“We modern civilizations have learned to recognize that we are mortal like the others,” declared the French poet Paul Valéry shortly after the end of World War I in his essay La Crise de l’Esprit.\(^1\) In the aftermath of September 11, architecture and urban design have been struck by a similar realization of the frailty of what they had tried to achieve from the very beginning of modernity: an environment that would contribute to the political and social pacification of the planet.

The attack against the World Trade Center meant that the twin towers were not interpreted as innocent symbols. Although initially they had been intended as a tribute to global prosperity, the terrorists targeted them as the embodiment of a worldwide system of economical and cultural oppression.\(^2\)

**Introduction**

The context of this event should perhaps give incentive to reexamine one of the fundamental assumptions lying behind architectural and urban practices, namely the intimate conviction that architectural and urban design systematically and ideologically promote order against disorder, and seek out stability in lieu of instability, fostering peace rather than promoting conflict. Throughout the twentieth century, there were, to be sure, exceptions to this disciplinary modus. On the eve of World War I, the Italian Futurists had, for example, praised the aggressive side of modernity, the beauty of industrialized conflict. Their leader, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had been especially adamant on that point in the founding manifesto of the movement in which one could read statements such as “Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece.”\(^3\) During the interwar years and World War II, Italian and German Fascist architectures clearly were imbued with militaristic values. But the general trend in Italy had been a quest for architectural and urban principles that would address and help to heal the social diseases of the time, enabling mankind to rid itself of war and social unrest. Le Corbusier was especially clear on that subject with his recurring alternation between architecture—the desire for a new and modern architecture for everyone—and its opposite, the unwelcome possibility of revolution and chaos.\(^4\)

History can perhaps be a useful instrument to distance oneself from the typically modern assumption of the possibility for architecture to be a pure instrument of betterment and progress. Even if one leaves aside episodes like Albert Speer’s contribution to the Third Reich dreams of grandeur, can architecture be free from any violent dimension? Can it be totally innocent?

A rapid tour in a more remote past shows indeed that architecture as well as public space have often had close ties with threat and violence, and these ties at certain moments of history have not merely been concerned with specialized domains of military infrastructure and architecture. Threat and violence represent a broader source of inspiration for entire sectors of architecture and urban design production and discourse. More generally, there is probably no architecture or public space without some relation with violence. Beyond the capacity of modernity to be self-deceiving on this point, the lesson to be drawn from these episodes could perhaps apply to some aspects of the present.

**Architecture, Threat, and Violence from Vitruvius to the First Industrial Revolution**

Contrary to the peaceful image that theorists have often tried to promote, threat and violence have been present in Western architecture almost from the start. After all, Vitruvius himself was an engineer versed in military matters. Besides the five column types and other fundamental areas of knowledge in the architectural discipline, war techniques and war engines are presented by Vitruvius as part of the elemental body of disciplinary knowledge in his ten books on architecture. From the Renaissance on, this military dimension
was among the factors that ensured the success of his treatise among theorists and practitioners. Indeed, fortification was a branch of the architectural discipline, one that influenced domains beyond the discrete limits of architectural practice.

If one takes the example of French architecture, the influence of fortification is noticeable in many famous Renaissance and seventeenth-century buildings, from the gate of Philibert Delorme’s castle of Anet that used forms characteristic of the bastioned defensive system to Claude Perrault’s Observatory. The latter’s sharply angled stone walls play with the directions of the sun in a manner that evokes a relation between fortified walls and the trajectory of projectiles (Figure 1). The resonance between Perrault’s building and King Louis XIV’s aggressive politics of domination was made further evident by a comparison drawn by the King’s minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, between the triumphal arch that Claude Perrault had designed to celebrate the military victories of the Sun King and the Observatory that was supposed to celebrate the scientific achievements of the French nation. “Triumphal arch for the terrestrial conquests—observatory for the skies,” noted the minister (Figure 2). According to Colbert, the astronomic discoveries were to be interpreted as an extension of the terrestrial conquests of the King. In seventeenth-century France, architecture was by no means an innocent practice foreign to the exercise of violence. Architecture was above all an instrument for legitimizing power, authority, and military threat and conquest. The same was true of the formal gardens designed by Andre Le Nôtre.

Their massive earthworks, reminiscent of the bastioned system, and their well-ordered flowerbeds seemed to parade like disciplined regiments clearly related to fortification techniques and more generally to the military’s spatial organizational systems. Despite the changing social and artistic ideals that shaped eighteenth-century architectural production, the connection between architecture, threat, and violence remained fundamental. Michel Foucault’s analysis of the new panoptic scheme mobilized for hospitals or prisons, with its intricate blend of generous belief and disciplinary practices, is well known. Panoptic prisons were inspired by a desire to reeducate through surveillance and associated threat. Beyond the realm of the penitentiary, this kind of hybrid between social

1. Bastion “Bellelle,” built under the direction of General Marc René Montalembert. (Image in public domain.)

2. Paris Observatory (Observatoire de Paris-Meudon), 1671, Claude Perrault. (Image in public domain.)
generosity, on the one hand, and threat and violence, on the other, permeated an entire range of production. Boulée’s famous utopian compositions, for example, constantly balance between these two poles of Enlightenment political thought. Besides purely civilian programs like museums or assembly halls, the architect designed a series of city gates clearly permeated with the desire to “speak” an aggressive military language.8 There are also striking similarities between the architectural vocabulary Boulée promoted and the evolution of military architecture from this period. To be sure, the fortifications designed and built under General Marc René de Montalembert—forts that were to influence many later military realizations—seem almost Bouléan in appearance with their simple geometries and dramatic masses.9 Despite the eighteenth-century aspiration to transform society in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts, its architecture communicated a complex balance between inferences of reassurance and inferences of threat.

The iconography of reassurance and the iconography of threat were often concurrently present in the same project. Besides prisons, state-sponsored architectural programs such as courts of justice were especially suited to this affiliation of opposites, an affiliation explored theoretically by the Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria. Beccaria’s highly influential treatise On Crimes and Punishments, published in 1764, was infused with the question of how modern society might—through proper sentencing—be more able to balance the civic need for society to punish the criminal severely and the equally important aspiration to ensure the criminal’s redemption and return to that society. Many eighteenth-century projects for courts of justices were born from within this Enlightenment discourse. This was the case of Ledoux’s proposal for Aix-en-Provence new court.10 A contemporaneous student project of the Ecole des Ponts et Chausées, a civil engineering institution in which architecture occupied an important place, is even more explicit.11 Whereas the marble stairs and the columns of the project speak of the majesty and generosity of justice, the cavernous openings in the basement that give light to the underground prison carry a definite threat (Figure 3).

Nineteenth-century examples of the representation of this constant negotiation between peaceful and more aggressive concerns are easily found. One must not forget in particular how the Gothic Revival movement was deeply rooted both in a social discourse exalting the liberty of the people and in racial considerations founded on the idea of an eternal struggle between nations and civilizations. Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc’s work can be understood as embodying this connection between these two seemingly conflicting themes. Gothic was for Viollet-le-Duc intimately linked to an urban civilization that he interpreted in terms of individual emancipation and to a racial impulse, with definitely aggressive connotations, that could not be entirely rationalized. Even in his Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle on medieval architecture, there is a dark side of Gothic in profound accordance with the tensions of nineteenth-century culture.12 This conflictual aspect is still traceable in Auguste Choisy’s seemingly more dispassionate history of architecture. Choisy’s diagrams of the diffusion of the Gothic style describe a process that might be understood as analogous to invasion and military conquest13 (Figure 4).

The conscious acceptance of a constant interaction between ideals of emancipation and
aggressiveness was probably lost with the modern movement’s quest for a purity of intention that architecture had in reality never truly possessed. Failing to remember the darker side of reason, the modern architects and urbanists tried to construct a world in which conflict would necessarily disappear as the utopian vision was fully constructed. Architecture was either to make revolution impossible, if one was to follow the Corbusian modus, or to be fully complicit in the revolution in a manner that would finally put an end to the turmoil of history. This goal of expunging conflict was all the more paradoxical since a particularly important stream of the modern movement had been infused at its naissance with a fascination for military conflict and conflict. The Futurist movement was the earliest example of this, and there has always been and there remains a certain enthrallment with conflict and militarism from a small but quite resilient stream of the modern movement. The perspective of war and the galvanization of the energies it entailed fascinated many designers in their pursuit of a heroic modernization. The vast destruction resulting from the two world wars and the numerous urban tabula rasa that were a direct consequence of the new totalizing forms of warfare represented both a source of terror and horror and a source of inspiration and a locus of opportunity to introduce new forms of modern urbanism to the now-damaged traditional city.

Digging further, modern architecture was even more ambiguous in its desire to help create a new human being and world citizen emancipated from the prejudices and defects of the past. In numerous cases, this desire bordered on eugenics. Le Corbusier himself did not always escape this pitfall with his enduring interest for Alexis Carrel’s eugenist theories.14

But the denial of these complex relations to war and violence remained quite general. Modern architecture saw itself in the white clothes of the entirely innocent. Beyond its fashionable dimension analyzed by Mark Wigley, modern architecture’s initial obsession with the color white might have something to do with this attitude of denial.15 Such an attitude was to survive the modernist era despite the postmodernist attempts at the demystification of the architectural agenda. It is striking how the contemporary obsession for sustainable development with its ambition to contribute unequivocally to the salvation of mankind and its environment is oblivious of the unavoidable ambiguity of architecture. Just as there cannot be an architecture totally liberated from its aggressive dimension, there probably cannot be an architecture that is wholly environment friendly and “green.”
Public Space and the Myth of Peaceful Citizenship

What has been asserted above in terms of architecture is also true of the way public spaces have been generally considered throughout the twentieth century in relation to war and architecture. In countries like France and the United States, the discourse on public space is frequently saturated with images of peaceful agoras and refreshingly civilized Italian piazzas as if these models were unsurpassable landmarks implying, if not ensuring, harmonious relations between citizens. Even the reconstruction of a city like Beirut has given into this imagery.

A closer historical inquiry reveals a muddier history in which public space has always been characterized by a history of violence just as frequently as it has by more serene activities and civil conduct. The agoras and forums of the ancients were marked by recurring and frequent episodes of violence, riots, and murder. The Italian piazzas of the Renaissance and certainly the medieval public spaces of Italy were places of armed clashes between various factions. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is in this respect truer than the images forged and circulated by modern planners and urban designers. In the same perspective, Baron von Haussmann’s use of public space as a potential military asset in case of riot or rebellion was by no means exceptional in the nineteenth-century metropolis even if the strategic importance of Haussmannian public space has been often exaggerated by historians. Like architecture, public space is, has always been, profoundly ambiguous (Figure 5).

In the past, the conflictual nature of public space was often translated in terms of literal incompleteness. Many urban squares were never finished as a result of contradictory political, social, and fiscal forces that were exerted on them. Today, urban places, like the celebrated Djemaa el-Fna square in the city of Marrakech, Morocco, provide spectacular examples of this unfinished character so different from the well-ordered, rationalized, and pathetically empty public spaces that designers try to implement today. One has only to imagine for a moment a typical suburban office park to understand this point.

It is striking to observe how, in spite of the multiple failures that surround us, the myth of civic space as peaceful, uneventful public space has not only endured but also infiltrated the latest discourse on public space. From William Mitchell to Stephen Graham, the discourse on electronic public spaces generally reproduces the same basic assumption that any space of public encounter could be pacific only.

After September 11

In the post–September 11 context, what kind of lessons can be drawn from these historical tendencies? The essential one is the recognition of our loss of innocence or rather the rediscovery of the fundamentally ambiguous nature of architecture and civic space (Figure 6).

The ambiguity was perhaps more evident in the preindustrial age when the ambition to substantially improve the conditions of the populace was almost immediately negated by the forces of nature or by the vagaries and darker impulses of man. In a world constantly confronted with crises, total and definitive pacification seemed out of reach. With the development of scientific and technological knowledge, we have perhaps forgotten...
that pacification is at the very most an aspirational target but never a definitive state. In the twentieth century, architecture and urbanism have often followed this utopic path, behaving as if instability, disorder, threat, and violence were problems that could be solved and forever vanquished through good design.

Today, designers should perhaps assume the loss of innocence of their practice rather than sticking to the modern faith in the good-natured character of architecture and urbanism. The risk is otherwise to appear as utterly provocative. Indeed, the most provocative aspect of modernity is perhaps its aspiration to be universal without coming to terms with the belligerence and aggression implied by this universalism. A caricature of this attitude can be observed today with the multiplication of friendly looking offices and condominiums that are in reality inseparable from the rise of social anxiety and function under video surveillance. There is something almost insulting in that kind of denial of the true context in which these realizations take place.

What I am advocating here is certainly not the invention of a new kind of panoptic design establishing itself as a mean of coercion. In between the denial of the violence at work in the constructed world and the total submission to it, there is probably a way to be found. Even if architecture can no longer pretend to save the world or even to heal it, it can express some of its fundamental tensions, making these tensions decipherable by the public.

For architects today, engaging in critical or ideological practices certainly does not have the same content as it did in the decades marked by the infiltration of Marxist theory into architectural discourse and production when one was supposed to denounce an existing political and economical domination in the perspective of a radical change. Here I would invoke work as diverse as the Russian Deconstructivists to the later Italian Rationalists. Today, we can no longer believe that a new golden age is awaiting us. Actually, we seem to be immersed in an everlasting present deprived of any clear historical perspective, hence the “end of history” famously advocated by Francis Fukuyama a few years ago.19

For architecture and urban design, a new pitfall is perhaps the temptation to transform the violence and the threats of our time into universals like those politicians and scholars who present the so-called “war against terrorism” as a new crusade opposing the Western and Islamic civilizations. We live in an age of globalization, but this situation does not imply that violence and threats are necessarily global. Actually, they are often local even if their consequences can be widespread.

This perspective could perhaps lead to a possible substitute for the critical regionalism in which Kenneth Frampton saw the redemption of the modern legacy.20 Instead of expressing local permanence in tension with the allegedly universal values of modernism, what is perhaps at stake now is to be able to convey some sense of the local instability that pervades any attempt at permanence.

Beyond its numerous digital implications, I would interpret in this light the success of themes such as the “interface” in today’s architecture, for the interface is never peaceful. It has more to do with conflict than with anything else. As an interface, architecture is perhaps no longer looking for plenitude. Its task is perhaps to make zones of potential or actual conflict more legible.

In the aftermath of September 11, we are reminded once again that the power of architecture
is not only to contribute to the built environment. Shortly after World War II, confronted with the destruction of entire cities, Europeans began to realize that architecture could also be meaningful because of its complete disappearance. Reprints of prewar postcards of Berlin and other major German cities multiplied commemorating what existed before the war. Monuments were no longer tributes to permanence but to the necessarily ephemeral nature of human realizations. The destruction of the World Trade Center towers and the painful feeling of absence it has generated point in the same direction. Today, architectural meaning might very well be displaced, lying now in the discordance between the desire for presence and permanence and the realization that presence and permanence are to a large extent illusory.

In between presence and absence, built and destroyed, a vast field is unfolding before our eyes in the domain of the incomplete or unfinished. This domain is neither a foundation nor a work in progress; it is neither a ruin nor a trace. It lies before us. We might very well then rediscover the relevance of some of the theoretical positions held by the Italian Radicals in the early 1970s, like their denunciation of the compulsion of architecture to appear as a form of cultural achievement, a critique admirably conveyed by projects like the Continuous Monument (1972). Architectural design, when it is seeking perfection and virtue, might very well give birth to the ultimate prison and the unavoidable trap. This represents its ultimate violence. The time has perhaps come for us to reengage the possibility of architecture as an open process.

Notes
10. See Marie Bels and Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Sur les traces de Ledoux (Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses, 2004).
11. M. Sevestre, Project for a Court House, 1782, Library of the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, MS 105.
14. The dimension of the eugensics of modernity is currently under investigation by the French historian of art and architecture Laurent Baridon. It is one of the themes of his forthcoming book Le Mythe de Dinocrate: L’architecte, le corps et l’utopie.