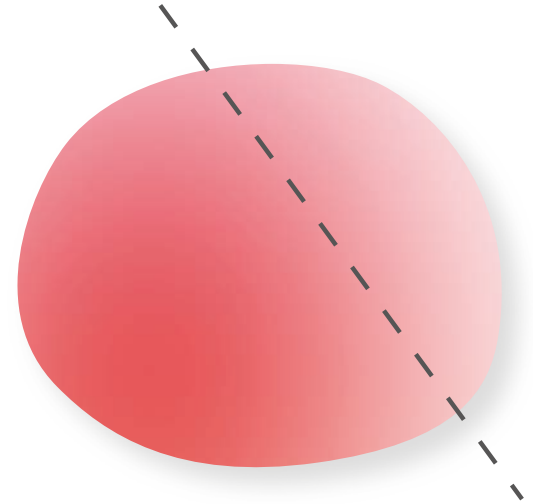
GENERIC DEFINITIONS are simple mathematic definitions originating in geometric shapes and numeric values. Uber's area of service is defined by a polygon, it's radius und the city center.



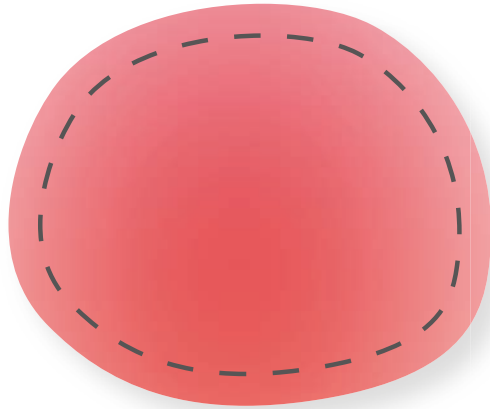
SPECIFIC DEFINITIONS are precise determinations following the cities existing parameters, f.i. streets or building blocks. Platforms with free-floating concepts usually use specific definitions.



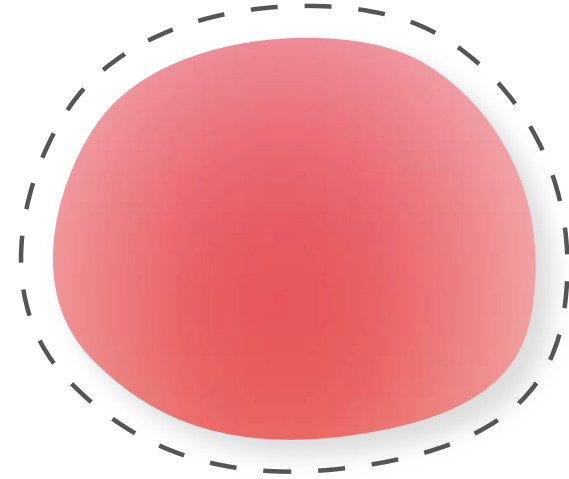
DYNAMIC DEFINITIONS can be observed as tools to manage assets in free-floating concepts. Share Now uses dynamic pricing for the use of their service in relatively remote areas within their definition.



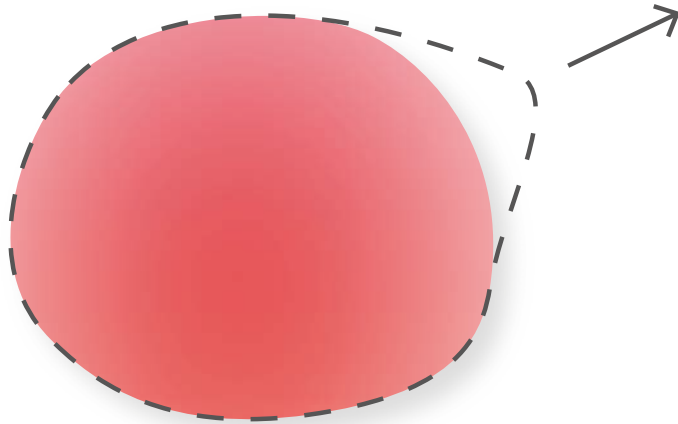
SEASONAL DEFINITION can be observed as adaptations to local weather phenomena. Tier excludes wooden bridges in Innsbruck in winter to avoid slipping accidents.



DECCREASING AREA can be observed following the launch of platform. The area of service is adapted empirically to profitable and unprofitable areas.



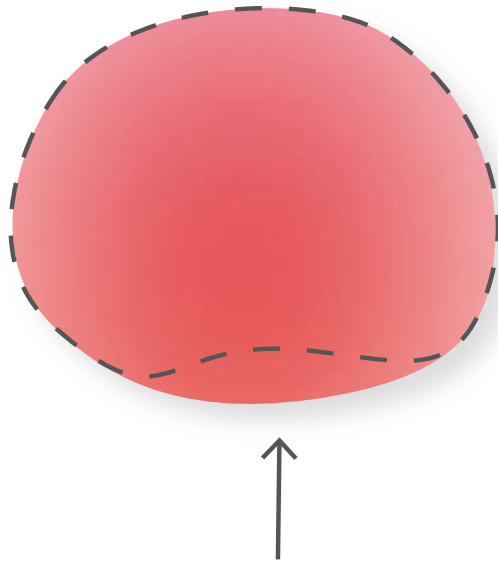
INCREASING AREA can be observed gradually analog to market growth and consolidation. More people are using a certain kind of service while the number of providers is decreasing.



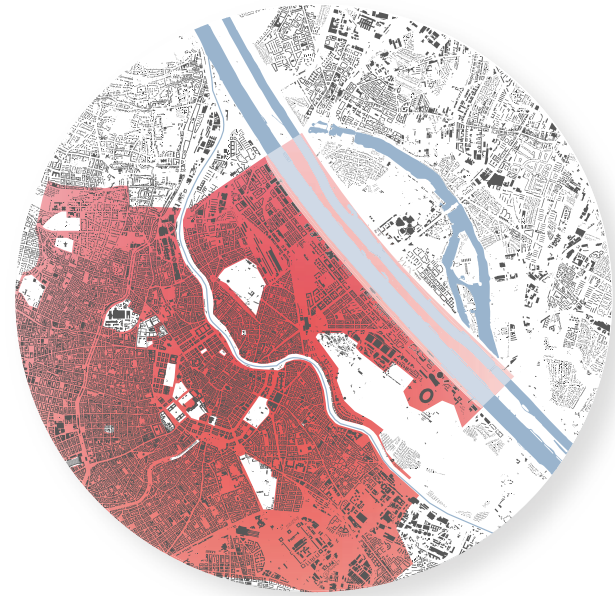
PULL MECHANISMS are mechanisms that lead to local and partial extension.



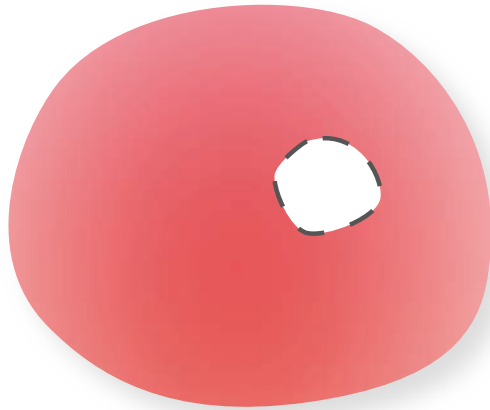
PRIVATE INTERESTS are possible pull factors. Tier extended their definition following the request of student, asking to be able to reach his dormitory.



PUSH MECHANISMS are mechanisms that lead to local and partial contraction.



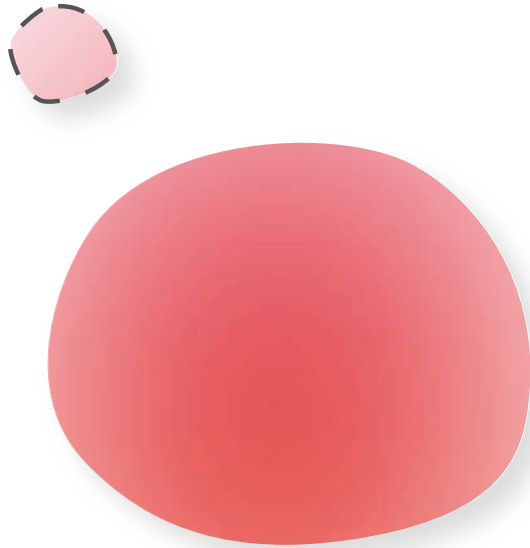
VANDALISM is a possible push factor. Tier removed the danube river banks from their definition following a series of destroyed or disappeared vehicles in this area.



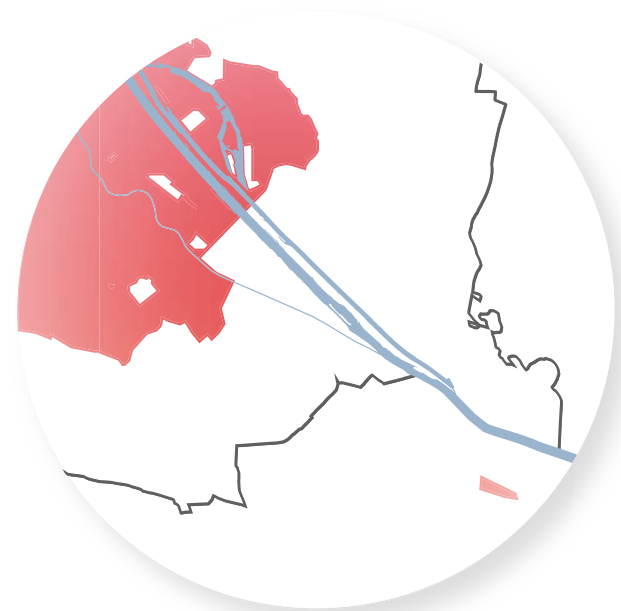
EXCEPTIONS are mechanisms that lead to local and partial areas of exclusion of service within the providers definition.



MUNICIPAL INTERESTS are possible factors for exceptions. Tier excluded several sights from their definition following the cities aim to visually declutter areas of public interest.



ADDITIONS are mechanisms that lead to local and small scale additional areas of service beyond the providers definition.



COMERCIAL INTERESTS are possible factors for additions. Share Now added the Airport Vienna to its defintion. Customers have to pay an additional fee to use this remote area of service.

MAPS

car2go - https://www.car2go.com/media/data/austria/wien/files/c2g_home_area_wien.pdf
 Drive Now - <https://www.drive-now.com/at/de/vienna/map>
 hive - hive app for iOS
 TIER - TIER app for iOS
 uber - <https://www.uber.com/global/de/cities/vienna/>
 all maps were traced in November 2019

LITERATURE

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 2 <https://www.google.com/search?q=define+desert>
 3 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert#Etymology>
 4 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oasis#Etymology>
 5 Baines, J, 1973, "The Environment", Batsford, London, p.3
 6 Health Education Journal, 2000, p. 138
 7 The Observer', 13/9/98, p. 11 "Supermarkets asked to cut prices for the poor"
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 10 Neuman, Susan B.; Moland, Naomi, 2016. "Book Deserts". Urban Education 54: pp.126

IMPRESSUM

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