COP CITIES, MOCK CITIES

ILL WILL

STUART SCHRADER

COP CITIES, MOCK CITIES

STUART SCHRADER

Cop City is fantasy. Cop City is speculation. Cop City is control. Cop City is investment. Cop City is a speculative investment in the fantasy of control.

Cop City is the name that activists have applied to the $109.65 million police and fire training center under construction in Atlanta. It is slated to include classrooms, firing ranges, and a mock city for specialized lessons in urban operations. (An early official name proposed for the sprawling facility was the Atlanta Institute for Social Justice and Public Safety Training.) And Cop City is what activists have also begun to call other proposed "public safety" training centers across the country, particularly those with mock urban streetscapes for tactical rehearsals.

These mock cities have long genealogies, implicating a vast imperial war-making apparatus, but they also can tell us something about the structure of feeling that governs policing, its fantasy of control without commitment. As sites of urban development, these mock cities also represent a hesitant orientation toward the city as such, substituting a confrontation with its reality with a realistic fantasy.

Each individual Cop City (uppercase) is a particular site-specific investment vehicle for local redevelopment backed by a unique growth coalition. Taken together, however, they embody a pattern. The cop city (lowercase) is a generalized orientation to urban risk management that relies on the claim that well-trained police can predict, pacify, and control—and that policing alone will suffice. The cop city does not attempt to eradicate or even comprehend underlying causes of crime, political unrest, or other social harms. Its presupposition is that social conflict cannot be eliminated; its fantasy is that it can be managed, however, by rapid tactical police deployment.

At the level of police tactics, the fantasy is that situational uncertainty can be minimized, that the operational capabilities of police officers can become so predictable and planned, so choreographed and controlled, that all contingencies will be anticipated. But at the level of urban planning, the fantasy is that security can be imposed without broader social change.

———————

Cop City has elicited strenuous opposition. In January 2023, Georgia state police shot an activist 57 times as they sat unarmed, hands raised. Manuel Paez Terán, who went by Tortuguita, was part of the Defend the Atlanta Forest, Stop Cop City encampment, an effort to prevent the destruction and degradation of a 381-acre tract of the Weelaunee Forest for the construction of the facility.

This killing occurred just over a week after a Memphis police beat a 29-year-old Black man, Tyre Nichols, to death after a traffic stop. The officers, who were themselves Black, were members of a specialized tactical unit called SCORPION, or Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods. These units often carry groan-worthy acronyms, a nomenclature first introduced by Daryl Gates of the Los Angeles Police Department, who created SWAT (Special Weapons Attack Team) and TRASH (Total Resources Against Street Hoodlums), though both names were ultimately toned down.

Today, regular police enforcement has grown anemic. Departments shrink through retirements and resignations. Recruitment pipelines are trickling. And petulant police unions urge officers not to engage. Specialized urban crime units and multiagency task forces fill the void, as Baltimore journalist Brandon Soderberg has shown. Charged by police brass with boosting stats, they are supposed to bring in guns, drugs, money, and other contraband, by any means necessary.

Such units often deploy the latest technology, including stingray cell-tower simulators, geofence tracking, AI-powered cameras and license-plate readers, and drones. They operate citywide and even beyond city limits, answering not to district or precinct supervisors but usually to a trusted high-ranking commander who knows how to look the other way.

Nichols's beating fit a pattern for such tactical units. Assembled by bringing together the most aggressive, volatile, quick-witted, and rule-breaking officers, these units breed corruption and violence under the aegis of unleashed discretion and energetic enforcement. To use "the rough stuff against the rough guys" was how one public defender described the mission of San Francisco's CRUSH (Crime Response Unit to Stop Homicide). CRUSH was notorious for warrantless searches as it broke down doors to record 700 felony arrests in two years. Yet these tactics did not make much difference: the city's crime trends matched those in other comparable cities.

Tortuguita's shooting was not the same. It was multimodal pedagogy for different audiences: to activists on the left, it demonstrated that protest can get you killed; to those on the right, it demonstrated that police are willing to do whatever it takes to eliminate opposition; and to Georgia's political class, it demonstrated that state cops can dominate the city if needed. But perhaps most of all, the killing ratified the perpetual reformist refrain: it demonstrated to liberals that police need more training, which Cop City will supposedly provide.

———

The killings of Nichols and Tortuguita, taken together, elucidate what underpins cop city as a post-2020 phenomenon. In earlier moments, police operations were defined by thick presence: officers saturated the ghetto, the barrio, the hood, the block.

This concentrated presence catalyzed the Black Panther Party's critique. Co-founder Bobby Seale declared that the "racist *military* police force occupies our community just like the foreign American troops in Vietnam." The police tried to hold territory that they believed had been infected with rogue and criminal elements, which could be contained or eliminated through cops' constant, vigilant, and (as Seale insisted) racist presence. The era's fantasy of imposed docility was a life of waged work.

Today, the police operate differently. Beyond the contested locations of their proposed facilities, holding territory is a less common objective. Instead, police maintain a thin, less visible presence. Turning winnowed ranks and cratering public approval to their advantage, they operate on the protocol of the lightning raid, appearing and disappearing quickly, without making a commitment. And so they will be trained and retrained in this tactical arbitrage, leaving the populace to manage itself and coordinate its survival via the cold cash-app nexus. Police can garner ever-increasing budgets, but the policed must seek mutual aid. Yet in an era of exclusion from a stable wage, of labor surplus, of platform-based gig-economy self-actualization, police conduct their operations accordingly. Police, too, appear and disappear as quickly as the Uber Eats delivery person.

This swivel in policing mirrors the shift in strategy of the erstwhile Global War on Terror from occupation to distantiation. When Iraq's occupation by coalition faltered and failed, the drone strike and small-unit special-forces operation replaced it. Now there would be little commitment to economic development and reconstruction outside building the lily-pad launch sites for policing the planet. There is no strategic endgame, just endless tactical deployments.

Hard-bodied but with supple, calculating minds, special forces embark on policified military operations abroad, while street-smart plainclothes special police units train to engage in urban counterinsurgency. Foreign and domestic are seamlessly joined by war-fighting as crime-fighting, police power for social war, social war as urban peace. Training in the secretive, anywhere non-place of the mock city sutures these spheres of operation.

The term for elevating policing to the prime principle of governance used to be "police state." As a dystopian warning, it predominated in an era when figures like Bobby Seale likened policing to occupation, which was when the first mock cities as training sites came into common usage.

We no longer live in this era, nor do we live in a police state. Instead, we live in the era of the cop city, and not only because so many mock-urban police training environments have been proposed or planned, or are in progress, across the United States.

The cop city is an increasingly widespread phenomenon of US urban political development as a result of masochistic YIMBYism. The cop city produces conditions it cannot abide and offers hit-and-run police tactics as the only response to social crisis. Police fail to hold territory but instead create what the late social theorist Randy Martin might have called their own self-perpetuating risk environment, affording opportunities for future law-enforcement interventions instead of resolution of the causes of violations.

Supply rather than demand undergirds these citadels. Public approval is not the primary reason they are emerging. Instead, they are pushed as schemes to boost cities' credit ratings and reconfigure neighborhoods or underutilized and disused zones, while also being fetishized and funded by corporate leaders eying the rising tide of anti-systemic discontent.

Still, however undemocratic its planning may be, the cop city is not a police state. The cop city has superseded the police state. The cop city mounts no ideological defense of the value of political dispute, nor does it assume that contestation can be eradicated. Instead, it equips the state for endless opposition without amelioration. It transforms the police training scenario into a political lifeworld.

The fantasy that Cop City enacts took decades to construct. Live-action set-piece training for challenging "public safety" scenarios has institutional roots in intelligence and the military, the CIA and the US Army, as well

as the FBI. But realistic scenario-based training is colonial in origin, a gift of the waning British to the ascendant US empire. It is also colonial in its worldview, presupposing a fundamental inscrutability, unpredictability, and hostility of the terrain, the adversary, and the populace. It offers rigorous and occasionally extreme approaches to reasserting order. Methods of control must be taught; they must become second nature.

How did this learning process commence? A superintendent of this approach demurred. "I will not describe the unpleasant techniques taught," wrote former CIA director Richard Helms, who led the agency under presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, about his introduction to "the deadly arts" at a secret training camp for spies in the 1940s. Many of the businessmen and Ivy Leaguers recruited to the Office of Strategic Services, the CIA's predecessor, attended this facility, hidden among the farms north of Baltimore and south of New Freedom, Pennsylvania. The urbane and discreet Helms did relay one particular lesson from the "gutter fighting" curriculum of knife and hand-to-hand combat offered by William E. Fairbairn, a British military officer. Fairbairn conveyed his technique for dealing with "hysterical women": he grabbed their lower lip, then slapped them across the face. President Harry Truman awarded Fairbairn the Legion of Merit in 1946.

Fairbairn's expertise in smacking women is not why he is remembered today. He is better known for his police training methods, honed in the Shanghai International Settlement in the decades before World War II. Among Fairbairn's innovations was the "House of Horrors," a setting in which he would train aspiring American spies in Maryland. Like a haunted house at an amusement park, frightened candidates would be subjected to varying levels of darkness and light, mysterious moving objects, and sudden noises as they stalked through a house, sidearm in hand. Targets were supposed to receive two kill shots. According to military historian Patrick J. Chaisson, the final target was a papier-mâché Hitler.

Earlier, in Shanghai, Fairbairn had created a scale-model city for teaching police units how to maneuver and use the built environment for tactical advantage. It was called Wee-Burg. A few decades later, Cold War US police trainers, working under the auspices of Helms's CIA, would introduce scale models of urban areas into their lessons for visiting police from other countries. But "wee" models were not big enough for the global ambitions of the United States.

Before mock cities, there were mock villages. As historian Nicole Sackley has written, the village, as an intellectual construct, "contained all of the dangers and possibilities that development experts saw in 'Third World' peoples." Cold War Orientalism needed and created the village as both problem and solution. As an object of counterinsurgency, the village, not the city, was the geographic locus because guerrilla insurgency was inherently rural. Mao Zedong had proven that. Rural populations would thus need to be resettled and villages remade, as agrovilles and strategic hamlets, to prevent guerrilla infiltration.

Until this point, the US Army was accustomed to training exercises that required soldiers to operate the way an enemy army would. War-gaming exercises were designed to be as realistic and symmetric as possible, requiring significant investments of time and resources in intelligence, logistics, care for casualties, vehicle repair, and so on. But in the 1950s, as the likeliest battle theaters moved to the Third World village and the enemy became a communist insurgency, it became necessary to retool training exercises for "unconventional" warfare, for asymmetric violence. Guerrilla warfare, waged by irregular fighters who relied on invisibility and surprise, went from being a side consideration in training to the main event. And the training required including a third element, the prize for the communist insurgency as well as for the forces suppressing it: the people. The geographic unit of the people was the village.

As army historian Andrew J. Birtle explains, there were two new challenges for realistic training. The first was getting soldiers to act like convincing civilians who might secretly support or even be guerrillas. The second was getting the soldiers playing soldiers to persuade the soldiers playing civilians not to harbor or become guerrillas. Stylized mock villages became a key training tool, intended to replicate the pastoral settings where the "war of the flea" against the furry dog of army battalions would take place.

To design effective training in pacification, soldiers had to learn deception, to become flea-like—hidden, ubiquitous, mobile, annoying. The "enemy" soldiers had to pretend to be civilians and deceive the soldiers

about their support for communism. In turn, the counterinsurgent soldiers had to pretend that they were not going to kill the civilians for non-cooperation. Instead, they extended benevolent "civic action" aid, such as medical care or agricultural assistance.

Against the politically indoctrinated, civic-action carrots were usually ineffective. Sticks were more reliable. The logic of counterinsurgency dictated that the soldiers were often taught, in Birtle's words, to "move the people out of the area and then destroy their crops, put the area off limits, and shoot anyone who goes into this area." Empty the mock village in order to save it.

Mock villages first appeared on US bases in Hawaii, Japan, and the Philippines. For scholar Simeon Man, "the mock village was a technology of race war," introducing a supposedly realistic foreign spatiality. In bases across the Pacific, locals, including members of the Hawaiian National Guard, played the role of the villagers. Though they had recently been bequeathed the gift of US citizenship via statehood, their skin color and "combination of civilian attire, burlap, and target cloth," as reported in the *Army Information Digest* in 1962, could still render them foreign enough to be plausibly insurgent.

Within the continental United States, as the necessity of learning counterinsurgency methods increased in the early 1960s, mock villages on army bases did not reach the requisite levels of realism, however. Soldiers had a tendency to think like soldiers rather than like civilian peasants, making the training less reliable.

And realism was the goal. Thus, as Cop Cities spring up across the United States today, you might be tempted to ask, why build mock cityscapes if realism is the coin of the realm? Why not conduct real-time training exercises in the towns and cities where policing operations will eventually take place? The US Army actually tried this, beginning not in cities but in the countryside, using soldiers who tried to win civilians over to their cause.

————

Around 1963, army units began to stage unconventional training exercises outside of bases, in nearby towns, asking civilians to play themselves.

Soldiers acted as both insurgents and counterinsurgents. The global Cold War became live-action role-playing. Yet the most common result was for civilians to sympathize with the insurgency, not the army soldiers sent to quell it. Americans instinctively hated being policed.

Soldiers posing as guerrillas visited civilian towns in advance of an exercise to reconnoiter the terrain and meet the locals. For exercise Highland Fox, conducted in North Carolina, the leader of the guerrillas had recently returned from South Vietnam. An expert in what the army considered political indoctrination, he tried to enlist civilians in his campaign. He gained their "complete sympathy," reported *Infantry* magazine, before the ill-fated arrival of the counterinsurgent battalion.

During the typical exercise, after soldiers pretending to be insurgents had nestled in with the locals, troops representing the counterguerrilla forces would attempt to elicit allegiance to the government. They would distribute candy, screen movies, stage concerts and parades, and organize softball and football games. Yet such civic action repeatedly failed to convince civilians to support the government. Instead, one town even hosted a potluck dinner dubbed "Guerrilla Appreciation Night." Counterinsurgent forces would attempt to obtain intelligence, to ferret out guerrillas hiding among civilians. But the civilians took the candy, jitterbugged, and lied.

Even more alarming to army officials than the sustenance and shelter civilians offered guerrillas was their propensity to adopt guerrilla tactics themselves, joining auxiliaries and forming intelligence networks, or openly rioting upon the troops' arrival. In response, soldiers built crude detention camps, ringed by barbed wire affixed to freshly felled logs, for holding "native criminals." During the aptly named exercise Helping Hand II, staged in Washington state, children posed as corpses for guerrilla propaganda photos, condemning the brutality of the US Army.

These expansive field exercises proved what military officials in Vietnam already understood about occupation: winning civilian allegiance was a pesky challenge. Civic action took a long time to have any chance of success, and civilian approval of the army's good works was never guaranteed to last. It made sense to reduce the energy spent on convincing civilians to participate in their own pacification. Training on bases would have to suffice.

On army bases, without the unpredictability of civilian behavior that conferred some authenticity on the exercises, the focus narrowed to tactical training in how to maneuver in particular environments. But this shift began to occur right as a new phenomenon grabbed the attention of military strategists: guerrilla insurgency was now targeting cities across Latin America and Southeast Asia. In the United States, rebellions in Harlem, Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, and elsewhere seemed to augur the same threat. The demonic figure of the guerrilla, which social scientists and soldiers struggled to comprehend and combat, would be urbanized. Applied to the United States, this meant the figure was essentially blackened. Mock villages became mock cities.

———————

At the outset of 1968, inspired by the research of the Kerner Commission into "civil disturbances," the uprisings by Black people against police abuse, economic exploitation, and civic inequality, the US Army inaugurated its Senior Officers Civil Disturbance Orientation Course (SEADOC). This was a training program for police, National Guard, army, and other public officials in how to control urban insurrection. At the center of the training was a mock cityscape called Riotsville (depicted in Sierra Pettengill's 2022 documentary *Riotsville, U.S.A.*), in which soldiers performed for gathered crowds of trainees and observers. They demonstrated what the outbreak of an uprising looked like and how to deal with it.

The designers of these exercises had sent observers to the mock villages on bases in Hawaii, and costumed soldiers at Riotsville imitated the realism of the island maneuvers. They adopted a swaggering pose, like downtrodden native denizens rising up. Think fringed suede jackets, hippie wigs, and mean mugs—streetwalkin' cheetahs with hearts full of napalm.

Riotsville provides blueprints for training in mock cities today, but despite being long gone, it rhymes with the present in other ways. One Riotsville was located just outside DC in Virginia at Fort Belvoir, where many Pentagon "war games" were devised. Today, Fort Belvoir is home to the Defense Logistics Agency, which operates the 1033 Program, facilitating transfer of military gear to civilian police forces, to the tune of $7.6 billion (at original cost) since 1990.

The other Riotsville was in Augusta, Georgia, at Fort Gordon. At the time, it headquartered the US Military Police. Recently renamed Fort Eisenhower, it is the new home of the army's Cyber Command. Cyber Command's slogan is "Operate, Defend, Attack, Influence, Inform!" Its website also doubles as an advertisement for Augusta, calling it "the place to be" and noting that it is just two hours and 13 minutes from Atlanta. As scholar Andrea Miller has written of the new operations, "cybersecurity dually functions as a platform for war-making and for speculative economic projects, invested with the potential to catapult Augusta out of more than forty years of failed urban renewal projects aiming to transform the city's predominantly Black downtown." Change a few words and this could also describe Cop City.

———————

In 1987, the FBI erected the direct predecessor to the contemporary Cop City at its National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. This was the moment when the last hot flashes of the Cold War in Central America were turning to embers. The wrap-up of wars tend to produce surpluses seeking opportunities for reinvestment. The counterinsurgency tactics applied in the recalcitrant Guatemalan highlands would be urbanized, brought home, now as a new investment in a flagging war on drugs launched by a three-way coalition of white Southern Democrats, Black Northern Democrats, and white Republicans. "Investment," Randy Martin reminds us, was once a term in military engineering, indicating the "isolation of a hostile force or fortress by blockade."

Quantico's new mock city was called Hogan's Alley.[1] It was not the first version of Hogan's Alley, a name the FBI had been applying to training facilities for decades, but what made it novel was its realism. Earlier iterations were basically two-dimensional, with automated pop-up adversaries, jigsawed from plywood, meant to hone marksmanship in controlled firing exercises. Now, a cityscape in three dimensions would grow. The new Hogan's Alley allowed actual people to jump out of actual buildings: a bank, a warehouse, a jewelry store, a single-family house. They would test the mettle, accuracy, and discipline of trainees.

With Hogan's Alley, the FBI has confected a high-crime neighborhood. But it has also saved this neighborhood, producing, as its website touts, an artificially high arrest rate. It's mock city as wish fulfillment. With this inherent tendency to perform problems only so they can be solved by perfected policing, thus orchestrating chaos for the purpose of reinforcing order, mock cities mock cities.

———

As the United States began definitively losing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, mock villages experienced a highly publicized renaissance, including photo spreads in major monthlies like *The Atlantic*. But they had never fully disappeared, nor did off-base exercises. In fact, when the US fiasco in Vietnam was nearly over, the Green Berets, the Army Special Forces unit that had played a central role in this failure, began operating a regular calendar of training operations across several counties in rural North Carolina. Although counterinsurgency was not necessarily the primary orientation, it would, of course, return. The civilians living in and passing through the area now called the Republic of Pineland were not expected to join their operations as in earlier training, though some inevitably savored the opportunity.

In the 2000s, the Green Berets hired a coterie of actors (themselves often migrants displaced by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) to join their counterinsurgency training. It took place among newly built, and highly incongruous, mock mosques, bazaars, cemeteries, and shacks daubed with Arabic script, scattered in North Carolina's pine forests, as deftly analyzed by anthropologist Nomi Stone in her 2022 book *Pinelandia: An Anthropology and Field Poetics of War and Empire*. In addition, on military bases like Camp Pendleton near San Diego and Fort Irwin in the Mojave Desert, the military constructed new mock villages, designed to train conventional forces.

Fort Irwin hosted the National Urban Warfare Complex, which included the colloquially named settlements Medina Wasl, Ertebat Shar, Razish, and Medina Jabal. (The Israel Defense Forces began operating a similar urban-warfare training facility in the Negev Desert in 2006—called "Little Gaza.") In these mock Iraqi and Afghan villages, festooned

with minarets, soldiers trained for scenarios they were likely to encounter upon deployment, including crowd and protest control, mass-casualty events, and locating and arresting high-value targets. In other words, soldiers learned how to police Afghan and Iraqi cities and towns in California. The assumption was that these fast-paced tactical operations would simply last forever, geopolitics unshifting.

But it was a shift in the earth's climate that ambushed the National Urban Warfare Complex. Fort Irwin suffered devastating flooding in 2013, with somewhat less severe but still intense storm episodes in 2015 and 2023. Four feet of mud covered Medina Jabal in 2013, and children of the base's population faced lengthy school closures. Things got too real for the simulation.

Simulations grew more simulated. Across the country, at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune, the Marine Corps tried to mix realism with environmental controls by building an "immersion" training facility inside a huge warehouse. According to *National Defense* magazine, the combination of actual Afghan actors, realistic Afghan village structures, and "computer-generated avatars and effects such as makeshift bombs," designed by Lockheed Martin, allowed a close approximation of the "fog of war" without the risk of actual injury from real explosions or even rubber bullets. Innovative Reasoning LLC, the vendor operating the immersion scenario, noted that the use of digital elements "incorporates the cultural piece, the intelligence piece and the tactical piece so these guys have to be thinking on their toes, all the time, as it happens." However culturally accurate the avatars appeared, these digital subalterns could not yet speak. Computers had not yet replaced immigrant labor.

———————

Yet computer simulations will be essential to many of the 70 proposed and planned public-safety training facilities like Atlanta's Cop City. Police relish bringing liberal critics into "use of force" simulators that test candidates' reactions. Almost invariably when you give a sociology professor a laser gun and then an avatar threatens her, her immediate reaction is to pull the trigger. Experts in social construction learn what instinct feels like. They rethink their priors. Fellowships and awards follow.

Plans for Baltimore's Public Safety Building, which activists have labeled Baltimore Cop City, feel like a sociology thesis gone awry. The idea originated soon after the uprising of 2015 but gained significant attention in 2023, when the Maryland-based design firm MW Studios released a multifaceted planning report. The Maryland Stadium Authority paid the firm $450,000 for its services. If awarded what could be its largest contract yet, the project promises to catapult MW Studios, which specializes in public facilities like police headquarters and firehouses, to national prominence.

The proposed Baltimore Cop City site is on the campus of one of Maryland's historically Black universities, Coppin State. It is located in West Baltimore, bestride North Avenue and adjacent to where the 2015 uprising popped off when cops, fearing a "purge," blocked kids leaving school from getting on public transit.

MW Studios recognizes that building a police training facility in the center of a Black university in the center of Black Baltimore might not be a good look. Providing a "benefit [to] the surrounding community" is therefore paramount.

The logic is as follows. Top police recruits will seek to work in Baltimore because of its "state-of-the-art public safety facility." The training they will receive will allow them to serve "with pride, integrity, discipline, and honor." They will then "embed themselves in our neighborhoods, build trust, and nurture relationships," producing a safer city. (That 79 percent of Baltimore police officers currently live outside the city goes unmentioned.) And a safer city "promotes tourism, attracts businesses, and encourages residency." Laying it on thick, the report says, "We firmly believe that this project has the potential to affect change and render Baltimore one of the safest and most inviting cities in North America."

The facility itself will enact community engagement and transparency. Think grass and glass. On a college campus, it will also mimic a college campus, with a quad-like community plaza placed on one corner of the site. It will include a splash pad and shallow wading pool to invite the public, who will "interact positively with first responders using the facility." You can almost imagine the sounds of kids frolicking and cops chitchatting. *Hey, you there! Don't I know you from somewhere? Didn't I pick you up last week?* Playground cops and robbers as prophecy.

The public, however, will not have access to the classrooms, "use of force" simulator, firing range, or mock cityscape. The training facility will thus be a paradoxically "'Accessible Fortress' that engages the community and keeps public safety personnel safe." The project emphasizes real-life scenarios that are customizable, but like earlier training on military bases, reality must be kept at bay. The cops need to be protected from the actual city while inside their fake city.

To stage policing's core dialectic of anonymity and intimacy, the ersatz city will replicate working-class Black Baltimore (not Roland Park, the upper-crust progenitor of white exclusivity). Its roadways will be the width of Baltimore's streets, alleys, and avenues, lined with row homes and garden apartments, as well as liquor stores, a motel, and corner convenience stores. In contrast to the surrounding neighborhood's ubiquitous abandoned row homes and empty corner stores, their replicas in the Practical Training Scenario Village will be vibrant, humming with activity.

What the mock city needs for police training—immediacy, unpredictability, intensity—it can only approximate. This is what distinguishes it from an actual city, which runs on the electric combinations of facelessness and passion, routine and surprise. Police must learn powers of prognostication to make adequate discretionary decisions, but the fictional environments for developing this ken fall short. The cop city's purpose lies elsewhere.

———

Previous generations of military and police training facilities were products of their geopolitical environments. Today's proposed facilities might instead be seen as producing a symptomatic social world.

Like Atlanta's Cop City, Baltimore's training facility will integrate emergency medical services, firefighting, and police training. Besides operational coordination, this "first responder" unity attempts to balance the comparatively more and less robust public approval, respectively, for firefighters and police. For political theorist Diren Valayden, the first responder, a relatively new coinage signifying the "transdisciplinary encounter of various agencies," is meant "to counter a supposedly diffused and society-wide insurgent threat."

This encounter of different specializations inaugurated a new paradigm of governance after 9/11, a "political subjectivity, through which counterinsurgency achieves its fundamental goal: to prevent social transformation by securing societal 'normalcy.'" Through operational flexibility and coordination, the first responder's social objective is restoration of the status quo and simple continuity.

But the proposed Baltimore public safety facility is also supposed to change the city, the last gasp of an exhausted "eds and meds" urban redevelopment scheme. Integrated with a master plan for rejuvenating Coppin State University through capital construction, the facility complements other efforts to redevelop the neighborhood. Along with other Maryland HBCUs, Coppin State has seen an influx of funding after a lengthy legal battle over historic discrimination. The university will thus play the role of anchor institution in neighborhood transformation. The university's president actually appointed the first head of the West North Avenue Development Authority (WNADA), Chad Williams, a Marine Corps veteran. Williams will take point on orchestrating public-private partnerships "to truly transform the community."

WNADA received over $11 million from the State of Maryland to put toward community revitalization. Baltimore City Council President Nick Mosby declared, "We can't go back and reverse history, but what we can do is look forward and ensure we're investing into the human flesh of our citizens and our residents." From WNADA, cops will get their pound of flesh too.

In May 2024, WNADA announced a $350,000 grant for "addressing cleanliness and public safety" at a key West Baltimore intersection. One of the main firms that will receive the grant is owned by a former deputy commissioner of the Baltimore Police Department; another is owned by a former commissioner. Redevelopment, it turns out, is but a masquerade for more policing.

———

This is how the cop city operates. Perhaps MW Studios can be forgiven for overpromising on potential results. The firm estimates the project will cost over $338 million, around three times Atlanta's Cop City, and it cer-

tainly wants to supervise the construction. But when discussing how the new Baltimore facility's funding will materialize, MW Studios is circumspect. It soberly notes that this money will not come easy. Grants, bonds, new taxes, and private donations all could fund the facility, though Baltimore does not have a police foundation like Atlanta's. Lobbyists might also convince the state legislature to commit funds.

MW Studios has the good taste not to suggest that fines and fees from increased police enforcement might supply another tranche of funds routed toward construction. Nor are tuition fees from potential visiting out-of-town police trainees ever mentioned. But the stark truth is that if the funds could be raised, they could be raised only for such a cop project, not for social housing or harm reduction, let alone reorienting the city's broader economic engines.

Expensive as the facility will be, it is still less than what the city spends on policing annually. Is it a worthwhile expenditure? True, Baltimore's eye-popping homicide rate has significantly declined over the past few years. The mayor, though minimally crediting activists and violence interrupters, has emphasized the relentless focus of police tactical units on grabbing illegal guns off the streets. Yet fentanyl lurked on every block while City Hall and the white mediasphere treated gunfire as the city's main malady. While murders declined, as a recent *Baltimore Banner* investigation revealed, overdose rates skyrocketed across the city. Almost 6,000 people died in six years, double the rate of other cities.

Overwhelming indifference lies at the heart of the cop city, evincing what Randy Martin has called contemporary empire's "massive flight from commitment." Even if constructing Atlanta's Cop City requires felling part of a forest, the cop city (whether in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, or elsewhere) is radically different from Benjamin Netanyahu's scorched-earth plans for post-genocide Gaza, where, according to AI-generated renderings, a free-trade zone will bloom by 2035, complete with a high-speed rail connection to the carbon-neutral Saudi linear megacity NEOM. The cop city paradigm is far more disenchanted and narrow. It seeks only its own perpetuation. The utopia of future aspiration resides in the mock city, not the real world.

The cop city is acquiescence to the current state of things, to a world of diminishing expectations. The entrepreneurial few who escape are the

ones who embrace volatility. Cunning, risk-taking, and fearlessness can be watchwords of business acumen, or they can be predictors of criminal conviction. Many in the cop city must manage this choice, accepting the challenge. But there is no sense that everyone might benefit. The cop city sorts rather than socializes, splits rather than stabilizes, hesitates rather than commits, pricks rather than embraces, leverages rather than raises, hedges rather than entangles. To draw on geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, it organizes abandonment.

————————

Cop training facilities are places of learning. After an academic year marked by anti-war and anti-genocide encampments that met with brutal arrests, degree denials by moneyed trustees, and new restrictions on speech and protest, many may be wondering whether colleges, which normally encourage self-actualization through risk-taking, will ever be the same again. *Not that kind of risky self-actualization; not that kind of fearless, committed speech*, bristles every dean of students.

Perhaps Cop City provides a model not of the city but of the college campus to come—an Accessible Fortress. Every classroom a simulation of doom. Every lawn manicured but empty. Every interface with the outside world a splash pad that can be turned off when reality becomes too much to bear.

Notes

Cunning, risk-taking, and fearlessness can be watchwords of business acumen, or they can be predictors of criminal conviction. Many in the cop city must manage this choice, accepting the challenge. But there is no sense that everyone might benefit. The cop city sorts rather than socializes, splits rather than stabilizes, hesitates rather than commits, pricks rather than embraces, leverages rather than raises, hedges rather than entangles. To draw on geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, it organizes abandonment.