

Architecture in a nebulous war

Ole Bouman

Archis

At the time of writing, a war is being fought on behalf of me, on behalf of you, on behalf of the whole 'broad coalition'. On one side there is us: the global community, technology, capital, the military-industrial complex, civilization. On the other side, a man in a cave. He wears a beard, a caftan and a turban. Against the wall is a Kalashnikov. The man is alone with his microphone. He doesn't look exactly frightened.

We know that this man is enormously wealthy but where his money is and how he is still able to access it, that we do not know. We also know that this man has a network, but how big that network is, how ramified, how real, that we do not know. As such, our enemy remains a lone wolf but his most important weapon is mass sentiment. And resentment. Make no mistake, war on these terms could last a very long time...

In the past we've been used to bigger enemies. The East Bloc, Communism, Maoism... They possessed terrifying weapons arsenals and massive conventional forces. Even terrorism in those days had a name and a clear objective. If it was not a country or an ideology, it certainly had cells that could be 'rolled up'. But rolling up is no longer an option. Networks have no identity, no inevitable boundary, no centre. In an age when everything is branded, El Qaida has no logo. Osama bin Laden is a projection designed to give a face to something that is in fact no more than a proliferation of hate. Against such abstract creations, bombing is useless. Nor are ground troops of much avail. This is no isolated rotten spot that can be swiftly patched up. This looks much more like systemic rot. In which case, new foundations are needed.

But on what are we to place those new foundations? What happened on September 11th has only vague causes. No one has offered any immediate reason; all we have heard are deductions. In turn, the subsequent punitive action has been based only on 'circumstantial evidence'. The war is being conducted against an opponent who is supposed, some how or other, 'to have had a hand in it'. The entire world is being turned upside down on the basis of vague aggression,

vague suspicions and vague actions. Everywhere where argument should count, suggestion prevails. Where it should have remained a suggestive threat, devilish precision is revealed. The circle is closed: when the foundation is destroyed, fundamentalism reigns. The result is a nebulous war on the *terrain vague* of the satellite picture.

Architecture is now undergoing its third great blow in the space of some 25 years. First there was time, which lost its moral authority. Architecture no longer had to be *absolument moderne*. It could be blithely anachronistic, drawing on a boundless historical repertoire. Next there was space, which lost its sacred status as the essence of architecture. People started to spend more and more of their quality time in virtual space such that network space became a social space to rival the built environment. And now it is the turn of cause and effect.

The relevance of this for contemporary architecture goes beyond mere cultural context. The substance of architecture's classic metaphorical value is also at stake here. For centuries architecture has been the expression of the philosophical trinity by which we simultaneously understood, affirmed and represented the world: time, space, and cause and effect. Now that this unity has ceased to be a unity, architecture must redefine its mission. This calls a lot of intense and innovative thinking.

Archis has made a start by asking several leading architectural thinkers for their views on architecture in the wake of the attack.