

PLANNED DESTRUCTION MODERN PLANNING, WAR, AND PUBLIC HOUSING

Anthony Fontenot

If the twentieth century stands as an icon to an era of progress and development with its monuments in the form of skyscrapers and massive urban territories reconfigured by modern planning, the beginning of the twenty-first century seems to represent its inverse, a negative icon—a void, with its monuments being the immaterial sites of destruction, urban disinvestment, bombed cities, decay, and demolition, which collectively constitute some of the most powerful, yet repressed, aspects of urban restructuring over the past few decades. Whether executed by war or the bulldozer, planned destruction—the intentional effort to destroy the urban fabric—has been an intrinsic part of urban development and restructuring throughout the twentieth century and seems to be acquiring a greater intensity in recent years. From Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris, to the military's strategic destruction of cities from the Second World War to the present, to U.S. public housing policies that institutionalized the demolition of existing housing as a condition for funding, to the destruction of the World Trade Center, a new urban paradigm is emerging. The planned destruction of the built environment characterizes some of the most dynamic and active processes occurring in the transformation of cities today, yet remains obscure in the discourse of architecture and urbanism and is largely repressed from public discourse.

The world of late capitalism is plagued by rotting territories, shrinking cities, and obsolete postindustrial landscapes, offering a full spectrum of destruction from outright attack to slow disinvestment and decay that demands a rethinking of the ways in which modernization has been realized. Whereas construction and destruction have always been inextricably linked in the discourse of modernism, the complex implications of the underside of modern planning are becoming evident in the early twenty-first century. As Paul Virilio states, “alongside progress—that is to say, the qualitative achievements of science, there is a quantitative logic. The more intense the progress, the more catastrophic and painful the accidents, the tragedies.”¹ It is a strange irony that both the beginning and the end of postmodernism is marked by the infamous destruction of buildings designed by Minoru Yamasaki: the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project, constructed in 1955 and demolished in 1972, and the World Trade Center, constructed in 1972 and destroyed in 2001.

Trapped in cycles of disinvestment, many U.S. cities today allocate millions of dollars in funding for the demolition of thousands of buildings. For example, the Demolition Division of the City of Detroit is one of the most active organizations in the nation, demolishing between fifty and one hundred buildings every month. “The economically, politically and socially driven processes of creative destruction through abandonment and redevelopment are often every bit as destructive as arbitrary acts of war. Much of contemporary Baltimore (or Detroit, New Orleans, Cleveland, etc.), with its 40,000 abandoned houses, looks like a war zone to rival Sarajevo.”² From urban disinvestment, to demolition, to the employment of military strategies of urban devastation, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the results of the various methods of urban restructuring. In an effort to bring back life to the failing inner cities of the United States, the federal government has embraced