

Mohammed Atta's *Plan Obus*

"Give us your bombers, and you can have our baskets. "

-*The Battle of Algiers*

Glancing over our shoulders with more curiosity than anxiety, the Sears Tower seemed darker and larger than before. Milwaukee Avenue stretched directly to the skyscraper, running diagonally along the lakeshore. My German friend and I had decided, like much of the city that morning, to walk home rather than risk the subways or buses. Three hours earlier commercial airliners had hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As we walked this long stretch of open road, something neither of us had done before in our three years in Chicago, my friend commented that when she and her identical twin sister had lived in New York they were constantly asked, "So, which one of you has the antenna?"

Over the following days, the news stations aired innumerable exposés on the hijackers, their supporters, and Islamic "fundamentalism." Briefly mentioned in most of these was the time that Mohamed Atta, so-called "ring leader" of the attacks, spent in Hamburg, Germany. They recounted his deepening extremism, his association with a "radical" mosque, and his "gradual disengagement from society." Inevitably, there would be a line or two about the reason for his being in Germany: he was a graduate student in urban planning at the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg. He had studied architecture and engineering in Cairo, and knew that if he wanted to be prominent in his field he would have to get more training in either Europe or America. By all accounts he was polite and hardworking, earning the respect of his professors and fellow students. His master's thesis at the university was on the Syrian city of Aleppo, long heralded for its preserved markets and traditional neighborhoods. In his thesis, Atta expressed discontent over the encroachment of modernist buildings, particularly skyscrapers, and Western urban planning schemes on what he perceived to be traditional Islamic spaces. His paper was well received by the faculty, many of whom shared his interests and concerns.¹

On reading these reports I was immediately struck by Atta's professional studies in architecture and his almost personal vendetta against an icon of modernist corporate design. Following the attacks, there were discussions about the future of super-skyscrapers. There were many that claimed the era of skyscrapers was at an end because of their vulnerability to such attacks. While this has proven not to be the case (certainly in Abu Dhabi and Kuala Lumpur), this discussion was interesting in relation to Atta's personal interests and possible motivations. Where Atta grew up in Cairo there are whole city blocks of modernist-style apartment complexes, in which Atta himself lived as a child. If we accept the idea that these buildings represent a type of Western colonialism that is inherently foreign to Islamic cultures, then the inhabitants of these structures literally occupy and are occupied by a different culture. Their daily life is prescribed by an arrangement of space and time they may not perceive as their own but instead as something that has been imposed on them by an oppressive colonial power.

In the first few frames of *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 1965), we are presented with a fundamental dichotomy that drives the struggle presented in the film: the camera pans from a shot of the European Quarter, with its wide, carefully laid-out boulevards, to the hills of the Casbah, with its intricate alleyways and stacked housing. Later on in the film, the Casbah is forcibly shut off from the European Quarter. The Algerian militants foil this act of ghettoization by mimicking the French, dressing in European clothes and engaging in unproductive leisure activities (going to the beach, the milk bar, etc.). Here we recall Atta's image captured by an airport security camera showing his shaven face and dress shirt (the quintessential business traveler), and the time the hijackers spent in Las Vegas in the months preceding the attacks. Did they go there to do research, to discuss the Duck or Decorated Shed in the home of a-historical pastiche architecture, a world Mecca of sorts? Or was this part of the process of "becoming-American".

Most of us are at least superficially familiar with Le Corbusier's *Plan Obus* (1932), the first and most famous of his Algiers Plans series. In this archetypal utopian modernist scheme developed over many years until its partial realization in the 1950s, Le Corbusier deletes the intricate, so-called "confusing" aspects of the existing architecture of Algiers in favor of "open" space. In describing his project, Le Corbusier sounds almost fanatically out of touch with actual urban conditions in this French colonial outpost:

*People of Algiers! Here we are on the highway, elevated 100 meters, driving along at top speed, looking out over a landscape that is sublime (because we see it, having conquered it, having constructed it). I am not deluding myself; but I say to you, people of Algiers, citizens of Algiers that, having erected this city of Modern Times for all the world to see, you would be proud, and happy!*²

For us today, after having witnessed the essential failure of this modernist dream, the dogmatic fervor of Le Corbusier's words seems almost quaint. But what I was struck by most in reading through Le Corbusier's statements about the project was what he perceived as the conditions of existence for his design: the ocean and the sun, conquering and *inventing* the landscape. He approached the project as a distinctly Mediterranean problem and endeavored to create a city uniquely suited to that specific environment. Never are the Algerians or the unique cultural circumstances of building in Algiers discussed.³ The existing architecture that had developed over centuries in response to the same environmental issues that Le Corbusier was struggling with could not be retrofitted to accommodate modernist machinery and commerce, and so had to be razed to ensure "progress." Where Le Corbusier saw innovation and felicity, the native Algerians could only have seen a continuation of oppression and eradication of their culture. They may have shared a Gauloises cigarette, but the "liberté toujours" slogan rang differently in each other's ears.

Given Mohamed Atta's background, it is unlikely that he would not have understood and agreed with American architect Lebbeus Woods when he states that "buildings [are] designed not for their inhabitants as much as for the social order that sponsor[s] them."⁴ Atta seemed to perceive a literal, not metaphorical or simply ideological, link between architecture and the organization of power. He clearly recognized the symbolic importance of the structures they destroyed, and how that destruction would be conveyed to the public via commercial media as something pre-imagined in our film and TV culture (think *Escape From New York* or *Independence Day*). The uncanny effect of seeing enacted in real time something we've all seen before in our collective fantasies added a further layer of disbelief and shock to the incident.

The combination of anti-modernist sentiment and deep religious conviction is perplexing. Initially, striving for de-modernization makes sense in the context of reviving respect for the pre-modern past. But like most postmodern architecture by Venturi or Michael Graves, what we end up with is a cultural pastiche that is neither truly historical nor salutary. Both Christian and Muslim fundamentalist ideologies point to an imaginary past and offer worldviews reflecting eclectic, exaggerated, and often contradictory histories. This visionary pastiche carries over into the terrorist cells themselves, which are equally organized along non-hierarchical lines. While we may perceive Bin Laden or al-Zarqawi as commanding a terrorist network, it is clear that there is no need for a central leader and that having one can in fact put the organization in jeopardy rather than improve its preparedness or efficiency. These molecular cells are responses to the still-centralized Western and Western-supported governments and populations. Of course we shouldn't be surprised that Bin Laden hid out in the Caves of Tora Bora, nor that terrorist cells have websites and satellite phones.

In many ways, Mohamed Atta is emblematic of the disaffection felt by many in the Middle East toward what they perceive as specifically European modernist architecture and what it represents politically, economically, culturally. Atta would almost certainly have known about *Plan Obus* and read the words of Le Corbusier and other high modernist designers engaged in colonial building projects. Again, he had lived in modernist housing in Cairo and had studied its implementation from Hamburg to Aleppo. He may have also known of Lebbeus Woods's *Radical Reconstruction* (1997) and other contemporary attempts to rethink the city and urban design in ways that deal with the particular realities of each situation, encouraging liberty and hope through reconfiguring space and time. The truly astounding thing is how a thoughtful architect, one clearly affected by the impact of architecture on the real lives of people, could deliberately end his own life and that of thousands of others by flying Le Corbusier's champion of modern industry, the airplane, into another icon of twentieth-century progress, the World Trade Center.

-Brendan Threadgill

NOTES

1. The references to Atta's architectural studies come from newspaper articles published mainly in 2001 and 2002. Cf., <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/waronterrorism/story/0,1373,556630,00.html>
www.abc.net.au/4corners/atta/maps/timeline.htm
www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?020204faFACT
<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/09/18/inv.hamburg.suspects/>
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/network/etc/script.html
2. Cited in Norma Evenson, *Le Corbusier: The Machine and the Grand Design* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1969), 62.
3. Only for the 1941 Algiers Redaction did Le Corbusier consult with local experts.
4. Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 18.