

# Simulating Urban Warfare

By [Tom Burghardt](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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In [Planet of Slums](#), socialist historian Mike Davis mapped the brutal urban realities shared by more than one billion of the earth's inhabitants, unmoored by neoliberal globalization from the "formal" world economy. From Baghdad to Karachi and from Lagos to Los Angeles and beyond, as ever-broader segments of the world's population are transformed into "a surplus humanity," the master class presents "no scenario" for ameliorating the immiseration it has itself designed through the "normal" functioning of a grotesque system of exploitation and injustice.

The vast expansion of planetary slum zones amid sumptuary wealth and dystopian high-rise palaces of glass and steel patrolled 24/7 by armed sentries, are future portents of a regime where the savage inequalities of the "free market" go hand in hand with the terminal vacuousness of the "Real Housewives of Orange County." As economist Michel Chossudovsky points out, the current economic crisis gripping late capitalism is hardly an accident of history:

...downsizing, corporate restructuring and relocation of production to cheap labor havens in the Third World have been conducive to increased levels of unemployment and significantly lower earnings to urban workers and farmers. This new international economic order feeds on human poverty and cheap labor: high levels of national unemployment in both developed and developing countries have contributed to depressing real wages. Unemployment has been internationalized, with capital migrating from one country to another in a perpetual search for cheaper supplies of labor. ([The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order](#), 2nd edition, Montreal, Global Research, 2003, p. 6)

Under existent conditions, a racist discourse of "feral cities" haunts the imagination of military theoreticians. Considered a "breeding ground" of subversion by ruling class economists, politicians and sociologists, the urban battles of the future are being "wargamed" today.

## Military Operations on Urban Terrain and Other Horrors of a Horrible System

Pentagon strategists refer to their doctrine of urban warfighting as Military Operations on Urban Terrain ([MOUT](#)). But urban warfare pose multiple risks and challenges for military planners; not least of which are recognizing "targets" across a complex environment of multistory apartment blocks, small- and large scale industrial infrastructure, power grids, political and cultural centers, sports complexes, houses of worship and transportation hubs.

Fraught with problems not readily amenable to technological "fixes," Durham University geographer [Stephen Graham](#) cites one military theorist's view of the conundrums faced by

21st century “warfighters”,

“Urban operations represent a black hole in the current Revolution in Military Affairs pantheon of technological advantage [...]. The technologies traditionally ascribed to the current Revolution in Military Affairs phenomenon will have negligible impact on Military Operations in Urban Terrain.” (cited in Stephen Graham, “From Space to Street Corners: Global South Cities and U.S. Military Technophilia,” Unpublished paper, 2007)

Indeed, there is a powerful imperative driving military strategists and their political masters: the stark recognition that capital’s economic/political project for domination is an acute failure, one which is creating conditions for chronic “low-intensity warfare” campaigns in cities against a panoply of “insurgent forces.”

In Venezuela for example, autonomous groups such as the 23 de Enero People’s Army, the “Tupamaros,” La Piedrita, Militia Zero, the Zapatista Collective or the Revolutionary Movement of Bolivarian Defense, neighborhood organizations of battle-hardened veterans who have at best, a strained relationship with Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian government, will form the backbone of armed resistance to any outside intervention or internal counterrevolution by Venezuela’s CIA-NED-financed elite “opposition.” As George Ciccariello-Maher [describes](#):

It was in [the] context of repression that the Venezuelan popular militia movement was born. Neither entirely clandestine nor fully open, small groups began to spring up to defend local barrios from both the state and the burgeoning parallel violence of narcotrafficking. Small groups, masked and armed, began to make semi-public appearances, giving an ultimatum to local drug dealers: either you stop selling drugs or you’ll be killed. The police, too, found themselves all the more frequently victims of armed ambushes and shootouts with masked militias. In order to explain this phenomenon, the police, government officials, and even more appreciative local residents adopted a single moniker, derived from the Uruguayan urban guerrilla struggle: in mythical fashion, these militias were deemed “Tupamaros.” (George Ciccariello-Maher, “Embedded with the the ‘Tupamaros’,” MR Zine, 23 April 2008)

Masters and mistresses of American *barrios* and “ghettoes,” Brazilian *favelas* and South Asian *chawls* where even police fear to tread, rapid urbanization has radically undermined the high-tech advantages built-up by the U.S. since the dawn of the Cold War, thwarting American fantasies of “dominating the battlespace” through “network-centric warfare” (NCW).

According to NCW [theory](#), an alleged “information advantage” is leveraged into a competitive warfighting upper hand through “robust networking” of well-informed, though geographically dispersed forces. But as the U.S. military discovered in Iraq, the high-tech systems built at a cost of tens of billions of dollars were brought to ground by disposable cell phones, garage door openers, twenty year old ordnance and the *will to resist*. Multiply radical neighborhood militias such as the “Tupamaros” on a planetary scale and it becomes abundantly clear that imperialism has its work cut out for it!

The political realities of urban combat inhibit the tactical requirements necessary to

“secure” an urban “battlespace.” Short of obliterating a city as the United States did during its series of destructive campaigns in [Fallujah](#) in 2003-2004, military options are fairly limited. Resorting to overwhelming force in the absence of broad political support in the area is hardly the way to win “hearts and minds,” as the Pentagon discovered much to its horror in Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive, when the U.S. simultaneously achieved a fleeting *tactical* victory and a devastating *strategic* defeat.

As a result of recent urban combat debacles, MOUT strategists are building simulated cities in the American outback as a “living laboratory” for protracted combat operations in an urban environment.

Mainly as a consequence of widespread opposition to 1999 “Urban Warrior” exercises when the Marine Corps’ Urban Warfighting Laboratory and U.S. Army Special Forces staged “realistic” war games on the streets of American cities, the Pentagon is creating entire pseudo landscapes and ghostly architectures: the urban space transformed into a militarist simulacrum.

Bryan Finoki, the editor of *Subtopia: A Field Guide to Urban Militarism* [writes](#):

Somewhere out there in the restricted strata of Defense real estate the Marine Corps is taking over cities in an imaginary Third World that have been grafted and turned into some sort of urban template for a spectacularly unseen militarized stage show. There are multiple MOUT facilities all over the world, but in addition to two that already exist at Twentynine Palms, there is a brand new site cropping up along the fringes that’s being called CAMOUT, or Combined-Arms Military Operations in Urban Terrain. Pronounced “K-MOUT”, it is expected to be the Mecca, so to speak, of the entire MOUT program. (“MOUT Urbanism,” *Subtopia*, February 23, 2008)

Covering some 280 acres, a half-hour’s drive from the Marine Corps’ Twentynine Palms Air Ground Combat Center the training facility is “roughly the size of downtown San Diego,” journalist Kelly O’Sullivan [writes](#). CAMOUT “will feature an Olympic-size soccer stadium, a hospital, airport, large marketplace, prison, police compounds, schools, an industrial center, extensive underground tunnel systems and two embassies.”

And at a cost of some \$250 million, CAMOUT is slated to be the largest such facility owned by the Defense Department. Orbiting somewhere between war and entertainment, the Pentagon is designing a disquieting netherworld, a series of Potemkin villages whose sole purpose is to perfect its apparatus of death and destruction.

Stephen Graham [writes](#):

The global complex of urban warfare training cities involve a different relationship to political violence to the atom-bombed suburban homes or fire-bombed tenements and rice-paper structures of the 20th century. For here, the simulation is not designed to sustain attempts at outright urban annihilation through total war. Rather, its purpose is to hone skills of occupation, counter-insurgency warfare, and urban remodelling via expeditionary, colonial war. (“Theme Park Archipelago: Simulating War in an Urbanizing World,” Unpublished paper, 2007)

Constructed for the maximum recreation of war’s nightmare and horror, these simulated

cities are filled with dazzling special effects courtesy of Hollywood. In addition to “realistic” settings and “culturally accurate” renditions of Middle Eastern architecture, these deranged spaces feature an array of olfactory sensations such as “...dead bodies, burning rubber, diesel fumes.” According to special effects wizard Manuel Chaves who runs the urban warfare site at Fort Wainright, Alaska: “I can do nine different buildings, nine different smells. Generally, if it’s a burning building, we put something really nasty in there like burning bodies.”

A \$13 million facility built on a 30 acre site in Fort Knox, Kentucky named Zussman village is able to accommodate “hundreds of role-playing ‘insurgents,’ who dress in keffiyehs and are armed with AK47s and RPGs.” According to Graham, “a ‘Third World’ slum is being constructed near the railroad.”

To emphasize the importance of urban warfare simulation in current military doctrine, in 2006 Congress commissioned the RAND Corporation to produce a [report](#) on the efficacy of current training facilities. RAND did, and with a characteristic racist subtext to boot.

RAND researchers evaluated training facilities for their architectural and infrastructural “realism” in mirroring conditions allegedly present in the “megaslums” of the global south. Those with “clutter/debris/filth,” “slums/shanty towns/walled compounds,” “subterranean complexes” and simulated “government, hospital/prison/asylum structures,” scored highest according to Graham.

Adding to the mix, RAND researchers recommended that U.S. military planners consider the possibility of “appropriating” entire “ghost towns” within the continental U.S., in other words, cities that have been deindustrialized and largely abandoned. RAND “specialists” conclude: “the use of abandoned towns has moved beyond the concept phase into what might be considered the early test and development phase.”

Graham reports that attention was focused on the virtually abandoned copper-mining town of Playas, New Mexico. The town has also been used extensively by the Department of Homeland Security for training anti-suicide bomb squads. Apparently, the destruction of U.S. manufacturing, mining and industrial infrastructure under the pressure of neoliberal globalization is viewed as a “plus” in some quarters.

“Over the course of time, towns and cities eventually die,” writes Steve Rowell of the Center for Land Use Interpretation in Culver City, California. “Despite this and despite the receding U.S. economy, the industries of defense and disaster preparedness are flourishing, reversing this trend in some of the most remote areas of the nation. The war on terror is redefining the American pastoral in an unexpected way.” In the case of Playas, its new role is “as a generic American suburb under simulated attack.” And, in future, as a simulated “Arab city” where U.S. “warfighters” come to hone skills for expeditionary war, Graham reports.

Despite adverse publicity generated by “Urban Warrior” exercises, RAND analysts insist they continue. Indeed, such displays of militarist omniscience will be even more necessary in the future because “no purpose-built urban training site and no simulation for many years to come will be able to present the heterogeneity and complexity of a modern megalopolis.”

## **Am I BLUE?**

But wargaming isn’t the only front where simulated urban battles are being fought and

refought. Enter the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency ([DARPA](#)).

Under contract to DARPA, capitalist grifter [Computer Science Corporation](#), combined electronic mapping and satellite image technology to create purely electronic representations of cities that are, or may in the future, come under the purview of U.S. military occupation. Scores of cities around the world are being electronically mapped by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency ([NGA](#)) in order to create a “virtualized reality” for U.S. “warfighters.”

Within complex simulation models, the structures of Middle Eastern or indeed, any city, have been classified using “Urban Terrain Zones” based “on international databases of the construction materials and practices used in the different parts of target cities: steel, glass and concrete in city cores, older brick, stone or mud in casbahs,” Graham informs us.

And even larger simulations of global south megacities are providing grist for the murderous mill of U.S. military “gamers” as they imagine full-scale counterinsurgent warfare well into the future. One electronic simulation, “Urban Resolve,” has actually mapped an eight square mile swathe of Jakarta, Indonesia in three dimensions! According to Graham, “this has been done down to the interior of the (1.6 million) buildings, and also involves 109,000 mobile ‘vehicles’ and ‘civilians,’ as well as the subterranean infrastructures.”

Such projects are expanding exponentially. Under the heading, Urban Reasoning and Geospatial Exploitation Technology (URGENT), DARPA’s Information Processing Techniques Office ([IPTO](#)), is searching for “new technologies” to defeat urban insurgencies. According to IPTO’s “Mission Statement” on the [program](#)

The recognition of targets in urban environments poses unique operational challenges for the warfighter. ... Today’s urban missions involve analyzing a multitude of urban objects in the area of regard. As military operations in urban regions have grown, the need to identify urban objects has become an important requirement for the military. Understanding the locations, shapes, and classifications of objects is needed for a broad range of pressing urban mission planning analytical queries.

A related program, Building Labels for Urban Environments ([BLUE](#)),

seeks innovative approaches that exploits surveillance video data to classify buildings automatically. In addition to visual feature data such as color and line orientation, video captures data concerning motion over time. The latter affords the opportunity for automated recognition of patterns in moving objects in the vicinity of buildings. These motion patterns may be reliable indicators of a building’s function. BLUE technology should be able to learn patterns that distinguish building types and to process video from surveillance video data, such as that collected from high-endurance military UAV platforms, to label buildings correctly.

As we have seen, the U.S. ruling class is intent on deploying its entire high-tech arsenal against the global south and perhaps someday soon, on the streets of American cities. Tied intimately into the defense, computing, entertainment and “homeland security” industries, the Pentagon’s quixotic quest to “dominate the battlespace,” is reflective of the precariousness of the entire U.S. neocolonial project in the post-Cold War world.

Despite its abject failure against urban insurgents in Iraq, the U.S. military's obsession with building simulation models of urban landscapes and electronic mapping suites of real cities tell us a great deal about the masters' preoccupation-and fear-with the direction things are heading.

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