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Die Hard (US, 1988 – Twentieth Century Fox)

Director: John McTiernan

Die Hard: easily one of the best architectural films of the last 25 years of the Twentieth century. The majority of the film's interest comes through its depiction of architectural space. John McClane, a New York cop on his Christmas vacation, moves through a Los Angeles high-rise in basically every conceivable way *but* passing through its doors and hallways.

McClane explores the tower—called Nakatomi Plaza—via elevator shafts and air ducts, crashing through windows from the outside-in and shooting open the locks of rooftop doorways. If there is not a corridor, he makes one; if there is not an opening, there will be soon.

Over the course of the film, McClane blows up whole sections of the building; he stops elevators between floors; and he otherwise explores the internal spaces of Nakatomi Plaza in acts of virtuoso navigation that were neither imagined nor physically planned for by the architects. His is an infrastructure of nearly uninhibited movement *within* the material structure of the building.

The film could perhaps have been subtitled "lessons in the inappropriate use of architecture," were that not deliberately pretentious. But even the SWAT team members who unsuccessfully raid the structure come at it along indirect routes, marching through the landscaped rose garden on the building's perimeter, and the terrorists who seize control of Nakatomi Plaza in the first place do so after arriving through the service entrance of an underground car park.

What is interesting about *Die Hard*—in addition to unironically enjoying the film—is that it cinematically depicts what it means to bend space to your own particular navigational needs. This mutational exploration of architecture even supplies the building's narrative premise: the terrorists are there for no other reason than to drill through and rob the Nakatomi Corporation's electromagnetically sealed vault.

Die Hard asks naive but powerful questions: If you have to get from A to

B—that is, from the 31st floor to the lobby, or from the 26th floor to the roof—why not blast, carve, shoot, lockpick, and climb your way there, hitchhiking rides atop elevator cars and meandering through the labyrinthine, previously unexposed back-corridors of the built environment? Why not personally infest the spaces around you? (Too bad that *Die Hard*'s spatial premise has not been repeated on a much larger urban scale in *Die Hard 2* and the other sequels.

An alternative-history plot for a much better *Die Hard 2* could thus perhaps include a scene in which the rescuing squad of John McClane-led police officers *does not even know what building they are in*, a suitably bewildering encapsulation of this method of moving undetected through the city.

Indeed, recent films like *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Casino Royale*, *District 13*, and many others could be viewed precisely as the urban-scale realization of *Die Hard*'s architectural scenario. Even *The Bank Job* — indeed, any bank heist film at all involving tunnels—makes this special approach to city space quite explicit. [raiding the Nakatomi Building by way of lateral movements across the surrounding landscape].

Or think of the urban differences between the Jason Bourne and James Bond film franchises. There's no travel in the new Bond; there are simply establishing shots of exotic destinations. By the end of a Bond film, you simply feel like you are in the international late-capitalist non-lieu (non-place), "a geography with neither landmarks nor personal memory" (Marc Augé).

Compare the paradoxically unmoving, amnesiac geography of James Bond, then, to the compressed spaces of Paul Greengrass-directed Jason Bourne films. These films are "set in Schengen", a connected, borderless Mitteleurope that can be hacked and accessed and traversed—not without effort, but with determination, stolen vehicles and the right train timetables. Bourne wraps cities, autobahns, ferries and train terminuses around him as the ultimate body-armor.

Rather than Bond's private infrastructure of expensive cars and toys, Bourne uses public infrastructure as a superpower. A battered watch and

an accurate U-Bahn time-table are all he needs for a perfectly-timed, death-defying evasion of the authorities.

The space of the city is used in profoundly different ways by Bond and Bourne—but to this duality we must add John McClane of the original *Die Hard*.

If Jason Bourne's actions make visible the infrastructure-rich, borderless world of the EU, then John McClane shows us a new type of architectural space altogether—one that we might call, channeling topology, *Nakatomi space*, wherein buildings reveal near-infinite interiors, capable of being traversed through all manner of non-architectural means. In all three cases, though—with Bond, Bourne, and McClane—it is Hollywood action films that reveal to us something very important about how cities can be known, used, and navigated: these films are filled with the improvisational crossroutes that constitute what the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman calls *Lethal Theory*.

Treated as an *architectural premise*, *Die Hard* becomes an exhilarating catalog of unorthodox movements through space. Where the various *Die Hard* sequels went wrong was in abandoning this spatial investigation—one that could very easily have been scaled-up to encompass a city—and following, instead, the life of one character: John McClane. But, when taken out of Nakatomi Plaza—that is, out of the boundless, oceanic fluidity of Nakatomi space—McClane is reduced to an action film cliché whose failing charisma no amount of wise-cracking can salvage.