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Mortar Attack

Andrew Y. J.

In 1963, a British author named Michael Moorcock coined the term Urbicide, which describes the relentless urban destruction prevalent in a territorial disagreement. (1) Sacrificing the city's legibility, rubbles of building material not only bury the collective memory of many generations but also implore a Mayday for its innocent civilians. As various material layers collaboratively shelter inhabitants from harsh exterior conditions, the architectural wall, amongst other temporary forms of fortifications, demands an additional ballistic layer between the vapour barrier and veneered facade. By confronting the inherent defenceless nature of a defensive wall, this text observes architecture's behaviour during turmoil.

Accompanied by dissonant sirens echoing within the city, residents are forced to react to a statewide emergency immediately. As evacuation becomes a survival instinct for many, *kenopsia* (2) foreshadows the turbulence of what's to come. However, the ghost town here differs from the stagnant urban scene during a global pandemic. The abandonment of a neighbourhood denotes an attempted escape from the imminent catastrophe. It foregrounds the urgency to preserve the city's memories of its past, as one of the impacts of urban destruction lies in dislocating the cultural lineage for future generations. From a young adult's perspective, a tangible monument responds to cultural identity, serves as a learning tool synonymous with museum artifacts, and provides critical access to the past. The destruction of such a monument decontextualizes the locality of a familiar environment. This atrocious act creates an irreparable breach that alters people's sense of belonging and attachment to a place. When sandbags enclose monuments and metal sheets cover medieval stained glass panels, these acts of identity preservation further communicate shared perseverance against weaponized aggression. (3)

According to Article 8(2)(b)(v) of the 1998 ICC Statute, «attacking or bombarding, by whatever means, towns, villages, dwellings or buildings which are undefended and which are not military objectives» is considered a serious violation of international law. (4) Yet, some military forces still decidedly aim their weapons at public institutions. Rising from piles of debris, vestigial architectural forms not only provide a space for gathering but rather serve as a symbol of hope, a token of tenacity. While many schools

A



B



A Sandbag on monument at the city centre, 2022.
Image: by the author

B Remote temporary shelters, 2022.
Image: by the author

are under irreparable conditions, some become training facilities that prepare citizens for total warfare. Architecture thus takes on a new participatory identity when an assembly hall becomes an interactive shooting range and factory workers sit at teenage-sized desks and learn about grenades and various other explosives. (5) Nonetheless, this new identity still emphasizes learning but is now incubating a lesson on survival and is deeply engaged in protecting the territory of its own.

As missiles decimate parts of a building facade and unexploded rockets enter the living room of a formerly loving home, architecture as the last frontier appears futile against the rage of the aggressor. Consequently, families are forced to relocate to unfamiliar locations and dwell in temporary housing facilities. (6) Unlike tents occupied during a camping trip, these slender poles and flimsy membranes are tasked with fulfilling civilians' daily needs for an indeterminate time and upholding a shared hope for a peaceful future. Accommodation, in this context, represents a physical adaptation of violence against the city. During a conflict, some also resort to basements and subway stations, hoping these covert below-grade environments can offer more reassurance than their home. However, the safety of underground living is not guaranteed. With larger families crammed in a small room with a few bunker beds, many suffer from insufficient daylight, reliable food sources, and lack of oxygen, together resulting in mortality. (7) Moreover, a 500-kilogram bomb can create an enormous artificial crater in the ground, threatening the livelihood of those in hiding. (8) When running for cover under the sounds of rocket fire becomes an ongoing daily routine, subterranean living emerges as a *pis aller* to survival.

Mortar attack is a striking strategy involving «a smooth bore, muzzle loading, high-angle-of-fire weapon.» (9) On the other hand, mortar is also «a mixture of sand, water, and cement or lime which is put between bricks to hold them together.» (10) The core objective of an urbicide is concealed within these two conflicting definitions (destruction vs. construction), which is to dissolve architecture as a bonding agent of the urban fabric and thereby disintegrate a city's collective memory. As a last resort, people mobilize sandbags to protect the public statues, convert public institutions to military training facilities, and seek refuge in remote, fragile shelters during a war. To those reading this text in a comfortable environment, what if this was your reality? How do you think architecture should react to an urbicide? Perhaps, architecture's participation in a violent urban destruction should be studied from the perspective of a war tactic for its inherent vulnerable qualities. (11)