

City Demolition Industry, Inc.

Arata Isozaki, 1962

You must not laugh at this strange business. The company is real! In the very center of Tokyo, yes, floating in the air, it is trying to sneak into the cracks of your life—the life you spend in the megalopolis.

I first learned of the existence of this company when I looked at the name printed on the visiting card of my friend S. He was once a professional killer rather famous in the field, but he quit that job to become a founder of the City Demolition Industry, Inc. I never knew why he chose murder for a profession, but he always said he did so because it was the quickest way to make money, and I did not try to delve further into it. I regretted that he should present me with his new card, slowly, shrugging his shoulders, just as I was about to consult him about an important matter I had particularly at heart. This is about annihilating all the editors of magazines in our country who are too timid to challenge the status quo in city planning and architecture. I asked him if things were going better. My friend S. then urged me to join his company, the name of which sounded to me more like a secret society than that of company.

There was a serious cause for his resignation from his job as a killer—a monster had emerged that kept hurting his professional pride day and night! He is a man of temperament, as any artist or artisan might be. Once he accepted an order to kill someone, he never spared any effort in the process of his work, whether that person was only a small boss with a dozen followers or a big figure in power such as a cabinet minister. The careful, long-term planning and scheming, the beauty of a murder well done, as well as the perfect disposal of the body! It was just like an artist engaged in designing. Without the snobbery of Frank Lloyd Wright or the bluff of Le Corbusier, he could produce a complicated vision in which, while extinction was coupled with existence, the concept of emptiness was caught in the very midst of action. He might have been one of the very, very few who could actually accomplish this. Then all of a sudden he changed his job.

Naturally, I was very curious to know why. He said he had been utterly disappointed at the relatively insignificant situation into which his profession had been driven, and so, feeling the bitterness of hurt pride, he wished to break with it and to start a new one. But what was the direct motive? In answer to my question he unfolded the newspaper at his side. "Yesterday's Traffic Accidents—5 Killed, 89 Injured." This meant that modern civilization had replaced the private enterprise of killing. The steady increase of such unintentional murders as traffic accidents, and moreover the low price attached to an individual life,

usually less than one million yen, gradually nullified his profession as a killer, lowered his wages, and hurt his sense of self-esteem. According mechanism called the city, which was the inevitable product and the physical supporter of modern civilization. The city, therefore, was the killer of all killers and, worse still, being anonymous, it was a curious enterprise to which no responsibilities were attached. And he felt that in order to create an age in which the killing profession would again be an art, and in which this human act could be performed with pleasure, there was nothing more urgent than to destroy these inhuman cities. The aim of his company, therefore, was to destroy cities by all possible means. Tokyo, for him, was especially easy to undermine. It was like a building whose foundations had decayed, walls collapsing, and water pipes getting thinner, structures barely standing, braced by numerous struts and supported by a jungle of props and buttresses, patches and stains from the leaks in the roof. Its original elegance had vanished. Imagine such a deserted house—decorated gaudily on the surface, it goes on killing people, goes on emitting a vigorous energy. A gigantic monster on the brink of extinction; a pig roasted whole; the ultimate evil of unintentional, inevitable mass massacre. . . He said that such a city must be destroyed as soon as possible.

This city makes people gradually forget the seriousness of death. Disappointed or rather infuriated by the depression of his own profession, my friend S., who decided to destroy the cities, may be an old-fashioned humanist. An admirer of artistic and humanistic murder, S. made up his mind to challenge the megalopolitan city.

It seemed strange to me that the prospectus printed for the establishment of his company, which he gave to me to read, showed only the conceptual aim of destruction and the methods and the organization of the execution. Well, S. is a poet, and so it may be that he is proud that only poets can understand his true intention. Now, if one is of the opinion that only methods are of significance nowadays and that each individual can prove his identity only when he risks his life in executing these prescriptions, it might be said that the aim and the prospect are only ghost images and that the real image is present only in the methods. A professional killer, in this sense, does not display interest in anything other than method. More precisely, all that counts for him is the act of killing, because he must discount all other considerations.

Prospectus of the Establishment of the City Demolition Industry, Inc. and the Content of Its Business

Our company aims at the complete destruction of large cities which have been repeatedly engaged

in vicious mass murder, and at the construction of a civilization in which elegant, pleasant and humanistic murder can be carried out easily. We shall be engaged in any action necessary for achieving these aims. We practice our business as follows:

1. Physical Destruction

We shall destroy buildings, roads and other city facilities, using all possible means including human power, dynamite, atomic and hydrogen bombs.

2. Functional Destruction

The aggravation of traffic confusion through the systematic abolition of traffic signals, etc.; the encouragement of illegal construction; the dropping of poison into water reservoirs; the disturbance of communication networks; the total abolition of the house number system; the immediate and complete enforcement of all legal city planning provisions.

3. Destruction of Images

The encouragement of proposals for Utopia city planning in the future; the enforcement of city improvement and a solution to the housing shortage by the mass-construction of public corporation-style residences; the elimination of all calamities in the cities including traffic accidents.

Our company will energetically carry out the kinds of destruction stated above and will constantly endeavor to introduce new plans. Readers may laugh at the determination of my friend S. as expressed in the above prospectus. You are all well accustomed to this city, intoxicated with its familiar smiles. You go on producing beautiful buildings one after another. You have nothing to do with my friend S.'s heroic resolve. He says that he does not feel any poetic sentiment before your beautiful accomplishments. He intends to continue the strange business of his company. He has nothing to do with you—nothing at all.

Not because I happen to be engaged in urban design but because S. is my friend I was finally persuaded to analyze and discuss the prospectus of his company. While discussing various aspects of the problem, his opinion and mine got so mingled together that we became unable to tell whose was whose. However, we finally reached certain conclusions. Is it really possible to carry out the physical destruction of modern cities?

To answer this question, it is enough to remember Tokyo or Hiroshima of seventeen years ago. The scene there was more than ruins. It was next to nothing. Although Hiroshima at that time was sentenced to death and was expected to remain uninhabitable for the next seventy years, we have to concede that Hiroshima has come to possess a body even more substantial than it had before the

war. No more Hiroshima! Resurrection like a phoenix! All right, at that time nobody dared to propose the destruction of cities. Nobody will at present, either. A city with physical substance—perhaps it has never existed on earth.

Aren't cities merely abstract ideas? Nothing but ghost images which have been built up by citizens through mutual agreement for their practical purposes? And, so far as such a mirage has been transmitted, only the process of transmission exists as the substance of the city. The force that can eliminate this transmission is not the destruction of cities, but the eclipse of a civilization.

If you do not believe this, burn your own house and dig up your land. You will not forget the scene, and somebody will probably make a record of it. Thus, you will still be possessed of some fragments of your house unless oblivion, death and the total eclipse of civilization wipe out everything. But I am not trying to justify nuclear war, which seems to contain the ability to annihilate both the substance and idea simultaneously. Certainly this will cause extinction.

My friend S.'s image of the mechanism of city may be too simple. Because it might be said that the city is maintained by a complicated feedback mechanism which its citizens have built up in order to protect themselves. This feedback is exquisitely intricate and so the functional destruction, as mentioned in Article 2 of the Prospectus, will be able to be immediately repaired.

However, the immediate and complete execution of today's city planning as drawn and legally authorized—if it were executed just as specified in the articles and maps—would bring about a drastic change. Such city planning has always ended in empty theory and that is why cities have been kept alive. But if any city planning would be put into practice just as it is blueprinted, the mayor would lose his job and the city assembly would be thrown into confusion. I had better say that city authorities have opposed city planning not because it is revolutionary, but because it is unrealistic and old-fashioned. If you don't believe me, put city planning into practice, and you will find it an excellent means for throwing the city into turmoil and for stultifying its energy. My friend S.'s opinion seems to be a little matter-of-fact, for in Japan those who have devised the legal city plans have not dreamt even for a moment that their plans will be actually put into practice.

That is why they have legalized plans in a carefree manner. According to my friend S. the implementation of city plans would inevitably bring cities to destruction. He says, with a cynical smile, that as soon as I draw up a plan I should put it into practice. It is inexcusable, he argues, for the professional to only make utopian plans. On the other hand the plan of his

city demolition industry, if he executes it too hastily, will bring prosperity rather than destruction and, against his will, the circumstances that would satisfy his artistic aspirations will not be brought forth. However, when I think of the hollow sound of the slogans for building, renewing and improving cities—in reality the political propping-up of the metropolis—I come to think in terms of destruction as the only reality.

Since S. is not a city planner nor an architect but a killer, he can be active about the cities, and can have concrete ideas because he can deal with the abstraction and unreality in his mind. On the other hand, I am connected, in my profession, with the product of reality, and so while I make concrete proposals, concrete countermeasures, and improvements on them, I am made to feel ever more keenly the impossibility of putting my proposals into practice. My friend S. says that that is all the more reason for him to go ahead with his business and that in so doing, he will again have some connection with cities and will feel the impracticality of concrete plans. As for myself, I could continue to draw an unrealistic veil over my concrete proposals as a staff member of his company.

Despite all these exchanges our discussions broke up. He called me a Stalinist coward and I called him an inexperienced Trotskyite. Thus, pasting the labels of the long past on each other, we both felt some satisfaction.

P.S. His name is SIN and mine is ARATA as it is written on the first page of this article. It is however, a sheer coincidence that SIN is a Chinese phonetic reading of the character of my name, while ARATA is the Japanese reading. I don't know if my friend's business will ever prosper.

Note

I wrote this story in 1962 when Tokyo was on the first wave of rapid economic growth, blending the reality and dream (fantasy) that I then saw.

(Translated by Richard Gage)