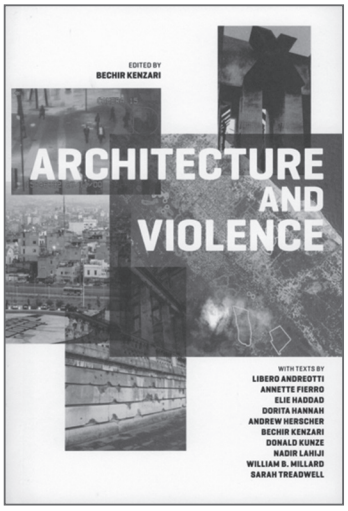
Architecture and Violence

Bechir Kenzari (Ed.)
Review by Sean Pickersgill



Edited by Bechir Kenzari 2012 *Architecture and Violence*. Barcelona and New York: Actar.

At the outset it is worth noting the title of the book reviewed here. It is *Architecture and Violence*, not 'Architecture or Violence', 'Architecture for Violence', or even 'Violent Architecture'. The conjunction "and" tells us immediately about the conflicted and ambiguous relationship between the practice of architecture and the effect and events of violence. This is both the strength and the weakness of this book, but is probably a position taken with full knowledge of the difficulty in conjoining two forms of experience that are not conventionally, in an institutional sense, brought together.

As the editor Bechir Kenzari admits, or perhaps celebrates, in the introduction, there has been no attempt to thematise the content or to address issues regarding the varied nature of the two subjects. Instead he adopts a default position of sequencing the chapters alphabetically by author name. Whilst polite in terms of editorial control over the contributors, it leaves the reader with the task of determining the relevant thematic strands that may be gleaned from the individual chapters. Further weakening this approach is the uneven quality of the essays that are contained in the book. The nature of this I will discuss in the review only generally, but it is unfortunate for a topic which, as Kenzari notes in his introduction, seems to be particularly appropriate subject matter for contemporary architectural theory. In a period in which there are significant challenges regarding issues of post-criticality, the need for texts to bring academic precision and consistent, cumulative argument to a topic is especially important.

Violence itself is a topic that, by its immediacy, requires our attention since its relationship to questions of moral and ethical behaviour, and to culpability by unauthorised perpetrators, fill our daily lives. The question remains, of course, as to the scale and form of violence being enacted. Is it violence that has been carried out by an individual, by a group of persons, by a systemic organisation? Is it deliberate, is it accidental; is it destructive or creative; is it gendered, racially profiled? As you cycle through the variations possible on the thematics of violence, the term clearly points towards the idea that in each case, violence can be recognised by the manner in which particularly egregious events take place. The question remains, is it the consequence of random conflict or of organised hostility and antagonism? Perhaps we can assume that if a violent act takes place within an architectural setting, then the architecture is no more than a witness. But if the violence is the product of deep structural chauvinisms then architecture may well be a principal instrument of the employment of violence. In any respect, the need to clearly define "What is violence?" in any analysis of architecture and violence seems crucial. Perhaps if we are able to refine our understanding of these categories of experience, the effect of violence, and practise, the making of violent circumstances, it would seem we could understand how actions within one (de)constitute effects in another.

These questions should constitute more than an academic parlour game of demarcating meanings, particularly in a text that has cast its net as wide as *Architecture and Violence*. The essays range from: specific historical studies of events (Libero Andreotti on the Italian Fascist Exhibition of 1932; Dorita Hannah on the Chechen siege of the Moscow Dubrovka Theatre in 2002; Andrew Herscher on the use of contemporary satellite imaging in the analysis of war crimes; William B. Millard

on the New Jersey environment of the *Sopranos* television series; Sarah Treadwell on a Maori/English battle in New Zealand in 1864); critical analyses of architectural projects, including Annette Fierro on recent projects in London and Elie Haddad on the Beirut nightclub b-018; and also studies on immanent aspects of violence within the culture of architecture, with Bechir Kenzari on the idea of rivalry, Donald Kunze on immanent topographies in architectural thinking, and Nadir Lahiji on autoimmunity.

While the range of subject matter is broad, it is not clear whether the exercise of bringing such disparate subject methods and modes of analysis together is successful. If it were even possible to define the precise nature of how each of these authors collectively addressed the idea of architecture and violence, it is likely that the description would be so loose and indeterminate as to be inapplicable in other contexts. There are some consistencies, but these tend to reinforce the separation between specific studies and general observations. Kenzari, Kunze and Lahiji share an interest in the vicissitudes of thinking architecturally and critically. They, particularly Kunze and Lahiji, explore the recognition that the task of bringing architecture and violence together is problematic, not because it is fruitless to look for anything to say about architecture in this context, but because there is a surfeit of material to draw upon. To look at any specific example of architecture and violence is to recognise its rhetorical function in parallel discourses on hope, aggression, despair, stoicism, continuity, etc.

If, by contrast, we turn to the specific analyses to search for more focussed and demonstrative presentations of architecture and violence, the essays that address this (Andreotti, Hannah, Herscher, Millard, Treadwell) vary wildly in their application of the term. For Andreotti, violence is the inherent bombastic and bellicose imagery of Italian Fascism; for Hannah it is the conjunction of the Dubrovka siege, the significant number of deaths that occurred in the botched rescue and the ideas of Antonin Artaud; for Herscher it is the dehumanising recognition that the violence of war crimes can only be legitimated through remote sensing; for Millard it is the argument that a fictional series about violent New Jersey mobsters is situated in a real environment; and for Treadwell it is the employment of successful military defense strategies by the Maori in their wars with colonial trespassers. For Andreotti, Hannah and Millard, their argument is not of the same order as the other essays since clearly there are differences between actual events and their characterisation. Whilst the events of the Dubrovka siege were tragically real, and so too were the actions of the Italian Fascists and the actual New York Mafioso, the authors' attempts to connect these to a general theory of violence seems strained. I was not convinced of the need to link Artaud's theatre project to Dubrovka just because it occurred in a theatre, nor to see a Fascist exhibition as being inherently violent simply because of its subject matter (itself quite abstractly realised), nor to see how the fiction of *The Sopranos* contributed to a critique of New Jersey as an inherently violent landscape.

Herscher and Treadwell, at least, show how a particularly specific spatial and material strategy inherently recorded a pattern of violence, but these instances do not occur within an overall narrative within *Architecture and Violence* that demonstrated their relevance to an architectural practice that drew upon and developed military practice. Since we know there are clear architectural precedents in this field, perhaps their essays might have been situated in a meta-narrative that started with situated historical examples and finished with methodological questions on future study of the entwinement of architecture and violence. The essays by Kunze and Lahiji would serve admirably for this purpose.

Whilst I think there is a tremendous amount of excellent and provocative thinking, my criticism of the text is similar to the one that could be made of one of the precedents cited by Kenzari, *Architecture of Fear* (1987, Arbor House), edited by Nan Elin. Though *Architecture and Violence* has, arguably, more rigorous scholastic effort in its individual essays, both texts suffer from a lack of governing and contextualising narrative that would still allow the individual essays space to explore their hermetic interests. In particular, since the material in *Architecture and Fear* is more intellectually challenging in some instances, the need to connect between the different voices becomes even more crucial.

The presence of a meta-narrative, an introductory passage outlining the purpose of an essay that will follow and a summary reflection that draws parallels with other texts would have benefitted the essays individually and the book overall. As it is currently organised, the alphabetical listing isolates each of the essays within their particular scope of definitions, leaving them the task of presenting their individual idea of violence and architecture as conjoined states-of-affairs that share coeval beginnings. The subject matter of architecture as the site of violence, a record of its effects, and a model for emulation or avoidance is exceptionally important. Making the presumption that the goal of enlightened individuals is to avoid Hobbesian doomsday scenarios, it would be valuable to have a text that addressed some core issues in a logical fashion if only to describe how one would distinguish between historical, contemporary, metaphorical, simulated, etc. forms of situated violence.

There are two examples of the need for a systematic text of this order; each addresses a real and a simulated encounter with violence. In terms of a real encounter, the relationship between cities and violence are incredibly complex, and the ties between particular urban patterns and human behaviour are proper subjects for the range of intellectuals, officials, planners and strategists. When the Spanish-language website *Otrameric.com* asks why 41 of the 50 most violent cities in the world are located in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, it is clear that there are some consistencies at play here. Just as key works such as Eyal Weizman's *Hollow Land* (Verso, 2007) have scrutinised the spatial and military practices of recent events in Israel and Palestine in a systematic fashion, there is clearly a need to find consistent relationships between violence and urban/architectural form in these cities. In terms of simulated encounters, we should ask ourselves why there is no parallel investigation into the rehearsed violence of digital game environments whose very functionality, in particular in First Person Shooter examples, relies upon the design of architectural and landscape environments. Commercially successful games have finessed the relationship between violence, ontological engagement, moral behaviour, rewards and their environments. Though it may have been beyond the scope of *Architecture and Violence* to cover all aspects of these two examples, they remain notable omissions.

In summary, the book is a brave attempt to bring together a diverse array of scholarship on terms that inherently, I argue, need quite careful terms of reference for the observations to be meaningful. Those essays that force the relationship between architecture and violence confirm suspicions that there are no inherent relevant theoretical relations within architecture when it comes to topics of urgency such as violence, while those who understand the complexity needed the editorial framing to allow their depth to have sense within an overall narrative. The topic deserves this.