

Case Study

Urban Terrorism: St. Peter's Square, Vatican City

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Cities have become theatres of radical terrorism today. Cities offer a unique confluence of vulnerabilities – as nodes of capital and human flow and sites of architectural spectacle – that work to the advantage of orchestrated and well-planned radical terrorism. The nature of threat has changed from an exogenous to an endogenous enemy, and battle lines brought from the outside to inside the city.¹ The natural density of cities and their roles as places of urban procession and activity make them attractive targets for terrorists aiming to destabilise, terrify, or destroy. The surge in terrorism that began with the destruction of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent spate of high-profile attacks in Boston, Bangkok, and Paris, all point to the convergence of terrorism, spectacle and mass destruction. Yet to this highly threatening convergence, present securitisation strategies and tactics appear contrary to the aims of architecture. Does this then require a rethinking of our entire basis of architectural design to accommodate securitisation?

The recent securitisation of St. Peter's Square (in November 2015) has illuminated three main contradictions between security and architecture that are apparent in practice today: the first relates to spaces and spatial practices; the second to the differing professional beliefs between the security and architectural professions; and the third concerns urbanity. The iconic status of St. Peter's Square as a tourist venue and the destination for pilgrims from all over the world makes it especially

vulnerable to terrorist threats. Fresh in the wake of the 2015 Paris attacks that claimed 130 lives, and in response to FBI warnings about threats made against it by the Islamic State terrorist group, the Vatican pre-emptively imposed stringent security measures and barricade structures around the square to deter possible attacks.²

The imposition of a carceral system of security checkpoints and barricades in a bid to impose a closed system on the square damages the very life of the square. This closed system, with a clear interior enclosed by a ring of security, goes against the open nature of a square that is designed not to have such demarcations. It is also striking that, although the security features fall under the architect's purview, architects are generally not involved in the formulation and installation of these elements. Often, the responsibility of securitising urban spaces falls entirely on security experts. These professionals adopt methodologies that tend to impose a prison-like system of surveillance and control that renders many urban arenas lifeless.

The crux of the matter could lie with the diametrically opposed aims of the two professions: architects strive to promote mobility and interaction among people, while security experts, endeavour to enclose and restrict movement to facilitate securitisation. More worryingly, the increasing influence of security experts on urban spaces could potentially undermine the values that architects wish to imprint upon these spaces. With the

ever-increasing frequency and severity of terrorist attacks accelerating the rate of securitisation of cities, how will the influences of both these professions on our urban spaces be negotiated?

The longstanding trajectory of securitisation in cities also raises questions of how urbanity should be perceived. The very nature of exclusion and control brought about by the securitisation of St. Peter's Square corrodes the inherent nature of what the square previously symbolised: a sanctuary where all could enter and be welcome. By replacing the openness of the public square with a carceral system of security checkpoints and barricades, St. Peter's Square has morphed into a place injected with exclusivity, fear and paranoia.

The opposing forces of an architecture of security and an architecture of mobility and interaction raises tensions between space and spatial practices, among professional beliefs in architecture, and on urbanity. As the increasing frequency and severity of attacks raises the demand and pressure for security in cities, the relationship between architecture and security will become more prominent. Under these new conditions of terrorism, how can the architect still contribute to the discussion of a convivial city?

Notes

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
2. Nick Squires, 'Security stepped up at Vatican over fears of terror attack', *The Telegraph*, 20 September 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>.

Biography

Daniel Tan is based in Singapore, where he works as an architectural designer in internationally renowned firm Woha Architects. Graduating with a Master's Degree in Architecture from the National University of Singapore, he found his passion in architectural design and theory. His research explores the increasingly intertwined relationship of contemporary warfare with the urban spaces we inhabit, in particular the transformation of these spaces in the presence of warfare. He continues to contribute actively to journals, while establishing himself as a practicing architect in the thriving Singaporean architectural scene.