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24

The Home as Political Arena - Interview with Andrés Jaque
Chantal Akerman, Yasujirō Ozu, and the Poetics of Intimate Space
The Fridge, the City and the Critique of Everyday Life

How to Domesticate a City: Adaptive Tools to an Urban Environment

The Minor Composition of Threshold Domesticities

Redefining the Domestic between New Forms of Dwelling and Emerging Social Problems

The Pavilion

Re-Addressing Commons

Housing in Continuity

A Nice Normal Little Village

An Amalgamation of Homes: 3 Micro-stories

Domestic Insecurities

The Circulation of Domesticity in a New Political Economy

Urbanism From Within

A Short Guide through the Grand Domestic Revolution

Socialist Urban Planning and the Housing Question: At Home in Skopje

The Interior of the Metropolis

Live, Work, Play: Learning from the Athfield House and Office

Domesticity - Interview with Herman Hertzberger

by Bernd Upmeyer Page 4 - 11

by Sander Hölsgens Page 12 - 17

by Justinien Tribillon Page 18 - 21

by CENTRALA (Simone De Iacobis, Małgorzata Kuciewicz), with Aleksandra Kędziorek Page 22 - 27

by Lucía Jalón Oyarzun Page 28 - 35

by Luca Lazzarini Page 36 - 40

by åyr Page 41 - 48

by Fabrizia Berlingieri Page 49 - 57

by Aron Bohmann and Charlotte Herbst Page 58 - 64

by Cookies Page 65 - 72

by Nele Aernouts and Sofie Van der Linden Page 73 - 77

by Ersela Kripa and Stephen Mueller (AGENCY) Page 78 - 83

by Ioanna Piniara Page 84 - 89

by Neeraj Bhatia and Christopher Roach Page 90 - 97

by Casco Page 98 - 101

by Jasna Mariotti Page 102 - 105

by STAR strategies + architecture Page 106 - 118

by Julia Gatley, Marco Moro and Simone Ferreli Page 119 - 123

by Bernd Upmeyer Page 124 - 129

Domestic Insecurities

Simulated Suburban Housing and the Future of Low-Intensity Conflict

By Ersela Kripa and Stephen Mueller (AGENCY)

Domesticity as Suspect

A growing number of military training sites in the US and abroad are simulating domestic environments of cities around the world¹, telegraphing changing conceptions of domesticity within the global security complex. US military doctrine now emphasizes urban counterinsurgency (COIN) training, recognizing the battlefield of the future will not be an explicit oppositional undertaking in the open deserts or jungles of conflicts past, but will infiltrate the very fabric of the city itself - a fabric mostly composed of homes, not headquarters. (Fig. 1)

Lessons from failures in Mogadishu and early failures of recent campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have shifted military strategy from privileging open battlegrounds with clear military targets to the messy realities of conflict within populated cities. Insurgencies and other low-intensity conflicts reposition the military landscape within a series of highly localized, itinerant and three-dimensional spaces, complicated by overlays of civilian and humanitarian actors. A complete theater of operations may be at the scale of a city block, a single home, or a high-rise apartment complex. The increasingly common 'three-block war', the emerging 'four-floor war'², and nascent experiments in subterranean warfare require more advanced training and operational protocols to assist soldiers in the difficult tasks of identifying potential threats and protecting civilian populations where conflict is embroiled within a complex milieu of everyday life.

Emerging voices in military doctrine have rendered individual homes and collective housing -primary agents of urbanization-as increasingly suspect, cast as likely foils for illicit or insurgent activity. Military strategists forecast the collapse of state governments and authorities, positioning the city as an indivisible and autonomous unit of geopolitical - and noopolitical³ - strategy. Simultaneously citing the pressures of informal urbanization and its easy appropriation by non-state actors, they warn that many cities may soon go 'feral'⁴, ruled by anti-state entities beyond the control state security or police forces. Absent the rule of law, the city's built structures and entrapped populations provide a cloak or cover from which opportunistic actors may conceive and execute actions against established geopolitical order. In a type of pre-meditated and pre-emptive response, domestic neighborhoods around the world are increasingly surveilled, patrolled, and targeted, in the hopes of gleaning intelligence or strategic advantage. The domestic sphere is thus increasingly complicit in an expanding 'securocratic' territory, a hypervigilant regime which subsumes large and poorly defined areas in the name of national and global security, under the guise of poorly defined and ever-expanding operational objectives. Extending the scope of its predecessors - the wars 'on poverty', 'on drugs', 'on terror' - this emerging securocratic regime now targets the city and its domestic spaces directly.

Domestic Insecurities

Conceptions of domesticity are inextricably linked to issues of

security. The 'domestic' signals not only a private residence but a shared territory, while the 'interior' surfaces as the innermost protected sanctum of both the state and its occupants. Nations and their people talk of 'homes' and 'homeland' with the same protective fervor.

In the US, growing insecurity in domestic spaces abroad generates a large-scale transformation of the domestic interior, with landscapes and cities within the homeland transformed by changing security objectives. Since initiating combat operations in Afghanistan in 2002, the US military has invested heavily in the expansion of military training operations on domestic soil, fielding over 29 premier sites for urban operations and countless smaller training sites by 2013. As training sites proliferate, so too do the confluences of domestic and security space. The newest model for the US military urban warfare training facility - the Combined Arms Collective Training Facility, or CACTF - lists among its mandated simulated typologies several domestic architectures, with 'apartments' and 'townhomes' among the required types. 'Villages', 'suburban houses', and 'courtyards' round out the list of common amenities. But this is just the minimum standard, and several planned military environments improvise with other, more stigmatized tropes of informal development for use as a simulated battleground. Thus, sites across the US and abroad are filled with 'shanties', 'ghetto blocks', 'tent cities', and 'refugee camps', iterations of domesticity in crisis throughout the world. (Fig. 2)

Following the advice of the RAND Corporation⁵ the military also sought to include existing cities more prominently in training operations, to convert cities to training use, and use the territories between cities for extended deployment and combined arms training.

The increased security presence in cities like Detroit, New Orleans, and St. Louis, where military training has been reported to enter homes unannounced, has led to wide-scale speculation on the often secret, classified, or unreported motives and directives behind such actions. While reports surface of unwelcome intrusions into the neighborhoods and homes of these cities' inhabitants, distrust escalates.

The infiltration of the interior by threats both foreign and domestic continues to capture the imagination of the public, buoyed by representations in media and popular culture. The recent film *Sicario* depicts one such imaginary in its opening scene, in which federal agents descend on an Arizona suburb to find a suburban home transformed by the gruesome activity of a cross-border cartel. The unease of infiltration here is twofold, in the form of the mobilized security apparatus seemingly out of place in the quiet suburban dawn, and the revelation of an as-yet undiscovered threat literally hidden in the walls of the suburban home.

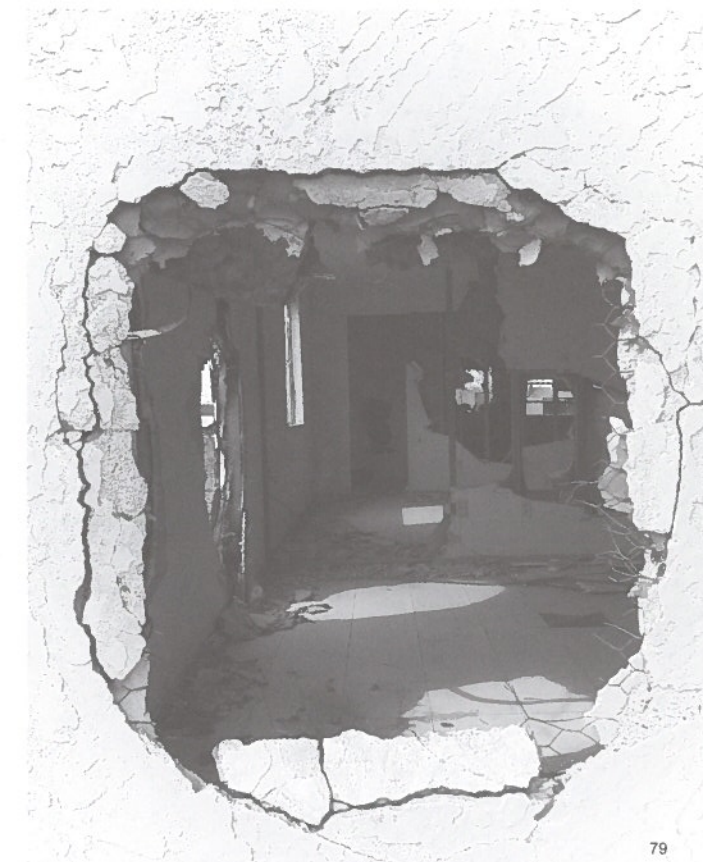
Conspiracy theories concerning the impending imposition of



Above: Fig. 1: Playas Exterior - Homes Repurposed for Urban Operations Training

Left: Fig. 2: Playas Training Facility - Breach Training Site

Right: Fig. 3: Playas - View Through Breached Wall Assembly



martial law abound and increasingly find favor among the general population and their elected representatives. In 2015, public and official reaction to Jade Helm, a joint training operation spanning sites from Texas to California, demonstrated clearly the unease with which security objectives and domestic space now routinely come. As combined forces orchestrated training scenarios beyond the bounds of military bases and previously established operational corridors, they crossed private property, traversing private lots and ranchland throughout the domestic southwest. Opposition voices found support in government representatives, who successfully petitioned for the deployment of the Texas State Guard⁶, to provide a bulwark against the escalation of this perceived federal transgression of individual property. Large-scale training scenarios continue to grow, influence larger territories, and forge more complex organizational alliances, as evidenced most recently by the joint operation North Thunder, involving 20 nations in King Khalid Military City in Saudi Arabia⁷.

Civilian and military strategies for city-building become intertwined in training environments, their advocates versed equally in the language of urban design and the machinations of war. Security operatives by necessity have become experts in the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of the domestic realm, echoing the expertise of urban planners and architects in the development of a type of 'tactical building code,'⁸ based in large part on breaching instead of building. (Fig. 3) Re-reading the city as an accumulation of tactical vantage points and logistical infrastructures, and its constructions in terms of susceptibility to different types of artillery and ordnance, military strategists simultaneously construct arguments and sites for intervention. They engage in city-building, and manipulate the domestic interior to service logistical and operational needs.⁹ Department of Defense (DoD) protocols increasingly require higher fidelity realism in these urban facsimiles, demanding expertise from architects and urban planners to devise realistic street patterns and material assemblages, and other military consultants who populate the domestic interiors with traditional, site-specific furnishings, food, and even waste.

Domestic Simulations

The transformation, however, is not only one-sided, an imposition of national security on the domestic realm and its construction. Private entities, individuals, and existing cities are recognizing the increased demand for domestic simulations and responding to the call, developing new typologies of simulated cities and simulated lifestyles 'for hire' by the military training industry.

Private entities exploit military expertise in simulation to develop highly coordinated test environments to maximize efficiency. The proposed Center for Innovation, Testing, and Evaluation (CITE) development, a multi-million dollar simulated city planned in the desert of New Mexico, is one such installation, planned by a government defense contractor, and designed for testing large scale urban logistics across a variety of industries. Preliminary plans for this city with zero residents, where "humans are banned"¹⁰ nonetheless replicates the fabric of ubiquitous suburban domesticity, with 'two-story', 'split-level', and 'ranch' homes making up much of the simulated housing for 350,000 residents who will never arrive.

An extensive cadre of professional role-players similarly recognizes and modestly profit from this growing need. Some live

within training sites for two or three months at a time. Many of the role players have escaped war-torn environments themselves, potentially extending their psychological trauma by living in a perpetual simulated war zone in the US. They take part in the training simulations in exchange for modest pay. Some leverage their time spent in support of the US military training to support applications for citizenship¹¹. They live in simulations of traditional homes, with other randomly selected role players serving as 'family members', and are required to conduct an artificial domestic and social life to support various training scenarios, responding to 'character sheets' much like extras in a staged production. The role players reinvent themselves on a bi-monthly cycle, in a city transformed into military theater for profit.

Existing cities are leveraging strategic sites and resources to fill the emerging market for urban training sites. Playas, New Mexico, is a formerly abandoned copper mining town, purchased in 2004 by New Mexico Tech through a grant from the Department of Homeland Security¹², and now run as a complex of urban warfare training sites. New Mexico Tech now manages the facility outright, as part of their Energetic Materials Research and Testing Center (EMRTC), and makes the environment available for law enforcement, military, and even entertainment industries - anyone looking for an immersive environment in which to play out 'physical security' scenario and scenes of domestic terror. This unlikely grafting of public institutions on the management of the *securocratic frontier* makes Playas a shared epicenter for a constellation of domestic interests. Afghan refugees, SWAT teams, Special Forces, and university students occupy the facilities in short and sometimes overlapping shifts, comingling in the streets of this desertified and deserted townscape.

In Playas, workers' housing, once serving the copper mining industry, has been occupied and retrofitted throughout the town to serve a variety of new roles. Districts of single-story homes alternately serve as target sites for training operations, breach facilities, short-term bunks for visiting trainees, and longer-term residences for the logistics and management staff of the center. Similar in typology and close in location, the lines between simulation and reality here are thick and blurry. Some blocks are fully serviced with water and electricity, 'homes away from home' for senior staff, complete with basic amenities. The division between simulation and reality is fluid. Facilities managers create temporary roadblocks to shift training activities to the appropriate blocks, designating different areas 'in play' depending on the scenario. The same managers cross this boundary at the end of the day, to live in nearby homes which substantially share the 'look and feel' of those in the simulated warzone.

Elsewhere services are simulated, plumbing is disconnected, non-functional water heaters and electrical meters included as peripheral props in elaborate scenarios. Faux fire hydrants and telephone booths line the streets, providing auxiliary textures of suburban reality. (Fig. 4) These trappings of infrastructure seem to complete the visual impression of a complete and functioning neighborhood, but paradoxically provide none of the operational complexities, potential advantages or disadvantages of having real-world infrastructural systems in an operational environment. The ambiguous distinctions between legitimate 'in-world' objects, and these purely decorative 'stagings', engenders confusion among trainees, who often do not fully exploit environmental objects to expedite their objectives, assuming that the rare working equipment



Right: Fig. 4: Playas Neighborhood Exterior Showing Observation Tower, Playground, and Simulated Telephone
Below: Fig. 5: Playas Disabled Aircraft Trainer



is also just 'part of the show'. Previous training scenarios have tragically been less clear about the boundaries of the 'game.' Robin Sage, a training op in North Carolina in 2002, resulted in the death of a Special Forces soldier, who was shot by a sheriff's deputy he and his partner assumed was 'in play' and had tried to disarm. At Playas, makeshift signs indicate what few clear boundaries there are - a printed sheet duct-taped to the back wall of a garage reads 'out of play'.

The suburban neighborhood here is conceived and executed as a complete and self-contained informational and operational ecosystem, in which training scenarios evolve throughout days or weeks at the whims of the event organizers. The homes are given new life for each new training scenario, according to the training and operational objectives of the 'client'. Local law enforcement may require merely a few homes and replaceable door casings to practice repetitive door breaching and forced entry. Counterterrorism agencies and SWAT teams may cast a larger net, requiring Playas to transform into a collection of informant safe houses, make-shift bomb or chemical factories, and hostage detention sites. While teams are deployed with little advance knowledge of the particular layout or location of potential threats, event organizers intimate with the simulated domestic landscape take advantage of a 'homegrown' knowledge in planning the training scenario.

There are few limitations to the adaptability of each home to specific training objectives, with perhaps the most restrictive variable being the type and amount of 'energetic material' slated for use in each home. While some training scenarios require only simulated fire, others use paintballs. Still others test live explosives in door and wall-breach training.

The suburban environment itself heightens the challenge of discovering threats. The repetitive network of 230 homes and meandering streets allow the orchestrations of scenario strategists to go largely unnoticed, to blend in amongst the apparent banality. The sheer number of indistinguishable homes on site provides a dizzying array of possibilities as trainees first enter the operational environment. As training scenarios evolve, trainees gather intelligence from visual cues, questioning, and interrogation of role players to eliminate variables, eventually 'zeroing in' on specific homes to target for operations.

Expectations within the homes are then intentionally subverted, as homes are gutted and interiors reconfigured into unrecognizable and illogical layouts, the architecture itself creating an element of surprise. The 'shell' of the suburban house will thus be a smoke-screen, or *feint*, for an alternate interior reality divorced from the standardization it implies. The calculated use of such an insidious interior domestic landscape presents a type of hyper-reality, with challenges often surpassing what operatives are likely to encounter in real-world deployment. (Fig. 5) The common military training adage 'make the practice harder than the game'¹³ is in full effect in the contorted interiors and elaborate booby-traps awaiting trainees in Playas' suburban homes. It is not uncommon in similarly disconnected environments for soldiers to completely 'buy-in' to the simulation, and later report symptoms of post-traumatic stress from manipulative training scenarios.¹⁴

Deeper in the interior of Playas' simulated domestic realms, the site's homes offer some impressionistic detail about the lives of

their inhabitants, both simulated and real. While clients may aspire to fit out their scenarios with a maximum amount of ambient realism, the realities of tight budgets and tighter schedules push many of the interiors into a 'barely-occupied' aesthetic, as if the inhabitants have just arrived, or are soon to leave. Many of the environmental details are provided at 'low resolution'. Basic furnishings like beds, tables, chairs, and computer workstations indicate uses and types of rooms, mostly visual confirmations of operational benchmarks, and in some cases useful accommodations for role players occupying the homes. A patio-style chaise lounge placed ad-hoc in a back bedroom provides the minimum requisite indicator of the location of one operational objective. (Fig. 6) Other scenario props are uncannily 'high-res', including culturally-specific clothing, table settings, ceramics, and simulated meals. (Fig. 7) In one room a child's drawing adorns the wall, innocent scribbles of family members still barely hanging amidst a splatter of paintball remnants, a hauntingly precise memento of family life out of place under the watchful eye of a surveillance camera monitoring the training action.

Capitalizing on the promise of the RAND report¹⁵, Playas has transformed a sleepy and isolated working class community into an epicenter of operational intelligence. Its distinct brand of suburban simulation seems well-suited to a range of operatives experimenting in low-intensity security operations in low-density urban environments. The existing town has grown since its inception as a training environment, and as training scenarios demanded more specialized environments. This 'terror town' now includes a growing constellation of domestic urban typologies, the suburban fabric in the valley now surrounded by nomadic camps and 'afghan villages', copied wholesale from urban morphologies across the globe. The suburban landscape remains a prime indicator of conflicts to come. As organizers reconstruct Main Street and the interior of the homes for the next few months of training, they approximate and forecast the next generations of conflict to come.

Ersela Kripa and Stephen Mueller are principals of AGENCY, an interdisciplinary practice engaging contemporary culture through architecture, urbanism, and advocacy. Their projects range from media environments, to guerrilla infrastructures, architecture, and speculative urban research. Seeking productive anomalies in the overlooked and the under-represented, AGENCY identifies and transforms emerging urban paradigms. Kripa and Mueller are the recipients of the Rome Prize in Architecture, fellows of The MacDowell Colony and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Kripa and Mueller are faculty at the TTU College of Architecture in El Paso. Their upcoming book 'FRONTS: Security and the Developing World' will be published in 2016 by ORO Editions.

Notes:

1. For a more detailed discussion and database of related sites, see FRONTS, Security and the Developing World, Kripa and Mueller 2016 (forthcoming).
2. Managuth, Geoff. "The Four Floor War." BLDG BLOG, 30 Dec 2015.
3. RAND. "The Emergence of Noopolitik: Toward an American Information Strategy." 1999.
4. See Richard Norton on 'feral cities'.
5. RAND. "Preparing for the Proven Inevitable: An Urban Operations Training Strategy for America's Joint Force." 2006.
6. Lamothe, Dan. "Texas State Guard ordered to monitor military's Operation Jade Helm 15." The Washington Post, April 29, 2015.
7. Karimi, Faith. "Saudi Arabia launches military exercise with 20 nations." CNN, 15 Feb 2016.
8. See US Army Field Manual 90-10-1, Appendix H - "Urban Building Analysis," 1993.
9. See for example, Weizman, Eyal. Hollow Land.
10. "CITE: The \$1 billion city that nobody calls home." CNN, 6 Oct 2015.
11. Jesse Moss. Full Battle Rattle. 2008.
12. Steve Rowell. "Playas, New Mexico: A Modern Ghost-Town Braces for the Future." CLUI.Org.
13. Nagl. Knife Fights.
14. Ibid.
15. RAND.

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Above: Fig. 6: Playas Objective Room
Left: Fig. 7: Playas Kitchen
Right: Fig. 8: Playas Children's Bedroom

