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Unsafe Cities and Other Forms of Urbicide

ABSTRACT

This text offers an interpretation of the city through the lens of situations of insecurity experienced in urban spaces. With population growth and increasing global interconnection, insecurity appears to be both an obvious and latent problem in most cities around the world. The article therefore asks if there is a causal relationship between insecurity and urbicide. This question is analyzed using a consistent paradigmatic and comparative method, which attempts to find similarities between acts that generate insecurity and the dynamics of urban life. On this basis, it can be argued that the emergence of unsafe environments emerges as an urbicide factor that undermines the possibility of living in many cities, given their already unequal development. To this end, we address some cases of insecurity and its various urban manifestations.

KEYWORDS: urban insecurity, city, metropolis, urbicide, security

STRESZCZENIE

Niebezpieczne miasto i inne formy urbicydu

Niniejszy tekst przedstawia interpretację miasta przez pryzmat sytuacji związanych z brakiem bezpieczeństwa, których doświadcza się w przestrzeni miejskiej. Wraz ze wzrostem liczby ludności i rosnącą globalną wzajemną zależnością brak bezpieczeństwa jawi się jako problem zarówno oczywisty, jak i ukryty w większości miast na całym świecie. W artykule zadano zatem pytanie, czy istnieje związek przyczynowo-skutkowy między brakiem bezpieczeństwa a urbicydem. Kwestia ta została przeanalizowana przy użyciu spójnej metody paradygmatycznej i porównawczej, której celem jest znalezienie podobieństw między działaniami powodującymi brak bezpieczeństwa a dynamiką życia miejskiego. Na tej podstawie można stwierdzić, że powstawanie niebezpiecznych środowisk jawi się jako czynnik urbicydu, który podważa możliwość życia w wielu miastach, biorąc pod uwagę ich i tak już nierównomierny rozwój. W tym celu omawiamy niektóre przypadki braku bezpieczeństwa i jego różnorodne przejawy w przestrzeni miejskiej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: brak bezpieczeństwa w mieście, miasto, metropolia, urbicyd, bezpieczeństwo

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Introduction

In order to gain a comprehensive perspective on the causes and effects of insecurity in today's cities, it is necessary to consider its global context, as well as events of violence whose effects radiate to the rest of the urban fabric and the international community. Evidence of this can be found in the current wars in the Middle East, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the case of Ukraine and Russia, which are highlighted in public opinion along with their economic and geopolitical effects, as well as through the indirect intervention of other military powers (Gatti, 2011, p. 524). As can be seen, these events have had global consequences, such as the migratory waves of hundreds of thousands of refugees in what may be described as a postmodern diaspora. These developments call into question the sustainability of humanitarian aid from receiving countries.

Beyond armed conflicts, other challenges arise in the form of persistent terrorist threat throughout the world, even in countries that, due to their economies and robust police states, had appeared safe (González Calleja, 2012). This is followed by a crisis of violence and insecurity caused by criminal networks and organized crime, especially in regions with emerging or developing economies (Hobsbawm, 2012, pp. 40–41). To these problems must be added the growing and justified concern regarding climate change—formerly conceptualized as global warming—driven by excessive pollution and by an economic system of production that based on ephemeral consumption and constant production of waste (Jappe, 2021, p. 81). This situation is accompanied by the exploitation of natural resources, animals, and human beings themselves. For urban populations, these effects are perceptible in everyday life and media representations. All these dynamics have reduced human experience to mere survival, undermining the Aristotelian idea of making the city a place for "the good life."[1]

Against this backdrop, this article offers a reflective analysis of the social factors that threaten the stability of cities, particularly those linked to the perception of insecurity. To this end, it puts forward the hypothesis that insecurity generated by various types of violent events leads to the deterioration of urban life to the extent that it inhibits the very habitability of cities. Given the constant recurrence of acts of violence, it may be argued that we are facing an urbicide factor that contributes to the "death" of contemporary cities. This consideration is proposed to broaden the notion of insecurity by incorporating urbicidal dynamics such as wars, terrorism, and forms of violence linked

1 For Aristotle (1988, *Politics*, 1252b8-9), the city marked a boundary between political human life (βίος πολιτικός) and animal life (ζῷον πολιτικόν) typical of barbarian peoples. This reaffirms that in the ancient *polis*, the good life was sought with the intention of forming virtuous citizens.

to crime. To this end, we pose two central questions: What theoretical dimensions make it possible to recognize urbicide? And what causal relationships exist between insecurity and urbicide? It should be noted that the theoretical relationship between the concepts of urbicide and insecurity is not intended to merely confirm the death of the city, it aims to open a reflective discussion about the limits of urban life in the face of problems linked to insecurity. From this perspective, we employ a paradigmatic analysis in which cases of insecurity are taken to help interpret urban space as a potential victim of violence. In this way, we affirm that urbicide not only generates conditions of insecurity, but that insecurity may also be a cause of urbicide.

The Concept of Urbicide in an Era of Urban Destruction

Urbicide refers to an event or series of events that lead to the "death" of a city.[2] Theoretically, it constitutes an analytical approach that allows for the joint diagnosis of a series of attacks against the political, social, and material dimensions of the urban fabric. The term originated in the last century amid constant controversy over urban renewal projects in New York City, although it was first used in 1963 in the field of science fiction by Michael John Moorcock (2008). In the social sciences, the concept gained relevance with the studies of Ruth Glass (Brown-Saracino, 2013, p. 33), who employed it to criticize certain architectural renewal policies which resulted in the demolition of buildings and monuments, effectively causing the "death" of certain urban spaces. In the same vein, Marshall Berman revisited the term to reflect on the effects of such renovations as manifestations of a volatile modernity. He summarized this critique as follows: "Where this happens, all the people, things, institutions, and environments that are innovative and avant-garde at one moment in history are left behind and become obsolete the next" (Berman, 1992, p. 71). Urban renewal was a continuous movement between the destruction and construction of buildings, leaving little or no historical trace for their inhabitants. In this context, critical reflections foresaw the massive elitization of certain spaces by those with greater economic power and, as a consequence, the displacement or adaptation of the most vulnerable populations. In this sense, urbicide began to be associated with what we now call gentrification.

Over time, the concept of urbicide has become increasingly used, coming to refer to phenomena of urban destruction that go beyond economic causes. In these cases, the theory of Martin Coward (2009) is particularly significant.

2 Although the term generally refers to the death of the city, its meaning ultimately depends both on the definition of city and on what is considered a "living" *city*, making it a flexible yet controversial concept.

In his book *Urbicide: Politics of Urban Destruction*, he introduces the concept with a philosophical approach to show the relevance of cities in terms of war objectives. One of the most compelling examples of his theory is the destruction of the old bridge in Mostar, an event that, in his view, triggered the Balkan War.[3] With this, Coward confirms the monumental relevance of urban space both for the formation of a community and for its disintegration. The British philosopher's theory thus consolidates urbicide as a concept that denounces and evaluates damage to urban space.

It should be clarified that about the concept of urban space refers to the material, the political, and the social dimensions of what we call a city. The Latins differentiated between the words *urbs*—understood as the built and physical space—and *civitas*, referring to the political association inhabiting it. This distinction provides a useful framework for analyzing the set of relationships that share an urban space (Sennett, 2019, p. 35). Although it is difficult to pinpoint where a city begins and ends, there are definitions such as that proposed by Marta Llorente (2015) that identify it based on human intervention, whose presence signals a separation between the urban or civilized, and the wild or untamed (p. 21).

While it may seem that there are as many definitions of the city as there are cities themselves, one of the most useful notions for identifying it is that of the city as an urban area, that is, as a concentration of bodies in constant interaction mediated by their shared built space (Perea-Tinajero, 2021, p. 27). This definition is related to that advanced by the urban planner Ildefons Cerdà (1867, p. 29), who describes the metropolis as an interdependent articulation of relationships between inhabitants. One might think that these relationships are already ontologically given, body to body, but Cerdà goes further by considering that this link is only possible because there is an (urban) space that allows it. Urbanization, says Cerdà (1867), shows elements "... exerting a very direct action on each other, [which] are in constant relation and consequently form a unity" (p. 29). To illustrate this unity, let us consider one everyday urban activitity such as waste management, which in a city becomes part of public services, including sewerage and garbage collection. This seemingly simple case shows that a failure in this management system could lead to serious pollution and health problems. Another example can be found in the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where we realized that interactions within the city may be a source of contagion.[4] With this fear, transportation systems failed, food did not arrive,

3 The relationship between urban space and physical violence directed against buildings has been discussed elsewhere in Perea-Tinajero (2024). Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the contribution of Coward (2009), as it is fundamental to understanding the crucial role of built space for the inhabitants of a city. A space charged with meaning, significance, and history, whose violent alteration disrupts everyday urban life.

4 The COVID-19 pandemic of 2019 also sparked controversy over measures such as the closure of businesses and even national borders. In a globalized world, however, such policies could prove

work stopped, and the city life collapsed. Such cases help us understand that ruining the very functioning of urban space also implies the ruin of the dynamics of its inhabitants' lives.

It should be clarified that, when referring to space, the concept is not limited to a physical, metric, and measurable dimension, as it is commonly conceived. Rather, space should be understood in social terms, as a place constituted through human relationships. This notion was addressed by Lefebvre (2013) in *The Production of Space*, where he established a close link between space and society. For him, there is no space without bodies in relation and vice versa:

> It is a remarkable relationship: the body, with its available energies, the living body, creates or produces its own space; conversely, the laws of space, that is, the laws of discrimination in space, govern the living body as well as the deployment of its energies (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 218).

As may be seen, the French philosopher employs an ontological axiom: being-with or being-in-relation, and takes it further to assert that space is produced through bodies existing in relation to one another. Such approaches allow us to understand that different models of relating also generate different conceptions of space. Hence, urban (social) space is constructed and, therefore, it can also be destroyed.

Although the destruction of buildings may seem secondary in the face of human suffering, the truth is that both are relevant from an urban spatial perspective. From this point of view, every element of the city functions as a body of orientation and, therefore, a source of meaning. Monuments, buildings, urban structures, animals, and plants configure a space, forming an environment or, more precisely, a habitat. In this vein, Sara Ahmed's (2006) thesis on orientation becomes relevant. According to her, our experiences of orientation are possible because we recognize a certain meaning in bodies: "If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies in space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). From this perspective, the destruction of certain bodies may produce the loss of meaning (of orientation).

It could therefore be argued that the loss of the city would entail the loss of a fundamental space of orientation. This is what Martin Heidegger had reinterpreted when he referred to the Greek city (the *polis*) not as a place of dispute (*polemos*) but as a "pole" of orientation (Heidegger, 2005, p. 116).[5] A similar

counterproductive in some countries. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see the work by Agata Bąk (2021): *To lock or not to lock? Mexico case*.

5 For Heidegger, the problem of community—whether designated as the city or the *polis*—had little to do with political discussion. Instead, he primarily emphasized the theme of space and place

idea can be found in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, whose concept of the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) is a metaphysical idea that gives meaning to inhabitants by having an already constituted experience (Martínez-Bravo, 2021). If this is the case, then the city may be conceived as the material realization of a shared world. Consequently, its destruction would imply the collapse of this world. This explains the profound gravity of urbicide, whose consequences involve the destruction of a point of orientation and the emergence of a space that, although habitable, becomes unlivable.

Therefore, what the spatial approach to urbicide allows is the broadening of the concept of violence from the individual to the collective, both at the level of victim and perpetrator,[6] considering that, spatially, an act of violence is not an isolated event. Hence, Cerdà's ideas on urbicide may be applied in reverse: not as constructing but as undoing urban space.

Insecurity as a Contemporary Urban Problem

Having discussed forms of urbicide characterized by the destruction of architectural environment, we now propose to reverse the perspective to focus on violence occurring among inhabitants, wreaking havoc on the rest of the urban environment. To do so, we must reiterate the question: what is the relationship between insecurity derived from violence and the one resulting from urbicide? Today, various factors have been making cities unsafe and reducing living in them from adaptation to survival. In addition to urban spaces ravaged by war, there are cities that are self-destructing[7] due to recurring acts of criminal violence. Unlike war, where it is still possible to identify both perpetrators and victims, in urban insecurity, these categories are blurred by the ambiguity existing in large cities.

as the origin of all forms of gathering. In his words: "The *pole* is the place around which every entity revolves, and in such a way that in the domain of this place the entity shows its rotation and its condition. The pole, as this place, allows the entity to appear in its being and show the totality of its condition" (Heidegger, 2005, p. 116).

6 Vittorio Bufacchi argues that conceptions of violence depend fundamentally on the approach used to conceptualize them. For him, understanding violence does not require the creation of separate concepts for every manifestation of violence, but rather frameworks that allow for its analysis, such as the distinction between minimalist and comprehensive concepts (Bufacchi, 2005, pp. 197–199).

7 This position may be contrasted with the title of the article Urbicide or Suicide? Shaping Environmental Risk in an Urban Growth Context: The Example of Quito City (Ecuador) by Marrero, J.M., Yepes, H., Salazar, P., and Lara, S. (2023), which questions the intentionality of actions directed at a city. Although the authors address an urban planning problem, their question can also be applied to contexts of insecurity. Are such processes examples of urbicide or rather forms of urban city suicide?

According to Pegoraro (2000), although insecurity is perceived subjectively, this ambiguousness arises from the generalization of criminal acts in an urban space, the constancy of which generates the "social construction of fear," associated with various factors (p. 120). Insecurity is understood as a constant state of concern derived from existing threats. It is also understood as the absence of security, a concept that, at least in Spanish or Castilian, has two meanings: the first is derived from the Latin word *securitas*, which means "without worry" (*Diccionario Etimológico en Castellano*, 2023); a state of tranquility, peace, or imperturbability. The second meaning refers to what the English language renders as safeguarding, which alludes to defense against a possible attack (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2023). The problem is that in a world where violence is a constant social dynamic, absolute security, without defense and protection mechanisms, is practically impossible.

Although insecurity is a matter of perception that arises from certain conditions, it is also an experience linked to vulnerability, to the extent that insecurity may in some cases become almost synonymous with vulnerability. To clarify this relationship, vulnerability should be understood as a condition emerging from the absence of protection—that is, from being susceptible to harm, exposed to the will of others, or lacking adequate support. The etymology of the term reflects this meaning: the Latin word *vulnus* signifies "wound," while the suffix denoting quality indicates a condition or state (Corominas, 1973, p. 612). What stands out about this notion is that vulnerability presupposes the existence of a prior threat. Hence, the vulnerable becomes the insecure insofar as it is unprotected.

Within the city, certain spaces provide the conditions through which individuals perceive themselves as safe. In this sense, different notions of safety may generate certain interpretations of urban space. For example, the post-war period and the tensions of the Cold War gave rise to a series of security doctrines that mediated relations between economic blocs and their military powers. Among these, the idea of national security stood out as prominent, primarily prioritizing the protection of state interests above the security of citizens and, if necessary, above the security of other states (Font & Ortega, 2012). This notion possessed a fundamentally defensive connotation, revealing how the security of some actors implies the vulnerability of others (Cavalletti, 2010). Another related concept is that of global security, which emerged from the globalization of warfare and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The existence of such weapons generated tension and a potentially global-scale conflict scenario. This was followed by one of the most recent and comprehensive concepts to emerge: human security, which "... means protecting vital freedoms. [It involves] protecting people exposed to certain situations, strengthening their resilience and aspirations ... It means protecting human beings against critical (serious) and omnipresent (widespread) situations and threats" (Rojas

Aravena, 2012, p. 4). This latter concept broadens the range of factors that are considered essential for security, tranquility, and the reduction of vulnerability. It offers a comprehensive perspective that extends beyond direct forms of violence, such as war or terrorism, to include broader dimensions of stability. In this framework, security also encompasses social security (or health), access to employment, and the creation of healthy ecological environments. As may be observed, the concept of human security is grounded in a holistic view of security, establishing it as a human right.

The above review of the notions of security can be contrasted with their absence in urban spaces. From this perspective, a critique of events of violence that may lead to urbicide shall be presented below.

Hybrid Wars and Other Partial Forms of Urbicide

To speak of urbicide is to conceive of the death of a city as the destruction of the conditions necessary for urban life: the reduction of dignified living to mere survival and the erosion of the right to the city. In this sense, hostile dynamics such as wars have increasingly transformed cities in recent years as strategic spaces of destruction—military targets or objectives (Perea-Tinajero, 2021, p. 81). Although as cities have historically been victims of warfare, it is particularly striking today because these processes occur in an era of global urbanization, in which the effects of urban destruction radiate throughout the world.

As history demonstrates, concepts of security have been profoundly transformed by the persistent threats generated by the wars of the last two centuries. The major conflicts of the twentieth century—commonly referred to as World War I and World War II, or more broadly as total wars—contributed to shifting the focus of warfare from traditional battlefield confrontations to the city as the primary target of devastation. In this process, civilian populations became indirectly yet deeply involved in military conflict (Perea-Tinajero, 2021, p. 108). As a result, cities and warfare began to merge into an inhabited yet paradoxically hostile urban environment. In this context, war "... incorporates measures of economic or psychological harassment, exacerbating hostility against an enemy who, without being a combatant, is perceived as an adversary to be defeated" (García Picazo, 2016, p. 314). Such dynamics may be observed in the large-scale bombings of European cities during the Second World War and in the atomic bombings on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. These events were later followed by continuous nuclear competition during the Cold War, reinforcing the perception that no city in the world was safe.

Following these large-scale armed conflicts, the legal protections of international law began to take shape, as it had become clear that no wall or shelter could ensure the safety of cities. In addition, concern that the world could be physically

devastated through the use of weapons of mass destruction contributed to the creation of the United Nations as a mechanism for containing and mediating international conflicts. This gives rise to a fundamental question: what have been the achievements, limitations, or failures in the promotion and implementation of security policies, given that nearly half a century later, the world continues to witness large-scale urban destruction in the Middle East and Eastern Europe?[8]

This situation has become particularly evident in the last decades, during which humanity has continued to experience conflicts such as the wars in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Syria, and Afghanistan, among others. In many of these contexts, warfare has reduced quality of life to conditions characteristic of high-intensity conflict.[9] In such environments, violence and socioeconomic conditions leave the population in a state of constant collective vulnerability. Although the number of formally declared wars has declined, the effects of ambiguous urban violence and terrorism continue to threaten peace and security, including within the world's most economically developed nations. This reality reinforces the perception of a condition of global insecurity in the eyes of international public opinion.

In this context, urbicidal violence cannot be reduced to the classical conceptions of war understood solely as open armed confrontation between two or more identifiable collective actors. It is precisely for this reason that the concept of urbicide becomes relevant: rather than constituting a redundant term, it emphasizes the fact that warfare is increasingly urban and that its dynamics directly disrupt cities. Consequently, urbicide emerges as one of the principal causes of global insecurity, taking on different forms. One of these forms is hybrid warfare, in which armies, terrorists, state agents, and civilians participate, while the distinctions between them become increasingly blurred. Within such dynamics, a soldier may later appear as a terrorist and, at another moment, as a defenseless civilian, rendering the identities of those involved deeply ambiguous (Weizman, 2012, p. 18). This form of violence appears to be closely linked to the rapid expansion of large metropolitan areas, whose scale and density provide a certain degree of anonymity.[10]

Because of its adaptation to complex urban environments, Eval Weizman (2012) classifies this phenomenon as urban warfare (p. 18), incorporating it into the broader history of contemporary types of urbicide. In this form of

8 The strengthening of international legal protection followed by the growth and power of public opinion in favor of nuclear disarmament had a positive effect on limiting the use of weapons of mass destruction. This process also encouraged the criminalization of the use of biological weapons and reinforced the implementation of concepts such as war crimes (Díaz, 2011).

9 Within the classification system of the Heidelberg Barometer (2022, p. 6), the category of "high intensity" corresponds to the dynamics of war.

10 Research by the agency Forensic Architecture, directed by Eyal Weizman, points out how military forces such as the Israeli army operate through highly precise, less visibly destructive, and with more sophisticated strategies, compared to the European wars of the last century.

violence, war does not destroy the city outright; rather, it transforms it into a war zone—a new and sometimes perpetual battlefield. It is therefore not surprising that the longest and most intermittent wars in recent years have been urban. Examples include the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, which lasted two decades; the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which has fluctuated between periods of peace and violence since the 1990s before escalating into Russia's recent invasion in 2022 (Navarro Benítez, 2022, pp. 25–26); and the current controversial Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory for more than half a century.[11] These cases stand out as conflicts in which urban life continues to exist only under conditions of extreme difficulty. The populations seem to resist, migrate, and rebuild as far as possible, even despite living in hostile spaces that undermine security and, consequently, their living conditions.

Insecurity as an Urbicide Factor

Under these circumstances and in light of the above discussion, it may be argued that insecurity, in its various manifestations, may be understood as a potential form of global urbicide. As we have seen, its consequences range from the degradation of the city to the deterioration of its inhabitants. At this point, however, let us reverse the perspective and consider violence that occurs among inhabitants as a cause contributing to an urban decline. While insecurity is a factor that does not always "kill" or destroy a city, it does undermine the possibility of the good life mentioned at the beginning of this article.

To illustrate this phenomenon, homicidal violence may be taken as an example, particularly given that homicide rates have remained alarming over the last two decades. According to the UN Human Security Unit (2009, pp. 19–20), the global homicide rate stood at approximately 6.01 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants per year. The highest rates were recorded in the Americas, reaching approximately 17.2 victims per year, despite the absence of formally declared armed conflict. Mexico, in particular, has a rate ranging between 20 and 40 victims, placing the country among those with the highest number of homicides in the region, after Venezuela, Honduras, and El Salvador, which exceed 40 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants annually (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research [HIIK], 2022, p. 94).

The relationship between crime and the space where it occurs may establish causal links between insecurity and urbicide, insofar as insecurity influences

11 Studies such as those conducted by Forensic Architecture highlight in particular the logical "spatialization" of violence reflected in the military strategies employed in Middle Easterrn conflicts. Many of these strategies are conceived and nourished by poststructuralist theories drawn from French philosophy of the late twentieth century. For further discussion, see Weizman's work *Through the Walls* (2012).

the degradation of urban life. This dynamic may be seen in the case of Tila, a small town in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, which has been the scene of violent disputes between organized crime cartels involved in drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, and other criminal activities (Rico Montoya, 2024, p. 279). For such criminal organizations, territorial control implies subjugation of the lives of its inhabitants. In a manner comparable to situations observed in Palestine and other territories affected by armed occupation, Tila has experienced constant territorial disputes. The key distinction, however, lies in the actors involved: rather than conventional military forces, they belong to criminal groups.

In 2024, as violence in Tila escalated, the town became a battlefield due to clashes between criminal cells of the Sinaloa Cartel and those of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, considered the largest and strongest in the country. The consequences were devastating: burned cars, destroyed homes, blocked streets, and ruined businesses, resulting in the paralysis of urban life (El País, 2024). Of course, the surviving population had no choice but to seek refuge in temporary shelters or flee to neighboring towns. Under such circumstances, the question inevitably arises as to whether any genuine habitation still exist. The answer appears negative. On the one hand, there is persistent insecurity that progressively destroys the city and, on the other, the identities of those involved become increasingly ambiguous—criminals, military personnel, civilians, and inhabitants overlap within the same space.

Another significant example is the town of Allende in the state of Coahuila, where control of security was taken over by a group called Los Zetas. At the time, criminal organization controlled not only criminal activities, but also the inhabitants and even the local police. The most tragic episode occurred in 2011, when a massacre left 70 people missing, according to official figures from the state of Coahuila.[12] At the same time, thirty-two family homes were destroyed, allegedly because they contained cash and weapons, or evidence of criminal activity (Aguayo et al., 2016).[13] Following these events, the majority of the inhabitants migrated elsewhere, while others attempted to rebuild their lives as best they could, but recovery has been slow.

These two cases are specific to Mexico, but they form a part of a paradigm of citizen insecurity that is experienced throughout much of Latin America, a region characterized by persistent extreme and constant violence.

12 In general, entire families were murdered, and numerous bodies remain unidentified. Although official figure from the Attorney General's Office of the State of Coahuila reported approximately seventy missing persons, alternative accounts claim that nearly three hundred individuals may have disappeared (Aguayo et al., 2016, p. 13).

13 This case is particularly noteworthy because it involved not only forced disappearances, but also the destruction of buildings. The events later became internationally known after inspiring the television series *Somos* (Schamus, 2021).

The expansion and disproportionate growth of criminal groups, coupled with the ineffectiveness of local police and security forces, has shifted control of the city to criminal actors. This process has contributed to the consolidation of criminal governance, largely unrecognized by the authorities. The consequences include what Mike Davis (2020) defines as an ecology of fear. In his text *Urban Control: Beyond Blade Runner*, the author criticizes urban policies based dystopian planning. He uses Los Angeles as a case study, criticizing the urban transformation of the southern part of the city, based on the segregation of population according to race, status, economic activity, and land value, factors to which he adds the fear generated by surveillance (Davis, 2020, pp. 32–33).

In the case of the aforementioned Mexican cities, fear escalates into terror, permeating everyday life to such an extent that inhabitants may no longer feel safe leaving their homes to work, shop, or participate in recreational activities due to the risk of extortion, mistaken identity, or becoming caught in the crossfire of organized crime. The very possibility of occupying public space becomes dangerous. What emerges, therefore, is a form of urban siege imposed through terror, functioning as a particular manifestation of urbicide.[14]

Although in these cases there is no explicit or initial intention to destroy urban life, there nevertheless exists a profound neglect and disregard for safety. A similar interpretation is proposed by Carrión Mena (2023), who understands the disappearance of public space due to urban planning policies as a form of urbicide. The distinction, however, lies in the fact that in the cases discussed here, the destruction of public space—and sometimes also private space — occurs through the spread of insecurity.

Based on the examples discussed and on the interpretative frameworks proposed by both Carrión Mena and Davis, it becomes evident that an urban environment permeated by violence generates fear and terror, thereby undermining the possibility of social interaction. In short, such a scenario leads inhabitants to experience the gradual "death" of the city itself.

Conclusion: The Spatial Production of Insecurity

For the ancient Greeks, the city was synonymous with refuge and protection against the threats of the wild and uncivilized world. After centuries of history, however, circumstances have fundamentally changed. Today, when we

14 Recently, following the assassination of Nemecio Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho" and leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (one of the largest and most influential criminal organizations in the world), a series of attacks targeting roads and businesses were unleashed, including the burning of vehicles on February 22, 2026 (BBC News Mundo, 2026, February 22). This tactic, commonly referred to as *narcobloqueo*, aims to disrupt communication routes by violent blockade of roads connecting cities.

talk about cities, it is almost impossible not to associate them with insecurity as an almost intrinsic and widespread quality. The analysis developed throughout this article allows us to illuminate the various manifestations of insecurity that stand in opposition to the ideal of the good life in the city. The aim has been to show that, in the contemporary era, various events of violence—ranging from total war and hybrid warfare to terrorist attacks and regrettable urban insecurity—are part of the integral dynamics that undermine the city's ability to be a safe space.

In this sense, being an urbanite in many cities around the world implies living with a certain risk of harm to our integrity. According to Elaine Scarry (1985) "... the human being can be transformed into a creature that always experiences itself as vulnerable..." (p. 317). What she suggests with this ontological proposition is that being aware that we are vulnerable beings translates into the construction of a world that, as we believe, begins with living in a home, a neighborhood, a city, and extends as we expand the limits of our familiar space.

This situation is a dual challenge for global security in a time of constant urbicide. On the one hand, there is the need to mitigate insecurity by addressing the global causes that sustain it, including an economic system capable of transforming even violence, crime, and destruction into profitable enterprises. On the other hand, it is necessary to reconstruct the urban social fabric on a material and spatial basis, by creating healthier environments and fostering more inclusive and less hostile cities. Only through such efforts can we secure our right to create, inhabit, and sustain a city in the face of the growing privatization of safe public space.[15]

Although contemporary urban life often appears to move towards instability and potential collapse, the city—as an entity of fragile balances—will always require constant construction and care. A city is never a finished work; there is no moment when it is fully complete. As a temporary entity, it deteriorates and renews itself according to the rhythm of successive generations. With all this, human beings cannot simply abandon urban life, since the city is their constructed habitat. Therefore, it will be necessary to prevent its decline as a fundamental task of contemporary societies.

15 One of the theses put forward in *Urban Control: Beyond Blade Runner* (Davis, 2020) warns that security is increasingly becoming a privatized right accessible only to a select few.

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