

Building on a Vision: An Anatomy of Defensive Architectural Paradigms

**Rouzbeh Akhbari
and David Schnitman**

In discourses of urbanism, death is identified as a threat, a terrain to be avoided; while life is understood as a landscape to be further manufactured, mobilized, and utilized. This supposed dichotomy between spaces of death and life has led to the generation of clearly demarcated built environments. Within modernist and colonial processes of place-making, these categories are delineated by border zones, whose construction relies increasingly on defensive architectural paradigms. Defensive architecture is the construction of built forms such as walls, turnstiles or bollards, which aim to postpone or suspend the inevitable arrival of the ultimate threat: death. In the continuation of a colonial agenda referred to as “the War on Terror” built forms common to distant militarized zones return to the homeland as tools for spatial management. The construction of these objects is informed by specific visual paradigms. In what follows, we aim to unpack the role of linear, aerial, and temporal perspectives in the conception of urban defensive strategies. We challenge the death/life binary by proposing speculative design projects that function in the interstitial spaces of Toronto’s fortified architecture. These intermediary spatial interventions exist as satirical props for a performative decolonial practice that insists on re-examing the city beyond a paranoiac mechanism for the living.

In order to unpack how different visual paradigms inform defensive architectures, we will begin with the convention of linear perspective. Established in the early Renaissance,

linear perspective as a tool of representation involves the convergence of horizontal and vertical planes on the horizon in reference to a vanishing point. This individualized perspective “makes the single eye the centre of the visible world,” addressing a single spectator who is in one place at one time.¹ This form of vision is useful for determining one’s surroundings in relation to the horizon line and allows one to visualize threats within the limits of their vision. Historically, watchtowers and other edifices for identifying threats on the horizon depended on a layered reinforcement of their perimeters through walls and other barriers. In 1871, during the Paris Commune, this method of spatial layering as a means of defence was mobilized in a makeshift manner by the communards throughout city streets as barricades. Subsequently, these informal barricades were appropriated and cemented as permanent structures surrounding secured buildings, often in the form of car-bomb obstacles, barbed-wire fences, and motorized gates. We propose an addition to the barriers that have militarized our urban landscape: a chair, specifically constructed for the gap between the car-bomb barriers in front of the American General Consulate in Toronto. Designed to accommodate up to four individuals, participants can sit and engage in dialogue as they monitor their field of vision for encroaching enemies.

Let us now turn our gaze downward and consider how, in the

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 16.



Rouzbek Akhbari, *Periculum Inspectoris*, 2016. Steel, CDV Geiger Counter. 40 by 210 by 20 cm.
Photo by Rouzbek Akhbari.



Rouzbek Akhbari, *E Pluribus Unum*, 2015. Ebonized Ash, 45 by 155 by 55 cm. Photo by Niloufar Nelly Goodarzi.

aesthetic arena, linear perspective has been supplanted by a god's-eye-view from above. In her essay *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, Hito Steyerl remarks that the god's-eye-view made ubiquitous through mapping software is "a proxy perspective that projects delusions of stability, safety, and extreme mastery onto a backdrop of expanded 3D sovereignty."² Beginning in World War One, airplane photography, initially used to comprehend an enemy's state of affairs, facilitated the expansion of an aerial perspective by uniting technologies of transportation and communication for the purposes of warfare.³ Today, aerial reconnaissance has shed much of its "lag time" and live video surveillance is often conducted remotely by unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones. Used by militaries to remotely survey "dangerous individuals" and zones of conflict, armed drones combine legal and lethal protocols of judgement that result in well-known atrocious consequences.⁴

At the same time, the proliferation of drones bought for consumer electronic purposes will likely have architectural ramifications that affect the morphology of the city. The prevalence of commercial drones will inevitably demand specialized infrastructure for safe operation and storage. We anticipate this infrastructure will function similar to architectural multipliers such as residential garages or bicycle racks. Inspired by similar forms of defensive architecture, we propose the design of a drone landing pad that disguises itself as an innocuous garden planter. In dense

urban environments, efficient drone operation will depend on its seamless integration in the urban milieu. The dual function of these pads as planters might allow them to adorn the grounds of civic institutions, rooftop gardens in financial districts, and privately owned public spaces.

Now, as an experiment let us close our eyes and imagine the threats that are beyond the threshold of human sensory experience. These include radioactive materials, toxic chemicals, viruses, and other forms of "delayed destruction that [are] dispersed across time and space, attritional [forms of] violence that [are] typically not viewed as violence at all."⁵ With advancements in biological, chemical, and radioactive warfare, the practice of defensive architecture now accounts for "violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive."⁶ This epistemological shift is largely concerned with complicating spatial representation by engaging with the temporal cartographies of slow violence. For example, in the event of a nuclear disaster or an environmental catastrophe, one's bearings are lost and orientation with

² Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," *e-flux*, April 2011.

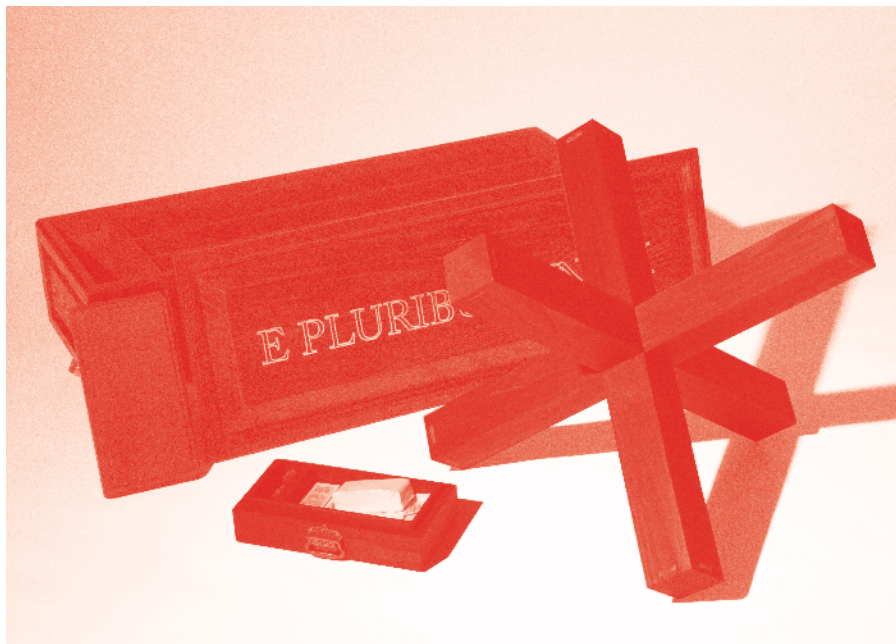
³ Allan Sekula, "The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War," in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 33–51.

⁴ Letta Tayler, "A Wedding That Became

a Funeral: US Drone Attack on Marriage Procession in Yemen," Human Rights Watch, 2 February 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/19/wedding-became-funeral/us-drone-attack-marriage-procession-yemen>.

⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

⁶ Ibid.



Rouzbeh Akhbari, *E Pluribus Unum*, 2015. Ebonized Ash, 45 by 155 by 55 cm.
Photo by Niloufar Nelly Goodarzi.



Rouzbeh Akhbari, *Periculum Inspectoris*, 2016. Steel, CDV Geiger Counter. 40 by 210 by 20 cm.
Photo by Rouzbeh Akhbari.

conventional navigational devices becomes impossible. This issue was addressed at the zenith of the Cold War. At the time, the heightened probability of a nuclear missile exchange between the US and the Soviet Union led civil defense companies to re-imagine wayfinding in post-apocalyptic landscapes. In the 1970s their efforts culminated in the commercial mass production of household “survival kits” complete with procedural manuals, dosimeters, geiger counters, and iodine pills.⁷

There are parallels between the devastation caused by a nuclear missile exchange and nuclear fallout from sites such as the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station. As recently as 2015, 200,000 Toronto households received potassium iodide pills, aka RadBlock, in order to reduce the risk of thyroid cancer in the event of nuclear fallout.⁸ Considering the demands for new forms of wayfinding across terrains shrouded by radioactive iodine gas, we propose to implement geiger counters situated at regular intervals on the city’s public walkways. This proposed public device is a CDV geiger counter that sits on a structure similar to a payphone stand, thus allowing passers-by to check radiation levels on various city blocks and navigate accordingly.

⁷ Defense Civil Preparedness Agency, “Radiological Defense Preparedness,” *CPG* 2-6.1, April 1978.

⁸ Daniel Otis, “East End Given Iodine Pills as Nuclear Disaster Precaution,” *Toronto Star*, 10 November 2015, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/11/10/east-end-given-iodine-pills-as-nuclear-disaster-precaution.html>.