

# The architecture of destruction

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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.

