

# Urbanisation of Panic

A response to Franco 'Bifo' Berardi in Occupied Issue 111

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Berardi describes the state of urban territory as striated by new dimensions of panic where the mental and physical environment of the city overlap in an over-saturation of signs “that create a sort of continuous excitation,” he writes, “a permanent electrocution, which leads the individual mind as well as the collective mind to a state of collapse.”

In short, he talks about how human beings as social organisms are excessively agitated by the urban experience to the point of existing in a constant state of panic. This cultural agitation exacerbated by technology has enabled a new economy beyond the production of material goods to one of “semiotic goods” as he calls them, that function within a kind of hyper-sprawl of frenzied sociality and contagious information. Berardi writes:

The problem of panic is generally connected with the management of time. But we can also see a spatial side to panic. During the past centuries, the building of the modern urban environment used to be dependent on the rationalist plan of the political city. The economic dictatorship of the last few decades has accelerated the urban expansion. The interaction between cyber-spatial sprawl and urban physical environment has destroyed the rationalist organisation of the space.

In the intersection of information and urban space we see the proliferation of a chaotic sprawl following no rule, no plan, dictated by the sole logic of economic interest. Urban panic is caused by the perception of this sprawl and this proliferation of metropolitan experience. Proliferation of spatial lines of flight.

The metropolis is a surface of complexity in the territorial domain. The social organism is unable to process the overwhelmingly complex experience of metropolitan chaos. The proliferation of lines of communication has created a new kind of chaotic perception.

He then portends the urban terrain is no longer understood as a mere economic pattern but as a psychopathological one as well. While this “digitalization and info-sphere” largely

defines the complexion of today’s metropolis the result, he says, is a political and economic crisis of bursting attention span, pressurized time management, and never-ending cognitive anxiety, all of which translates to a City of Panic.

I imagine it as panic en-globalized; or, panic as a new prototypical capitalist form, or something. The economic engines of the world spurred on by frenetic geographies of panic development; panic as more than just an urban dimension but as a 21st century planning principle. Is it a transnational institutionalization of panic through global urbanism that makes the world go round today?

Back to Berardi’s point, however, if I understand him correctly (and in my own words), human society as a system for social organization is compressing and fragmenting under the weight of its own urban psychosis self-constituted in the nature of these “semio-cities” (as I might choose to call them), and civilization is burying itself in the environmental traces of this collective panic, as if cities were mass psychospacial fossils, if you will, ready to leave the future imprints of our psychic breakdown in the skin of the earth forever, in the indelible space patterns of the city.

Taking the City of Panic a bit further in Subtopian terms I ask, has panic become the main ingredient that binds the urban experience today – spread through a larger geopolitical climate as well? If we think of so-called globalization and the ‘War on Terror’ purely in terms of the spaces it occupies, we could examine the implicit panic in structures like border fences and illegal immigration detention centers, leftover bunkers and future secret fallout space; or in the atmospheres of urban conflict zones like the Occupied Territories; or from behind the walls of the new American embassy compound in Baghdad – there are entire cartographies of paramilitarism and slumaphobia to be traced across the map. The urban morphology of panic has left behind entire Cold War landscapes once modeled on a panic preparedness. Berardi likens this ubiquitous panic to an electrical charge, but I also see it is a

critical vibration in some way - or, maybe more like a resident frequency that signifies the simultaneous (in)stability of the global city's core social and structural foundations. Panic as a volatile urban harmony. We have engineered a range of metropolises that vibrate on the edge of collapse at every level.

I get a little leery of some of the language in his article (but I get even more so of my own in relaying it!), so, in other words, while he riffs off some classic post-modern theory on media saturation, semiotic bombardment, information barrage, globalization, and ultimately a culture of fear that has already been written about extensively, he also provokes good reflection on the ways fear is transmitted in the very genetic make-up of our cities, in the spatial logic that organizes and rearranges the social infrastructures of global capital. Berardi provokes one to ask: has panic always existed this way and what is the urban evolution of it? How has the change of different urban forms exerted an influence over the history of panic?

Berardi's article not only shares the title of Paul Virilio's recent book but leans towards similar observations, namely how the contemporary city is defined by a kind of de facto psychopathology that is embodied in the very spaces and architectural rationales that order urbanization today, from gated communities to urban surveillance landscapes, to the last dying refuges of public space that have been overwhelmed by privatization and a complete hyper securitization of the built environment at all scales. It is not entirely unobvious that panic appears almost as if it were a chief modus operandi for much of the world's planning strategy. We've moved past the kind of bombastic but functional fear that the nuclear threat brought towards a more dysfunctional domestic terror that keeps everything on edge – both within the zones of safety now as well as outside the gates – where at any moment something on a smaller local scale could

suddenly cause considerable mayhem. Either way the current urban response is less on how to unravel the causes of such a crisis and more so on how to armor ourselves from its penetration – a posture rooted in a perpetual state of anticipated panic, a great looming panic attack, ultimately a state of terror.

Perhaps more so than ever the culture of cities today is defined by a collective psychology whose roots flourish in the very physical forms that constitute the contemporary hyper-metropolis. This is a topic of great interest particularly in the ways the production of cityscapes are used either intentionally or as a de facto means of stoking a 'culture of fear,' or what could be also referred to as the hysteria of a fortress urbanism. I am extremely curious about the psychological effects of armoring our skyscrapers, fortifying every inch of our public spaces, walling ourselves off from every possible threat. How are these threats themselves even reproduced or perceived in the very process of trying to secure ourselves from them? How must we consider such trends in urban design from a psychological vantage? What do our obsessions with securing the environment mean in the cross-pollination of global culture? It is the direct correlation between landscapes, anxiety, and cognition that fascinates me in the context of a City of Panic.

Part of the goal of Subtopia ([subtopia.blogspot.com](http://subtopia.blogspot.com)) is to try to look at the pervasive discourse around a security culture through a psychospatial lens to better understand, for example, how gated communities, security fences, and ubiquitous surveillance are discussed, presented, consumed, rationalized, inscribed as expressions of a deeper cultural pathos. Through an architectural lens Subtopia tries to chronicle how the militarization of urban space not only as a planning tool for controlling cities (or, perhaps, designing them for the sole purpose of military occupation), but also



as a psychological apparatus for expanding the ideals of militarism, i.e., urbanization as a means to militarize the ego, religious antagonism, national identities, border conflicts, and so forth. Subtopia deconstructs the city as the ideal military recruiter.

One might ask, based on the panic-stricken nature of western culture what is the current diagnosis and mental health state of neo-liberal democracy? Or, how can the city be viewed as an architectural weapon to enforce a certain behavioral code, or to forcefully spatialize neo-liberalism in a way, to rear obedience (or addiction) to a rampant commerce? What are the inherent narratives of power that run through constructs like maximum-security prisons, megalithic casinos, shopping mall complexes, refugee camps, suburban sprawl, torture spaces and the hardened borderzones between nation-states? Is there a psychopathological connection between them all? Is there a new urban geopolitical archetype here to be deconstructed? I suppose to some degree Subtopia is an attempt to document these realms of spatial politics and the psychological underpinnings that govern these globalized architectures of control—these Cities of Panic.\_