

## Concrete Landscapes

Steven Humblet

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Bunkers, churches, memorials. These are the buildings that are the subject of a photographic series made by the Australian artist Don Cameron (1975). One could find the combination of these subjects a bit strange. At first glance, they are seemingly unrelated: a bunker is a fortification meant to defend the boundaries of a country against invading armies, a church is a place for worship, a memorial is a public expression of an event (or foundational value) that is worth to remember. Nevertheless, if one makes abstraction of their immediate function, there is indeed something common to all of them. All express elementary needs of a society: the need for protection against adversaries, the need to remember foundational events or values that define a society, the need for gathering places where people can celebrate their private beliefs. Furthermore, in this particular case, these three types of buildings are also connected by the material that was used in constructing them. All are built using concrete: a novel and modern material that was already abundantly used in European architecture from the 1920's onwards, but that nevertheless seems a weird choice for the construction of buildings that are supposed to represent the foundational values of a country or political system.

The bunkers were part of the Atlantic Wall, a series of fortifications built by the Nazi's between 1942 and 1945 to defend the newly gained territory against a possible attack from the Allied Forces. The use of reinforced concrete meant that they could withstand the incoming mortars from marine ships and the bombs from aircrafts. Each bunker had a specific function: some were meant to simply gather intelligence about the movements of enemy troops, others were equipped with gun batteries to keep landing troops at bay. As a thorough and seemingly indestructible material, concrete is here used to express sturdiness, the unflinching will to defend a territory against the enemy. Their construction can thus be seen as the latest iteration of defensive systems that were already in place during Medieval times when cities were protected by fortresses and later by intricately designed ramparts.

The function of the concrete bunker determines its form. Yet, one aspect is common to all of them: their contradictory relationship to the environment in which they were dropped. On the one hand, a bunker tries to hide in its environment, tries to use the natural defensive properties of any given landscape to its advantage. On the other hand, a bunker also has to instill fear in the troops that would attack it, and therefore needs to be plainly visible as an impervious fortress. It is the attempt to combine these two seemingly contradictory requirements that give the bunker its specific architecture. Bunkers are rarely square or rectangular with sharp edges. Instead, the walls are most of the times somewhat curved, making it a more difficult target for the attacking army. Contrary to regular brick and mortar buildings, they are also seamless which only enhances their rigidity. Each bunker operates as a protective mantle around the bodies of the soldiers that occupy them. All these defining aspects of the bunker come to the fore in the carefully crafted images of Cameron. He circles around them, looking for vantage points that do more than just present the bunker but that also articulate their different functions. He does not only show how they are embedded into the environment, but also how they are visually connected with the terrain they have to oversee, in this case the vast emptiness of the Atlantic Ocean. In one image we see the omnipresent ocean in the background, in other photographs Cameron draws the attention to the rectangular apertures at the front of the bunker. These horizontal slits mirror the flat horizon line of the ocean they were supposed to keep an eye on. They are the squinting eyes of the bunker, a tool for enhancing normal human vision by focusing on the parts of the sea that matter while obscuring everything else.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, concrete would also be used for the building of new churches to replace those destroyed in wartime. There is also a clear link between some of these churches and the concrete bunkers that preceded them. That link has a name: Paul Virillio, a French philosopher who became fascinated by the bunker and worked together with the French architect Claude Parent for the construction of the Church of Sainte-Bernadette du Banlay (designed between 1963 and 1966 and dedicated to Bernadette Soubirous). Paradoxically combining the military logic of the bunker and the sacred function of a church, Virillio and Parent created a stern yet dynamic monolith infusing the viewer with a sense of awe and dread at the same time. Also elsewhere, in Germany architects started to turn to concrete for the creation of their Catholic or Protestant churches. As the German architect Helmut Stiffler, one of the foremost builders of these churches in Germany, explains: "We were looking for a new language of form that had no link to the past ...that was indestructible ... and that would ensure these horrors could never be repeated." Concrete gave these churches mass, stability, eternity. It grounded them. Furthermore, there was a generally felt need to start afresh after the horrors of the Second World War, a feeling that was shared between the victors and the defeated. Especially in Germany, burdened as it was with the legacy of the Nazi regime, architects were looking for means to "build" their way out of the cul-de-sac of the second World War.

While the use of concrete turned the churches into an almost impenetrable mass, a forceful if not absurd presence in the (urban) landscape, the fluidity of the material also allowed for a new found freedom in the architectural language. For the first time in history architects were no longer confined to the building schemes of traditional churches. At the same time, the philosophical interplay between seemingly oppositional forces that underpinned the construction of Christian or Protestant churches remained intact. The congregation of worshippers that attended mass in these churches were treated with

a big surprise: from the outside experiencing the church as a dark, foreboding presence, they were greeted on the inside with a dazzling, playful arrangement of lines, planes and volumes. In contrast with the old, traditional Catholic or Protestant churches where the idea of a connection with a transcendent force that exceeded human experience, was expressed in the building of towers, lifting the eyes of the faithful upwards to the heavens, these churches did the same by creating vaulted ceilings that were seemingly constant in motion. Exchanging the immateriality of light for the heavy, but surprisingly fluid, material of concrete stressed the struggle of a society that was forced to reconcile with the recent past and imagine a new future. In deciding to focus on the outer shell of the concrete church, Cameron stresses the architectural novelty of these odd buildings. Choosing black & white photography over color photography, stresses the brute materiality of the concrete, directing all attention to its rough, coarse texture. His strategy is not dissimilar of the one used by those photographic pioneers who in the 19th century went out to photograph the pyramids of Giza and other architectural wonders of the world. Opting for a pure descriptive approach, they also tried to communicate the particular and quite spectacular features of these ancient buildings: their mass, texture and architectural form.

At the same time that the West-European countries embraced concrete for the building of new churches, something similar happened across the Iron Curtain in the East-European countries that were aligned with or occupied by Russia. They also started to look favorably on the use of concrete and other modern materials (like steel) for the construction of their monuments. These memorials or so-called “spomeniks” were sometimes built to remember gruesome events that took place there during the Second World War, at other times they were meant to express the more abstract values on which the new communist regime was built. As these East-European countries considered the establishment of a communist regime as a clean and absolute break with previous political systems, they needed a new material and a new, more abstract, language to express this fresh start. For them it was immediately clear that the architects building these monuments should shy away from the use of marble, bronze and other noble materials that were previously used for the creation of statues. As such, both the West-European churches and the East-European “spomeniks” express the desire of a society to reinvent themselves and to use the modern materials of concrete and steel to articulate that in physical objects. However, they differ in the way they approached that aspiration: the memorials or “spomeniks” were meant to give a foundation for a totally different order – a utopian ideal; while the churches were conceived in relation to an already existing tradition. No matter how bizarre these concrete churches may appear, they are still part of a deeply rooted history. In contrast, the “spomeniks” use historical events to articulate a path out of the past into a radiant future. But the future they imagined did not come to pass. And it is precisely this aspect of a promised future in shambles, that becomes the central topic in Cameron’s photographs. In his images these “spomeniks” appear as fallen soldiers. While stressing their commanding monumentality, the outcome of a society which once firmly believed in the bedrock truths they so proudly articulated, Cameron also confronts us with the current state of disrepair to which so many of these once imposing monuments have fallen. They have become ruins of a botched future. While the bunkers functioned as a final line of defense against an invading army, these “spomeniks” were meant to solidify the abstract ideals on which a new society was to be born. In both instances, they proved to be unsuccessful.

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He taught photo history and photo theory at Sint-Lucas Brussels (2003-2016), MDA Genk (2005-2008) and KASK Gent (2008-2010). He was a member of Citygraphy, a research platform initiated by Dirk Lauwaert on the photographic and filmic representation of city and countryside. Since 2018, he has led the research group Thinking Tools and teaches the subject Photo History 1 at the KASK Antwerp. In 2014 he defended his doctorate at UGent on the photo project Changing New York by the American photographer Berenice Abbott.

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