

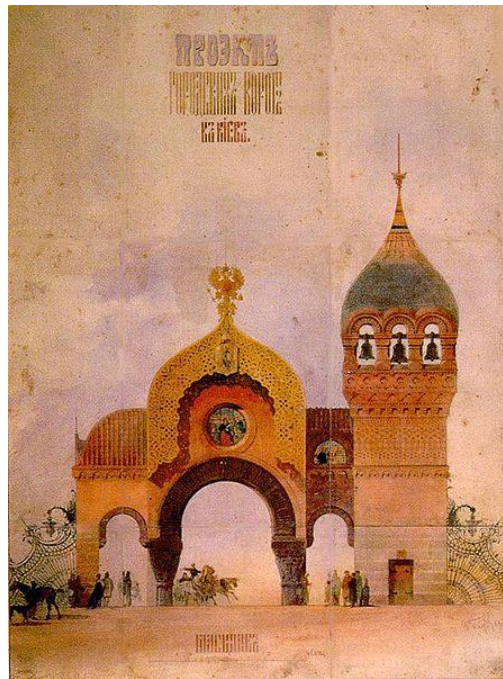
Ara Urbanis: City as Fortress...with Walls!

By: Kris Hartley

INTRODUCTION

“Harmony was a capitalist plot to sell pianos.” – Adrian Jacobs, (Untitled)

The Great Gate of Kiev, the final movement of Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky’s magnum opus *Pictures at an Exhibition*, is an unsettling musical depiction of class aspiration and subtly expresses the horror of institutionalized oppression. Mussorgsky’s jarring timpani strikes may not be the liberated masses’ clamorous support for triumphant Tsar Alexander II, but a raging mob of desperate serfs pounding at the Great Gate (right) in search of freedom, dignity and happiness (scarce commodities in Alexandrian Russia). The privileged few thrived behind the impenetrable walls of a fortified enclave both literal and figurative, whose cracks would not give way until the early 20th century. Society for the wealthy was a fortress, from which resource holders could cruelly but comfortably lob profit-hungry cannon shots into huddled packs of starving women and children. The social ecology was constructed as a capitalist plot to protect property. So is the modern city.



INTELLECTUAL PRECEDENTS

It is clear from the tone of the introduction that this metaphor is indebted to Manuel Castells, as it is grounded in a class-warfare *weltanschauung*. If society is a class struggle, then the fortress metaphor is appropriate. However, it is not applicable only to the elements in society that control resources. All classes, affinity groups and ideological factions withdraw behind the Great Gates of their own fortified enclaves, from which they peer with suspicion at threatening passerby. When threats are illegitimate, it becomes necessary to manufacture fear in order to perpetuate a siege mentality (as in America’s recent military campaigns or the Red Scare). Also a constituent element of this metaphor is Mike Davis’ “Ecology of Fear,”¹ which divides the urban landscape into post-apocalyptic panic zones and enclaves of security.

NOVELTY OF THE CONCEPT

This theoretical advance resists the urge to indulge another stale physical metaphor. How can the city be understood: as a series of concentric circles, a jagged-edged star, or a quilt? Perhaps even the human

¹ DAVIS, Mike. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.

body may be used, albeit clumsily, to represent the city. Indeed, it provides admirable explanatory power for both the physical and sociological. However, a theoretical advance calls for bold propositions that depart from traditional trend-lines of academia, which often prides itself on squelching iconoclasts in favor of adherence to tautological philosophies that may be as useless as they are inbred.

So, why the fortress?

- Given the polemic rhetoric found in modern society, the fortress is easy to understand.
- Its modularity offers versatile explanatory power in a variety of physical and social contexts.
- It has boundaries. A perfectly flexible, open-ended metaphor that proposes a catch-all description of urban phenomena might avoid offending competing theories (such as the one holding that cities have no termination point), but can become a turbid swamp of self-evident rhetorical flimflam. Life has boundaries, as do cities. The fortress analogy captures this.
- The fortress is a timeless concept, and its use as a metaphor can be retrospectively applied to cities and societies of all historical periods.
- The fortress metaphor is scalable. It can be applied in a microcosmic examination of the living spaces created by individuals, or territories held by vast empires. In its application to the nonphysical, fortress mentality can explain micro-sociological phenomena that occur between individuals, but also national or global social trends, such as the seemingly monolithic political support for the Bush Doctrine.²

APPLICATION OF THE THEORY

Explorations of sociological phenomena contribute at least as much to understanding The Urban as do theories about physical form, and the following focuses on the former.

A Mighty Fortress is Our God: Understanding Social Auto-exclusion through Church Hymn Lyrics

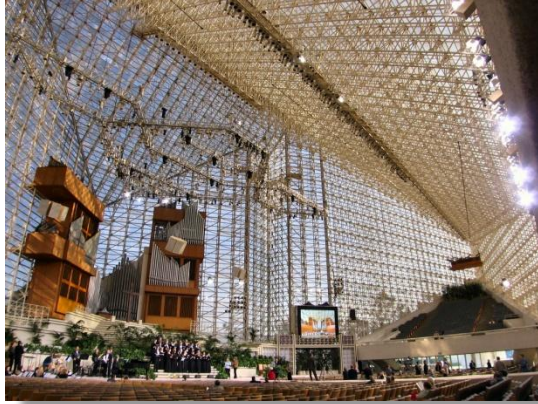
American Evangelo-Fascism has seized both the cultural and physical landscape. Is the church a welcoming sanctuary of spiritual refuge, or a fortress of outdated ideologies? One might assume the latter, after a drive around Loop 1604 in the far-flung exurbs of San Antonio, Texas. Cornerstone Church is not only an unmistakable Christian fortress protected by a moat of parking lots, but it is an ideological bastion from which the cannonballs of doctrine are launched to a worldwide audience, via Pastor John Hagee's (right) weekly television ministry.³



² CASTELLS, Manuel; ARSENAULT, Amelia. "[Conquering the Minds, Conquering Iraq: the Social Production of Misinformation in the United States: a Case Study](#)". *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 3, June 2006, pp. 284-308.

³ Listen to a clip of Pastor Hagee at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13IXIWhKEHU&feature=related>

As such, Cornerstone Church truly is the embodiment of this paper’s metaphor. It is located along a major ring road, used as a feeder conduit for the parishioners who occupy the physical and social periphery of San Antonio. Likewise, people watch from their homes, often those who are on the periphery of critical thought and scientific reason. They are safe from these invading forces once they



pull up the drawbridge and withdraw into their fortress of Christian mysticism. This example can be found anywhere there is an exclusionary enclave of ideology, which often incarnates itself in physical ways. The Crystal Cathedral (left) in Orange County is an imposing fortress of doctrine, shoehorned into a neighborhood of modest homes but towering over them in an immodest display of wealth. In ante-bellum Charleston, South Carolina, St. Phillips Episcopal Church was deliberately built into the middle of the street, so passerby would have to alter their course

and acknowledge the existence of (G)od.⁴ The Mormon Church on Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles is an unmistakable fortress reference, encircled by an unfriendly fence beyond which, one presumes, the yard bears green grass and exclusionary rhetoric flows like a protective moat.

It is also difficult to resist also mentioning the various sects that have fortified themselves from society through the years: Ruby Ridge, Waco, Jonestown and most recently, Warren Jeffs’ branch of the LDS.⁵ Each of these examples exhibits siege mentality, the notion that participation in society is anathema to the ideals of Christian spiritual reflection.

Fortress of Fear: ‘Protection,’ Security Theatre, and Consumer-Citizens as Manipulated Subjects

Public space can itself imply the need to fear, and socially acquiesce. In lower Manhattan, the built environment around the fortified federal courthouses serves as a deterrent to terrorist mischief, and the



security theatre reminds passerby never to stop fearing. These environments become emotionally treacherous and bludgeon their visitors into catatonic obedience. The same can be said for the security tango at airports, a treacherous affair to which society has become deferentially inured. Other elements of semi-“public” fortress landscapes include shopping centers crawling with private law enforcement agents in quasi-authoritative attire, pat-down bomb screeners at

⁴ <http://www.nps.gov/history/nR/travel/charleston/stp.htm>

⁵ Jeffs was indicted for child abuse and polygamy, and will now enjoy the fortress of prison.

football games, and security call boxes on campuses that are a constant reminder of our. Even institutional public housing, influenced by the design zeitgeist of the 1960's (mid-century brutalism), mimics a fortress style in its fenced playgrounds and impenetrable concrete walls. Social unrest is attributed to this toxic environment.

Fortress mentality goes beyond security. American society is infatuated with the private social gathering place: the country club, gated community, first class section of an airplane, and express check-in line for “gold club” members. These are protection from the grit and inconvenience of public life, and all the hassles, dangers, and loss of dignity it causes. The *hoi polloi* are left to “pound at the gate.”



Pruitt-Igoe Homes in St. Louis

Scaling up the Model

Cities often adopt a fortress mentality for the sake of competition. Civic boosterism, a concept explored in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, is a siege strategy that perpetuates notions of localist superiority and breeds suspicion and contempt for regional neighbors. The same might be said for nations as well. In addition to the very literal adoption of fortress mentalities through military force, countries often diplomatically fortify themselves either as political lone rangers (North Korea and Iran) or as unholy ideological alliances (America and Britain). As such, *Ara Urbanis* has the power to explain The Urban, The Inter-Urban, and The Super-Urban.

LIMITATIONS AND PROSPECTS

This theory is derivative. Although it advertises a unique way to conceive of The Urban, this is only realized upon its *application*, rather than its virtue as a creative metaphor. I was hoping to precipitate a jarringly iconoclastic theoretical landslide in how scholars think about cities, but instead I came up with a building as a metaphor. A building. It has applications and some explanatory value, but may well be relegated to history's garbage heap of discarded theories due to its failure of creativity.

However, its contribution, as argued in this paper, is to rekindle a critical-theory-based examination of sociological phenomena with an eye towards cities. Despite the confines of its limitations, I believe that this metaphor is still useful in casting The Urban in a critical light that accounts for the complexities of society and their influence on the landscape.