DOMESTIC INSECURITIES

INFORMAL HOUSING AND THE FUTURE OF LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

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A growing number of military training sites in the US and abroad are simulating domestic environments of cities around the world, 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 positional 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. [IMAGE 1: Playas Exterior – Homes Repurposed for Urban Operations Training]

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 reposited the military landscape within a series of highly localized, transient 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”, 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 geopolitics – and noopolitics – strategy. Simultaneously citing the pressures of informal urbanization and its easy appropriation by non-state actors, they warn that many countries are simulating domestic battlegrounds, repositioning the military landscape within a series of populated cities. Insurgencies and other low-intensity conflicts are now targets to the messy realities of conflict within domestic spaces, requiring 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 for use as a simulated battleground. 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.

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/DOMESTICITY AS SUSPECT

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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 unexpected 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 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 the unease with which security objectives and domestic space now routinely conflate. 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 Guard, 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 Arabia.

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 the image and function of a type of ‘tactical building code,’ based in large part on breaching instead of building. [IMAGE 3: Playas - View Through Breached Wall Assembly] 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 ordinance, 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. 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.

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 environments and sites for intervention. They engage in city-building, 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 (CITET) is a state-of-the-art, 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” 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. 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 citizenship. 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 Security, 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’ scenarios and scenes of domestic terror. This unlikely grafting of public institutions on the management of the securitocratic 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, conjoining in the streets of this deserted and deserted town.

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 alternate 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 warezone.

Elsewhere services are simulated, plumbing is disconnected, non-functional water heaters and electrical meters exact simulated domestic scenarios. Faux fire hydrants [IMAGE 4: Playas Neighborhood Exterior Showing Observation Tower, Playground, and Simulated Telephone] and telephone booths line the streets, providing auxiliary textures of suburban reality. 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 ‘staging’ engenders confusion among trainees, who often do not fully exploit environmental objects to expedite their objectives, assuming that the rare working equipment 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 night guard who was under the impression he 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.

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. [IMAGE 5: Playas Disabled Aircraft Trainer] The common military training adage ‘make the practice harder than the game’ 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.

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 [IMAGE 6: Playas Objective Room]. Other scenario props are uncannily ‘high-res’, including culturally-specific clothing, table settings, ceramics, and simulated meals [IMAGE 7: Playas Kitchen]. 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. [IMAGE 8: Playas Children’s Bedroom]

Capitalizing on the promise of the RAND report, 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.