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Defense in Desolation

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Defense in Desolation

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Thesis Sponsor:

May 13, 2019

Date

Thomas Weaver

Signature

May 13, 2019

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Alexandro Segade

Signature of Second Reader

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Thank you to all of my friends who play music, make art, write and use their creative forces to make a positive mark in a damaged world.

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Defense in Desolation

In psychoanalytic theory, the term *Defense Mechanism* refers to (typically) unconscious mental processes one uses to shield themselves from negative feelings like insecurity and anxiety. Some general examples of defense mechanisms are Repression (of memories and traumas), Projection (one's unwanted feelings onto another person), and Denial (of one's unwanted reality as a form of escapism).¹ Psychological experiences (especially of space) and their impacts are indeed a driving force for my work, perhaps because I am constantly battling my own neuroses, but also because as sentient and conscious beings I don't think we can segregate the concrete, inanimate world from our mental and lived reality. I turn to architecture to understand this duality of the physical and the psychological because of a) my own affinity for the history and theory of architecture, b) my investment in how materiality helps articulate abstract emotions as well as how it provokes them and c) how the psychological impact of the built world is amplified and inherent in my perspectives, through my experiences of living in New York, one of the most structurally dense cities.

I will be discussing how defense mechanisms work in architecture and design both as literal tools to defend some people and threaten others while also considering the psychological

¹Nolen, Jeannette L. "Defense Mechanism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 8 Feb. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/defense-mechanism.

effects and emotional projections an individual can cathect onto the built environment. This dual meaning is integrated throughout this paper, which is broken up into three parts. In part one I discuss defense mechanisms in design. In part two I discuss transmorphic functions of architecture in relation to social conditions and history. Finally, in part three I discuss how these concepts provide the context for my thesis installation, “Defense in Desolation.”

* * * * *

Part I

Architectural mechanisms of oppression have been inherent in civic infrastructures for centuries, a notable example being medieval castle fortification. What are now fantastical manifestations and seductive enchantments were once perfectly articulated constructions of defense. Despite their obvious practicality, fortifications were aesthetically intent on conveying oppression from the start, and I have been enchanted by their unwelcoming spirit. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the concentric castle schematic was developed, marking it as one the utmost defensive design strategies of fortification. The concentric castle layout involved an outer curtain wall, which provided extra protection by adding additional obstacles to penetrating the

castle's interior spaces.² The outer wall was built lower than the inner wall so that archers could still target attackers. Of course castles and fortresses are of a different epoch that seems like light years from our contemporary reality, but the reign of infrastructural defense is alive and present.

In the last decade we have seen the rise of the urban design movement known as “Hostile Architecture” or “Defensive Design,” as it permeates the public spaces of metropolises such as New York, London, and Washington D.C. This has involved the installation of metal spikes on window sills, ledges and pipes, the excessive use of arm rests on benches and intentionally uncomfortable urban furniture, and barred off corners.³ Most explicitly, these design tactics are attacks on homeless people, adolescents, skateboarders, and drug users, but the impact of such installations extends even further to the mainstream population in that it discourages the prolonged use of public space by everyone. These enforcements often go completely unnoticed, cloaked like a Romulan Warbird⁴, only to unveil their looming presence which is ultimately intended to deter and reject groups of people.

As I navigate New York City I am becoming more and more cognizant of the abundant hostile elements, documenting every encounter on every street and accumulating an archive of spiked ledges, unnecessarily intrusive boulders, criminally uncomfortable benches and so forth.

² Rank, Scott M. “Concentric Castles.” *History*, 31 May 2017

³ Savičić Gordan. *Unpleasant Design*. G.L.O.R.I.A, 2013.

⁴ In the *Star Trek* Universe, the Romulan Empire (the Federation's long-lasting hostile enemy) is in possession of cloaking technology which allows their space vessels to remain undetected until they reveal themselves to the enemies in which they encounter.

I've grown particularly fascinated by defensively decorated standpipes, which I've found surrounding corporate buildings throughout Manhattan. Though seemingly mundane, these pipes are a requirement by law for multistory buildings to have on their exterior, so in the event of a fire, firemen can connect hoses and access water and therefore *protect* the building from any further devastation. When the spikes that forbid people from sitting on top of these standpipes (being that they're about 2ft tall it actually makes them an ideal seating height) are added on, so is another layer of "protection." So on the one hand, these pipes have a pretty egalitarian function at their surface, but as agents of defensive design they become more emblematic of the oppressive forces that circulate in the public sphere. Furthermore, my interest in these standpipes extends to their overall form as it relates to the body and more specifically, the sexual. When you remove these objects from their surrounding atmosphere you can start to see them as iconic representations of both the phallus and the breasts, though their industrial objectivity still remains. In an ongoing printmaking project in which I utilize these bodily standpipe icons, I like to refer to them as a "Fetishization in Aegis."

There is also an interesting dialectic between the employment of metal spikes in the urban environment as an anti-loitering tool and the way studs and spikes have been integrated into punk fashion. For decades the youth of punk have been wearing leather cuffs and bootstraps with chains and spikes while studding every square inch of their jackets. This is more than a fashion statement—this is a uniform, an armor. It adds a layer of protection, not

pragmatically, but ideologically, as it reinforces all that punk has always set out to be: loud, anarchical, rebellious—a fetishized chaos. For punks, chains and studs are anti-authoritarian, a rejection of the very systems and figures who implement these anti-homeless/anti-human design strategies of the same aesthetic throughout the public (or quasi-public) sphere. As a participant in punk and a wearer of these fashions, I understand that in a way we are shielding ourselves from the conformist expectations of society, defending ourselves from the normalcy we fight against, from the normalcy that never made us feel at home. But I can't help but wonder if the aesthetics of punk paradoxically make others feel unwelcome? At what point is social enclaving and defensive design morally acceptable and not problematically exclusionary?

* * * * *

Part II

I like to think of buildings as having a sort of perpetual identity crisis, that is a product of the ever-shifting conditions of the society in which they are materially situated. Factors like the socio-political climate, geographical circumstances, religion, ownership and control, all of which are constantly transforming, affect an architecture's utilitarian and moralistic role; buildings are the thread linking all of humanity's triumphs and depravities. I think a problem

with how we view architecture is that we assume buildings to have a fixed function when in fact there is, or needs to be (especially with the growing density of urbanization), fluidity. A bunker can be an aquarium, a church can be a nightclub.

A prime example is The Church of Holy Communion located at 20th Street and 6th Avenue. While its Gothic Revival structural integrity has remained intact, the last 50 years of its life have been nothing short of a multifunctional chaos. From its construction in the mid 1800's and for just over a century it served as an Episcopal Church. But once its spiritual servitude was terminated (both due to financial upheaval and lack of communal religious interest) the Church morphed into the antithesis of devoted Faith. In the 1970s it was a short lived cultural Mecca for the arts and sciences before its ultimate transition into one of New York's most infamous nightclubs, the Limelight.⁵ Within its stone walls held up by classic Gothic ribbed vaulting, the Limelight was a space for queer people and outsiders to be stripped from society's straight jacket of repressed identity, to explore their sexuality and drug induced euphoria. Of course, due to a murder scandal and all of the stigma that followed, the Limelight lost its way as a club and now exists as a fitness center in the ever-gentrified Chelsea neighborhood.⁶

In Bunker Archaeology Paul Virilio writes of his explorations of the cadaverous forts along The Atlantic Wall and states, "These buildings brought upon themselves the hatred of

⁵ Krishna, Priya. "From House of Worship to House of Sin: The History of Chelsea's Limelight Building." *Curbed NY*, 30 Nov. 2016

⁶ Ibid.

passers-by, as they had only yesterday concentrated the fear of death of their endangered users.”

⁷ These structures are now emblems of a distant trauma just as they were once the embodiment of survival for an invading army. Jean Baudrillard writes of his experience standing before the Berlin Wall in 1989 at the time of its demise and recounts:

“It is impossible to recapture the tremor of terror. Everything is insignificant—here, at the pinnacle of history self-exposed by its violence, everything is eerily quiet like an abandoned November field. Every other abandoned urban zone offers the same spectacle. The most amazing thing is that history is being antiquated as *terrain vague*. One can remember it like some nightmare, that is, like fulfilling a desire, but the signs have long since become a true battlefield. They are the true conductors of lethal energy, the electrodes of electrocution. Today, it is the circular flows that burn, those of the head, those of the sensorial and beloved machines that we ourselves are. It is no longer the buildings that go up in flames and the cities that collapse; it is the Hertzian relays of our memories that crackle.”⁸

The Nazi Flak Tower, another monolithic structure used in WWII, once housed civilians circumstantially on the wrong side, as it protected the cities of Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna from Allied air raids and warded wounded victims. The towers’ 11 ft thick concrete walls made them practically indestructible, and it was only after the war that most of the 16 block houses were destroyed, no doubt an attempt to erase any triggers of the horrific genocide that had just occurred.⁹ However, several Flak Towers still remain in Vienna, and one in particular has been repurposed into an 11 story aquarium, known as “Haus der Meers,” where children and families

⁷ Virilio, Paul. *Bunker Archaeology*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. “The Anorexic Ruins.” *Ruins*, edited by Brian Dillon, Whitechapel Gallery, 2011, pp. 67.

⁹ Foedrowitz, Michael, and Don Cox. *The Flak Towers in Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna, 1940-1950*. Schiffer, 1998.

congregate for their leisure, to explore thousands of different species all living harmoniously. With this transmorphic function in mind I wonder if the building, with most of its original presence still preserved, remains Fascist if we designate its purpose to a cause that is the opposite of fascism? There is an inheritance of the once incited trauma engrained in its infrastructure but are we repressing that trauma (a defense mechanism) to allow it to serve a humanitarian (and capitalistic) purpose?

As we can see, a monumental concrete edifice can possess quite a controversial character. Another specific building with a phased and confused history, shifting in servitude, is a peculiar Brutalist building in Johannesburg, South Africa; Ponte City Tower.

Constructed in the 1970s during the period of the apartheid system implemented in South Africa in which segregation between white and black people was strictly enforced, Ponte City Tower was built in what was to be an up and coming and highly developed area for white elites.¹⁰ Functionally and economically speaking its design was based on a limited amount of land and certain housing laws at the time which required windows in both the living room and kitchen, thus yielding its 54 story high, cylindrical and hollow form that allowed natural light to flow within and around its residential spaces.¹¹ Undoubtedly a peculiar and unconventional structure, Ponte's ultimate intrigue lies in its evolutionary history and culturally iconic nature.

During its time of domination by well off white people, most of whom had one if not

¹⁰ Mars, Roman, host. "Ponte City Tower." *99% Invisible*, 26 Sep. 2017.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

multiple maids, it ironically became a way of camouflaging interracial relationships which were prohibited at the time. Because its (capitalistic) design permitted so many apartments and tenants, people of color involved in a relationship with a white person could pose as a maid without being questioned by guards.¹² While this made an interracial relationship seemingly feasible (and perhaps even evoked a slight sense of freedom), it also extended the dehumanizing impact of the apartheid system.

Ponte's history of transformation continued into the 90s following the abolishment of the apartheid system. Its white residents flocked to the suburbs and the complex became predominantly inhabited by people of color and immigrants. Along with the building's physical degradation it became the site of a slew of high crime rates, gang violence, and sex work, deeming it extremely dangerous and ultimately making it a socially recognized icon of a slummy dystopia.¹³

The mode of thought that determines something to be dystopian only when marginalized people are the face of its image is, in itself, criminally problematic. For what needs to be recognized here is that Ponte's subjugation to dystopian conditions began at its very birth in 1975. The (problematic) social circumstances of a building are just as important as its physical appearance and degradation.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Smith, David. "Johannesburg's Ponte City: 'The Tallest and Grandest Urban Slum in the World' ." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 11 May 2015

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Part III

My thesis installation, “Defense in Desolation,” is a wall-sized drawing exploring the two concepts articulated above— defense mechanisms and metamorphic functions in an architecture’s history. Due to its size and rhythmic repetition of forms the drawing imposes itself on viewers and engulfs them. The bunkered forms span 25 ft across and about 13 ft high, nearly exceeding the wall of gallery upon which they are installed. The top watchtower physically surmounts one’s body. Though we know that this is only a pictorial rendition of a militarized concrete edifice, its obtrusiveness still overwhelms us. In a way, this empty watchtower parallels the function of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, an architectural prison schematic designed so that the prison guard could view any point of the prison and its captives at any time while those incarcerated would never know when they were being watched.¹⁴ The panopticon design was intended to promote “good behavior” at all times, but what it does is imply a greater force of control over those incarcerated. As in my drawing, and even in the defensive design tactics discussed earlier, these camouflaged surveillance devices allude to an

¹⁴ Bentham, Jeremy. *Jeremy Bentham: The Panopticon Writings*. Edited by Božovič Miran, Verso, 1995.

Orwellian dystopia that feels dismally real.

“Defense in Desolation” directly references images of the now abandoned bunkers along The Atlantic Wall that now exist in desolation. Like most ruined fortifications, bunkers, outside of their functionality and in their abandonment, evoke a grim, uncanny moment of time—an oppressive presence that eternally remains. Also referenced (on the right side of the composition) is the Church of St. Bernadette, a brutalist church in France designed by the architect Claude Parent. Parent was a close friend of Paul Virilio and, after visiting the bunkers himself (particularly the ones that had slid off the cliffs and lodged themselves in the sand), remained inspired by the indelible, vertiginous experience of their ruin, describing it as “you tumbled through a strange room; the floor was so sloped that you couldn’t tell whether what you were standing on was a slanted floor or a former wall.”¹⁵ Many of Parent’s projects went on to evoke this idea of euphoria through disorientation, including the Church of St. Bernadette. Subsequently, Parent published the manifesto “TWELVE SUBVERSIVE ACTS TO DODGE THE SYSTEM” which I believe provides a proper framework for viewing and understanding my drawing. The manifesto, in its entirety, states:

TWELVE SUBVERSIVE ACTS TO DODGE THE SYSTEM

1. OPEN THE IMAGINARY
2. OPERATE IN ILLUSION
3. DISLODGE THE IMMOBILE
4. THINK CONTINUITY

¹⁵ Maak, Niklas. “CLAUDE PARENT: The Supermodernist.” *032c*, 26 July 2011, 032c.com/the-supermodernist-architect-claude-parent/.

5. SURF ON THE SURFACE
6. LIVE IN OBLIQUENESS
7. DESTABILIZE
8. USE THE FALL
9. FRACTURE
10. PRACTICE INVERSION
11. ORCHESTRATE CONFLICT
12. LIMIT WITHOUT CLOSING

—Claude Parent, 2001¹⁶

In many ways, I think this is the ideal lexicon in which I want the drawing, and my work in general, to speak. In “Defense in Desolation” the different architectural references are fragmented, distorted and hybridized. While the forms coalesce into one overall imposing composition, they are combative at times with each other and their reality. Some areas are more direct and architecturally recognizable while others are implicitly allusive, intentionally unresolved or fictitious, which is accomplished through the formalized drama of fracturing. What this does in turn, is create a liminal (in-between) space, a space that is seemingly structural but not completely grounded, and is ultimately displaced from a concrete reality.

Another seemingly subversive tactic in the drawing is the inclusion of blacked out shapes (Fig VI). In their intrusion these black forms create a voidlike vastness. They are an entanglement of push and pull and seem both empty and lifeless on one hand, and completely hypnotic and engulfing on the other. They also act as an incursion of solidity amidst the very

¹⁶ Ibid.

gestural and washy way in which I've applied the graphite and charcoal. I see these solid black forms as offering the structural integrity in a drawing that otherwise is largely dominated by a quality of ephemerality created through my light and wavering mark making on the translucent Duralar paper.

The mark making in itself parallels the rawness of concrete, the integral material for military fortification and Brutalist buildings (the name deriving from *Béton brut* which translates to raw concrete). Working with water soluble graphite, charcoal and mica powder marks and washes on top of Duralar's plastic surface allows me to be very fluid and tactile in combination with allowing the materials to more or less chemically disperse on their own. I like to refer to some of these textures and marks as "microcosmic explosions" and "tornado armies"—atmospheric and climatic warfare (Figs. V & VII). These are moments of a fluidly organic interjection contained in my articulation of inanimate structures, a push and pull between the real and the illusory, the bold and the ephemeral.

* * * * *

Ultimately, I am most interested in the way social inequity and political control is solidified and mediated through architecture, whether it's something as fantastical as a centuries old Welsh Castle or as mundanely overlooked as a bench. Political control is implicitly in the

urban planning that forces ghettoization as much as it is in the very sidewalks with no curb cuts. It is in the imaginary borders that separate territories as much as it is in the literal walls that keep people out and lock people in. Defense seems like an unavoidable tool, even though it is always paradoxical, what protects one, destroys another (physically, psychologically, morally). What this seems to come down to is your identity, your class, your privilege. And so I ask, are you being threatened or protected?

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Image List

Figure I: Installation view, Defense in Desolation, 13ft x 25ft, Charcoal, Graphite, Acrylic on Duralar, 2019

Figure II: Installation view, Defense in Desolation, 13ft x 25ft, Charcoal, Graphite, Acrylic on Duralar, 2019

Figure III: Installation view, Defense in Desolation, 13ft x 25ft, Charcoal, Graphite, Acrylic on Duralar, 2019

Figure IV: Detail, Defense in Desolation

Figure V: Detail, Defense in Desolation

Figure VI: Detail, Defense in Desolation

Figure VII: Detail, Defense in Desolation



Figure I (top), Figure II (bottom)





Figure III



Figure IV (top), Figure V (bottom)





Figure VI



Figure VII