

11-3. Particular acts of insurgency necessarily engage certain forms of architecture. Do you agree? If so, or not, explain with examples.

Robert Campos

Certainly there is a relationship between acts of insurgency and architecture—but “architecture” here has several shades of meaning. The barricades of the Paris communes were “architecture”, as were the tent cities of the “Bonus Army” that marched on Washington, D.C. in 1932, and the constructions of the Tiananmen square protesters. These types of interventions were not, of course, designed by architects, nor did they have a purpose which to their designers/builders would be described as “architectural”. Can architects ever engage their architectures in “particular acts of insurgency” however? This is a more problematic prospect, given the network of capital and state power that, as Tafuri made clear, the professional practice of architecture cannot seem to escape.

Nathalie Westervelt

I disagree that insurgency “necessarily” engages anything. Architecture becomes an instrument of insurgency in the form of barricades and fortresses, but often times, the use of architecture for warfare is unplanned and regular, ordered architecture may be used as compounds as well as ramshackle buildings and narrow passages.

The examples of architecture of satire (narrow, poor streets surrounded by slums) and those of tragedy (the boulevard surrounded by stately buildings) as expressed by Vidler point towards agreement with the statement in question, but I would argue that acts of insurgency rely on a strong community force and urban guerilla tactics that could make use of any architecture.

In Paris, the poor pulled up the cobblestones and barricaded small neighborhoods. The winding streets and dense housing provided tactical shelter for the revolutionaries and boulevards were constructed to control such uprisings “the tragic street was thus the instrument of urban control and regulation.” (30 Vidler) The ordered architecture of control, however, has failed often as in the cases of public housing megaplexes constructed in the United States for the often minority urban poor. It is a well-known story that in these clean, sterile environments, drug lords take control of the entrance and exit ways and even police cannot enter.

I used to deliver “Meals on Wheels” with a 72-year-old nun to one of these complexes and even with this saint by my side, felt the discomfort of the gang-related door control of these ordered-modern-housing projects.

The well-known story of the group MOVE is the example of a West Philadelphia row house turned barricade in the early 1980s. Again, the row house is a generic example of architecture built for the working classes and the group chose to barricade themselves in a middle-class Black community. In this case, like the insurgents in Paris before the turn of the 20th century, they pulled up the ground and filled the house with their feces to ward off police and neighbors. They were making a stand to free their brethren (including Mumia Abu-Jamal) from prison.

The architecture was used as their stronghold, but I would argue that the act of insurgency didn’t “necessarily” engage the row house. It could have been another type of architecture as long as they had an impact on the neighborhood that aroused attention. The government soon classified stoops and other public gathering places as dangerous zones where insurgency could begin, thus eliminating these elements. I argue that not only is this racist, but it is not an answer to social injustice and as long as that survives, insurgency will too.

As with Hitler marching up the Champs Elysées or parading around the Ringstrasse it can be seen that architecture may be used for invasion. Agreed, this is not the same as insurgency, but it proves that architecture and its intended symbolic meaning is temporal.

Insurgency arises, not solely from architectural conditions, but from a widening economic divide and an unfairly impoverished and persecuted proletariat.