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Houses without windows

16 April 2012 | By Maria Kuzmenko



Jeroen Hofman photographic book of the architectural props used to train the western military paint a gloomy picture of archetypal european community

The largest military ghost town in the Netherlands is quiet. There are dry leaves on the lawns, cars parked in the driveways. It looks like a typical Dutch village, except for dark smoke, tanks and large piles of rubble. Along with Holland, the US and the UK are also well known to have their own uninhabited military villages, each costing up to €15 million each. This allows the military to design the props to accommodate every possible scenario and to train in urban warfare. In the UK, there is a replica Middle East settlement in Stanford Training area, with plastic fruits 'sold' in markets and synthetic rotting meat odours pumped out by mysterious smell machines. In Israel there is 'Chicago' – a fake Arab town built by the Israeli defence forces in the middle of the Negev desert, where role playing occurs among graffitied walls. Architecture of the replicated places is carefully examined and scrutinised; forming an all-important stage set for training. The design of those settlements directly mirrors the conflicts in question and to a certain extent, the military urban predictions for the future.



Jeroen Hofman is mainly a portrait photographer, albeit not without a certain fascination with the 'secret worlds' of miners, fishermen and the military. His self-published book presents the photographs of the training village in the Netherlands – the Marnehuizen. This book comes at a time when post-apocalyptic scenarios of Bronze and Silver medal projects are subjects of numerous discussions – criticised or rooted for by various scholars and architects. Marnehuizen is a Potemkin village 'neither here, nor there' in northern Netherlands, a ghost town where soldiers are only passing inhabitants. It is more of an unconventional coffee-table book – made up of various photographs collected over the last few years, with a preface by Pieter van Vollenhoven, a former military, as well as a member of the Dutch Royal Family.

Marnehuizen is a stage for simulation of various future combats and raids, with the names of the streets sentimentally borrowed from those wiped out during the bombardment of Rotterdam at the beginning of the Second World War. It is the biggest military training village in Europe; made up of 126 micro infrastructures, including housing, banks, supermarkets and even a train station. This depiction of training gives the sense of control over the uncontrollable – an impending disaster. A fleeting moment of chaos contained before the real world, which does not seem to exist in Jeroen's photographs.

There is an undeniable sense of melancholy about Hofman's desaturated images – as Marnehuizen is built to represent a number of various Dutch towns, without actually being one. The 'playgrounds' are expansive in their scale, and are filled with 'blocks' - houses, courtyards and



structures, similar to Lego pieces. Jeroen photographs his post-apocalyptic landscapes and Marine Corps from elevated platforms, enabling an unusual angle, and reducing the brutality of training to sheer playfulness. Hofman suffers from almost boyish fascination with fighting, running and shooting – and this emphasises the grotesque nature of the 'game'. Flicking through the book, narratives emerge, constructed around a scarce number of architectural props, half-built concrete structures, burnt vehicles and industrial complexes. There is an eerie feeling about the photographs and a sense of detachment – where the dangers of reality cease to exist.

The book shows soldiers training in city; fighting techniques, avoiding physical obstacles and 'civilians'. The fact that military training is a meticulously planned operation becomes evident when reading the book. For Hofman, architecture in the photos forms a backdrop to these training activities; a stage set. It raises the question of the archetypal representation of a modern European settlement. The housing in the photographs conforms to a set of stereotypes – suburban, with double pitch roofs, evident result of an urban sprawl, a gloomy representation for architects.

The copious photographs would surely interest someone trying to understand the methodology of training for unknown disaster in a small European country and a certain fascination with horrors of the Anticipated Future. There are plenty of other top-secret military camps around the world. But what makes Marnehuizen different is its setting. There are no fences around the camp as The Netherlands is so small in its scale that emergency services do not have an exclusive right to Holland. The archetypal village is embedded in vast landscapes – characteristically flat, as this is Holland. The landscapes form an all-important backdrop to the photographs' setting – untouched, infinite fields. They help to make the training activities seem lighthearted, a game.

The architecture of Marnehuizen is made up of various components sprung upon it, raising the question of adaptation of modern cities to the new typologies of war, and their future location. It turns out that the predictions of the US Department of Defense and Netherlands military in fact echo that of Archigram – that the cities of the future will be instant and placed in the middle of nowhere. The United States Army War College also claim that future battlefields lie in 'streets, sewers ... and a sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world', a portrait of Marnehuizen. But the unfinished and uninhabited 'pieces' in Hofman's photographs also raise a question of adaptation. Would Marnehuizen return to its natural rugged state after the training is complete? Would its architecture be adapted to become inhabited? A town placed in a vast landscape, made up of many modular elements, leaves those questions unanswered.

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