

## FROM DETROIT TO EASTERN GERMANY

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From 1998-2001 I was in Detroit, living in an area where the city's darkness seem the deepest. Moving there was not because it was a great place to live. I was drawn by its war like state of devastation.

An unprecedented measure of urban destruction, now for more than a half century, the demises of Detroit continues without much explanation. From demolition of more than 200,000 housing units since 1960, to the annual Devils Night where hundreds of homes and buildings could be on fire in one day, the psychosis of its culture is ruthlessly postmodern. In the vertigo of the helplessness and hopelessness, between its citizens and government, the montage of urban illusions and reality is beyond the imagination of Disney. And its in real-time and real-life.

My seduction toward mutilated spaces began earlier. During my period at Store-Front for Art and Architecture, I curated three exhibitions that germinated my architectural sickness. They were; Warchitecture, a photographic and statistical account on the destruction of Sarajevo from 1992-93; Beyrouth, a photographic essay by Gabrielle Basilico, on the devastation of central Beirut during the civil war; and The New American Ghettoes by Camilo José Vergara, a 20 year survey on the decay at the core of American cities.

From then, I began to take interest on architecture during its state of destruction than in its construction. I began to think city as an organic substance, not simply as a man-made machine. This was the basis of my development of Urban Ecology and, strangely, the distopia of Detroit has resurrected my belief in Utopia. This time for practical purpose instead for its ideological aims. This was easy to think, after living in a distopia that was far unrealistic than any Utopia I read.

From then on, I realized that space, whether it is architecture or urban, was less shaped by walls or buildings, and more by cultures. In the 1980's, the images of new cities and new architectures promised a better future, over the covers of Times, Nesweek and other medias. But, since the removal of the Berlin Wall, the buildings and cities, on newspapers or televisions, were exploding, burning and ruined, from Bagdahd to Sarajevo, Kabul, Waco, Okalahoma City, Moscow, Grozny, Dublin, Jerusalem, and now New York City. So Detroit is not alone.

Architecture and urbanism, in public and in culture, has become a global franchise of highly experimental theaters for communal expressions, notably presenting their dissatisfaction with current state of political, economic and cultural systems. From peaceful to suicidal, with spectacles of flying banners or projecting packs of nails, buildings and spaces have become the violent targets for change, reducing their previous logic to rubbles. The aesthetics, no longer at its pure form, now seem totally symbolic. What it represents is now more important than how it appears. The space, no longer a simple commodity, is a powerful messenger for cultures in transition.

Although needed, urban studies and statistics have not given us a clear comprehension or direction toward solutions. And, architecture and urban projects seem to have fueled the crisis more then resolved them. Ironically, between bricks and steels, architecture and urbanism best serve as powerful documentation of economic, political and social degeneration.

Some traditional works have recognized this theoretical shift in architecture and urbanism, from Mike Davis, Neil Smith, Edward Soja and others. Visual arts, through a series of urban-based or inspired exhibitions, such as Documenta 10, Mutations, Cities on the Move, and others, have attempted to inspire artists and toward some political legitimacy, from its exceptional commercial period of today. I did my part at the 97 Kwangju Biennale in Korea, by curating an exhibition of 23 politically contentious cities world wide, titled "Images of the Future: The Architecture of A New Geography." And the disinterest or ineptitude from architects and urbanists has left this crisis to other fields of professions, from social geographers to video artists.

Therefore, my approach has been more direct than academic, and that has brought me to work within the space of crisis than at distance. The first was to move myself into a ghetto, and bring others to it, by starting International Center for Urban Ecology, and organizing international workshops in there, such as "Architecture of Resistance" (1999). Later, working with University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture and students, I developed "Adamah: A New Equity for Detroit," which prescribes the regeneration of the near eastside of Detroit toward a self-sufficient community through the remedial process of urban agriculture. Then, I took a fictional account of what destroyed Detroit, a 2-channel video about an urban conspiracy to burn the city to the ground, on "Detroit: Making It Better For You". Finally, to take the story of Detroit to other cities, I cut up an abandoned house from Detroit so that it could be moved and reconstructed anywhere in the world. Known by its address, 24620, was moved and reconstructed in four cities in Western Europe already.

From these and others works still to come, in or about Detroit, I work with space as a substance of culture not a commodity. This may have been the failure of GDR, or even Germany since its unification, in dealing with shift of economy and population from one part to another. The political and economic program to stop this is losing their effectiveness. The migration to the west or the suburbs is not about more or better space to live, but it is about desire for space of a different culture. We need to visualize and communicate culture in space This is a war of beliefs, fought with images.

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