

Murray Guy

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# OCTOBER

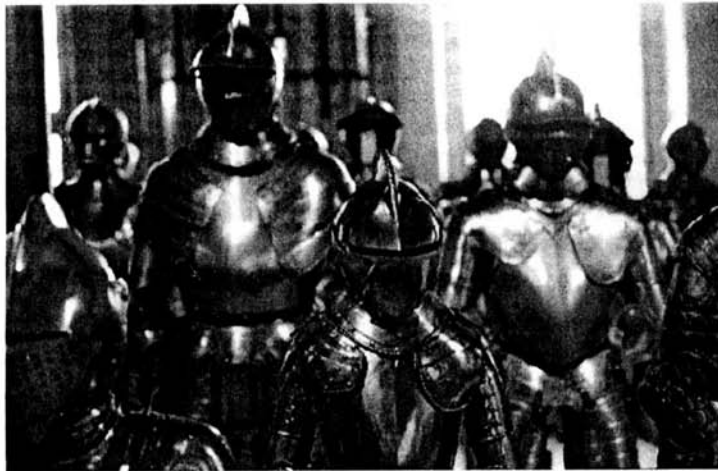
Spring 2002

"Points of Suspension"

By Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester

## *Armor*

In 1712 Louis XIV gave his great-grandson, the five-year-old Infanta Luis, prince of Asturias, a child-sized suit of armor as a present. It was lined with red velvet to minimize the clattering of the young prince. But if the Sun King's gift was intended to perpetuate the tradition of armoring the body it failed; the Infanta Luis's little suit of armor was the last one produced in Europe. Even before it became obsolete, armor was one of the first objects collected purely for symbolic value. Courts, monarchs, city- and nation-states created elaborate displays of captured enemy armor to impress their citizens and prisoners.



*Musée de l'Armée, Paris.*

*Photo: Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester.*

Civic and military histories are inextricably intertwined and few social values or actions are so abstract that they fail to be reflected in material forms. "Empty" or indeterminate spaces are often the most revealing. Today the second most popular

\* This contribution on the subject of obsolescence is excerpted from the five-channel video installation *Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State* by Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester, first exhibited at the Statens Museum for Art, Copenhagen, March 16 to May 18, 2001.

tourist attraction in Copenhagen, after the bronze statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, is the 1,200-person anarchistic squat located on the site of a former military base now known as the Free City of Christiania. Since 1971 it has existed as a police-free social experiment, self-governed under a direct-democratic process where all major decisions are made by unanimous vote. A sign posted at Christiania's main entrance declares: "You are now leaving the European Union."

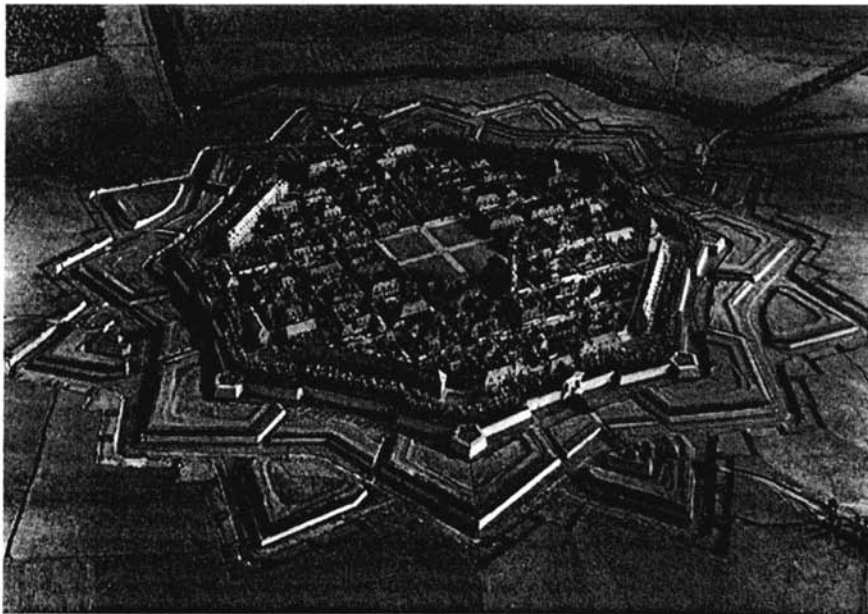


*Top: Squatters in front of the Peace Ark, Christiania, 1971.  
Bottom: Soldiers in front of the Boatman Street barracks. Late 19th century.  
Photos: The Royal Library, Copenhagen.*

*Star Cities*

States have made wars and wars have made states. After 1500 many cities in Europe were shaped exclusively by cannon fire, real or imagined. Missile trajectories intersecting with defensive sight lines gave birth to fortifications constructed as a series of diagonals, emanating from old city centers out across the countryside. The objective was to place great quantities of defensible "empty" space between the city and the enemy to keep hostile fire power out of range. The resulting pattern of interconnected angles, composed of ramparts, moats, and bastions, created star-shaped cities all over Europe. Fortified communities became urban ecosystems, but, like suits of armor, the new city walls also constricted, and sometimes paralyzed, urbanism. Expanding towns were forced to build up instead of out. When not under attack, temporary use of the protective free space was made. In Copenhagen, civilians built windmills on the bastions, fished in the moats, and grazed sheep on the ramparts.

As the European arms race continued into the nineteenth century these artillery defense earthworks slowly became obsolete as well. The strategic empty spaces surrounding Copenhagen were discretely sold off to the private sector in pieces small enough to keep real-estate prices high. Profits from this financed

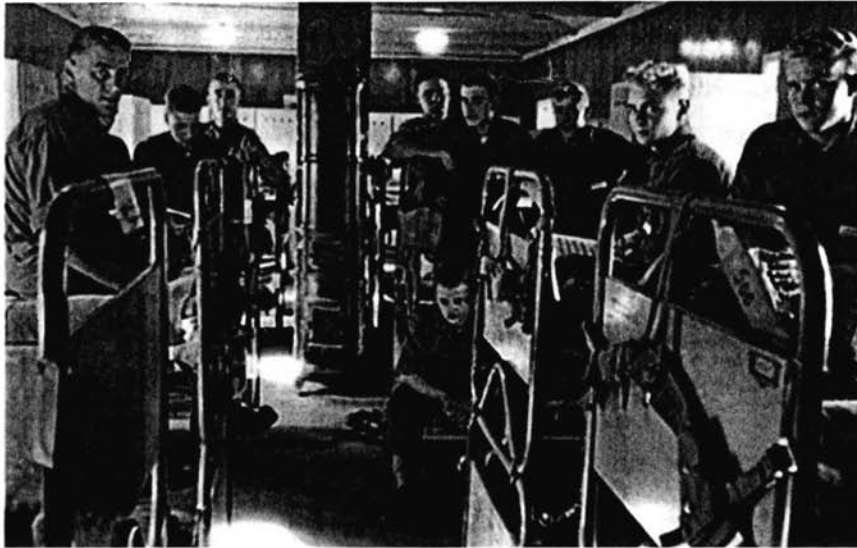


*Model of Neuf Brisach, on the Rhine. Archetypal example  
of late 17th century European city-fortification.  
Photo: J. Feuille/Spadem.*

an entirely new modern defense preparing Copenhagen and Denmark for war in the age of machines. Some portions of the old ramparts were reserved and converted into parks or became building sites for state museums. One section of the old city wall was retained, however, for continued use by the Danish military as a drill ground and army base called the Boatman Street Barracks.

*Forbidden Land*

Historians of ideas usually attribute the dream of a perfect society to philosophers, but there is also a military dream of society, a dream that depends on artificial kinship relations that can be created in military bases. Spaces like this are not meant to be perfect social environments, but, instead, places in which society itself can be perfected.



*Soldiers in the Boatman Street Barracks. Early 1960s.  
Photo: Polfoto.*

After serving this function for over a hundred years, even the Boatman Street Barracks lost its value for the Danish military and the site was abandoned in 1968. Having been a part of the city defense since the twelfth century, it was unclear whether legal title to the land belonged to the city of Copenhagen or the state of Denmark, so the barracks remained vacant until 1970 when a few young people began a secret collective there. They had a silent agreement with the night



watchman, who, like so many gatekeepers before him, gently surrendered to circumstances. They lived safe and sound. The outer districts of the base were only for the brave and the adventurous—the ones who wanted to live alone in a deserted place on forbidden land.



*Ramparts, Christiania.*  
Photo: Buckingham and Koester.

In 1630 there were four types of cities: national bureaucratic capitals, international trade metropolises, mixtures of these two, and pirate cities. The anarchical military republics on the coasts of Algeria and Tunisia, living on plunder—the outlaw cities of the “golden age of piracy”—were extreme versions of their contemporaries, the maritime city-states like Venice and Cordova. Copenhagen was the third type of city—a centralized government combined with salt-water imperialism. To King Christian IV the North Sea was a connection to, rather than a barrier from, the rest of the world, a potential trade highway. To capitalize on this he created a separate tax-free port, autonomous from Danish rule. Ramparts were built to include the new harbor within the protective ring of fortifications surrounding the city. These were the ramparts that would later become Christiania. The rifle houses with their gun ports aimed at Sweden, now known as Air-Condition, Autogena, Fakir School, and Cosmic Flower, were built on the bastions originally named after royalty and real and imaginary animals: Elephant, Lion, Tiger, Panther, and Unicorn. After a group of housing-rights activists known as the “Slum Stormers” declared the army base “free and open,” hundreds of squatters broke down the walls and moved in. The founders of the Free City made King Christian the namesake of their new community and created a flag to represent themselves: three yellow dots on a red ground. “The Christiania

Guide,” a free publication for visitors, explains that the dots are taken from the three occurrences of the letter “i” in the word Christiania.



*The flag of Christiania.  
Photo: Buckingham and Koester.*

*Dots*

Symbols, like monuments, attempt to fix meaning against the flow of time. But Christiania’s flag seems to do the opposite, marking transience and fragmentation. In the Free City one is surrounded by these three dots; enormous and tiny flags carrying the symbol blow in the wind, and the dots are printed on stickers and cigarette lighters, painted on buildings and bicycles, and posted on signs everywhere. The three dots resemble an ellipsis, or “points of suspension,” the typographical mark that indicates an omission, faltering speech, or an incomplete thought in a printed text. Wherever one of these ellipses appears, it seems to interrupt its surroundings—punctuating it with doubt.

The individual dot “evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure or decided goal?”<sup>1</sup> This aspect of the dot is made explicit when it is multiplied by three,

1. Robert Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 94.

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*Top: The Peace Ark, Christiania.  
Bottom: Entrance to The Lice, Christiania.  
Photos: Buckingham and Koester.*

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creating the ellipsis. A period, or full-stop, demands an ending, but three points together imply infinite points, making endings impossible. The ellipsis marks the indeterminate, but it also has the ability to join any two sentences together, and any ellipsis can potentially be connected to any other ellipsis, forming an endless chain of possible thoughts. This is what makes these three dots a horizon line—a limit that is not a limit—because it is always receding into the distance. Empty space urging us onward, reminding us that the vanishing point of history is always the present moment.





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MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM is an artist living in New York. Recent projects include the installation and artist-book "Subcutaneous" which examine physiognomy in western culture. He is currently working on a project about European contact with indigenous peoples of the Hudson River valley. He is represented by Murray Guy Gallery, New York, and Galleri Tommy Lund, Copenhagen.

JOACHIM KOESTER is an artist living in New York and Copenhagen. Recent projects include "Nordenskiold and the Ice Cap," a slide installation dealing with the exploration of the Greenlandic Ice Cap, and "Anna Karina," a series of photographs of the French New Wave actress. He is represented by Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, and Gallery Jan Mot, Brussels.