

Before the Bunker.

By Steve Redhead

A 'bunker' called Martello Tower No 73 stands guard over the coastline of Eastbourne in East Sussex almost two centuries after it was originally built.



A circular, semi-conical building policing the security of English territory across the sea from France, Martello Tower No 73 is the last of seventy-four forts to be built on the coast in a line between Suffolk and Sussex in the South East of England in the early 1800s. They have never been used in war but they represent a time 'before the bunker', a pre-history of modern military architecture symbolised by the World War 2 bunkers of the Atlantic coast.



Martello Tower No 74, at Seaford, just past Beachy Head on the way from Eastbourne, is also still standing. Some of the seventy-four forts have been converted over the years into contemporary living accommodation. Some are derelict.

This article for *Nebula* is a photo-essay. It is a homage to Paul Virilio's book *Bunker Archaeology*. First published in 1975 in French, it was republished with this seeming spelling error in the title intact, in January 2009. The relationship between text and image replicates and refracts his alignment of text and image. The capacity to use an online refereed environment to re-locate and reconfigure this old book seems not only timely but appropriate.

Paul Virilio has argued that 'war was my starting point. I discovered the bunkers when I discovered freedom...my discovery of the bunker was the discovery of a child who was claustrophobic...For me the bunker is a kind of metaphor for suffocation,

asphyxiation, both what I fear and what fascinates me.’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002: 23)



The Martello fortresses, precursors of the World War 2 German bunkers in France which Virilio famously studied in his ‘bunker archaeology’ and ‘cryptic architecture’ in the 1950s and 1960s, were directly copied from Corsican forts on Mortella Point. They were designed, in England, to rebuff a Napoleonic invasion from over the water, an invasion which never materialised (1). Virilio’s bunkers were built to keep the Allies out of German occupied France. He experienced strategic Allied bombing in Normandy as a child in World War 2, an experience he never forgot. He swam out to sea to see the bunkers, the blockhouses that were built to defend fascism.



Locally in East Sussex the Martello Tower is known as the Wish Tower from the marshy area close to it (known as the ‘wash’ which became, in adaptation over the years, ‘wish’). The towers were built up to thirteen feet thick in places on the seaward side, using enough bricks (half a million) to build forty modern houses, and calculated to repel Napoleonic naval bombardment. Virilio talks of finding out about the German bunkers – he emphasises that the thinnest wall of the bunkers he photographs is ‘five feet thick’ and that there is ‘twenty feet of concrete for the submarine foundations’.



In the late 1950s, a young Paul Virilio (Redhead, 2006, Redhead, 2004a, Redhead, 2004b) first put pen to paper about the German bunkers he had been photographing along the Atlantic coast. The partnership he forged with architect Claude Parent (Redhead, 2005) in the 1960s around the idea of ‘the function of the oblique’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008) was based in Virilio’s photographic study of the German bunkers. The two ‘hip gunslingers’ of ‘Architecture Principe’ went on to create a ‘post-architecture’ of sorts, envisioning people living on inclined planes with buildings sprouting furniture coming out of the floor; a whole city, indeed, on an incline. The buildings, such as churches, they created together were based on bunkers (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002).



The bunkers along the Atlantic Wall totalled 15,000 and were designed to repel Allied attack against occupied France.



These bunkers had fascinated Virilio since he was a ten year old boy evacuated to Nantes in the Second World War where he says he learnt at the ‘university of disaster’ (Virilio, 2009a). The subsequent military architecture studies led him to an understanding of what he calls the ‘space of war’. Eventually, he would study ‘space-time’ and its conversion into ‘space-speed’.



Paul Virilio always saw himself as a ‘blitzkrieg baby’ or ‘war baby’ and later was himself conscripted into the French army during the Algerian war of independence. Virilio subsequently published the very short piece ‘Bunker Archeologie’ (see translation in Redhead, 2004a: 11-13) and eventually an illustrated book called *Bunker Archaeology* (Virilio, 2009b, English translation) following an original French edition in 1975 and the exhibition of his collection of text and images on the bunkers at the Decorative Arts Museum in Paris in 1975.



Sociologist Mike Gane has written, convincingly, of Paul Virilio's 'bunker theorising' (Gane in Armitage, 2000). Moreover, the idea of the architecture of fortification, and 'fortification as architecture', has been subjected to wide historical and social survey (Hirst, 2005: 179-223). The Wish Tower bunker in the series of photographs presented here recalls, from two centuries earlier, Virilio's 'modern' bunker studies.



For Virilio ‘the bunker is the symbol of modern times’.

Notes

*All photographs by Tara Brabazon, Professor of Media, University of Brighton, Sussex, England.

1. A symposium called ‘Trajectories of the Catastrophic’ was organised by City Lights Bookstore at the San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, USA, in October 2008 to bring together scholars looking at the work of Paul Virilio, especially ‘bunker archaeology’, speed politics and ‘the logistics of catastrophe’ -

http://www.citylights.com/info/?fa=event&event_id=402.

The symposium incorporated a ‘Bunker Tour’ of the World War 2 military bunker on Marin Headlands, Fort Chronkhite, Marin County. The bunker, like the Martello towers in Suffolk and Sussex, was built for an overseas invasion which never came.

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