The architecture of destruction Ole Bouman

Ever heard of Kevin Sites? He is a reporter who runs a blog, currently under the Yahoo! banner, about his experiences in the 'Hot Zones' of the world.

He's gone to dozens of conflict areas, where he, armed with a camcorder and all on his own, tries to cover 'how conflict feels on the ground' by letting people tell their own stories.

Even under the veil of high professionalism and the gloss of a global audience, you can feel how gruesome the circumstances are of so many people.

Whether it is a matter of more extensive coverage or real quantities, it is clear that we live in an age in which conflict is increasingly considered inevitable. It is taken for granted. With the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, we have started to realize that violence in the 21st century isn't necessarily directed at people, but can also, and even more so, be inflicted upon buildings. As symbols of the value system of the enemy (like the Samarra mosque), they are attacked or blown up in order to incite outrage, fear and a degree of resentment that seems to be stronger than any mass murder could have engendered. It is also a new trend in warfare not only to fight the enemy, but his habitat and infrastructure and even that of people who might harbor him. In sum, while the reasons for terrorist attacks and pre-emptive strikes become vaguer, retaliations become ever more severe and the consequent suffering more widespread. And most importantly, destruction is no longer the outcome of blind rage, but increasingly a matter of meticulous calculation. Destruction has become an alternative architecture.

Underlining this historical reality makes it even more interesting to see how those who create the stuff that is destroyed, architects, react. It is quite remarkable that there seems to be virtually no discourse on this subject within the global professional community. While there is a dramatic proliferation of the unbuilding of cities worldwide, most architects remain silent. This is even true when they are directly involved, as citizens of countries at war, as soldiers of modernity who are asked to build on the tabula rasa of city governments, or as professionals effected by massive neglect, mismanagement or the misconduct of developers. Even if the opportunities to analyze this destruction and enter public debate or to act constructively to repair or reconstruct are right in front of them, any and all architectural engagement with this subject has remained at the level of incidental intervention.

Let me probe one reason for this passivity. Architecture has always been identified with construction. It appeals to our deepest feelings about the fragility of life and how to overcome it. Architecture is there to protect, it offers shelter from the outside world. In literature, theology, politics and philosophy it has been associated with the positive, the will to elevate, with resurrection, with hope.

And if people managed to start thinking from scratch, in a utopian gesture toward completely unknown worlds to inspire mankind with a destiny, architecture was the first to help provide the images of the better world. Architecture was about giving shape to dreams and striving for utilitarian perfection: a better world that needed to be built. Architecture simply has a hard time addressing despair.

Yet even if we accept this historical rationale for perpetuated innocence, it does not mean it is justified. This notion of architecture as the vehicle of hope and progress is under siege. This is an age of realism. A time of acknowledging the human condition as possibly a dangerous, fanatical, destructive force. At least in the West, today people are inclined to save what they have, rather than risk achieving their aspirations. It is also a time in which historical tendencies like globalization are widely accepted as inexorable forces that need to be coped with, not challenged.

In sum, metaphorically speaking, it is a time to shelter against fear and accommodate private interest, not build new edifices of collective vision or monuments of general optimism. If war is not a fact, it has become a projection in our minds and hearts.

For instance, this is also an era of renewed interest in certain worldviews which for a long time were seen as utterly disgusting and unacceptable. Quite suddenly, violence is back on the agenda; not as an expression of evil, but sometimes as auseful tool to solve problems. Warmongers, social Darwinists and professional Cassandras are taking the floor to proclaim the purifying value of violence.

Most people, living in their safe havens of affluent societies, take it as a matter of press, covering events too far away to engage, or feel perhaps somewhat tempted by the new totalitarian seduction. Others, those on the fringes of the global village, have to deal with the consequences of these new forms of aggression.

Whichever side one is one, violence is increasingly becoming a norm, if not a value.

All this notwithstanding, a positive side effect of the new realism is a clearer view of aggressors' agendas and ideologies. Indeed, architecture often reveals itself currently as a criminal tool of oppression and destruction. Witness Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon: modern violence is pervasive, abstract and dehumanizing. It destroys buildings and communities with a frequency never seen before. As a result, it forces ordinary people to improvise and develop ways of survival.

What does it mean to stand up for those who are victimized? Is there also room for architecture on that side of the spectrum and if so, how?

Perhaps the most daring and at the same time uncanny position is for architects who device strategies to cope with destruction by finding ways to deceive, ridicule or pervert it and in so doing possibly help to avoid it.

When marshals order bombs to be dropped, we need to marshal our resources to deal with post-conflict situations. When nature hits our habitats, we need new ways to inhabit this world and cope with nature. When crime and corruption destroy public trust, we need a new sense of public domain. When violence is the norm, we need to violate the status quo in architecture.

This is the aim of this issue of Volume. When the rulers of this planet no longer come to public forums, we will come to them. Our print run is currently 8000 copies. If our distribution system does not reach you in Kabul, Kigali, Prishtina, Beirut, Ramallah or elsewhere or you know someone who would benefit from a copy, please contact us and we shall have one sent to you.



'Hot Zones' in the world, as enlisted by reporter Kevin Sites. http://hotzone.yahoo.com/