Urban Violence Laboratory

Seminar Terminal Prep + Advanced Architectural Design Thesis Studio

ARCH 407 / 507

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Violence *noun*

- behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something.
  *Oxford Languages Definition*

- the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy
- an instance of violent treatment or procedure
- injury by or as if by distortion, infringement, or profanation
- intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force
- undue alteration (as of wording or sense in editing a text)
  *Merriam-Webster Definition*
Violence in 2021

Cities across the United States of America are experiencing record-breaking violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic destabilized our already frail healthcare, education, and housing systems. Exacerbated numbers of poverty, unemployment, houselessness, and addiction are visible not only in major American cities, but in multiple sites around the world. Racial and political tensions continue to further divide our nation, making violence the center stage of American social life.

But what is violence to you? To your city? To your home country?

How can we synthesize violence through the lenses of architecture? Can we then theorize and propose interventions? Can violence be solved, mitigated, or reduced through design? What can we learn from communities and political leaders?
“Even a casual glance at the repertoire of the built environment reveals that structures (from palaces to illegal settlements, from propaganda exhibitions to jails, from barracks to detention centers, from suburban complexes to slaughterhouses, and from separation walls to concentration camps) either sanction violence or give it a spatial ground to thrive.”

Architecture and Violence, Bechir Kenzari

“Urban violence (and the fear thereof) can be said to emerge out of the intersections between structures, processes, narratives, practices and bodies that constitute the urban and this is particularly relevant in the so-called information age, in which the speed, scale and dimension of the circulation of representations, discourses and ideas make the interplay between direct, structural and cultural violence increasingly more complex.”

What is Urban Violence, Simon Tulumello

Figure 2. Text analysis of abstracts of articles about urban violence in Scopus (our elaboration; tool: KH Coder).
Urban Violence

Violence, however, is not only visible and felt. The current urban chaos is also the result of “nested socio-political, legal, and economical structures” that create oppression and inequity.

The urban is then, “also a social and existential condition”.

This research seminar will establish an analog and digital laboratory of Urban Violence.

Students will investigate, synthesize, document, and publish research on urban violence, by providing multiple definitions, manifestations, and representations of data, analysis, and experience. Students are then expected to propose an architectural project in the advanced architectural design studio in the winter and spring semester, related to urban violence.
Forensic Architecture (FA) is a research agency, based at Goldsmiths, University of London, investigating human rights violations including violence committed by states, police forces, militaries, and corporations. FA works in partnership with institutions across civil society, from grassroots activists, to legal teams, to international NGOs and media organizations, to carry out investigations with and on behalf of communities and individuals affected by conflict, police brutality, border regimes and environmental violence.

**ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN DEATH ALLEY, LOUISIANA**

DATE
17.18 - Ongoing

LOCATION
Death Alley, Louisiana, USA

FORUMS
Exhibition, Media, Web Platform

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
RISE St. James

A stretch of the Mississippi River once called ‘Plantation Country’ is now the ‘Petroleum Corridor’. Known to those who benefitted, its twin as ‘Death Alley,’ using advanced techniques in cartography and fluid dynamics, we worked to support local demands for accountability and reparations.

**EUROPEAN ARMS IN THE BOMBING OF YEMEN**

DATE
26.03.2015 - Ongoing

LOCATION
Yemen

FORUMS
Legal Process, Exhibition, Human Rights Report, Web Platform

COMMISSIONED BY
European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)

Since 2015, airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen have constituted grave human rights violations. Partners across the Investigative Commons developed an interactive map to reveal the extent to which arms producers and governments in Europe continue to profit from arms exports despite evidence of their substantial contribution to the military operations of the Saudi-led coalition.

**THE BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION**

DATE
04.09.2020

LOCATION
Beirut, Lebanon

FORUMS
Media

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
Mada Mar

The explosions that ripped through the port of Beirut in 2020 devastated the city, leaving as many as 300,000 homeless. Following calls by city residents and prominent for an independent investigation, we’re releasing our models of the sequence of the incident as a free resource for investigators and civil society.

**NSO GROUP’S BREACH OF PRIVATE DATA WITH ‘FLEMMING’, A COVID-19 CONTACT-TRACING SOFTWARE**

DATE
09.2020 - ongoing

LOCATION
Israel and around the world

FORUMS
Exhibition, Media

COMMISSIONED BY
Self-initiated

In May 2020, an unprotected database belonging to Israeli cyber-weapons manufacturer NSO Group’s COVID-19 contact tracing software called ‘Flemming’ was left exposed. NSO denied there was a security breach. Forensic Architecture analyzed a sample of the exposed database, which suggested that the data was based on ‘real’ personal data belonging to unsuspecting civilians.
Urban Violence Laboratory
Research, Activism, and Architecture

Studio projects will range in program due to the nature of the investigation, however, all projects must respond, contest, and theorize on visible and invisible violence at all scales: individual, communal, regional, national, global, etc. All projects will be subject to specific parameters (tbd).

All projects must also create or evolve existing urban infrastructure with their architectural intervention. The architectural project will be defined by the research and results from the prep research seminar (ie. shelter, school, refugee center, community building, greenhouse). Projects will also be derived from community communications, data, and political leadership.
Research, Draw, Synthesize

To define, theorize, and draw social, cultural, physical, economical, environmental, medical, political, and urban data relate to a specific topic or theme in Violence. However, topic or theme must always relate back to an American urban context. Types of violence include, but are not limited to: physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual, cultural, verbal, or financial; including neglect. Other lenses to look within include, but are not limited: gender, race, or religion (intersectionality as well).

Deliverables

1 Final Research Book (print and digital)
2 Mapping(s) / 2D + 3D representation
3 Photographic Research
4 Surveying, Data, Interviews
5 Topical Drawings (experimental, multimedia)
6 Graphic Poster(s) - Potentially exhibit in city
7 Exhibition Proposal

2 possible sites for investigation/intervention:
Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco
Research, Draw, Synthesize

Student work from studios, research, and media seminars, 2018 - 2021, more @_elistudio
Research, Draw, Synthesize

Student work from studios, research, and media seminars, 2018 - 2021, more @_elistudio
Research, Draw, Synthesize
How can we employ research and representational tools to understand urban violence?
From 2008 to 2012, the city of Juárez, home to 1.3 million people, was widely deemed the most dangerous place on Earth. Curiously, El Paso, Texas, border town to Juárez, was ranked the safest city in the United States of America. I was lucky, blessed and perhaps destined to have moved out of Juárez on 2003, just before the Drug War took over the border. I grew up in the west side of El Paso, directly across Anapra, the poorest neighborhood in Juárez which is divided by the mighty, contested and tired Rio Grande. I have lived a life of high contrast, aware of the economic, political and racial tensions that decided my fate. Though I may come from a difficult place, my architectural education has enabled me to understand the built, political and cultural environment I grew up in. I was through this understanding that I found my passion for activism through architecture and social justice.

2016 - present

What happens to children that live and grew up in cities that are socially divided, violent and decaying?

Bay Love - "I am love". This non-profit focused on fundraising for the reconstruction of a children's kitchen and shelter called La Merced, located in Juárez, Mexico. The first fundraising event was an art and fashion show hosted by local artists and designers known for creating environmentally conscious collections. With the profits of the first event, the team was able to build a permanent roof over the shelter and construct outdoor learning spaces for the students. In the following years, the students became the protagonists of the design and maintenance of their gardens.

Plan, Build, and Grow

What can architects, urban planners, artists and activists do together to shape the next generation?
Social + Environmental Justice projects through art, architecture, and activism

Elisandra Creative Studio