Physical and non-physical walls

A reflection on the ambivalence of walls and their meaning

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1 Introduction

For many years, the practice of building a wall around a territory is known as a tool of marking and protecting it. At first, walls were meant to protect people and create a shelter. In time, walls were protecting cities, communities, house plots. Their physical form changed during the years, even if, the main features remained the same.

Walls are carrying the ambivalence of protection and offence. In a silent way, they protect *those from inside, from those that are outside,* encouraging, in a way, the battle between the two sides. Many times, the battle is invisible, but it influences the behavior of actors. Walls are sending messages: *you are safe here*, at the same time saying *you are not welcome here/ we do not trust you/ you do not belong.*

The idea of writing this paper appeared during the study trip in Manila, The Philippines, organized for the Urban Shelter course, during the spring semester of 2020, by Lund University. There, the expression of walling phenomena resulted in the creation of gated communities, gated house plots, multiple layers of security for the same entrance. It is important to say that the wall culture is different in every part of the world, but they are all talking about trust issues, property claim and the feeling of ownership.

This paper will try to focus on the ambivalence of walls, their physical and non-physical presence and the impact on urban life that this duality brings.

Picture 1. Multiple security layers. Metro Manila, The Philippines, 2020. Photo taken by the autor

2 Literature Review

The book *Urban walls, Political and Cultural Meanings of Vertical Structures and Surfaces,* Brighenti A.M and Karrholm M., 2019 is an anthology of essays from different authors, discussing the presence of walls in various cultures, their multidimensional meanings and importance in social processes. The book begins with a text from the editors Brighenti and Karrholm, followed by eleven texts written from different geographical perspectives like Northern Ireland, Australia, Brazil, Poland, Sweden and France.

Being present as an urban element for so many years, wall became a part of permanent structural landscape and, what we have to do is to find better ways of integrating the both sides of the walls, making this barrier more permeable. "Whether driving through the city's streets or walking along its pavements, walls bar the citizen's passage at the same time as they productively shape and permit it." (Brighenti and Karrholm 2019, p. 27) The ambivalence is about seeing the walls as the psycho-immune system of a community, but also it might express the denial of interaction "as well as usually expressing anxiety, fear and hate towards those who will find themselves on the other side of the wall." (Brighenti and Karrholm 2019, p. 2) The non-physical walls are carried in memories of the past, becoming walls inside the walls, causing disruptions of the flows.

For Ken Wilber, in *No boundaries,* 2001*,* walls are presented as invisible entities that shape each of us. He approaches walls as self-limitation tools, that we create inside of our mind, councious or unconcious, expanding them to the outer world. In the absence of awareness, people tend to live separately from the *All* that they are part of from the very beginning. The author asks "Do you feel you *are* a body, or do you feel you *have* a body?" (Wilber 2001, p.10), outlining one of the boundaries we create within ourselves that can grow and expand, taking various shapes and expressions, including those solid walls we will discuss in the paper, but also walls based on race, identity, status and many other known and unknown invisible walls that all of us have exerienced.

"*I, a stranger, alone, afraid, in a world I never made.* So the primary boundary severs the unity of the organism-environment, and creates the apparently conflicting opposites of organism versus environment, me in here versus the world out there."(Wilber 2001, p.80) Wilber describes very clear that the reason for separation is coming from inside, from conflicts within ourselves which are evolving and expanding, taking various shapes. Born from fear of different, of unknown, of unfamiliar, every boundary is a sign of unsolved conflicts, underestimated issues, same for individuals as for entire societies.

The book is organised in ten chapters, starting with the question *Who am I?*. The author is continuing with the *Territory, Awareness and Moment of The No-Boundary*, explaining *The Growth of Boundaries* and ending with *The ultimate state of Counciousness.*

Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures, World Cities Report 2016 from UN HABITAT was used as the third reference for this paper. A report that outline and describe the issues that rapidly urbanization process is facing, a result of technology, growth of cities, their dynamics and problems that appear, climate change and its influence on people's way of life. The Report demonstrates the need to rethink the current urbanization model, directing it to a sustainable vision of development, from social and environmental points of view. The Report is devided in ten chapters starting with a brief description of changes that took place between the *Habitat II* and *Habitat III* conferences, outlining the need for a New Urban Agenda. The information from *Chapter 2: Urbanization as a Tranformative Force* was used in multiple paper references, as a problem-solution exercise. Further, the Report is discussing the Fate of Housing, as need and

demand, Urban Divide, Urban Governance and Legislation, as well as, in Chapter 10: The New Urban Agenda, key principles and components of it.

3 Argument, Critique or Discussion

"Nature, we have seen, knows nothing of this crazy world of boundaries—there are no walls or fences in nature. Yet we seem to live almost completely within a world of boundaries, a world of walls and limits, bounds and battles.*" (Wilberg 2001, p. 78)

3.1 Walls - concepts of status, public governance, segregation

Status: from the Great Wall of China to the USA-Mexico wall that is intended to be built or the wall that cutted Germany in half after the WWII, walls are a form of control on different scales, of physical limitation and non-physical defence. At first, walls were meant to protect (but selectively), to define the boundaries of a place, to control the flow of people that come or leave a place as a basic measure of owning it. They come in different forms: like solid walls, fences from hard or light materials, permeable or opaque. Even if there are different ways of expressing the safety feeling, wall remains by far the first tool that comes to mind when this need appears, as a primary expression. If there is no gate for in and out, for making the communication and exchange possible, the wall is just a solid urban shape, a bold separation tool with no entity. A wall can also become an active urban actor when you can penetrate its solidity, when it becomes a catalyst for some happenings or behaviours, for movements or screenings.

Picture 2: Wall as a screen. Sagada Province, The Philippines, 2020.

Photo taken by the author

One of the results from using such elements like walls, are gated communities. These are a more often phenomena in the societies were the social inequality and the gap between social classes is bigger, defining a non-spoken language of social interaction. By definition of Cambridge dictionary, a *gated community* is:

"a group of houses, surrounded by fences or walls, that can only be entered by the people who live there." It is a defined territory, with certain internal rules and behavioural characteristics that have to be respected by those that live or enter the community. It also becomes a prohibited area for those outside it, an abstract place on the map, that has its own existence, regardless the outer events. Every gated community becomes a cell of the urban fabric, defining the structure and the social entity of the city.

Finding yourself in a closed space would mean you are finding yourself in a community with shared views and values where the sense of belonging appear. At the same time, it cuts you from the perspectives of interaction with those outside. The same is happening with people from the other part of the wall, outlining the fact of separation. A non-spoken attitude is born when the division and constraints take a physical form. The message never disappears, but takes another shape. A boundary is carrying the dichotomy of sharing and dividing.

"We progressively limit our world and turn from our true nature in order to embrace boundaries."(Wilber 2001, p. 7)

Public governance: the multiplication of walls inside the urban medium and the formation of so many gated communities are also a result of failed public governance. The unequal distribution of forces, chances and rights, not only in written form but also in practice, have, in result, the segregation of classes and segmentation of urban fabric. It also results in privatization of urban space, decreasing the area used for walking, playing or working, as for The Philippines example, the street plays an important role in work and commerce being one of the most active urban element. As it is saying in the UN HABITAT report:

"While the rise of gated communities have in part, been in response to growing crime and security concerns, they have far greater ramifications, leading to disproportionate and more intense consumption of public space, increasing polarization, privatization and segmentation of urban space, and segregation between income and social groups." (UN HABITAT 2016, p. 20)

Segregation: many times new communities that are planned are formed from families with various background, places and views, so that, at first, they have to gain a sense of community inside the walls and after they can open to those from outside. In addition, social inequality and location of communities are factors that rise the fear and uncertainty, leading to the phenomena of walling. "Today, the world is more unequal than it was twenty years ago, according to UN-Habitat/CAF, 75 % of the world's cities have higher levels of income inequalities than two decades ago." (UN HABITAT 2016, 72)

In the US, gated communities are the fastest growing housing type with a number of 20 000 communities in 2007. In England, their number is more than 1 000, mostly located in the Metropolitan Area. (UN Habitat 2016, 20)

3.2 Scales of Boundaries

On a *city scale*, the presence of walled communities of different scales and configurations shape the urban landscape, defining it and becoming a permanent structure. Walls frame the streetscape, walkways and visibility. City as a whole is perceived through areas where the access is allowed and where you can get in touch with the urban life as it is. At the same time, a city can be perceived through the multiple forbidden places, sending the message that you may find yourself in an unsecure place or, maybe, that you are not welcomed there. Both ways are a form of communication. However, the level of visibility or permeability does not guarantee equal use of public space or social interaction. From *the user scale*, depending on where do you find yourself, on which part of the wall, a closed space can exclude and lead to a limitation in actions, opportunities and chances to advance in the society. The more interruptions in the urban landscape, the more it becomes stigmatized from the social perspective. The limitations are not only reflected in the physical boundaries, but also are developed on a personal, intimate, non-physical scale. The way residential communities are designed, their relation to the neighbourhood, possibilities of interaction, programmed and non-programmed spaces, permeable and non-permeable boundaries are important aspects to look into as they determine the bilateral relationship between inhabitants and the outer community, from physical and emotional perspective. For the user that is born with the idea of living in a segregated society, limiting his/ her actions and thoughts, it is a challenge to overcome the situation and feel a part of the bigger community. The mindfulness and care starts with the attachment

to the place they grow up in, multiplying its scale to the neighbourhood beyond their place of birth and even beyond country. Every design should be made thinking about its sustainability, promoting emotionally healthy and resilient inhabitants and communities. There is evidence that the built environment and its characteristics have a direct connection with the physical and emotional health of the inhabitants, and with their will to engage in social and economic activities. It influences their integration process with socially different groups.

Picture 3. A temporary shelter in San Juan, Metro Manila, 2020.
Photo taken by the author.

3.3 Permeability of Walls

As a physical structure, the metamorphose of meaning and the message of a wall is possible when using certain materials, heights, or using them as screens. In an urban situation, the built element can become a source of formation of a specific street culture. In this situation, the wall is changing its initial purpose, gaining new characteristics and attitudes for those that are "outside" it. It becomes an active element of urban life, turned into devices of communication of certain messages by adding words or images. In The Philippines, walls as screens are a present feature of Manila streets, an active tool to promote or argue, a way of owning the street and its elements. This also softens the defensive message of the wall, building a double relation of communities that find themselves inside and outside

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the wall. When giving some intimate, personal meaning, a boundary is transformed from a divider to a connector. However, this relation is built with the wall, but not between communities that oppose each other.

4 Urban Shelter Design

One of the solutions for reducing the phenomena of walling, but also to diminish existing social inequalities is based on *national/ urban laws and policies* in the form of the decentralization of power and the transfer of certain powers to local communities and also, the diversification of spaces and uses in order to decrease the social inequalities. (UN HABITAT 2016, p.81) When people are given the power to decide and organize themselves, they tend to preserve and care about the places they live in and work, in this way being connected inside the community as well as outside the walls, developing the feeling of belonging. Narrowing the social gap built by those invisible walls is to give people strength and power to believe in their self-governance and to become active local actors. Providing places for employment or for conducting their economic activities will integrate communities as active members in the market. A guided and mature community that can face different present and future problems regarding social, economic and even climate change issues is a resilient and sustainable community. Every time a new housing project is being built, people have to be trained to live together in the new environment with openness, trust. The same activities are a way of rebuilding already existing gated communities. Citizens' involvement together with other local governance measures can change the way people treat each other and those on the other side of the wall. The aim to build a resilient neighborhood would mean to built the trust and social security through citizens' participation. Also, urban policies can be a tool for implementing social diversity in residential projects, encouraging denser and mixed housing, where people get to know each other and live in their diversity, growing from a building scale to the neighbourhood openness to "the other". A protective structure might not be even necessary if there is a common *social* activity in the neighborhood, where many people are involved and they have the interest to take care of the place.
"Not only do cities feature high densities of people, but their high densities also force people of different religions, nationalities, ethnicities and sexual orientations to live and work alongside one another, and in doing so, they get to know "the

other," leading to a cosmopolitan respect for differences." (UN HABITAT 2016, p. 71)

In terms of *design*, if there is a need, the walling of a community can be done in a more softer way using less defensive materials and structures, increasing visibility and connection of the happenings from both directions. It can be done with either a green wall, a lower railing or by using natural, permeable materials. As it was discussed earlier in this paper, the wall can take the role of the screen, being involved as an active actor in the life of the community, a place for activities on both sides.

5 The Role of Architects

As architects, there is a need to plan and think communities in a sustainable way, with possibilities of growing, developing and changing. This can be done in various stages of a project, but the most crucial is the very beginning of it: the planning stage. This is why, urban planners and architects should think forward every new development. They also should be involved in generating urban laws and policies, as they are the ones that can influence the decision making process. Since architects are involved in all the design stages, from the idea to the implementation, they can analyze, predict and change in a better way urban development and the quality of life, reducing the number of physical and non-physical walls.

Picture 4. Presentation of a self-governance programme and the importance of collaboration between architects and civil society. Ernestville Project, Metro Manila, 2020. Photo taken by the author.

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