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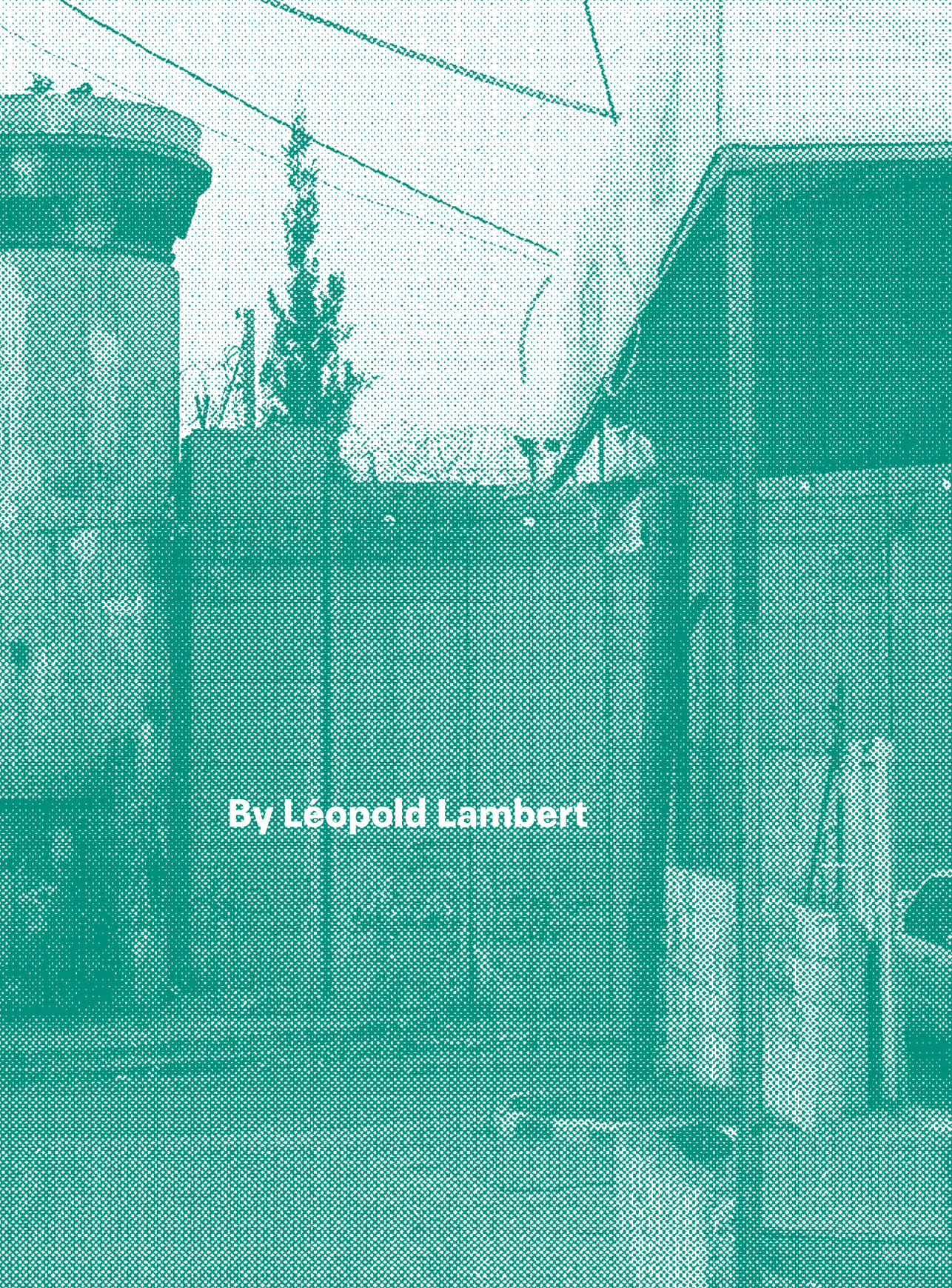
A field guide
to the future
of architecture

Edited by &beyond



Weaponised Architecture

**Deconstructing
the logic of architectural
violence**



By Léopold Lambert

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Deconstructing the logic of architectural violence

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“The determination of who designs/ builds architecture and benefits from the control of its violence on bodies has necessarily drastic political consequences.”

From bus shelters to borders, the spatial consequences of political agendas are impossible to escape: Léopold Lambert breaks down the violence inherent in our built environment and encourages the profession towards more active acknowledgement and resistance in the field.

What does it mean to say that architecture is a political weapon? In order to answer this question, we need to see how architecture is, firstly, a weapon (that is, how architecture has a propensity for violence) and secondly, how such a propensity is necessarily instrumentalised by one or several political agendas.

Let's begin with some non-anthropocentric considerations. The material assemblage we call a wall and the material assemblage we call a body are both situated spatially in the world at a particular moment. Because of their material properties, none of these two assemblages (nor any other) can occupy the same spatial coordinates at the same time. What this means is that in order for a body to occupy the same spatial coordinates as a wall – a requirement if this body wants to *cross* the wall – a shock will occur, detrimental to both assemblages; this shock is what we call violence.

The first political dimension through which we can think of this encounter between the *wall* and the *body* lies in the fact that walls are almost always built in such a way that the body's core energy (i.e. without the use of tools) is incapable of affecting their structural integrity. This determines the conditions of the encounter: although the violence will be reciprocal, the degree of violence will not be symmetrical. In other words, the violence deployed by the wall on the body will be much greater than the one deployed by the body on the wall.

Léopold Lambert

Léopold Lambert is the founder and editor-in-chief of *The Funambulist*, a bimestrial printed and digital magazine associated with two open-access online platforms: a blog and a podcast. His work is dedicated to the formulation of questions about the political relationships between the designed/built environment and bodies. His main fields of involvement are in Palestine, the Paris *banlieues*, and "Fortress Europe". He is the author of *Weaponized Architecture: The Impossibility of Innocence* (dpr-barcelona, 2012), *Topie Impitoyable: The Corporeal Politics of the Cloth, the Wall, and the Street* (punctum books, 2016), and *La politique du bulldozer: la ruine palestinienne comme projet israélien* (B2, 2016).

Previous page: The Apartheid Wall in East-Jerusalem, 2015.
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The consequence of such an asymmetrical spread of power is the ability for architecture to organise bodies in space, as much through the violence described above, as through its potentiality, usually internalised by bodies – we, as bodies, do not need to encounter a wall to know that we will have trouble crossing it. We can already see how this essential organising, and by extension controlling, function of architecture appeals to political agendas. Surrounding a body with walls enforces the incarceration of this body. Of course, the invention of the wall was quickly followed by the invention of a mechanism to mitigate the potential violence described above: the door, allowing the porosity of a wall to be moderated by making a small part of it rotate at will. But here again, the door was not invented alone; it came with a lock and an associated key that allows only certain bodies to transform the impermeable wall into a punctually porous one.

Whether the key holder is the agent benefiting from private property legislation, the warden of a prison, or an apartheid state, the determination of who designs/builds architecture and benefits from the control of its violence on bodies has necessarily drastic political consequences. Even the seemingly innocent shelter or bus stop in the pouring rain illustrates the relationships of power that are created through architecture. Should this shelter become filled with bodies seeking architecture’s protection against the rain, the snow, or anything else, additional bodies will be excluded from such protection. Whether the rule “first come, first served” is ethically legitimate or not is not (yet) the problem here: what is important to observe is that architecture creates processes of inclusion and exclusion of bodies that either reinforce or create unequal social conditions.

“Architecture creates processes of inclusion and exclusion of bodies that either reinforce or create unequal social conditions.”



Given these intrinsic political effects, and acknowledging the necessity to engage with architecture rather than giving up on it, we therefore need to examine what these effects are directed against in a given society. Almost always, partially because the drastic political consequences of architecture are either ignored or denied, these effects are directed in such a way that they reinforce the state-driven and/or normative relationships of power between bodies. Architectural projects motivated explicitly with such political programmes are, of course, the easiest to describe in this matter. The apartheid territorial and architectural apparatuses designed and built by the Israeli government and army in Palestine may be the most tragically illustrative examples of such deliberateness.

Portion of the border wall built by the Viktor Orbán administration between Hungary and Serbia, 2015.
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The infamous wall that separates the main part of the West Bank from the rest of Palestine, built at the beginning of the twenty-first century under the Ariel Sharon administration, is of course, the most expressive use of architecture to implement the state of apartheid. However, many other architectural forms also contribute to it: the blockade of the 1.8 million of Palestinians living in Gaza, the 139 Israeli civil settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and their neighbouring military bases, the segregated infrastructure (roads, water, electricity, the internet, etc.), the numerous temporary and permanent military checkpoints that regulate/prevent Palestinian movement between cities, not to forget the walls built on the borders of historical Palestine, preventing the return of five million refugees in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

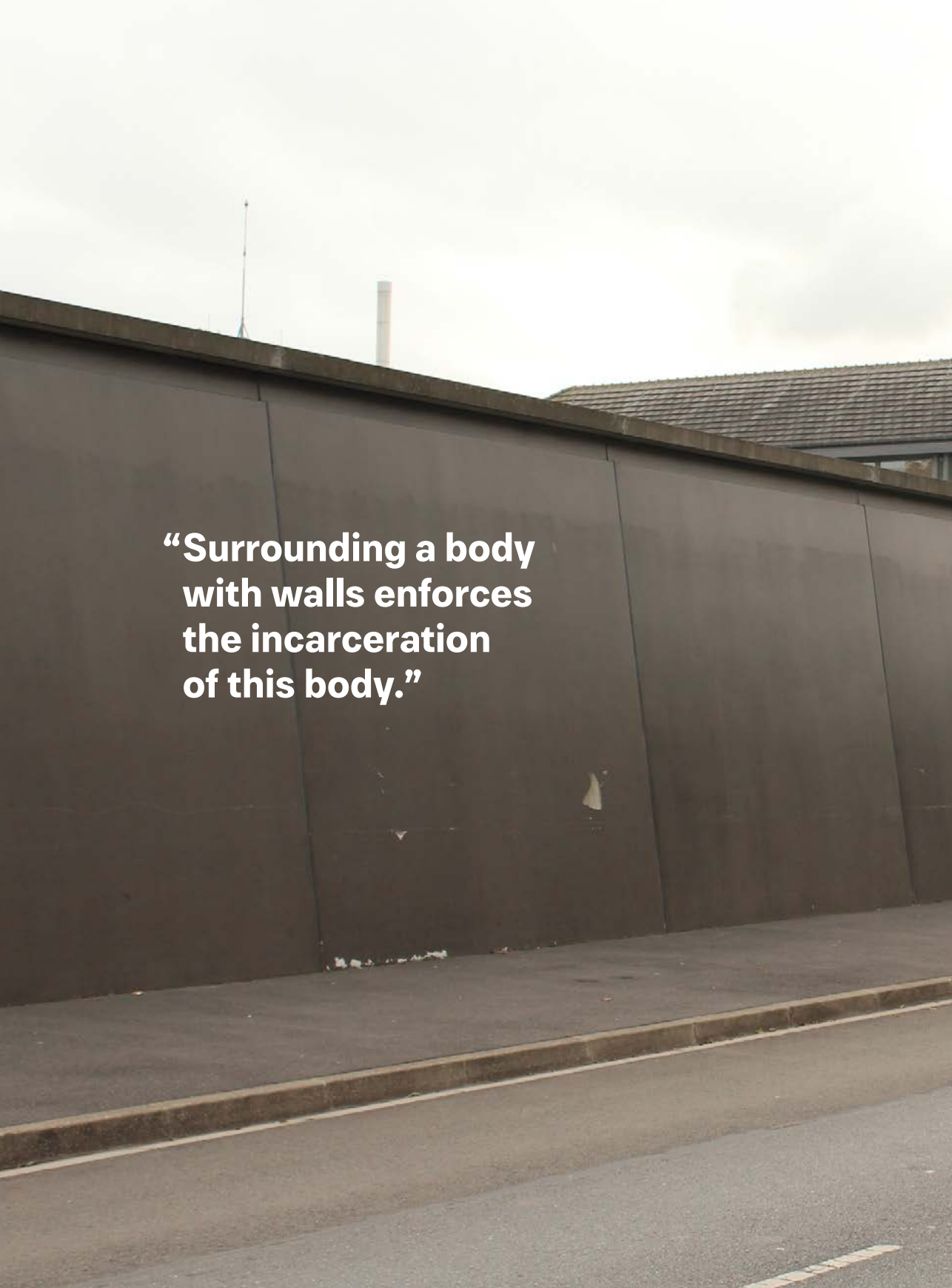


Container refugee camp of Calais so-called *Jungle*, 2016.
© Léopold Lambert

The logic of the architectural violence at work in Palestine is nevertheless not confined to this territory. We find its avatars in contemporary Europe, between states of emergency (in France and Belgium for instance) that transform cities' public space and the specific measures

taken to deny proper hospitality to hundreds of thousands of bodies fleeing their countries because of military and/or economic violence. Border walls, container camps, detention centres, fortified police stations, fences, checkpoints, the numerous architectural apparatuses that are flourishing in the European Union and its periphery, although not all targeting the same bodies, have in common the myth of a homogenous national identity epitomised by a neocolonial structural racism.

We would be mistaken, however, to think of the violence of these political programmes as exceptional or responding only to the particular drama of current events. The way most cities are territorially organised enforces a social segregation between populations that are economically and racially categorised. The example of Paris is particularly illustrative here. Its *banlieues* (suburbs), where 80 per cent of its inhabitants live, are proportionally segregated from the rest of the city in direct correlation to the average income of their residents. Their most precarious population consists of a working class composed of people whose parents and/or grandparents were subjected to colonisation in the Maghreb, West Africa or the Caribbean. Here again, structural racism finds in architecture and territorial organisation a particularly effective embodiment. Part of these apparatuses materialises in the relationship of the residents and the national police. A look at the police stations built after the 2005 and 2007 suburban revolts in the Northern and Eastern banlieues is evocative. The particular care put into the materiality and spatiality of these buildings reveals them to be the work of architecture offices, some of which are relatively well known. These buildings, however, hardly hide the antagonism developed by the police towards the

A photograph of a dark, solid wall, possibly a prison wall, with a quote overlaid on it. The wall is made of large, dark panels. In the background, a building with a tiled roof and a tall chimney are visible under a cloudy sky. The foreground shows a paved road and a concrete curb.

**“Surrounding a body
with walls enforces
the incarceration
of this body.”**



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population that surround them: they are small bastions fantasising a future civil war against the racialised youth of France.



Previous page: Police station of Villiers-le-Bel (Northern Paris banlieue), 2015.
© Léopold Lambert

This page: Palestinian qasr disobeying the Israeli military's occupation legislation. Project by Léopold Lambert (2010) for *Weaponized Architecture: The Impossibility of Innocence* (dpr-barcelona, 2012)

At a smaller scale, we can see how segregation between bodies is also active through architecture, this time categorising them into two distinct genders to which specific activities have been attributed. A look at the typical post-war American suburban house in relation to the representation of standard gendered bodies, Joe and Josephine, conceived by designer Henry Dreyfuss says a lot about such normative separation. While vehicle compartments and office furniture are calibrated on a male standardised body (Joe), ironing boards, vacuum cleaners and kitchens are calibrated on its female counterpart (Josephine), thus accomplishing what Dreyfuss himself calls “human engineering” in the reinforcement of gender normativity both in terms of anatomy and activity.

Although the ideologies behind the political programmes exposed here were not invented by architecture, architecture is a necessary means to implement their violence on bodies. In this regard, this discipline and its practitioners are complicit and co-responsible for their effects on society. Acknowledging that certain degree of violence is inevitable, as we saw above, a politically conscious architecture will not shy away from it, but rather wonder against what this violence should be oriented. In other words, to what political programme does the architect contribute through construction? We should not be looking to “solve” anything, but rather, to further problematise political situations and engage architectural means of resistance against it. ■

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