Boundaries in the Urban Landscape

Alternatives to walled developments through community strengthening and the use of liminal boundaries.



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Introduction

I personaly recall my first conscious experience of boundaries as a frustating restriction of my liberty: When I was a child I used to live in a low-income though safe Swiss neigborhood filled with mid-rise apartment buildings. The network of my friends consisted of people from my class and our territory was the ground floor in between buildings. But this territory was not a continuous open space: every plot of one or several buildings was fenced for no apparent reasons and some of my friend were left on the other side, thus seriously complicating our interactions outside of the school. So the decision was spontaneously taken to dismantle the fences by ourselves in the sections that were the most strategic for our respective circulations. As every sensible adult would expect we did not have to wait long until our parents, motivated by the solenal letter that they received from the real estate agency, reluctantly put an end to our noble and misunderstood endeavour. In the following years the case repeated itself, probably by the schemes of other networks of young criminals, but the fence was always fixed.

These events surfaced in my life while I was visiting a resettlement site in the outskirts of Metro Manilla. On the other side of a thick concrete wall separating the new relocation site from the adjacent slums. There I saw a young girl waiting for us to leave before regaining her new playground as I saw myself, fifteen years ago, pliers in the hands. Apparently the naïve but pristine world of children has something against walls.

This essay is an attempt for a better understading of the boundaries of various forms that are present in the urban landscape. After discussing the place that boundaries take in our daily life and the reasons of such presence I will try to identify the troubles or potentialities that they may cause, with a focus on gated communities, in order to give some possible architectural solutions, especially in the case of developing countries such as the Phillipines.

The conception of boundaries

mind process, passive

Such as our perception of time is divided in different intervals by events, our perception of space is intimately connected to the notion of boundary. Moreover the act of delimitating, sorting and ordering is an essential part of human culture (Pellow, 1996). Through ages it has been a tool for a better comprehension of the sourroundings from the Aristotelician classifications to the French enlightment Encyclopedia and to the core of modern sciences. Thus, as architects, when we talk about different scales and hierarchies we subconsciously refer ourselves to a whole set of various boundaries dividing and ordering our space. As a result the thinking of space per se is bound to the one of boundaries.

Power and identification, active

Nevertheless dividing is not only a passive activity of understading but also and mostly an active activity of appropriation, and power. As Feliciani (1997) remarks defining his territory is a primary human need that goes with the mental projection of the concept of property and its revendication and protection. Here we can comment that setting a sensible property boundary could be both for making it clear to the others but also for reminding it to onself for various purposes such as organisation or identification.

As he further develops, delimitating is neither just about the strict application of a jurisdiction but also about giving a quality, a meaning, to the circumscribed area. For instance you can have further subdivisions in your garden for planting, for playing or relaxing even if the property of the whole garden is yours.

Here we touch to the theme of how a person or a group of people is involved in the production of a meaningful environment. The contribution of anthropologist

2

as well as sociologists is that of the understanding of that the meaning is socially constructed through culture (Mitchell 2005). And that is maybe why the inexperienced and spontaneous mind of the child cannot really process boundaries as the adults do. This also entails that different people can have a different reading and interpretation of boundaries according to the way they behave with their fellow beings.

To a further extent boundaries are political in the sense that they are "tied to the creation, maintenance, transformation, and definition of societal relations and behaviours" for finally "freezing a particular state of the social struggle" (Pellow 1996). Because the world is full of different cultures the way social relations have stabilized in the built environment are different and not all the landscapes are equal in terms of continuity. If you need to prove it to yourself just draw a random line on a map of a Swedish forest and an other on the Metro Manilla conglomeration and survey how much your actual promenade will move away from the line. Then carry out the same experiment but between a Swedish, a Swiss and a Phillipino middle rise neigborhood. Differences will still be noticed.

Classification of boundaries

Eventually it is really difficult to render the complex relations we maintain with boundaries. In order to demystify them, divisions can be made in the ontology and the purpose of them. Lawrence (1997) proposes to sort boundaries as such: First there are physical and symbolic boundaries. Physical boundaries can achieve to oppose a resistance to forces: walls, rivers, highways, etc., whereas symbolic boundaries just act as a delimitation that notify a change. This section is really broad and can include the use of a certain material for a neighbourhood to the use of a sign or even the smell of a place can act as a boundary. Secondly a distinction can be made between legal and administrative boundaries. Legal boundaries serve to define the extent of one's possession and rights and administrative boundaries are related to the management and control of an area. Of course a boundary can serve more than one purpose.

We could also discuss if the boundary is human made or not and if the effect of bounding is wanted or a result of the existing conditions but this drifts from the subject. With these theoretical considerations, we are now better equipped to dive into the subject.

Gated communities: origins and consequences

For Lawrence (1996) boundaries are tied up with the mediation of interest between the private, the collective and the public. A well known issue when it comes to collective or public shared goods is what Hardin (1968) called the tragedy of the commons, namely the over exploitation of shared ressources by some, thus jeopardizing the whole stability and sustainability of the group. As a result, through ages and countries, different policies have been implemented to regulate the use of space which is, as not enough reminded, a shared good.

Pubic and private land policy

Some countries have since a long time ago emphasized the importance of a strong state in terms of planning for insuring a fair use of space that does not forget the interests and rights of the weakest. (European countries for instance but not only). Some others, willingly or not, have exercised a much more liberal, private oriented policy thus enabling the interests of the strongest to prevail. This has shaped sensibly different landscapes than what we are used in Europe. In *Beyond Manila: walls, malls, and private spaces* Connell (1999) gives us an insight:

"Suburbanisation in the extended metropolitan area of Manila has produced new middle-class consumer landscapes of exclusive suburbs, alongside tower blocks, offices, residential estates, shopping malls, and golf courses, linked by freeways and flyovers. Economic growth, the emergence of a new and mobile middle class, and the lack of public planning have emphasised individualism and privatisation. Enclosed homogeneous suburbs, designed and marketed as fragments of Europe in a global era, enhance security, exclusivity, and isolation. Suburban village associations regulate community life through private legal regimes and strengthen class divisions. Malls and freeways are further forms of privatisation and social segregation as the city has become more fragmented and divided whilst public space diminishes. Social divisions are particularly acute in cities like Manila where uneven development is considerable, the public sector is weak, and metropolitan government is absent".

As mentionned a symptomatic feature in these discontinuous landscapes is the gated community. In such countries living in gated communities is not only seen as a trend but is strongly engraved in the mentalities as a reflex and this applies both for private developpers and the population. More suprinsigly, in the Manilan context, this applies for every social class from the highest income to the slum relocation recipients. It is time to look at the reasons for such a phenomenon.

Interest of the profesionals and the residents

Even if the term gated community focuses discussions and debates¹ because of the implemented features that can be more or less stressed, 4 differents categories are often highlighted (wikipedia) :

-	Life-style	for	sharing amenities
-	Prestige		status appeal
-	Physical security		crime and trafficprevention.
-	Purpose-designed communiti	es	(e.g. workers compound)

It has to be mentionned that these categories are not exclusive and that many projects take their strength from the combination of different characteristics as Libertun de Duren (2005) indicates:

"This new concept of housing articulates five basic elements: security, seclusion, social homogeneity, amenities, and services. The image that confers the highest status (and is the most seductive) is that of an enclosed, fortified, and isolated residence, a secure environment in which one can use various facilities and services while living exclusively among equals."

Thereby he considers the building of gated communities projects as an "Effective real estate strategy targeting middle income houselholds". This is even more accurate in developing countries where people still live with a strong opposition Western / developing countries in their minds and crave for a western standard of living experience up to the hype. Developers are well aware of this

¹ Sometimes the term subdivision is prefered, especially in the Phillipines. Varies from one country to another.

and even play with it by systematically branding their products with western inspired names and visuals.

Moreover, to pursue the thinking from the developers point of view, it is easier to separate one development from the others for managing and administrative purposes. For the architect it is also more convenient to build a wall and start designing with no context, on the basis of tried and tested typologies instead of trying to connect the development with its surroundings by subtle articulations.

As earlier mentioned the gated community is kin to the American condominium which principle is to group people in a community so that they can financially afford amenities or services that they could not alone, e.g. a swimming pool, a gym, a maid service. But in the Phillipines and more generally in developing countries, where the private sector overpowers a state that is not able to provide all its citizen with basic needs, these amenities can be really essential. For instance people would have to buy in a subdivision to afford running water, electricity, some vegetation or public spaces that the government fails to provide. We can thus understand why the trend has also grown among the low-income classes: gated communities are seen as a way to live in decent conditions. Security is of course part of these needs and for all social classes, but we will come back on this later.

Furthermore, unlike Europeans, Phillipinos rather place their trust in the hands of the private sector than on the ones of the states. The population has learned to get by by itself and see stability in the economy, profit based as a proof of responsibility, rather than in the state tainted by political scandals and corruption among successive failures. The development of gated communities and business improvement districts such as Makati or Bonifacio Global City in Metro Manila are symptomatic of these structural issues. The highest classes and investors do not want to risk their money on dangerously instable markets and thus prefer the apparent stability that the private sector offers.

An other interesting point was raised by Blakely and Snyder (1998) arguing that when people largely disagree with the government or feel a lack of power over their own lives, they are likely to attempt to scale down their community in

6

order to go out of the anonymity. This can be particulary true in the United States where the grid laid over the whole territory as a symbol of democracy homogenize and anonymize the space. But this problem is not particulary present in the Phillipines. The will of scaling down the community could rather have to do with security and mutual help opportunities.

The negative consequences of gated communities

Even if the spread of walled communities can be understood in the Phillipino context, it has to be underscored that the situation lays troubles, both for this generation and the next ones.

Mitchell (2005) ironically compares a resident of one of these communities with a topologist that, for protecting himself from a lion, decides to build a cage around him and then reverse the world. The obvious paradox is that the protection process is often a self exclusion process. But living in such a community is rarely autarkic because it only consists in housing; people are highly dependent on the outside for working, goods supply and almost every action of life but sleeping. This is what made Libertun de Duren (2012) rename this dystopian vision a "Dormitory community". Lawrence (2016) goes even further by disputing the term "community" arguing that people usually just live close to each other but benefit from no social aspect of the community and neither are interested in interactions between members. In the end we are just left with a Dormitory.

This results of course in empty streets where no life happens: the opposite of what architects and most of the people are dreaming of and in the Phillipino context, a serious cut in the street business, the source of income of the poorests. Furthermore it is often the low - middle classes that use the public spaces because they do not have that space in their private garden. By privatizing and excluding them from the only space where they could interact and participate, the society send them a terrible proof of non acceptance and exclusion.

Blakely & Snyder (1998) were particulary critical against gated communities highlighting the selfishness of their resident that close the eyes to the more global problem and search for individual solutions instead. The charge is also to put on the developers that by not only trying to provide housing but a whole bundle of extra services which could be done more publically enforces their libertarian

vision of the society. This overtake by the private sector that is leads to a vicious circle where people always trust the government less, which is the one working for the public good and not personal profit (Libertun de Duren 2005).

On the theme of security, which seems to be the main concern of many gated community dwellers, many have denounced the lack of efficiency of the measures because of the sudden lack of vigilance induced by a relative feeling of safety, the inevitable flow of external workers inside of the community (Blakely & Snyder 1998) and the appealing "treasure chest" image it gives from the outside for potential burglars. Gated community dwellers are thus stigmatized as gainful prey by malicious beings acting either inside the walls or just on the other side where their actions are blinded by this very wall.

Moreover on a global level gated communities are blamed for sending a negative securitarian image and therefore take part in the increase of societal fear. This may sound like a paradox but the feeling of security viciously decrease with the increasing number of visual defensive methods as Low (2001) remarks. What she further condemns is the effect on children that living in an excluding system has. The lack of various social interaction and the promotion of the fear of the other can be destructive for a sane development of the child and lead him to a paranoid existence. This burden will then be an inherited from one generation to the following towards always more fear.

Here I do not abnegate that the Fillipino context is objectively more violent and dangerous than some others European countries but I rather acknowledge the importance of other factors in the construction of fear. Moreover it is really hard to say wheter it is the feeling of insecurity that leads to walls or walls that lead to a feeling of insecurity because these two phenomena are bound and coexist. Anyway this shows that there is a critical need to break the vicious circle with fear. But unfortunately it has always been a lucrative market for private businesses such as gated communities developers, surveillance companies or sensation oriented media and these powerful actors are not likely to help at the task.

Opportunities of gated communities

After all the bad that has been said it is important to mention that some authors also found positive aspects in the trend of gated communities when implemented in less favoured areas. Besides enabling the access to amenities for some people that could not afford it by themselves, Webster (2005) raised the issue that it has the virtue of spatially bringing different income classes closer which results in job opportunities for the poorest and increase of tax income for the local government that can later be reassigned for community projects. In developing countries the local government and public authorities can not always keep up with the challenges because of lack of funds and experienced employees. For sure a raise in their means will help.

Eventually we can cite four good points in it: " improvement of quality of life in the zone, better job opportunities, diminished social stigma of living in a poor district, and an increase in the value of their land" (Libertun de Duren 2005). There we can see that these benefits have to do with density and social diversity which are two concepts praise by most of the architects. All around the world the challenge is to mediate this density with privacy and to negotiate social diversity with security. Unfortunately in developing countries, where inequalities are pushed to the extremes, the implemented diplomatic artefact is more than often the wall.

Planning without walls

As the previous chapter pointed out the reasons behind the creation of gated communities and the construction of walls are numerous and diverse. While nobody is really opposed to the creation of communities, the critiques mainly focus on the gatedness or walls that not only act as excluding physical boundaries but also send a message of societal failure.

The purpose of this chapter is not to defend a complete accessibility of every space because privacy is needed at many different levels of the society but rather to discuss alternatives to walls at the level of the streets in order to regain a proper interaction oriented public space. The extent of what is shared has to be thought accordingly to the scale between the private, the communal and the public and this

could be really different for different cultures. The theoretical considerations we raised in the first chapter on boundaries have opened the door to other directions and shown that some similar issues of divisions and identifications of space are addressed by symbolic boundaries.

In the context of the Phillipines the resolution of the wall issue hinges definitely around the feeling of security. The apparatus status that gates can offer is in my opinion not strong enough to set the whole walls trend and could easily be replaced by the use of expensive building materials for instance if the only goal was to show wealth. The two approaches that I will discuss address the security issue by either working on the people through community strenghtening and managing or working on the physical environment. The two approaches should of course be implemented together for the best results.

The community

The fact of reinforcing the bond between individuals sharing a space could be profitable on several levels: It would help in the maintenance of the space by preventing the everyone's job, no one's responsibility issue (Newman 1976). It would also increase the feeling of safety by reducing the anonymity and the lack of knowing one's neighbors because people are less likely to act maliciously around people that they know and who know them and are less likely to be afraid of someone they have made the acquaintance of than of a stranger.

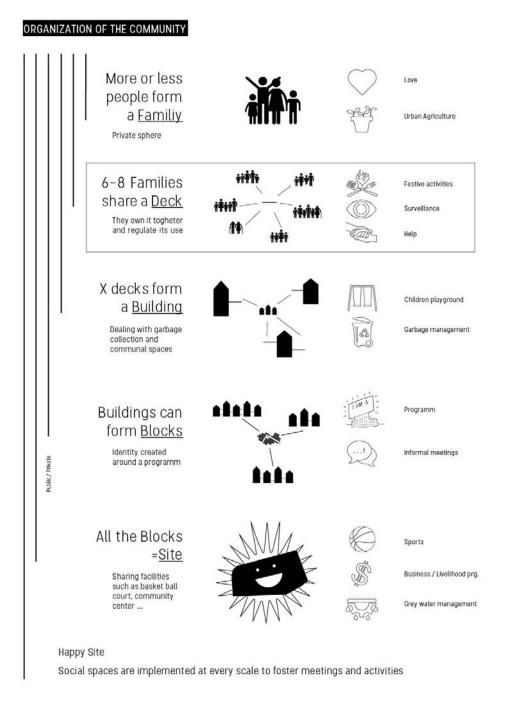
But this has of course a lot to do with the scale of these groups of people and different strategies can and should be implemented at different scales or better at every scale from the family to the whole site. The increased feeling of belonging to a group would strengthen the confidence of the individuals as I recall the testimony of a husband in a relocation project in Quezon city "We feel safe when we are in group with my family. Not when we are alone".

It is not whitout a reason that the filipino political system includes a smaller entity under the municipality: the barangay. This is a proof that there is a need for scaling down the management as a reaction to dense and precarious living conditions.

The sense of the community can be fostered around many various things from maintenance to education to leisure activities. For instance in Saint Hannibal upgrading project in Pasay City, the dwellers were all asked to have at least five plants on their outside corridor. While enhancing the quality of the place by providing shade and natural features this initiative also contributed in the creation of the identity of the place. In other projects this bond could be tied by a urban farming group or by a self help building process or by a livelihood programme or by artistic activities or by maintenance routine or even by the use of a certain material for the façade and personalization and so on. Some of these have the property to be visual features and thus act as a reminder of the belonging to the area and of its rights on it. At the same time it will also liminaly convey an image of a strong knit community and, thus, keep strangers away. This is what, together with other visible element such as change of materiality, signs or thresholds and so on, are called liminal boundaries. The goal is to show the spatial extent of a certain administration, management whitout requiring walls. Nevertheless it can be argued that identity always goes with a certain degree of segregation. That is why it has to be done at a responsible scale and with an acute intensity dealt with buffering zones.

In a project developed as part of the design course of Urban Shelter in Lund, I was part of a group that developed the idea to connect buildings by exterior decks privately owned by a group constituted of six to eight families. This was an attempt to create an intermediate scale between the one of the family and the one of the building by giving a shared space which use has to be determined the coownership of it. This could offer a stronger relationship between neighbors by and facilitate initiatives and collaborations. Moreover the incidence of this design criteria on the built form will give a recognizable character to the whole area and thus increase the feeling of belonging by its residents while deterring casual intruders by giving them the impression that their presence requires justification (Newman 1976).

For the solution the last exemple or some of the others it has to be highlighted that it often requires a certain amount of space, specifically dedicated or not, to happen. The process of territorialisation is indeed induced not exclusively but notably by the use of the materiality (Kärrholm 2006). Therefore it has to be tought by or with the architect since the beginning of the proposal for allowing the knitting process to happen or not.



Organization of the community, Urban shelter design project, Julien Tacca (author)

The physical environment

A major contributor to the theme of security in dense housing projects is Oscar Newman (1976) who patiently gathered an impressive amount of data on where crimes occurred in american housing blocks. Using a comparative method on different areas he could argue that architecture, by how it physically is built, is linked to security and can, in some contexts, foster or prevent criminal behaviours. His theory hinges around the themes of surveillance and creating herarchy of space.

According to him four important factors have to be taken into account for assessing the capacity of a neighborhood to convey the image of a social fabric that defends itself. These factors are the capacity of the environment to create perceived zoned of territorial influence (visible boundaries), to provide surveillance opportunities (windows, balconies, people using space), to influence the perception of the project as being unique and the influence geographical juxtaposition with safe zone (such as schools, police station, ...) (Newman 1976). These parameters are liminal in the sense that they are made sensible for both the residents and the intruders, to reassure the first and query the second. He further insist on the simportance of subdivinding a high density project in portions on which the sphere of influence of the occupants is made perceptible. This could be done by the former proposal of shared decks. As earlier mentioned it is clear that all of these parameters have to do with the physical design of the area.

To extrapolate the thinking an open, wall-free fortress should feature the virtue of both the Panopticon and the Labyrinth. The first was used for the design of prisons because of the viewing opportunities it confers and the second has the advantage to make the circulation uneasy for strangers that are kept out of the understanding of the logic of the plan of the neighborhood. In South America favelas are renown because such complexity that let the intruder with no escape plan and thus empowers the locals. Thus the topology of space and the space syntax can be a powerful tool for enabling privacy and security

Reflexion on the case of Parque Santo Amaro V

To underpin my argument I would like the discuss the case of a rather unsuccessful 2012 project by the renown practise Vigliecca and Associados. Located in a slum area of Sao Paulo, the intervention had the noble goal to enhance the living conditions of not only the beneficial owner of the upgrading but also the whole area by providing public green spaces and sport/educational facilities. After three years of functioning though unanimously grateful for the improvement the owners took the decision to lock the area into walls because of nuisance and misuse of these spaces (garbage disposal, dangerous driving, noisy skateboarders,..). In the referenced online video the architect defends that the lack of public infrastructure and the density of the area ruined the first intention of the project.









Illustrations of the discussed project : Aerial picture, plan and pictures (source Archdaily)

In the light of the previous chapters some points can put us on the track of the understanding of this failure. Of course the observations of the architect are corrects because the density coupled with the notion of public spaces can be conflictious (*Commons*, Hardin 1996). Nevertheless the argument is that some issues could have been avoided or mitigated with designed measures.

On the pictures above we can note that the resulting urban form is a snake-like building which is understandable according to the plot shape. The problem is that it its really complicated to tell what belongs to who according to which boundary because the urban form fails to provide semi-public spaces for the residents and only separates the plot in two big public zones. The inner circulation of the buildings (vertical circulations or narrow outside corridors) further make it difficult for the community to meet. Resident are thus only left with communal spaces that are public spaces shared with the whole slum. Therefore it is understandable why they feel invaded and why they fail to have a strong community that could deal with the problems like garbage disposal and general misuse of the space.

We can also point at the global expression of the façade that, being composed mainly by blind walls, confers to the area the impression of no surveillance. Nobody really looks at the public space from the building and these walls are instead ironically used as support for unwanted graffitis. With larger windows, balconies, used semi-private spaces looking downwards and soft edges (Gehl 2010) on the ground floor the area could convey the feeling of being watched and the residents could make their presence more visible, thus fighting against anonymity. Newman (1976) piece of advice " subdivide a high density project so that occupants and outsiders will perceive various portions of it as being under the sphere of influence of particular groups of occupants" is here missing.

To conclude I do not mean that the public space is not possible in that dense context, but that there should be a gradual progression in the publicness of spaces and that should be made visible by liminal boundaries or experientiable by topology for respecting privacy and thereby enabling publicness at corresponding levels of the society.

The Role of Architects

At the time when population grows at an unsettled pace and cities, as an attempt to hold their expansion, promote the living in a dense human environment, the architect has to be well aware of the effect of the different boundaries, human or non human, that divide and creating hierarchy in the urban landscape.

Even if some professions such as jurists or politicians still fail to recognise architecture as a strong regulation, it is clear that the planning and building has a strong and long-term impact on urban phenomenon such as segregation or equal opportunities (Schindler 2015). Inequalities can be fought in the legislation but if nothing is physically done the success of such measures will only be relative. As a valuable exemple the deliberate decision taken in New York City by Robert Moses to build overpasses intentionally so low that the busses can not pass under has been recognized as powerful to prevent the access to the Long Island beaches to poor populations relying on public transportation.

While politics were fighting to end segregation the act on the physical environment of one man has jeopardized the whole policy.

It is important to be aware of how quick and spontaneous design decision can have a long term influence on the living of the inhabitants. Therefore in the daily practice of architecture every drawn line is a boundary for which the architect has to question the materiality or not. The consequences of it has to be assessed under the eye of how it will be dealt with in the managing of the living in the neighbourhood. It is also important to bring back that boundaries are not something intrasically bad and that they are necessary both for the mind and for enabling the living in the society through creating privacy and that opportunities can be found. An other point to mention is that the theme does not only relate with traditional design but also management design since the two are strongly connected in the experience of living in a human environment.

Eventually the responsibility of the gated communities trend can be to both the demand and the supply but the facilitator between the two, the one that has the power to raise is voice and draw, is the architect.

I strongly believe that societal problems can be efficiently addressed by good physical and management design. It is now between our hands to work in that direction.

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