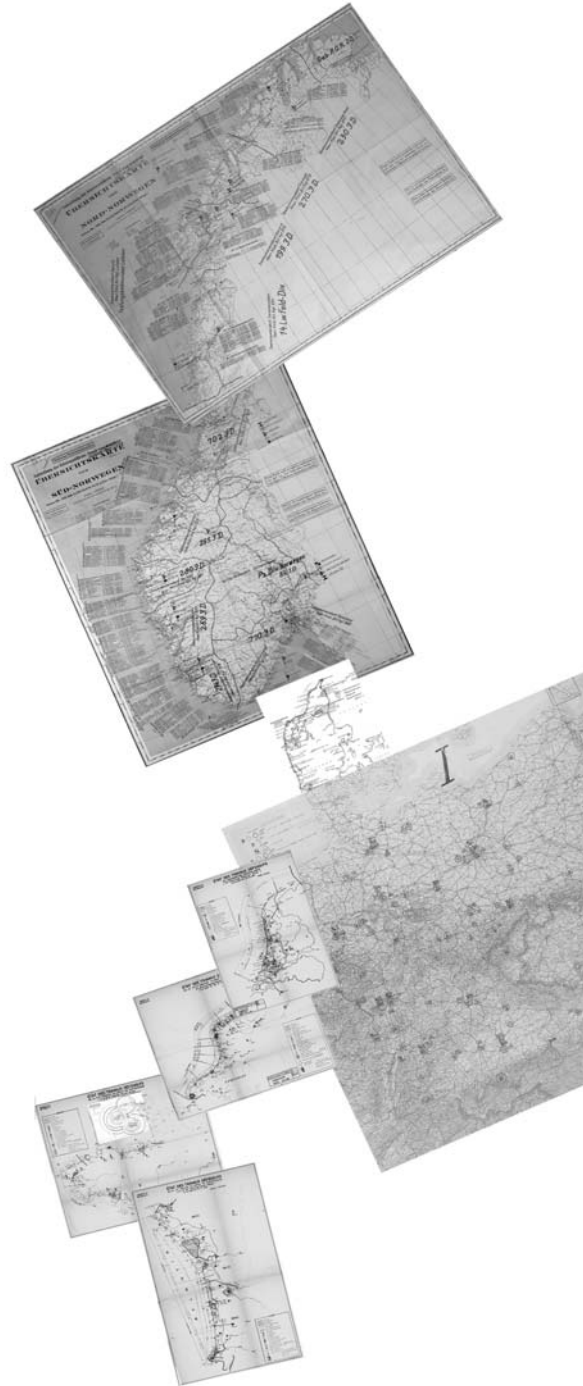


# THE ATLANTIC WALL: BUNKER AND/AS MODERN ARCHITECTURE

**Gennaro Postiglione**

"L'architecture, c'est, avec des matières brutes, établir des rapports émouvants".  
(Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, 1923)



*fig. 1:* Re-assembled map of *Atlantik Wall* batteries and fortress engineers, 1944-45 (maps of France, Belgium and The Netherlands © Service Historique de la Défense: Département de la Marine, Vincennes/F; maps of Denmark, Germany and Norway © Bundes Militararchiv, Friburg/D; map of Channel Islands/GB © Priaulx Library, St. Peter Port, Guernsey/GB).

## INTRODUCTION

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1941 Adolf Hitler for the first time talked about the "Atlantikwall" which was supposed to defend the Fortress Europe from the invasion coming from the West. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March of the next year in the Directive on War no. 40, the *Atlantik Wall* was officially established. Hardly a month after, Albert Speer succeeded Fritz Todt, who died in a mysterious air crash, as head of the organization, that retained its former name, and supervised the construction of fortifications, mobilizing thousands and thousands of people, among them prisoners and deported. Hitler's project was aimed at constructing a line of foxholes, a sort of backbone to Europe facing the ocean (Rolf, 1998). Virilio, who took photographs of these concrete constructions between 1958 and 1965, talks of modern monoliths, "small-sized temples without religion", crypts that prefigure the Resurrection. "A foxhole" (*stuzpunkt*), he writes, literally means "strong house" and not "false house" as stated in dictionaries; a reinforced house, an armour that surrounds a soldier, but also a form of "disappearance" (Virilio, 1968). Our research-work highlighted an issue already raised by the French architect and afterwards by (Diller & Scofidio, 1995): the close connection that exists between these architectures of war and many buildings planned by the Modern Movement, but also bunker as a point of reference to a great part of modern & contemporary architecture. Bunkers as an icon of modernity (Postiglione, 2005).

The research entitled "The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum"<sup>1</sup> promoted and developed a valorisation project with the aim of bringing the vast heritage of WWII built along the Atlantic coast back into the world of cultural heritage but also in the one of architecture. The project was actually intended to draw attention to the architectural, aesthetic and landscape value of the *Atlantik wall*, understood as a trans-national cultural heritage.

## HORIZONTAL VISION, AESTHETIC FASCINATION AND TERRITORIAL DIMENSION

Bunkers are based on the privilege of a horizontal rather than a vertical vision; windows, as Le Corbusier wrote (Le Corbusier, 1923), will no more be vertical, but horizontal. They follow a new view of the world imposed by the cinema, an aspect which appears to be dictated more by a cultural factor than by a true technical need; and in bunkers this horizontal cut perfectly corresponds to the observer's eye movement through the sights of an automatic weapon while observing the horizon (Belpoliti, 2006).

Fruit of desire and necessity to control, "to survey," bunkers deprive a place of its genesis: absolutely atypical, these constructions respond to communal principles merging the necessity to control the horizon with the necessity to generate networks, to built-up a system. A system of points, isolated but at the same time kept together by a dense network of communications and infrastructures; often incapable of looking at each other, they are placed in a mutual relationship only according to the Command Post's position (Rolf, 1980).

This is the establishment of typological superiority as opposed to the topological one, so dear to a great part of the recent and more distant classical architecture: the organization of form is in no way related to the context if not functionally, which enables an interpretation of the bunker as the archetype of tumulus in its double acknowledgement of a monument and a tomb. Monumental is its desire/necessity for eternity (of being indestructible); it is tomb-like because of its rejection of the external world in terms of *topos* and installation (in order to be invisible). It is an architecture that becomes subterranean and excavated, vanishing in the same landscape it is inserted in, out of the need for mimesis and out of indifference to the context.

Bunkers, purely abstract in character and value (abstraction of place more than abstraction of use), seem also to suggest their possible future: unable to return to their original function, they appear to be mere significant objects which cannot fulfil a purpose that does not imply an absolute elimination of any function,

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<sup>1</sup> The research ([www.atlanticwall.polimi.it](http://www.atlanticwall.polimi.it)) was developed during the 2005 in cooperation with The Department of Architectural Design at the Polytechnic of Milan (DPA/Politecnico di Milano), The Architecture and Infrastructure Group at the University of Versailles (GRAI) and The Raymond International Centre for Conservation at the University of Leuven (RICC). The work was co-financed by the European Commission, within the programme "Culture 2000" and Gennaro Postiglione was the project leader, while the artist and photographer Guido Guidi was the author of a specific photo campaign of the Atlantic Wall remains: the research results and the pictures of survey are the content of the travelling exhibition "The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum" available on request.

determining them simply as "things". Their re-existence is primarily aesthetic: *objets trouvés* in coastal landscape at the same time revitalise the object and the context, creating a new relationship between them.



fig. 2: Bunkers abandoned in the landscape along the Danish west coast (map of a Danish *Stunzpunkt* © The Danish National Archive/DK; photo by G. Postiglione).

The aesthetic dimension of bunkers can be considered a new interpretative parameter, not only in relation to modernity. The excavated compact stereometric monomaterial form interprets and influences in an emblematic manner the canon and many of the current architectural trends: from monomaterialist minimalism to the installationism of the land art matrix, from the aesthetics of machine to conceptual abstraction that transforms material into pure matter.

The relationship between construction and decoration is definitely broken in a manner that the latter no longer expresses the reasons of the former. The expressive aesthetic figurative value of the material takes the edge off tectonics, becoming pure language and proposing a path to architecture that, in fact, has become our present. What else should a construction show or say to be recognized as architecture both of its own time and overcoming it?



fig. 3: Bunker interior space: monumentality as result of the connection between typology and material (plan of a bunker type after a drawing by R. Rolf © 1988; photo by G. Postiglione; drawings by R. Rolf © 1988).



fig. 4: Picture of a bunker along the *Atlantik Wall* (Propaganda photo © Bundesarchiv Koblenz/D).

Therefore, comparing, for example, the towers erected by Germans on the Channel Islands and the profile of Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York (1956), we again discover a disturbing formal parallel: a narrow vertical crevice as the characterising architectural motif. But there are also other similarities to be noticed, for instance, with a large part of architecture built before the war, from Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower in Potsdam (1919-20) to Steiner's Goethenaum in Donarch (1924-28), or some typologies of great civilian architecture, like American barns celebrated by Le Corbusier himself (Le Corbusier, 1923), author, among others, of the Monastery Sante-Marie de La Tourette. Built in 1959, its northern façade presents itself like a profile of a bunker. The lateral walls of the chapel, with three openings that let light into the underground room (called by Le Corbusier "cannon lights"!), according to Colin Rowe, create a series of whirling forces, just as it is the case with bunkers' forms/forces. Bruno Zevi speaks in his history of architecture about the abandonment of classicism, about the end of the classic and rationalist era (Zevi, 1975). Therefore bunkers can be seen as a link between pre-war and post-war architecture: a sort of bridge connecting different periods of Modern Movement.

This enables the introduction of another aspect that the Atlantic Wall buildings have in common with modern architecture: the use of reinforced concrete implies indeed not only an aesthetic, but also the industrial process of a construction system.

#### **CEMENT, MONOLITHIC ARCHITECTURE AND INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION**

Reinforced concrete is the material chosen by modernist architecture. A liquid substance that, when poured into a mould, can serve to model any type of architecture and, once consolidated, is left to be viewed.

Already from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the new material seemed capable of giving a clean expression to the functional programme, of following and adapting itself to the demands of use, of being a valid alternative to iron, thought as the construction material for excellence («Rassegn», 42/1992). More than other materials concrete possessed all characteristics necessary to transform the construction process from handcraft into industry. Le Corbusier, with his search of the industrialisation of domestic architecture, appeared as a pioneer: from 1915, with the project of Maison Dom-ino, to the realisation of Unité d'Habitation in Marseille (1947-52). Even Auguste Perret, like many of his contemporaries closely related to the classical architectural tradition, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century conducted certain architectural experiments using reinforced concrete, but his research – like the ones of many others - did not entail structural issues as much as linguistic ones: he was only looking for a canon for the new material (Singelenberg, 1972).

So when planning the *Atlantik Wall* began in 1943, concrete represented a better solution for the achievement of its goals, in terms of time needed for the realisation, in terms of efficiency of the form, and in terms of economising the process of project-making. Bunkers were seen as the perfect typology for interpreting the potentiality of concrete as recognized by many modernist masters.

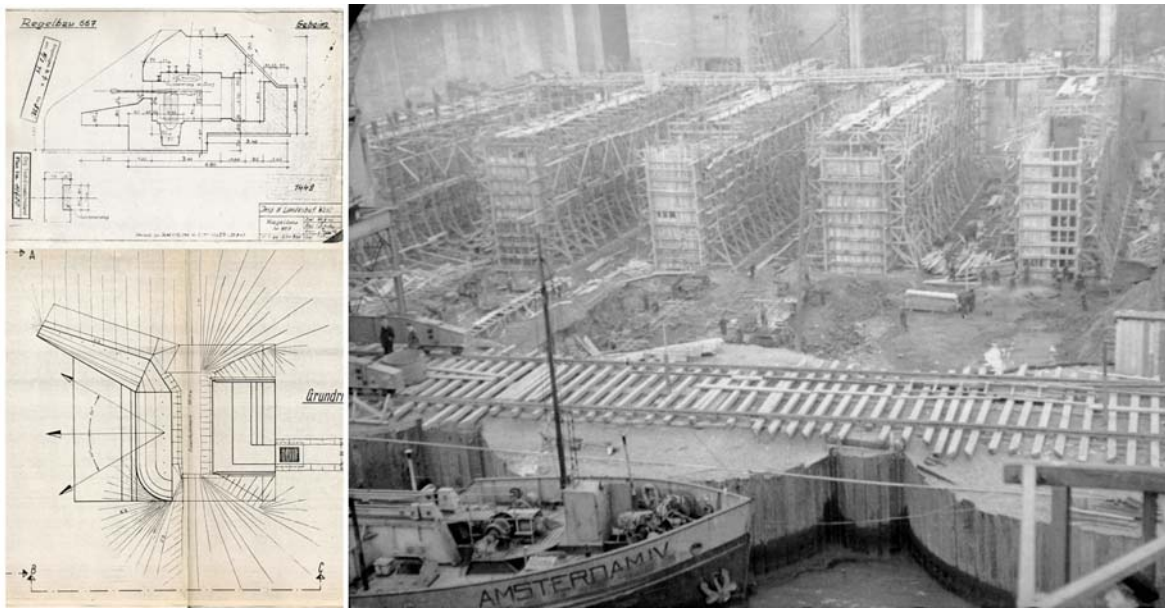


fig. 5: The construction process, from industrialization of the design to industrialization of the construction (construction drawing, orig. scale 1:50 © R. Rolf; propaganda photo © Bundesarchiv Koblenz/D).

Todt industries compiled the *Typenheft*, a catalogue of all the bunker types needed to protect the Western Front, which included structures for very diverse goals, from “Command Post” to “Ammunition bunker”, from “Anti-aircraft foxhole” to “Tobruk”, and so forth with hundreds and hundreds of different types, each of them meticulously planned into utmost detail, like an industrial product (Rolf, 1980). Similarly, in fact, to industrial world, the major control process shifted from the realisation stage to the project making: all problems were recognised and solved right there in order to avoid difficulties at the construction (De Fusco, 1996, Pirovano, 1991).

Another industrialisation linked to the first one is the construction itself, related to the identification of an individual warfare product as industrial architecture: because of the absolute correspondence of form to use, because of the elimination of all activities related to housing, and because of the rigorous productivity of the construction (the productivity related to its primary function of surveillance and protection).

## CONCLUSION

The value of the immense infrastructure, recognized as "industrial heritage" and as "architectural manufact", allows the rising of new meanings that contribute to promoting its valorisation and re-call in life. And, above all, the highlighting of Atlantic Wall remains as part of modern architecture history and heritage.

The system of military fortifications constitutes one of the greatest European cultural architectonic heritages, shared geographically, which preserve fragments of the collective memory, forming the basis for the construction of contemporary Europe.

Furthermore, we are not unaware of the embarrassing memory that lies in these buildings - a collective and mutual memory, on a European basis, not yet resolved and in certain ways postponed. It seems as though a look could rest on these objects, but only under the notion of alienated mnemonic drive: memories which remain firmly imprinted in their physical structure and geographic place.

For that reason it is also necessary to confirm that dealing with these embarrassing warfare products does not have anything to do with any sort of attempt to rehabilitate those responsible for the war or those believing in it. In fact, we would like to corroborate the idea of transforming the great Atlantic Wall into a monument bringing together true, positive and creative actions, which will enable us once and for all to transform the mourning and keep the collective memory preserved in it alive. What are monuments if not instruments that prevent people from forgetting and, at the same time, products with the task of preserving and handing down mutual collective values?

This, in fact, is the task of a monument. This is what The Atlantic Wall should be turn-into.



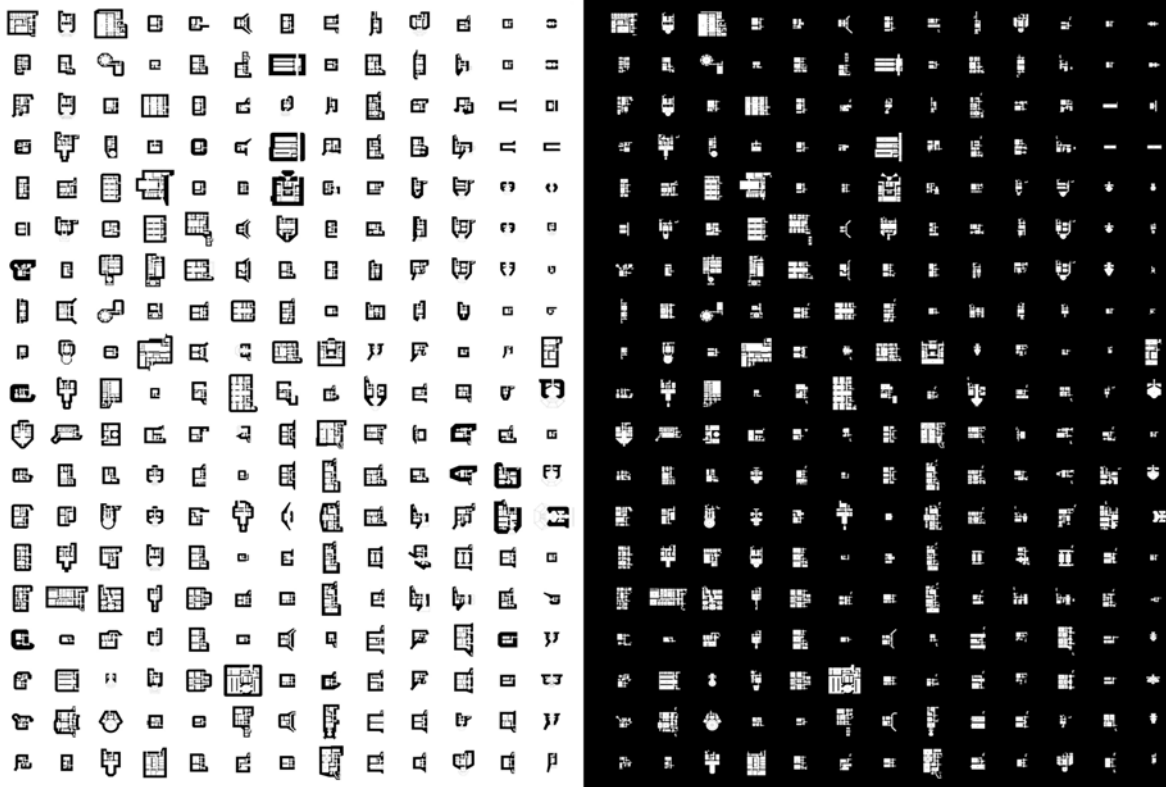


fig. 6: Typologies collection: mass vs volume (after drawings by R. Rolf © 1988).

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#### **AUTHOR CV**

Gennaro Postiglione is Associate Professor in Interior Design and Museography at The Politecnico di Milano, where he got his PhD in 1994 and where he teaches from 1998. Graduated in Napoli in 1988, he has been Visiting Scholar and Visiting Professor in Scandinavia.

His researches are focused mainly on domestic interiors, questioning relations among culture of dwelling, domestic architecture and modernity, with specific attention to Nordic countries and to dwelling culture. He is also interested in museography and in preserving and diffusing collective memory and cultural identity, connecting the museographic issues with the domestic ambit.

Museum and Home are the main subjects of his research and teaching activity. One of his recent research work is, besides "The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum", "One-hundred houses for one-hundred architects of the XX century", on architects' own houses, with the realisation of the first European network of domestic architecture of XX century ([www.meamnet.polimi.it](http://www.meamnet.polimi.it)), focusing on the value of Interiors as cultural praxis.

He is redactor of "AREA" magazine of architecture. Some of his published works are: *The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum*, Milano 2005; *Panos Koulermos, Opera completa*, Mendrisio 2004 (general ed. K. Frampton); *100 Houses*, Kolon, 2003; *Sigurd Lewerentz. Complete work*, Milano 2001/New York 2002, with C. St. Wilson; *C. Norberg-Schulz. Terre notturne* (Italian edition by G. Postiglione), Milano 2001; *Sverre Fehn. Complete work*, Milano/New York/Oslo 1997, with C. Norberg-Schulz.