

**Concrete Doesn't Burn**  
**Text by Eugenie Shinkle, 2021**  
<https://bit.ly/3i6inIU>

The idea of the city as a historical and political text has been around for most of the modern era, but it reached a critical point amongst urbanists and intellectuals in the last decades of the twentieth century. Architecture and urban space were seen as a codex onto which layered narratives – of history, politics, national identity – were inscribed. Such notions captivated early theorists of postmodernism, who imagined the city as a forest of signs and symbols, and semiotics – the study of visual, written and spoken language – as a tool for finding their way through it. Today, many European cities – particularly their centers – have been colonised by a new kind of development that remakes the urban fabric in the image of global capital. These spaces are no longer the terrain of semioticians; today, it's the job of media theorists to navigate the endless play of image, surface, and reflection that marks the twenty-first century global city.

The city's margins and undeveloped regions, on the other hand, are typically confined to separate discussions of unused and derelict public space: terrains vague, urban voids and brownfield sites. Spaces like these have preoccupied photographers since at least the middle of the twentieth century, in a heritage that's often traced back to the work of New Topographics image-makers like Frank Gohlke and Lewis Baltz, and rolled forward into the more recent practice of photographers such as Michael Ashkin and Jörg Colberg. Much of the writing that accompanies this work turns on the idea that urban deadspace is laden with anxiety and tension, or freighted with ideology. And occasionally it is – but often, it's just empty, and all that the photograph can do is show us this emptiness.

All of the photographs in Bertrand Cavalier's *Concrete Doesn't Burn* were taken in European cities that have been marked, at some point, by conflict. Little of this history is evident in the images. Other than the impression that they were taken outside the city centers, there's not much in the photographs to indicate their location. Belfast, Warsaw, Sarajevo... the list is a long one, and they all look pretty much the same. It's as though the urban landscape has been scrubbed clean – there's no rubbish, no broken windows or charred rubble, only the odd splash of paint or scrawled slogan, disrupting the silence like bursts of static emerging into a quiet room. Rather than the spectacle of the city as a battleground, Cavalier presents the less dramatic tableau of decline around its edges – the urban fabric frayed through neglect rather than smashed by force. Many of the places in his images resemble model towns built for the purpose of training military personnel – sites where conflict itself is reduced to a kind of generic act, played out against equally generic foes.

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Cavalier's eye is drawn, over and over again, to the city's blank spaces, and it's easy enough to slot his photographs into the by-now-familiar trope of the 'urban banal'. His focus, it seems, is not the places themselves, but their failure to express anything substantial about history, or nationhood, or even the lives of those who pass through them. But the sheer banality of these images also poses a question: are they photographs of empty space, or space that's been emptied of meaning? It's not easy to tell the two apart.

The human figures in some of Cavalier's photographs suggest an answer. Like the vacant lots and urban wastelands in which they gather, the subjects in these images aren't easy to place – young, male, apparently unemployed, their identities are difficult to determine. Rather than portraits, Cavalier's photographs depict his subjects as proxies – stand-ins for the growing number of urban dwellers who feel no particular ties to the places in which they live. Today's global cities are reflections of the vast networks of power and capital that create them. Mass movements of populations, and the destruction of urban neighbourhoods, have changed the relationship between public space and those who use it. For many, there's little meaning to be found in the mute, secular architecture of the city. The ability to 'read' such environments from a distance is a privilege unavailable to many of those for whom urban space is the backdrop of their lives – a concrete reality rather than an economic abstraction. Cavalier's work shows us the city as it's seen through the eyes of people like these.

Rather than a text or an image, *Concrete Doesn't Burn* depicts the contemporary city as space that awaits a different kind of meaning. Alongside this, it asks us to consider what kind of meanings might be inscribed on the urban landscape, and by whom. The spatial language (if we can call it a language) in his photographs contrasts sharply with the expectations of old-school semioticians, for whom the city was an open book. Cavalier's cities are blank pages, and the empty spreads that separate one image from the next throughout the book could be read as metaphors for the sense of alienation that marks so much of the urban environment in upper-middle income countries.

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But these blank spreads might also be seen as provocations – I found myself gripped by a powerful urge to deface them, to complete the book by scrawling my own slogans on the unmarked paper. They're invitations not just

to look, but to do. Concrete might not burn, but it erodes and crumbles. If the silence at the city's heart is deafening, Cavalier's work suggests that there are new languages waiting to be spoken along its margins. Instead of anonymous spaces, *Concrete Doesn't Burn* shows us surfaces awaiting new inscriptions: not with impassive representations of power or eulogies for past revolutions, but with the rallying cries of those that will inevitably follow.