My first reaction to Stephen Graham’s new book, *Cities Under Siege*, was a feeling of puzzlement: why would a book on military urbanism have a cover picture of what appears to be Hiroshima after it was levelled by the American nuclear attack? Doesn’t a depiction of a city, laid waste by the indiscriminate destruction of a nuclear bomb, stand at-odds with much of Graham’s work on new practices of purposefully-discriminate and technologically-driven control? Is this an errant publishers decision, or perhaps an esoteric clue? I’ll return to these thoughts in a moment.

Readers familiar with the work of Stephen Graham will not be surprised when they read *Cities Under Siege*: predictably, they’ll find another well written text that details advancements in the “new military urbanism”, where the “world’s burgeoning cities are the key sites” for the new wars of the post-Cold war era (p. 16). After the book opens immediately with an examination of colonial and imperial legacies - and the fixity of urban control in the fantasies of various world powers - readers might wonder: what exactly is ‘new’ about the new military urbanism? The question is not lost on Graham. He underlines that military ideologies of boundless and permanent war are not newly innovative, arguing that we are experiencing a contemporary twist to these formations. Transformations associated with the new military urbanism “merely extend and revivify the urban militarization, securitization, Manichaean thinking, and war mongering that were central features of, notably, the Cold War but also of earlier wars” (p. 60). Chapter Three, under the title, The New Military Urbanism, outlines seven related characteristics to define the “new” trends in the contemporary militarization of urban life.

For readers of *Surveillance and Society*, Graham offers a bounty of material and analysis that speaks to surveillant practices and rationalities in the militarization of urban life. Exploring the intersections between surveillance, geography, and security, Graham stresses that the new military urbanism is at once a set of presumptions about a “world where civilians do not exist” (Appadurai, 2006:31), while also a condition where bodies and populations are under constant scrutiny. For Graham, new military urbanism functions through surveillant capillaries where “the extension of military ideas of tracking, identification and targeting [seep] into the quotidian spaces and circulations of everyday life” (XI).

*Cities Under Siege* includes three thematic chapters and seven subsequent case studies that explore elements of urban militarization. The book’s three first chapters are collectively positioned to offer a coherent account of new trends in military urbanism. Graham describes a Manichaean world of good/evil, where distinctions between civil and military spheres, defence and aggression, or the inside and outside of empire, are increasingly blurred. True to an Orientalist lens that views urban landscapes of the Global South as sprawling spaces of insecurity and risk, Graham underlines how Western urban spaces (particularly within America) are also increasingly subject to control and surveillance. Graham uses...
Foucault’s (2003: 103) notion of the “boomerang effect” to describe how experimentation with technologies of control in the outlying peripheries of empire are subsequently re-deployed in domestic urban environments, often accompanied by parallel illusions of insecurity, risk and ‘otherness’ which define the imagined geographies of empire. Graham underlines this point by detailing how the discursive use of “homeland” has created a culture where the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of U.S. cities are ridiculed and derided by a dominant culture that increasingly identifies with suburban “American dream” aspirations and Wonder Years-type nostalgia (79-83). Graham underscores how wealthy cities are at the heart of neoliberal capitalism, coordinating (and profiting) from the “urbicidal” violence, which “deliberately targets the city geographies of the Global South to sustain capital accumulation” (xxix).

Case studies underscore the relation between the new military urbanism and trends in imperial and domestic frontiers. While most of the case studies have been detailed in some of Graham’s previous publications, they have been fine tuned and updated. Chapter Five presents new empirical content, offering a chilling analysis of U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Israeli (although that is expanded upon in Chapter Six) dreams of robotic warfare and advancements in military operations on urban terrain (MOUT). Grounded in visions of launching a “new Manhattan Project” (163), these efforts aim to develop a “massive, integrated, world-spanning system of surveillance that would be tailored to penetrating the increasingly complexity and mobility of urban life” (163). Focussing mostly on the techno-fantasies of the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Graham details emerging technologies from the project entitled “Combat Zones that See”, to surveillance drones, as well as remotely controlled ground robots named SWORDS.

The release of Cities Under Siege also benefits from good timing, corresponding with a wave of urban social movements - and repressive government responses – that illustrate the extent to which militarized regimes of practice are mobilized against urban populations. From the Arab spring uprisings, to Occupy Wall Street movements, and the various mobilizations against European austerity measures, contemporary examples of the new military urbanism are abound. Of course, recent media focus on these conflicts reveal practices that remain commonplace and continuous in the spaces of occupation and empire – as residents of Baghdad, Gaza, Rangoon, Belfast, Akwesasne, etc., could attest.

Thoroughly exposing the contemporary battlefield of urban domination, Graham offers a somewhat gratuitous ‘resistance’ chapter – he uses the terms counterpolitics and countergeographies – as a conclusion. Offering an assortment of artistic events, efforts at culture jamming, and social movements that “mobilize radical concepts of security” (150), Graham suggests these collections can serve to contest and disrupt the circuits and logics of the new military urbanism. He writes, “The architectures and discourses which sustain the new military urbanism must be countered in the crucial realms of public discourse and public spectacle, which, in an urban setting, can take advantage of the presence of transnational media” (349). In contrast to the pervasiveness of militarized urban life, Graham recognizes these examples are merely “scattered and ephemeral” islands of contestation within a dominant culture that is saturated by technologies of violence and control. Indeed, Graham frequently revisits implications of the West’s culture of militarism. He notes that the diffusion and commonstance of militarization has become deeply embedded and embraced in contemporary culture, warning of the “colonization of urban thinking and practice by militarize ideas of ‘security’” (xxxii) and the “deepening militarization of all aspects of contemporary urban societies” (296). Yet, while offering some insightful starting points for contesting urban militarization, Cities Under Siege is better described as a catalogue of contemporary practices of control and domination.

Which brings me back to the cover image of an urban wasteland, levelled by a nuclear bomb. While Graham spends much of the text examining complex and intricate technologies of control, the logic of militarization clearly cannot exist separately from notions of social defence, otherness, and destruction. Enemies are not entities to be controlled – nor are they to be reformed – and, in the era of “full spectrum domination”, military fantasies of aggression have become ever-more extensive and limitless. In this sense, military colonization of urban life points towards a logic where enemies are to be destroyed and,
when these enemies are demonized as subhuman or outside humanity, this destruction aims towards are apparent endgame: elimination. Therefore, one would conclude that the militarized city is one that is increasingly approaching its own destruction.

For Graham, the hope for contesting this outcome rests largely in the Global North. Creating solidarity between global peoples to confront war-mongering and other manifestations of dominant culture could serve to disrupt binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and create empathy in a world that is increasingly antithetical to ideals of coexistence. Of course, contesting militarization is no newer that the ‘new’ urban militarism. Several post-war generations have confronted the realities of global politics through the lens of binary conflicts, while witnessing the expansion of dominant cultures that ignore the violence and rapacity that accompanies efforts to maintain (and expand) gluttonous consumer lifestyles. Instead of cultures with more empathy, we have a dominant culture that is increasingly more militaristic, more destructive, and more wasteful. Cities Under Siege demonstrates, above all else, how successive generations – to paraphrase Debord – have had the opportunity to choose between love and a garbage can, and have everywhere chosen a garbage can.

References