

BUNKERKUNST

The Aesthetics of Violence

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Build: to form by ordering and uniting materials by gradual means into a composite whole.

Destroy: to ruin the structure, organic existence or condition of....

– From Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.

Architecture has the capacity to become a vehicle for human culture that unlike other arts exists as a continuous background of our every day lives. Sometimes, architecture ages, erodes, degrades and disappears without leaving a trace of its existence. But sometimes architecture transforms itself through external forces into a new entity, still imbued with its original cultural baggage, now augmented by its material transformation and the added fourth dimension to the original three. This characteristic is a signature of *architecture* over simple *construction*. By this definition, the German bunkers of the Atlantic Wall are by all means architecture, and their destruction into archaeological artifacts manifests a new narrative, one to be contemplated as an aesthetic in its own right even if the resulting language is a material consequence of "human energy transformed into violence." (1)

In this paper I have juxtaposed quotes taken from Paul Virilio's seminal work *Bunker Archaeology* with my own photographs of the D-Day bunkers of Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. While Virilio, whose work is of great influence in this project approaches the bunker on a macro level, i.e. as whole entities, BUNKERKUNST focuses on the close-up, the detail, and the isolated fragment. The images shown here investigate an aesthetic, a language and a condition of landscape.

Virilio explores the bunker as both a typology and as an artifact. Typologically, he sees the bunker as a repeated component of a larger infrastructure he identifies as *the fortress*, in reference to the Atlantic Wall built by the Germans and Hitler's growing concern with protecting occupied Europe from allied invasion. In terms of artifact, Virilio identifies the bunker-object as *the*

monolith: a silent scale-less object in the landscape, witness to a time and a belief system.

In terms of its intrinsic architectural qualities, bunkers can be looked at from two points of view: before they have accomplished their purpose, and after. Virilio refers to the bunkers as an expression not of themselves, but of the weapons technologies they are designed to resist. A Bunker is designed to ensure survival of its occupants, and its their intended performance; it's just that bunkers possess only one function; that of survival. This makes the bunker a fascinating study subject; it's design the ultimate expression of functionalism; its construction the most irreducible example of shelter, the *primitive hut* for an environment of high explosives. The bunker's purity is even more evident in its destruction. Its parts contain the narrative of its own demise.



Fig. 1. "The earth has lost its materialness, and the space its emptiness, everything is saturated and the ordinary problems of architecture remain, but amplified." (1)

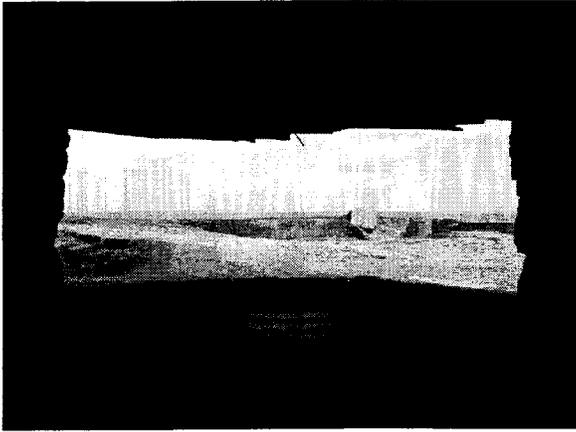


Fig. 2. "The function of this very special structure is to assure survival, to be a shelter for man in a critical period, the place where he buries himself to subsist." (1)

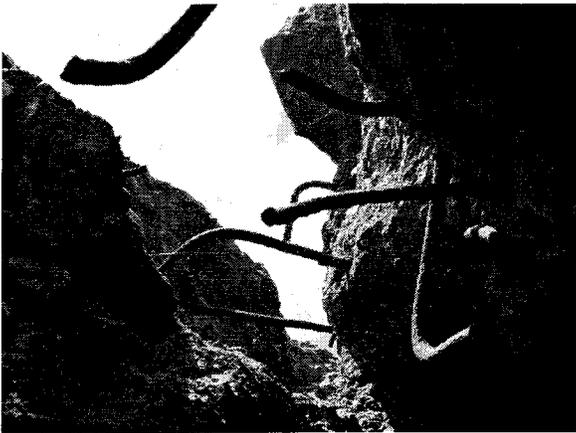


Fig. 3. "The bunker is the proto-history of an age in which the power of a single weapon is so great that no distance can protect you from it any longer." (1)

Most buildings "die" either by disappearing through total and complete demolition or by their progressive transformation and adaptive re-use. Bunkers, on the other hand, remain freeze-framed in an act of sudden violence. It is here where landscape and building blend into unity and secret spaces are revealed to the sky. The violent energy employed in the transformation of a bunker from shelter to ruin is imprinted on its materiality, which doesn't cease to exist. The transformation of the bunker from *monolith* (1) into a landscape of artifacts occurs in the way its materials behave relative to one another after destruction. The relationship between concrete and steel, seamlessly hidden in the original bunker now becomes the redefined language of the architecture, the original purpose of those materials gone with the disintegration of its form and geometric properties. Concrete and steel are transformed into events of *tension* and *compression* in all its possible permutations.

TENSION

Steel is tension. It resists being pulled on. The twisted, rusted surface represents a two-stage process of degradation. A sudden

discharge of violent energy transforms steel into an artifact of dismemberment. The material later degrades, no longer symbiotically protected by its concrete sheathing. Steel is the glue that holds concrete together. It is for this reason that when subjected to destructive energy, it retains much of its geometry while concrete tends to fracture. The steel embedded in the concrete wall is pulled apart, ungluing the *monolith* into discreet parts. The structural tension now becomes the tension of the gap, of the void. Tension still exists, just transformed from a physical tension into spatial one (Figure 4). Steel bends, twists and arches grotesquely, but maintains most of its physical integrity. We can still recognize its shape and consequently its intended function. Tension also becomes *stiffness*, the sharp jagged protrusions reminding us of the inherent aggression that fuelled the sole purpose of the *monolith's* first life (Figs 4,5,6). Time degrades steel through corrosion, making the combination of time and our natural atmosphere a pair of formidable agents of degradation much like the "atmosphere of violence" described by Virilio. Violence is followed by decrepitude, a process that mirrors human history.

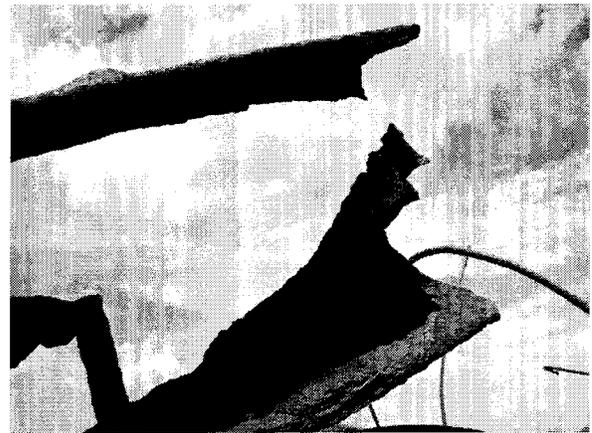


Fig. 4. "Matter only survives with difficulty in a world of continuous upheaval." (1)



Fig. 5. "All conditions for a building is disrupted by war." (1)



Fig. 6.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 10. Bomb impact on concrete roof.

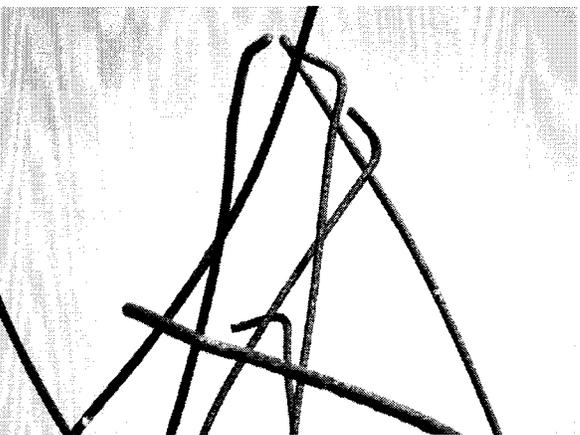


Fig. 8.

Tension in its many forms is embodied in the archaeology of violence. It expresses itself with a freeze-framed depiction of the moment in which energy was suddenly unleashed upon it.

Steel's geometry is usually defined by its section, which defines the degree of slenderness in relation to its length. It cannot resist forces perpendicular to its axis without adopting special shapes to resist non-axial forces. Steel embedded in concrete lacks this

Figs. 7,8,9,10. "The action/reaction of attack-defense is an exchange of energy that does not pertain to the human habitat, but to the locus of violence, a reduction of the physical world to that of an exchange of energies." (1)

shaping as the concrete itself resists the "shear" pressures that would easily defeat the steel. It is a true symbiotic relationship. But when that concrete is suddenly gone, the steel is easily displaced, bent, contorted; it arches upwards and bends, sways, twists following the forces that left it exposed. It is a true cinematic moment where the material's sincerity exhibits a snapshot of the moment of its demise, its language almost organic in its expression. It truly becomes the flora of the new landscape (*Figs. 7,8,9*).

COMPRESSION

Compression speaks of concrete. It's a soup of heterogeneous materials that rub against one another, combining physical friction with chemical reactions. Concrete provides density, a feature that comes in handy when trying to dissipate the energy created by a 1,000-pound gravity bomb or a 12-inch naval round. (2) Concrete is easily formed into a geometry that allows the man-made object to dissolve into the landscape. Concrete



Fig. 11. Longues bunker naval gun steel shroud



Fig. 14.

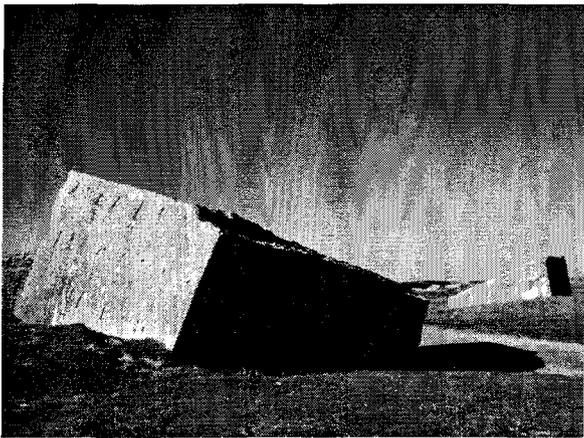


Fig. 12.

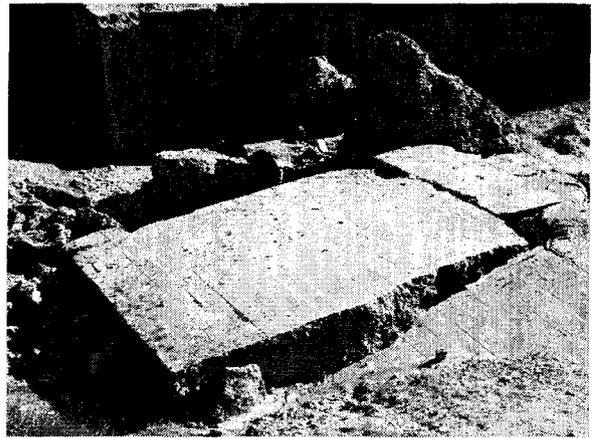


Fig. 15.

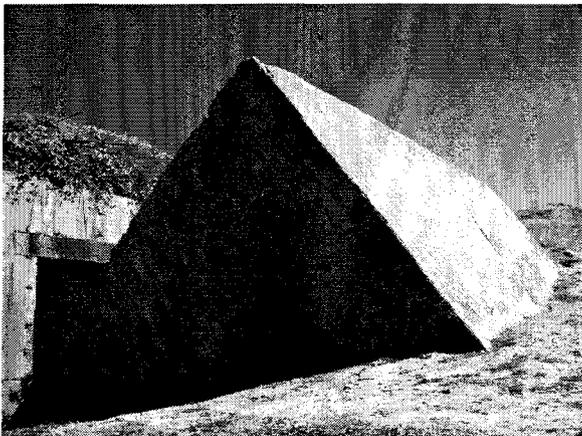


Fig. 13.

Figs. 12.13. "Space was at last homogenized, absolute war became a reality, and the Monolith was its monument." (1)

and earth become one, both in compression, both held together by gravity.

Concrete has texture. Its aggregate contains seashells, its surface striations left by wood formwork, and then infinite

Figs. 14.15. "The Monolith does not aim to survive down through the centuries; the thickness of its walls translates only the probable power of impact in the instant of assault." (1)

accidents that make up its imperfect surface. When made discontinuous by the action of sudden violence, concrete loses most of its compressive solidarity and becomes an artifact, its partner steel protruding uselessly while still reminding us of its original purpose.

The aesthetic of compression depends heavily on material continuity. When discontinuity suddenly happens, it exposes the aesthetic of the *brutal encounter*. (1) Most bunkers were destroyed from the inside out; the energy unleashed by explosives appears to dissipate when applied from the exterior. It is only when the unleashing of sudden energy occurred from within the structure that the monolith truly exploded; large multi-ton fragments hurled hundreds of feet away. Now the monolith becomes landscape, the suddenly decompressed concrete turned into inert masses, its geometric properties still visible yet redefined aesthetically (Figs.12, 13, 14, 15).

Compression as a language becomes synonymous with *tightness*. Only small, controlled voids are allowed in the

bunker's concrete mass, and the material's properties and large amounts of steel embedded within it allow the opening to be

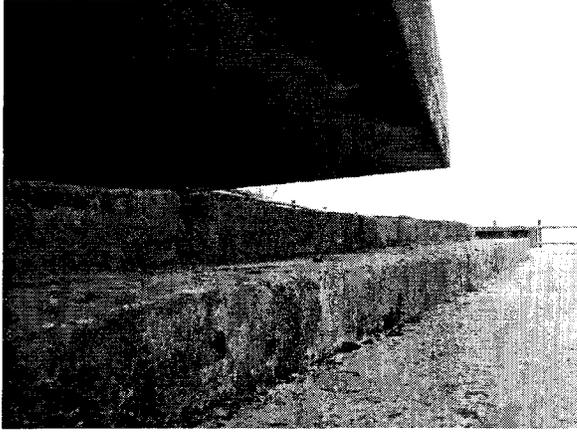


Fig. 16.

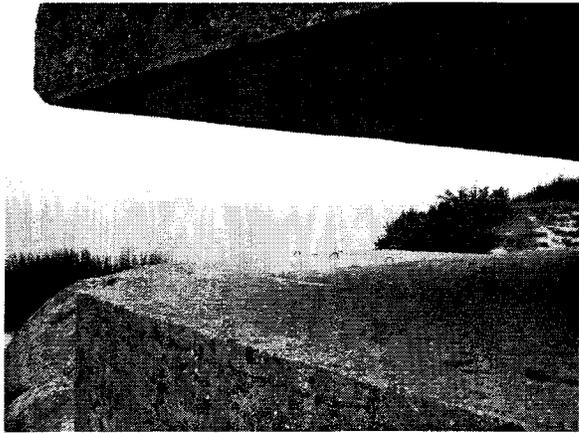


Fig. 17.

Figs. 16, 17. "Tightness became the key word of fortress builders; this was the era of the submarine, and the underground structure could efficiently protect you for a considerable depth from the omnipotence of the new arms." (1)



Fig. 18. "Protection accomplishes accuracy and accuracy in turn protects." (1)

continuous horizontal gashes that frame the horizon. These slits that are the only visual connection between the interior space and the dangerous world outside constitute the only moment where the true depth and mass of the bunker is exposed. It reads as a stone cloud defying gravity by floating above the ground just enough to prove its point. Tightness becomes synonymous with survival, and concrete is its embodiment (Figs. 14,15,16,17,18,19,20).

LANDSCAPE

Architecture can be seen as the process by which humankind modifies the surface of the Earth to fit its needs. The release of

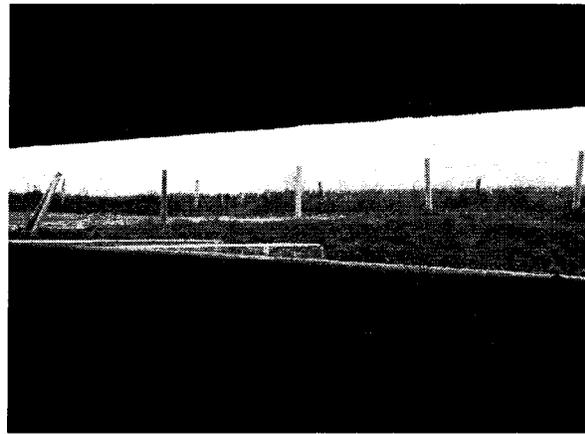


Fig. 19.



Fig. 20.

Figs. 19, 20. "Like a slightly undersized piece of clothing hampers as much as it enclothes, the reinforced concrete and steel envelope is too tight under the arms and sets you in semi-paralysis close to that of illness." (1)

violent energy is inherent to our modernity and it too reflects on the surface of the earth. The grass-covered bomb craters at Pont Du-Hoc create a "Yellow Submarine" -like topography that possesses the qualities of shadow and texture of unnatural erosion. The act of violent cut-and-fill landscape combines with the still angular 20-ton fragments of bunker material create a

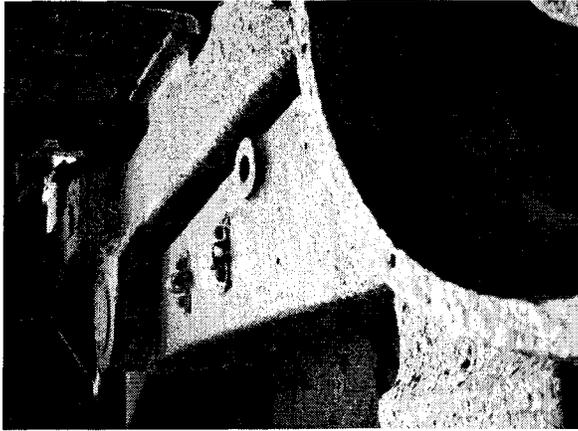


Fig. 21. "If man has no need for the machine to live in his natural environment, he needs it to live in a hostile one." (1)

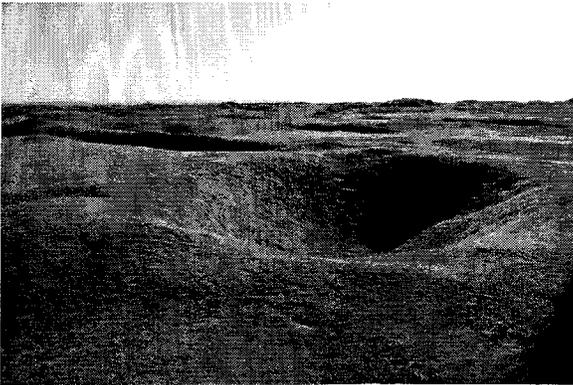


Fig. 22. "A new geography was created with the concrete shelters as its markers." (1)

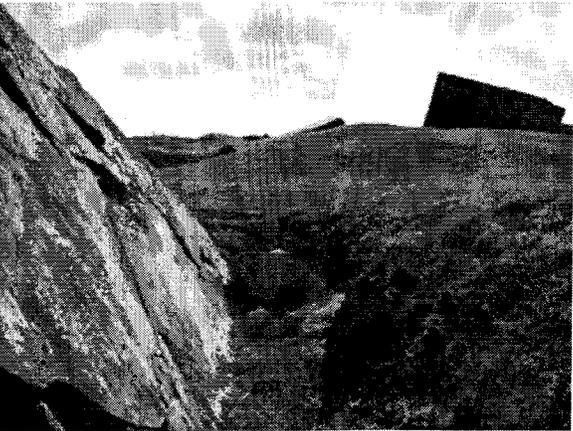


Fig. 23. "The construction of strategic and tactical infrastructures throughout the ages is in fact nothing but archaeology of the brutal encounter." (1)

unique topography: Here concrete and earth merge, blend and then separate in a vast field of artifacts who's dispersal is a direct witness of the amount of energy released in a very short amount of time. Some voids in the ground are earthen (Fig. 22) while some are man-made (Fig. 24) and their mutual existence tells a story about not having anywhere to hide. Virilio's notion (1) of three-dimensional warfare (where the only safe place is down, away from falling bombs) is clearly expressed here not by how the bunkers survived that third vector of weaponry, but by how they lost their identity as shelters from violent energy (Fig. 25).

CONCLUSION:

The eye of the camera is an external-inner eye, one that places itself between our minds and the physical world. Photography is undoubtedly an irreplaceable tool in critically observing architecture on many levels since it allows for interpretative and contemplative instances that compliment the actual experience of being there. The photographs of fragments included in this paper are seen in their own context and logic, only revealed as an interpretation of reality, only one reaction to the events of history. It does not attempt to be pure documentation, but

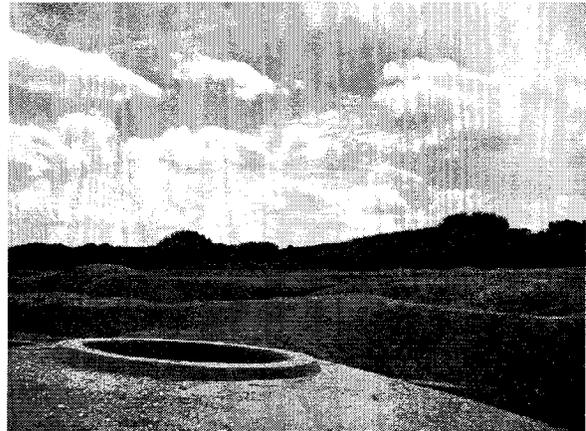


Fig. 24. "The bunker's form anticipates erosion by suppressing all superfluous forms." (1)

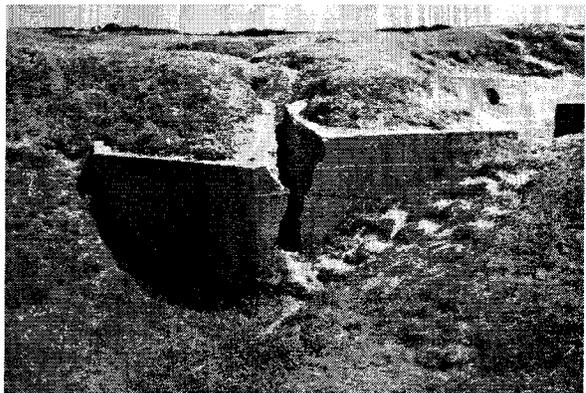


Fig. 25. "In truth, the principle of arms has always been aimed at this deconstruction, first of a man's body, of his armor, and then of the rampart built for his protection." (1)

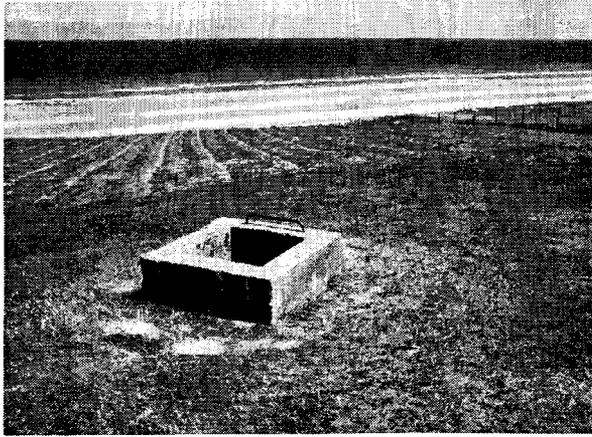


Fig. 26. "Life is haunted and filled with the idea of protection" Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (1)

rather an illustration of ideas shared with Virilio, merging critical history with pure visual communication.

My interest is evolving towards observing these dead yet eloquent structures primarily from an architectural point of view but attempting to broaden the discussion of how an *archaeology of violence* is actually born: how it can be read as a poetic, tectonic witness to violent energy unleashed upon the landscape. The afterlife of concrete and steel can be read as

landscape, as architecture, as artifact or all the above simultaneously. As materials forming a cohesive whole, they can very well be *the monolith*. Yet when juxtaposed with the vector of violence, (1) they tell a different story, one of stress (and distress).

If it's true that buildings are a reflection of a civilization, it's accomplishments and aspirations, it may then also be true that their destruction is a reflection of a civilization's contradictions and doubts. Virilio sustains that the moment the Germans decided to fortify defensively instead of continuing their *blitzkrieg*, they lost the war. The bunker tells the story of how total war required essential shelter. Where violence intersects concrete and steel, *bunkerkunst*, architecture as art in its purist, naked form becomes the new landscape of that encounter.

FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY:

¹ "Bunker Archaeology". Paul Virilio, *Les editions du Demi-Cercle* 1991

² "The D.Day Landing Beaches". Georges Bernage. *Heimdal publishers*.

PHOTOGRAPHY:

All photographs are by the author.