



Architecture Research
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Architecture and Irony
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2024

Catching Flak On the Irony of Fortresses

by Anna Neimark and Michael Osman

Architecture has a certain aspect, some of which is related to the design and construction of the building and some of which implies language used for the design and construction. When we talk about architecture as a form of communication, we include all the above, and we can see and feel the irony, and it is often an irony. Architecture can be a language of itself. It is a language of power, of authority, of control, of order, of discipline, of hierarchy, of hierarchy, of hierarchy.

We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture. We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture. We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture. We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture.

Architecture plays a significant role in our lives. It is a part of our lives, and it is a part of our lives. It is a part of our lives, and it is a part of our lives. It is a part of our lives, and it is a part of our lives. It is a part of our lives, and it is a part of our lives. It is a part of our lives, and it is a part of our lives. It is a part of our lives, and it is a part of our lives.

Here, we will look at the irony of architecture, and we will look at the irony of architecture. We will look at the irony of architecture, and we will look at the irony of architecture. We will look at the irony of architecture, and we will look at the irony of architecture. We will look at the irony of architecture, and we will look at the irony of architecture. We will look at the irony of architecture, and we will look at the irony of architecture.

At a time when the military gate, fortress, and castle are becoming more and more important, we are talking about the irony of architecture. We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture. We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture. We are talking about the irony of architecture, and we are talking about the irony of architecture.

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- 1 Peter D. Eisenman's academic career in architecture began by contemplating philosophical questions of the field's self-definition. For example, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition," *Design Quarterly* No. 78/79 (1970), 1–5; "Post-Functionalism," *Oppositions* 6 (Fall 1976). See also, many of the essays in *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963–1988* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

- 2 Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 163–184.

"The ironization of form consists in a deliberate destruction of the form."

Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstskritik in der Deutschen Romantik* (1920)

Architecture has a written aspect, some of which is related to the design and construction of buildings and some of which employs language as a tool for the description of buildings in narrative. When we consider architecture as a form of writing that includes all the above, it can be sensuous, literal, figurative, and abstract—as an abstraction, architecture can be representational of itself.¹ An inevitable byproduct of architecture's written aspect is its production of irony.

We define irony along the lines of Paul de Man's 1977 oddly titled lecture on "The Concept of Irony," where he described the term as anything but a concept.² Rather, de Man viewed irony as an interruption in written narrative, a negation of its linear flow. Insofar as narrative is the basis of civilizational history, de Man maintains, it is the technique through which human culture documents its development over time.

Architecture plays a significant role in such an effort. For example, when a work of architecture is intended to mark a moment in time—often as a monument—it offers culture a circuit of reference between historical narrative and built form. In many cases, one work of architecture refers to another that preceded it in history and thereby reinforces the linearity of the civilizational narrative. Architecture's ironies would therefore be interruptions to this structure of narrative; they might be interpreted as gaps within the networks of reference, or "shorts" within the circuitry of history. These forms of architectural negation are meanings that interrupt any metanarrative of civilizational meaning.

Here, we will focus on one example of an architectural irony that interrupts the cultural metanarrative: the fortress. It is one of the Ur-forms of architecture because it has traditionally functioned in the defense of cities, coastlines, and borders. Fortresses have a storied literature, and they constitute a significant part of architecture's military genre. First, we will show how fortress architecture developed through language and then we will explain the resulting irony of fortresses today.

As a form in the military genre, fortresses were expensive, highly technical, large-scale military constructions that warranted a specialized set of terms. Over time, this vocabulary became a common syntax for army engineers and soldiers. The architectural grammar of fortress-design and construction reached a climax at the end of the 17th century with the work of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, Louis the XIV's guru of siege warfare. He

formalized the use of words that represented precise programmatic functions for the arrangement of any fortress. At the start of his *New Method of Fortification*, Vauban provided a list of words and their respective definitions in about twenty pages. Here is a selection of ten terms as they appeared in the context of the British translation of that lexicon:

Banquette, a little foot-pace at the bottom of the parapet, upon which the soldiers get up to fire into the moat, or upon the covert-way.

Battery, is a place raised, whereon to plant the great guns, and play upon the enemy.

Breach, is the ruin which the cannon or a mine makes in a fortification to take it by assault.

Chandeliers, are wooden parapets covered with bavons, filled with earth about a foot high, made use of in approaches, mines and galleries, to cover the workmen, and hinder the besieged from constraining them to quit their labour.

Courtain, is the longest straight line that runs about the rampart drawn from one flank to the other, and bordered with a good parapet five feet high, behind which the soldiers place themselves to fire upon the covert-way, and into the moat.

Esplanade, is the place void of houses, between the citadel and the town.

Flank, is the part which joins the courtain to the face of the bastion, from which the face of the next bastion requires its defence.

Gallery, is a covered walk, either of earth or turf. The sides of it are made with planks and pillars; and they are made use of in the moat.

Palisades, are wooden stakes from five to seven feet high, armed with two of three iron points, which are fixed before fortresses, courtains, ramparts, and glaces.

Parapet, is an elevation of earth upon the rampart, behind which the soldiers stand, and where the canon is planted for the defence of the place.³

3. Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *The New Method of Fortification*, 5th ed. (London, 1722), p. 68-85.

Removing these words from their alphabetical order allows us to arrange them in a fortified stack, a sort of poem. *Offset from the perimeter of the moat, the chandelier bedecked parapet looms upon the rampart, encircling the bastions that extend into the flanks connected by curtain walls. These, in turn, descend inward toward the parade grounds, beyond the banquettes and the batteries of weapons. Reversing direction, we follow the line of fire, along the vectors of the palisades, where galleries dig in before the glacis that undulate outward and then flatten into an esplanade of no-man's land.* These sentences do not only describe a tower of stone and earthworks, they also compose a tower of words that was once held together by the language of fortresses.

But the coherence of language has been breached. This assault is not only the result of our awkward attempt at writing an ironic poem: the words are simply hard to follow. We also cannot blame ourselves as mere laymen who lack the necessary knowledge of these technical terms. Indeed, so many of these words do sound familiar because they have received new definitions that overwhelm those developed by Vauban. Fortresses and their vocabulary have taken on an ironic character because of the cultural repression of their technical meaning. These terms have been (purposely) forgotten from the mainstream of culture as the buildings have increasingly disappeared from the linear narrative of history. Fortress language appears to have become antique, antiquarian even. Meanwhile, physical fortress buildings no longer belong to strategies of war, nor do they express the enclosure of cities, nor do they figure prominently as protectors of national borders. Certainly, nobody would take on the expense of building a fortress any longer. It is ridiculous to fortify a place with a building when one must defend against drones or cyberattacks, except metaphorically, as in designing a "firewall." Fortresses are now memorialized as sites of the lost narrative strength of architecture—they remain as historical sites of victory or loss, as relics of former political and strategic representations of power.

The written aspect of fortress architecture lives in the scrapheap of metaphor. The very silliness of a contemporary fortress allows it to contribute to our definition of architectural irony. With its dislocation from culture, the language of fortification—and its corollary architectural forms—have come to interrupt the flow of cultural meaning with archaic meanings. Paul de Man would have called this, after Fichte, parabasis. This is our modern Tower of Babel.

The language of military architecture has an extensive double life: banquette furniture, hanging chandeliers, curtainwall façades, urban boulevards, interior enfilades, Thanksgiving parades, battery power, and printed magazines. These are just some of the terms that have taken on new meanings and

4 The language of warfare more generally populates critical discourse. The word "salient," for example, means a projecting feature of landscape; it is also known as a "bulge" in descriptions of territory. Often, it is a feature within a battlefield that projects into enemy territory. See Hugh M. Cole, *The U.S. Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations. The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1993). More broadly, see Bruno Latour, "Why Critique Has Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (Winter 2004), 225.

5 Michael Braun, More than 1,300 refugees are stopped at sea or removed from Dry Tortugas National Park, WUSF, The Florida Roundup, January 6, 2023 <https://www.wusf.org/local-state/2023-01-06/more-than-1300-refugees-stopped-at-sea-removed-dry-tortugas-national-park> (accessed December 10, 2024).

6 Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to This Field of Art*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica: Getty Center for Arts and Humanities, 1988). See also, Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

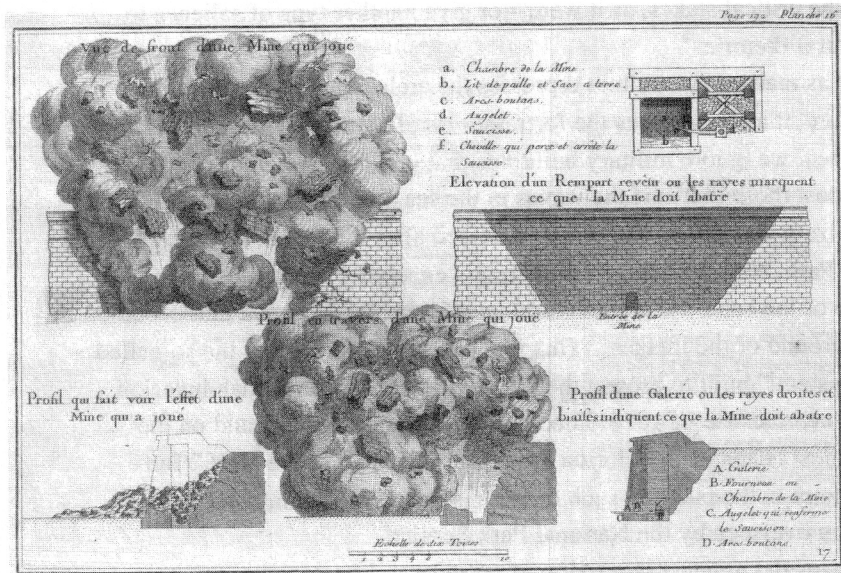
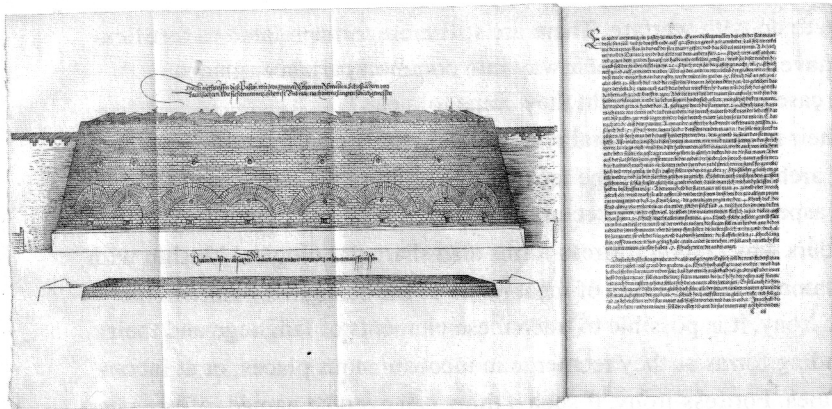
have little to do with warfare. There are still more terms related to fortification that have not yet found their way into common parlance: glacis, caponier, casemate. What might they come to mean?

At their moment of cultural relevance, fortresses borrowed from other genres of architectural language too. We can point to the terms used for domestic aspects of that architecture that helped feed and house the garrison. One wonders why certain fortress-terms also share philological kinship with animal anatomy: how do cuts of meat relate to the bastioned flank? In the service of irony, it is possible to trace these elements of language and their corresponding forms as they reemerge in inconspicuous places, or at inconvenient times. Fortress-irony, if such a thing can even be named, offers a certain comic relief, albeit nerdy and even boring. At the same time, it may also sharpen the critical stakes, as it were—or give another type of salience to architectural rhetoric.⁴

Just as mainstream culture represses the archaic language of military architecture, it also represses the fortresses that linger in cities or under them. Often, we ignore military buildings that populate the countryside, or we look past those that surf the waves in the sea. In 2023, hundreds of refugees from Cuba and Haiti were processed after landing at Dry Tortugas National Park. News coverage of this tragic encounter with the Coast Guard said little of the beautiful architectural landmark Fort Jefferson that occupied the background of the images.⁵ This was one of the 42 forts of the so-called "Third System," built to protect the US coastline after the British invasion that spawned the War of 1812. That monument continues to stand on the western most island of the Florida Keys, as "Guardian of the Gulf." But there is irony in the fact that such fortress is now a snorkeling and fishing destination overseen by the National Park Service.

Perhaps the greatest repression of military architecture figures strongly in one of the core narratives of architectural modernism in Europe. The erasure of the medieval ramparts around the city of Vienna made space for the Ringstraße at the end of the 19th century and literally laid the groundwork for Otto Wagner to theorize a form of a monumental modern metropolis.⁶ Even the Viennese architect Adolf Loos, with his distinctive psychoanalytical view of modern life—for Loos, architecture was a tool that enabled repression—was unable to see the newly cleared land as the greatest act of repression: that of a former fortification.

Canons, too, are a medium of irony. In the German language, little distinction is made between the weapons of war and the annals of disciplinary knowledge: both *kanonen* are spelled with a single *n*. Bringing cannons into the canon, Robin Evans described the conundrum faced by early military engineers who sought to describe the projected surfaces of fortresses. The



7 Robin Evans, "Architectural Projection," *Architecture and Its Image*, eds. Eve Blau and Edward Kaufman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 18–35.

form of a defensive fort, he showed, made a direct relationship between the arc of an offensive shot and the projection plane of drawing. In the field, a vector of offence produces a corresponding geometry of defense. On paper, representing that geometric confluence requires a set of reciprocal orthographic conventions. The longevity of these projections—plan, section, elevation—now celebrates five centuries of architectural attention and far outlives their value for fortress design. Evans writes of one early user, the artist Albrecht Dürer, who speculated on the form of a fortress as a truncated cone with the visual aid of a projectile's path [1]. The convex surface was simultaneously formed by the attack of cannonballs and informed by the impression of battered arches. Evans playfully dwelled on a possible moment of indecision: Dürer needed the wall to map the path of the projectile, and he needed the path to map the wall. We will never know which one came first.⁷ His projections of a fortress were therefore doubled: they were self-referential to the process of projection itself. Self-reference, according to de Man, is a fundamental part of the ironic trope as it posits the "I"—the self—and simultaneously posits its destruction. In this case, the "I" of the fort is its geometrical construction and the "not-I" is its destruction under cannon fire. Perhaps this irony is captured in Vauban's depiction of a fortification caught in a cloud of linework flak [2]. Flak itself is an abbreviation of a compounded German word coined during World War II. The acronym stands for the *Flieger-abwehr-kanonen*, or the flying defense cannons, that produced clouds of shrapnel in the skies.

During this time of heightened emotions brought about by wars, military terms might be the last object we might suspect to remind us of irony. There is nothing ironic about war, as it is experienced. Yet we do find it disturbingly present in the modern language of our discipline. So, much like a fortress under cannon fire, we too are willing to catch some flak for the simple observation that the fortress was once an architectural form that protected; and its meaning was culturally clear. Now, it is a form that destroys form. It is ironic.

1 Albrecht Dürer, *Eitliche underricht, zu befestigung der Stett, Schloß, und Flecken*, (Gedruckt zu Nürnberg, 1527).

2 Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *Traité de l'attaque et de la défense des places* (La Haye: chez Pierre de Hondt, 1742). In an astonishing drawing, the military engineer Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban figuratively represented the explosion of lines—this can be read as much an aesthetic attack as a descriptive image. What explodes in the drawing is a curtainwall.

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