

Problems in Reconstituting the Traditional Urban Values in Contemporary Cities and the Role of the Boundary

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Abstract

Critics would commonly agree that in many contemporary cities wasteful modes of consumption, encouraged and facilitated by fantastic developments in technology, have significantly eroded the values of the traditional urban environment. Very often these contemporary cities would lack a sense of placeness, a vibrant public life, and a harmonious relationship between man and nature of the traditional urban environment. This paper studies why the configuration of the physical boundary may be used as an important tool in reconstituting these values in contemporary cities. It suggests that the boundary is not merely an abstract pattern of lines. Rather it is an integral constituent of the physical landscape whose importance lies in its intrinsic ethical values.

Introduction: What is the boundary?

The word *boundary*, as found in the standard English dictionaries, means *that which bounds, divides, or separates*,¹ or *something that indicates a border or limit*.² In its generally accepted meaning, the concept of the boundary has been used at various levels of granularity in order to describe the physical landscape. For example, in some cases it has been used to determine the shape and size of individual plots. In other cases it has been used to characterize the configuration of much bigger units of the

physical landscape, such as blocks, census tracts, districts, etc., ignoring the features of individual plots. Yet in other cases it has been used to delineate the relationship between the smaller and the bigger units of the landscape, such as the relationship between the form of the city and land platting. And there are even cases where the concept of boundary has been used in all of the above senses at the same time. These uses of the concept would imply that the *boundary* is an important elementary device that enables us to conceptualize the physical landscape in some sense or the other. It helps us to map the landscape we inhabit (**Figure 1**).

However, in none of the above senses, it is recognized that the man-made physical landscape is not a mere agglomeration of land plots. And in any man-made landscape, the boundary is not merely a set of abstract lines demarcating individual plots, but is a product of how the landscape and its constituent units are defined in relation to each other. In addition, in none of the mentioned senses, human actions which define the physical landscape by disposing boundaries in various different ways are also not very important.

In contrast to the standard uses of the word *boundary*, Cassirer, in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, writes, "there can be no boundary independent of what it bounds--it exists only in the act of division itself, not as something which could be thought before this division and detached from it."³ In Cassirer's concept, the boundary then is viewed not as a passive divider, but as something intrinsically related to the object it defines. This concept also suggests that the problem of the proper conceptualization of the boundary is to be determined through the action which puts the whole in relation to its parts. This is to say, Cassirer's concept implies that in the physical spatial domains, such as the built environment, the problem of boundary is to be resolved with respect to various actions and processes incessantly occurring in these domains. Hence, any understanding of the built environment would require that we explore how societies create the need for specific spatial concepts, and how these concepts are

materialized through the creation of various types of boundary. In the following section, in order to reveal the status of the physical boundary in the landscape of the contemporary cities, we then study the basic socio-political dimensions of contemporary cities and how these dimensions are realized in the spatial form of the city.

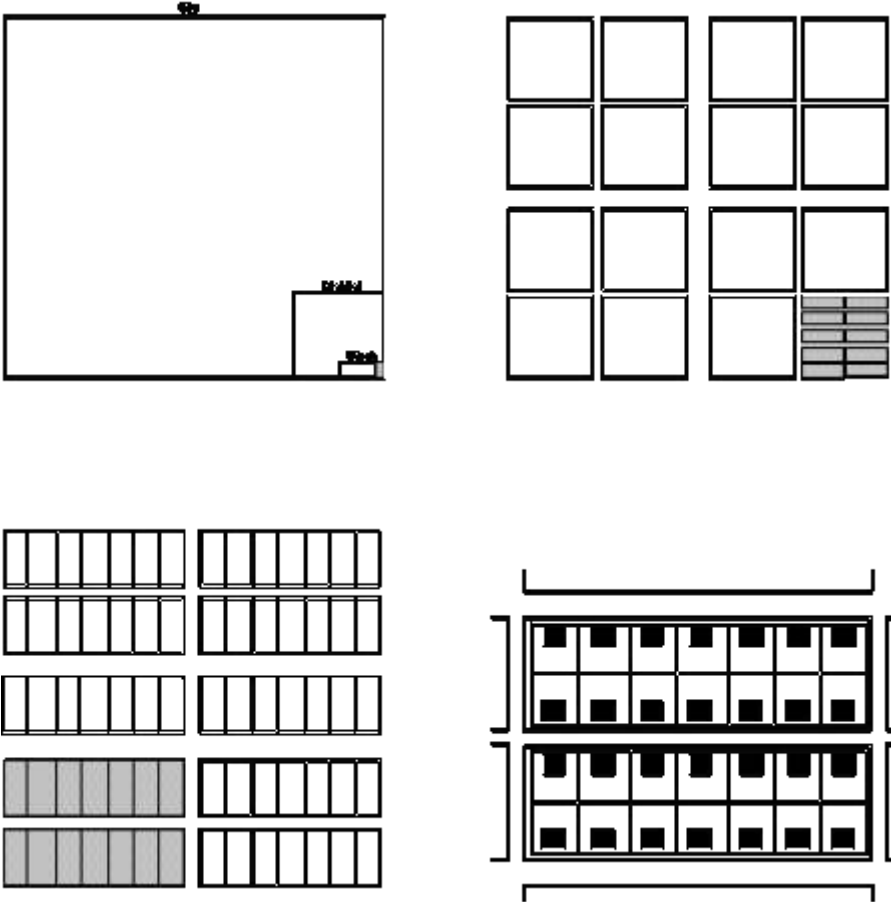


Figure 1: The schematic drawing shows the hierarchy of boundaries at different levels of granularity of the city. (Source: Author.)

Contemporary cities and the status of the boundary

In this paper the term "contemporary cities" refer to a class of cities probably best exemplified by cities in the Sunbelt region of the United states. The region, as is commonly agreed, includes Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Florida, Southern California, and perhaps some of the Southern states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. Of course, not all the cities in the region possess the characteristic features of contemporary Sunbelt cities. And there may exist other cities as well which do not lie in the Sunbelt region but possess several qualities of contemporary Sunbelt cities. A list of these contemporary cities may include Phoenix, Tuscon, Albuquerque, Orlando, Atlanta, Charlotte, Houston, Dallas, Tampa, Los Angeles, Denver, Portland, and Miami. However, in order to facilitate a finer description of the nature of urbanism in these cities several authors have used terms such as exurbs, technourbs, urban villages, supersuburbs, and edge cities. Here, the term "contemporary cities" is used in a generic sense to include all these types of built environment.

These so-called contemporary cities seem to have a non-hierarchical structure. Instead of having a dominant center, these cities have a number of equally dominant centers. More specifically, these cities comprises of several clusters of offices, shopping centers, and even cultural facilities scattered over a vast geographic region with residential developments occupying the in-between spaces. These contemporary cities are also characterized by a society which Daniel Bell has called a post-industrial society.⁴ However, it would be a mistake to suggest that Bell's post-industrial society exists only in these contemporary cities. In fact, the mentality that underlies a post-industrial society seems to be more pervasive, and may be found even in a more traditional American city. But, while we may be able to map the socio-political dimensions of a post-industrial society onto the physical domain of the so-called contemporary cities, we may not be able to do so onto the cities of more traditional kinds.

One important feature of the post-industrial society is the existence of a tension between reality and image. According to Richard Bolton, "The [post-industrial society]. . . is marked by the loss of object, by the invisibility created by communication, by the electronic and photographic distribution of images, information, and capital."⁵ Jean Baudrillard identifies four successive phases of the use of images. First, as representations, images reflect reality; second, they distort the reality; third, they mask the absence of the reality; finally, they bear no relationship to the reality whatsoever: here, images are their own simulacra.⁶ He feels that the post-industrial society is already in the fourth stage. Now the danger is not simply that images distance us from the reality, but that simulations substitute it. Baudrillard describes this as a self-perpetuating system, "when the real is no longer what it used to be . . ."⁷ It blurs the line between the real and the artificial (**Figure 2**). Or as Abraham Moles would say, "As we enter the age of *telepresence*, we seek to establish an equivalence between *actual presence* and *vicarial presence*."⁸ "This vicarial presence," Moles continues, "is destroying the organizing principle upon which our city has, until now, been constructed. We have called this principle the *law of proximity*: What is close is more important, true, or concrete than what is far away, smaller, and more difficult to access (all other factors being equal)."⁹ We may not endorse Baudrillard's and Moles' views in their entirety, but we must agree that in these contemporary cities mass access to independent transportation and increasingly flexible communication and production technologies have helped eliminate certain spatial dependencies that bound the traditional cities into a coherent whole. And, as new technology increases our ability to move and communicate, it simultaneously erodes both our connection to place and our identity, and puts into question time and distance with which we measure and map our world.



Figure 2: Rene Magritte's *The Human Condition* (1933) suggests that the disorientating relationship between the representation and the reality already became a theme for the painters by the 1930s. However, the issue have eluded architects until the 1960s. (Source: *The Twentieth-Century Art Book*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996.)

Another important feature of the post-industrial society is its emphasis on the modes of consumption. Charles Leven suggests that while the "old" cities were designed to maximize production, the "new" cities are determined spatially to maximize consumption.¹⁰ An undifferentiated proliferation of malls, offices, hotels, drive-in theaters, and first-food restaurants may exemplify the nature of this kind urbanism in contemporary cities. Margaret Crawford uses the shopping malls in order to illustrate the spectacle of consumption. According to her, the design strategies of the malls are calculated in every respect to stimulate consumption: Here, time, space, and weather are suspended; connections to real places are

replaced by a spectacle of exotic attractions and diversions; images of the commodities are used in attractive ways in order to enhance consumption. According to Crawford, these shopping malls give us several clues as to why and how contemporary cities may impoverish the richness of the traditional urbanity. Instead of providing the inhabitants with a real interface between the private and the public realms of the city, these privatized worlds simulate a public realm in order to fulfill the fantasies of desire and consumption. Here, the presence of people, instead of generating a body politic, serves to mask the conditions of alienation. These malls are essentially a symbolic rejection of the diversity of street-life. The safe, controlled, and clean environment of these malls are calculated to serve a socio-economically homogeneous clientele, and seeks to exclude those who do not fit the profile **(Figure 3)**.¹¹



Figure 3: A view of a shopping mall. The shopping malls in contemporary cities are essentially a symbolic rejection of the diversity of street-life. (Source: Author.)

The kind of urbanism offered by these contemporary cities is summarized rather nicely by Dunham-Jones when she writes: "Post-industrial urbanism removes us from the institutional center of the city, segregates our public and private lives, increases the spatial and cultural distance between classes, and habituates us to wasteful modes of consumption. Physically and culturally, we are losing ground."¹² In contemporary cities any concept of placeness has lost its ground in favor of a universal, placeless domain. Since the act of differentiation based on a sense of *placeness* has now been reduced to an undifferentiated "singularity" of a placeless domain, the role of boundary as a significant physical-spatial device to create differentiation has been rendered irrelevant. Any intrinsic differentiation is no more significant, because modern life is enchanted with small, insignificant difference. This is certainly not the kind of *differentiation* Durkheim had in mind when he had characterized organic solidarity with the rise of differentiation in *The Division of Labor in Society*.¹³ In fact, Durkheim had failed to see that any differentiation taken to its extreme could collapse into an anonymous "singularity," where the sense of any intrinsic, significant *differentiation* may be lost (**Figures 4 & 5**). It is possibly what has led Melvin Webber to coin such terms as "community without propinquity" or "non-place urban realm," as slogans with which to rationalize the total loss of the civic domain in the post-industrial society.



Figure 4: Muralist Thomas Hart Benton in his *City Activities with Subway* (1930) depicts the city life as sets of events and experiences which no more cohere in any sense. (Source: *The Twentieth-Century Art Book*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996.)



Figure 5: Zarina Bhimji's work *1822-Now* (1993) illustrates that any differentiation taken to its extreme may collapse into an anonymous "singularity," where the sense of any intrinsic, significant *differentiation* may be lost. (Source: *The Twentieth-Century Art Book*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996.)

Figures 6-10 present a set of very different boundary conditions in the physical landscape of the United States. They may help us to visualize the nature of the transformations of contemporary landscape that the critics are talking about. Beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a large part of the country is divided into a rectilinear grid in order provide a political definition to the territory (**Figure 6**).¹⁴ In fact, this grid covers most of the Sunbelt region. Throughout the nineteenth century, it is used as a primary tool in organizing the urban landscape. Within the grid a hierarchy of street network generally would have ensured a sufficient amount of differentiation in the locational attributes of the plots. Which, then, would have brought in different types of land uses depending on their locations (**Figure 7**). However, by the mid of the twentieth century, different socio-economic and technological inventions could no longer be accommodated within the political boundary defined by the grid. Instead of supporting diversity of the urban life, the built environment now was defined as a set of zone containing specialized functions. In some cases, in order ensure a homogeneity of the locational attributes of individual plots for a socio-economically homogeneous clientele, the grid was ignored (**Figure 8**). In some other cases, the grid accommodated networks of freeways introducing discontinuity in the fabric of the city (**Figure 9**). And more recently, there are cases where the grid is ignored purely because of economic reasons. For example, it is always profitable to build shopping centers, hotels, recreational facilities in clusters. Most of the time, these huge facilities would destroy several blocks of the grid in order to facilitate movement and easy accessibility of people and goods (**Figure 10**).



Figure 6: A landscape yet to be urbanized. The grid defines the political boundary. (Source: *The New City*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969.)



Figure 7: A landscape of the public-private dialectics. The boundary serves its traditional purpose as the interface between the self and the environment through the elaboration of place. Blocks of different sizes, a network of streets of different hierarchy, and a set of open spaces available at local levels could have sustained a community life in this environment. (Source: Georgia Aerial Survey, INC., 1995.)



Figure 8: A landscape of homogeneity. The boundary eliminates any interaction between individuals, as well as between the individual and the collective. The lack of the hierarchy in the street system, the lack of the definition of blocks, and the lack of open spaces at local levels may discourage a community life in this environment. (Source: *The New City*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969.)



Figure 9: A landscape of movement. The existing grid accommodates a network of freeways. (Source: Georgia Aerial Survey, INC., 1995.)



Figure 10: A landscape of consumption. A cluster of shopping malls, theaters, offices, and hotels easily accessible by a road network allow individuals to participate in a "transient" public life without politics. (Source: Georgia Aerial Survey, INC., 1995.)

Paradoxically, as the boundary is losing its value at the level of the physical space, it is becoming more important at the level of the temporal space. As people are becoming more used to movement breaks in continuity occurs less within the boundary of a physical urban space than within a span of time, which is being incessantly restructured by the advanced technology and industrial redeployment. Now urban space is no more designated *only* by a line of demarcation between here and there, but has become

synonymous with the programming of a "time schedule." For example, the theory of "shared jobs," already introduced into a segment of community, offers each member an alternative plan in which shared timetables could open onto a whole new sharing of space. It has become an imperative, as Virilio suggests, that we must deal with the question of "technological space-time." He writes,

If metropolis still occupies a piece of ground, a geographical position, it no longer corresponds to the old division between city and country, nor to the opposition between center and periphery. The localization and the axially of the urban layout faded long ago. . . . Replacing the old distinctions between public and private and "habitation" and "circulation" is an overexposure in which the gap between "near" and "far" ceases to exist, in the same way that the gap between "micro" and "macro" disappears through electronic microscope scanning.¹⁵

However, it may not be enough simply to reveal the facts that the boundary is losing its value as a physical-spatial device, that the built environment is losing the sense of placeness, and that the old distinctions between center and periphery, public and private, far and near are fading away in contemporary cities, if we consider these as problems. We must decide whether we want to enhance this process of dematerialization and universalization which would create a homogenous placeless domain without any boundary, or whether we want to restrict the process which would allow the boundary to serve its traditional purpose as the interface between the self and the environment through the elaboration of place. However, there may even exist an intermediate approach, such as the one suggested by Paul Ricoeur's, which to achieve both ends, i.e., to take part in the process of universalization, on the one hand, and to return to traditional sources, on the other.¹⁶

The reader must realize that there is no easy way to achieve Ricoeur's objective. To copy the material forms of the historical and traditional artifacts is no solution to the problems of contemporary cities. These problems cannot be resolved through a simple-minded imitation of the past. A study of any

pre-modern culture would reveal that the material order in that culture became meaningful only in relation to an *invisible* order which had revealed the place of man not only within his society and built environment but also within a cosmological totality. Without this purposeful *invisible* order, no amount of structure would have been sufficient to generate a meaningful environment in the culture. Now the problem is, no such intrinsic relationship between the visible and the invisible order exists in the modern world. And it does not seem likely that this archetypal ground of meaning can be made accessible from any set prescription. Which may partly explain why zoning ordinances used by the city authorities have failed to resist the process of impoverishment of the built environment in contemporary cities.

In addition, it does not seem that the available means of modern technology are going to provide any solution to the problem of an impoverished built environment either. Heidegger tells us, technology, which once had revealed natural conditions and provided access to natural resources, now processes and conceals nature. He distinguishes between modern technology, which exploits nature and treats it as a standing reserve, and pre-modern technology which reveals nature. He traces the root of "technology" back to the Greek word for art, *techne*, which means a crafted art that expresses the constructional logic poetically. It is related to nature in the sense of revealing it. By contrast, modern technology distances us from nature by minimizing the effects of time, distance, climate, topography, and even physical presence.¹⁷

If neither the traditional forms nor the means of modern technology are able to resist the process of impoverishment of the built environment in contemporary cities, how can then it be resisted? Perhaps the most pertinent message on this issue is delivered in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where he suggests that no amount of rule may be sufficient to ensure a prescribed end.¹⁸ That is because even when we know everything knowable, we may still need to depend on the ability to recognize what the Greeks had called the *kairos*, i.e., knowing when to speak in what manner. We can not understand the *kairos* by

reference to a set of prescribed rules, or to the *techne*. It is a part of the practical reason and therefore inextricably bound up with the notion of the good. Plato advances an analogy for this in *The Statesman*, where political craft is compared to artistry in weaving. He suggests that, like weaving, politics also must weave opposing factors into unity from an acute sense of what constitutes the good in life.¹⁹ Urbanism surely belongs in such company, because its dialectic must be driven by something like the *kairos*. In order to constitute the good in our cities, we must locate the source and content of moral and ethical affairs in city building.

The boundary is important in the above context precisely because it modulates the intervening distance between the self and the world around. It is not just an instrument of spatial organization, as Cassirer tell us. The boundary does not merely contain the life led within it but is integral to it, and therefore possesses greater significance in the process of city building. For our purpose then it is necessary to understand the dimensions of the bond between the boundary and the society, and to situate architecture and urbanism around these dimensions. However, most frequently, as designers or planners we fail to recognize the bond between the boundary and the life contained within it, and trace only the abstract pattern of lines on a map. We refuse to accept the fact that the configuration of boundary may have any significance in our physical landscape; or, that the interaction between different domains of a city-life may largely depend on the nature of the interface provided by the configuration of the boundary. Here, then, we must ask: How has the boundary lost its concrete specificity? In fact, it would seem that it is our confusion over the issues of ethics and morality which has significantly contributed to an erosion of the concrete specificity of the boundary, and thus to a loss of the significance of its physical configuration in our consciousness as well as in our built-environment, which we study next.

Issues of ethics and morality and the erosion of the importance of the physical boundary in the built environment

Etymologically, both morality and ethics suggest a connection to custom or to the accepted ways of behavior in society. However, whereas morality, irrespective of its level of consideration, tends to establish *a priori* foundations or standards for human behavior, the notion of what is ethical at any moment is vague. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, sought to limit Platonic intellectualism in examining questions of what is good, hence founded ethics as a discipline independent of metaphysics. He emphasized the contingent nature of ethics in questions regarding the good over Plato's extreme mathematical exactness which considered the good as an external unchanging ideal, an object of contemplation removed from this world. Aristotle saw that each situation in our life is profoundly different from every other one, and that it is our own actions which give each situation its fundamentally inimitable quality. In his ethics the realization of the good comes about as a kind of ongoing critique of the concrete actions of people in specific situations. Thus, in Aristotelian philosophy, we might say that ethics arises out of one's recognition that there is in every situation a complex reciprocal relationship between situations and those who act within it and constitute it. Similarly, in Hegelianism, the notion of the "moral" pertains to virtuous conduct or natural excellence as distinguished from the "ethical" which pertains more to civic or legal righteousness, indicating the fact that "morality" always has a transcendental dimension associated with it. In fact, the distinction between ethics and morality is best expressed by Deleuze when he writes: "Ethics is a *typology of immanent modes of existence*, whereas morality *always refers existence to transcendental values*."²⁰

The above distinction between ethics and morality should have clear implications on how we understand the built environment. According to it, while the "moral" implies that the ultimate purpose of the built environment is to ensure an ideal state of goodness, the "ethical" implies that the built

environment should determinantly bear upon the more immediate aspects related to humans. As Clive Dilnot writes: "We know that any activity which, like architecture, works to inter-implicate physical structure and figural conditions has direct implications for the subjects who inhabit the results of that activity. This means that architecture is ethical, and is so not merely contractually (as a legal principle), or as a formal idea (as a morality), but substantively, as a making."²¹ From this it would seem that any architectural decision may inherently be an ethical decision which relates, on the one hand, to the political, i. e., how to *build*, and, on the other hand, to the social, i.e., how to *live*. Which would also imply that, instead of judging the built environment against the degree of its attainment to an ideal state (which relates more to the "moral" concerns), from an ethical viewpoint we must judge it in relation to a set of *concrete* and *immanent* issues of the built environment.

However, in today's context, due to our overemphasis on the "moral" we have lost the sight of the immediate, concrete aspects of the built environment. Our overemphasis on the "moral" is a by-product of the rise of the "social," Hannah Arendt tells us:

Historically, we know of only one principle that was ever devised to keep a community of people together who had lost their interest in the common world²² and felt themselves no longer related and separated by it. To find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world was the main political task of the early Christian philosophy, and it was Augustine who proposed to found not only the Christian "brotherhood" but all human relationships on charity . . . The unpolitical, non-public character of the Christian community was early defined in the demand that it should form a *corpus*, a "body," whose members were to be related to each other like brothers of the same family. The structure of communal life was modeled on the relationship between the members of a family because these were known to be non-political and even antipolitical.²³

Thus instead of the dichotomy of the private and the public realms of a classical Greek *polis* or a Roman town, what becomes important since the rise of the Christian community is a hierarchical social structure where relationships between its members become an issue of morality. Hannah Arendt further tells us that morality became necessary only when a sense of "worldlessness" began to dominate the political scene:

Worldlessness as a political phenomena is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; . . . This happened after the downfall of the Roman Empire and, albeit, for quite other reasons and in very different, perhaps even more disconsolate forms, it seems to happen again in our own days. The Christian abstention from worldly things is by no means the only conclusion one can draw from the conviction that the human artifice, a product of mortal hands, is as mortal as its makers. This, on the contrary, may also intensify the enjoyment and consumption of the things of the world, all manners of intercourse in which the world is not primarily understood to be the *koinon*, that which is common to all.

"Morality" thus proposed the boundary as an empty vessel, devoid of any kind of permanence, into which the "social" could be poured, or onto which an external use can be stamped as an obligation from without. Far from conjoining man and his artifice, the boundary now denoted their real, abyssal separation. Under this condition, the relationship between artifice and its "otherness" became inherently problematic and unstable. By constantly forcing the artifice into an external relationship with the other, morality caused either the collapse of the boundary conditions into the social, thereby threatening a loss of what the configuration of the physical boundary could offer. It also caused in the defensive preservation of the "real illusion" of the autonomy of the boundary, but only at the terrible price of being unable to bring to the consciousness the complex relationship between human and its artifice.

One way to disentangle the "ethical" from the "moral" may be to disentangle the "public" from the "social," which, as Hannah Arendt would put, is possible by understanding the "non-private" part of the private realm, and without which, as Locke pointed out, "the common is of no use." For example, in the ancient Greek world it was not the interior, but the exterior appearance of the "hidden" private realm which was important for the city, and it appeared in the realm of the city through the boundaries between one household and the other. The law was originally identified with the boundary lines, which in ancient times were actually a space, a kind of no man's land between the private and the public. Though the law of the Greek *polis* transcended the ancient understanding, it retained the original spatial significance of the boundary. About which Hannah Arendt writes,

It was quite literally a wall, without which there might have been an agglomeration of houses, a town (*asty*), but not a city, a political community. Without it public realm could no more exist than a piece of property without the fence to hedge it in; the one harbored and inclosed political life as the other sheltered and protected the biological life process of the family.²⁴

Elsewhere, Arendt remarks on the contrasts between the pre-modern and modern thinking about the importance of the boundary:

While it is only natural that the non-private traits of privacy should appear most clearly when men are threatened with deprivation of it, the practical treatment of private property by premodern political bodies indicates clearly that men have always been conscious of their existence and importance. This, however, did not make them protect the activities in the private realm directly, but rather the boundaries separating the privately owned from other parts of the world, most of all from the common world itself. The distinguishing mark of modern political and economic theory, on the other hand, in so far as it regards private property as a crucial issue, has been its stress upon the private activities of property owners and their need of government protection for the

sake of accumulation of wealth at the expense of the tangible property itself. What is important to the public realm, however, is not the more or less enterprising spirit of private businessmen, but the fences around the houses and gardens of citizens.²⁵

According to Hannah Arendt, then, it is the loss of the importance of the boundary in modern sensibilities which has significantly contributed to the loss of the distinction between the private and the public realms, as well as to the loss of the sense of responsibility of the public to the private or of the private to the public. Subsequently, all these have contributed significantly to the loss of the sense of placeness. Seen in this way, it would seem that the ethical structure of the built environment relates directly to the existence and recognition of the importance of the boundary. Which would also imply that we may be able to use the configuration of the physical boundary as an important tool in order to rediscover the lost sense of placeness, to redefine the public and private realms, and to minimize the destructive dimensions of our unregulated consumption resulting from a lack of mutual responsibility between the public and the private domains in contemporary cities. We discuss these issues next.

Why the configuration of the boundary may be an important tool in recovering the traditional urban values?

Our review of the literature has suggested that critics in general have agreed that the boundary as a spatial concept is irrelevant in late twentieth century cities because of a lack of interest in an intrinsic differentiation of placeness. In addition, critics also have suggested a shift in emphasis from the spatial domain to the temporal domain which has contributed to this loss of placeness. However, it can be argued that the distinction we make between "of space" and "of time" to show that time is becoming increasingly more important than space in our cities cannot be correct. These two domains are indeed

inseparable because ultimately both have to converge in the spatial-temporal mode of understanding.²⁶ This is to say, any understanding of the built environment either as an establishment of place, or of time is essentially one-sided, and if the boundary is somehow important in *time*, then we must also believe that it is important in *space* as well. Heidegger's famous description of a Black Forest farmhouse, in the article "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," thus depends equally on the temporal and spatial dimensions of dwelling and building. He writes: "The nature of building is letting dwell. . . . Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build."²⁷ In the same article, Heidegger also favors the concept of *Raum* as a phenomenologically bounded clearing or domain over the concept of infinite space, *spatium in extensio*. For him the boundary is important, because it marks the *beginning* of the sense of *placeness*. He writes, "A boundary is not that at which something stops, but as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing."²⁸ This sense of *presencing*, as Heidegger uses it, is an act of differentiation between a specific *place* and a sea of unbounded, unlimited space, without which a phenomenological *existence* would have been impossible. Likewise, Heidegger would say that to live detached from place and community is to inhabit without dwelling, to exist without being (**Figure 11**).

In contrast to Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, defines the necessity of placeness from a political point of view. She proposes at least three distinctive features of the public realm which may have direct relevance to the sense of placeness: 1) It is where things or actions are made visible and accessible; 2) it is what everybody holds in common; and 3) it is what lends immortality to humans. She writes:

Only the existence of a public realm and the world's subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life span of the mortal men. . . . Without this

transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible.²⁹

Hannah Arendt's insistence on the necessity of permanence echoes the famous passage in Aristotle, "Considering human affairs, one must not . . . consider man as he is and not consider what is mortal in mortal things, but think about them [only] to the extent that they have the possibility of immortalizing."³⁰

The boundary is important precisely because it is the first step of human intervention in the physical landscape which guarantees against the futility of individual life, and defines the space for the relative permanence (Figure 12).

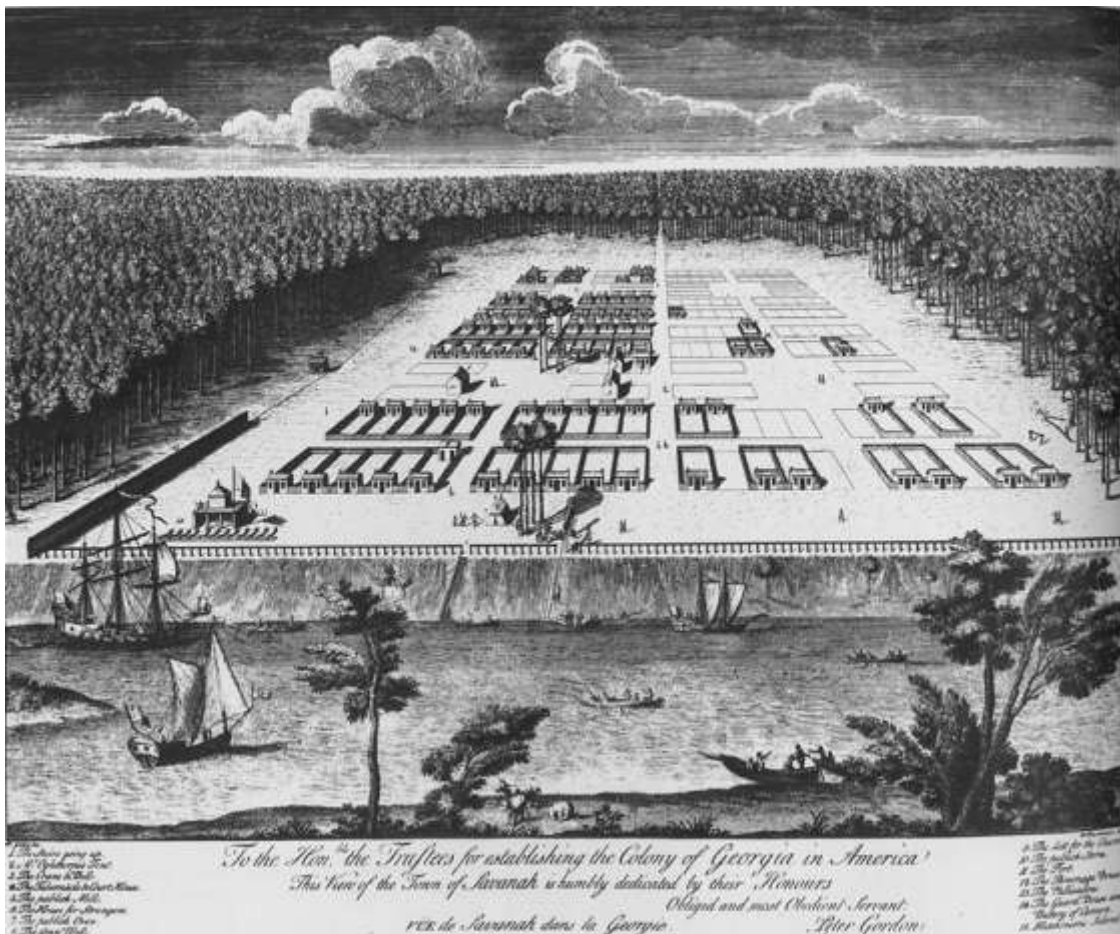


Figure 11: "A boundary is not that at which something stops, but . . . that from which something begins its presencing." Savannah in 1734 . (Source: Mills Lane, *Savannah Revisited: A pictorial History*, Savannah: Beehive Press, 1973.)

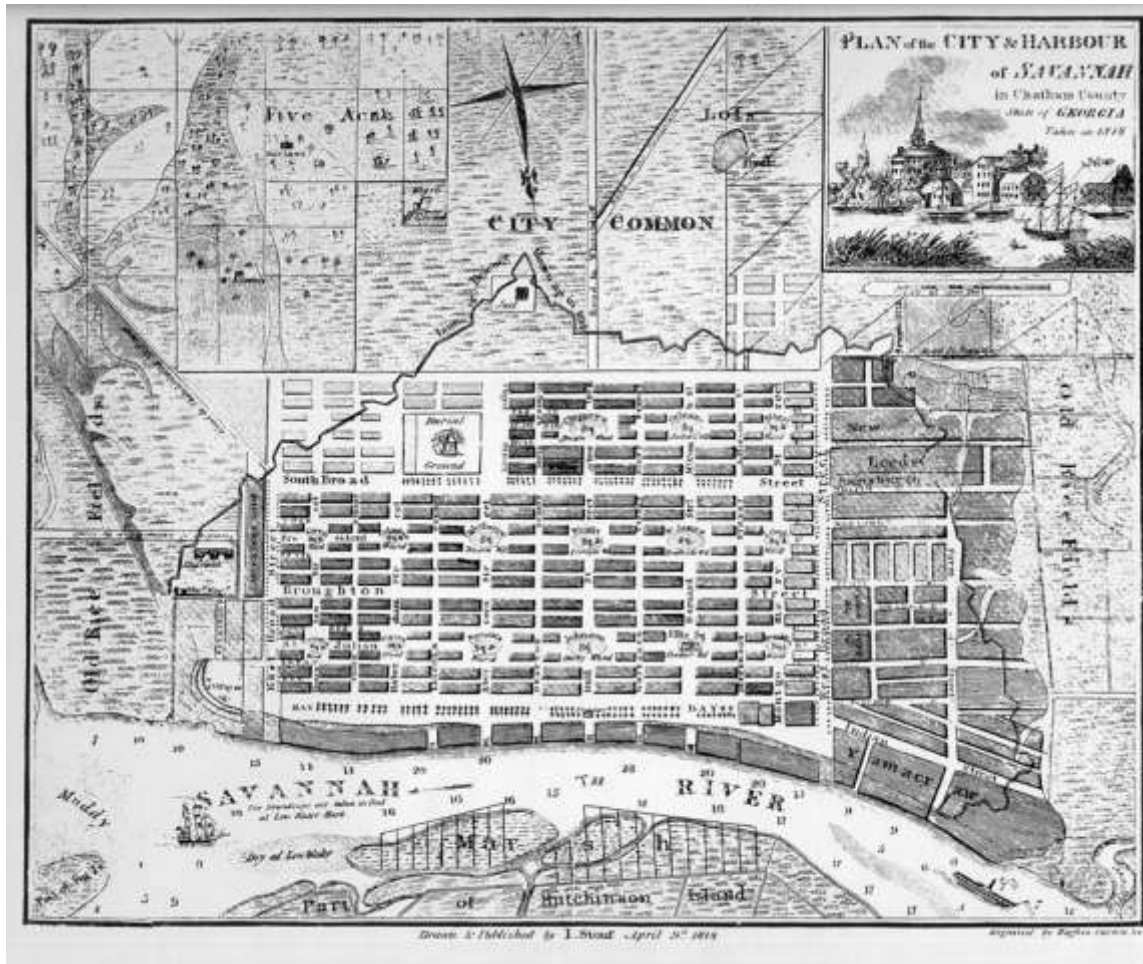


Figure 12: Savannah in 1818. By now the lines on the ground have been transformed into a stable interface between the public and the private realms of the city. In addition, the relationship between the center and the periphery has also become clearer through the articulation of the boundary. (Source: Mills Lane, *Savannah Revisited: A pictorial History*, Savannah: Beehive Press, 1973.)

According to Hannah Arendt, the *permanent visible presence* of the public world, on the one hand, separates and protects us from falling onto one another; on the other hand, it allows for a unity because separate individuals can relate to it, and thus can create a common world out of differences: "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the [public] world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."³¹ The necessity for apparent *separation* for the purpose of *bringing together* in the form of a discourse perhaps found its first expression in Plato when he writes: "The isolation of everything from everything else means a complete abolition of all discourse, for any discourse we can have owes its existence to the weaving together of forms."³² A similar theme can also be found in the *Timeaus*, where Plato identifies *similarity* and *differentiation* as two of the three basic elements out of which the whole universe is created.³³ Thus even for Plato, who considers the good as an external unchanging ideal, an object of contemplation removed from this world, the demarcation of the boundary becomes an important act in his ideal city. About which Arendt writes:

What prevented the *polis* from violating the private lives of its citizens and made it hold sacred the boundaries surrounding each property was not the respect for private property. . . , but the fact that without owning a house a man could not participate in the affairs of the world because he had no location in it which was properly his own. . . . Even Plato, whose political plans foresaw the abolition of private property and an extension of the public sphere to the point of annihilating private life altogether, still speaks with great reverence of Zeus Herkeios, the protector of borderlines, and calls the *horoi*, the boundaries between one estate and another, divine, without seeing any contradiction.³⁴

Of course, spatial proximity strengthens the force of connecting separate things in the built environment. However, the feeling of being close together does not depend on spatial proximity only.

Distance can be either dissolved or stretched to virtual infinity by intervening boundaries as well. In order to create a unity out of diversity which we all might call the "public" in our cities, we must find suitable ways to define this intervening boundary. For it, a lack of boundary may be as harmful as an over-defined or too rigidly defined boundary. For example, rigidly defined boundary resulted from the concept of zoning of modern planning has segregated urban life into isolated functions. It has eliminated any possibility of encounter and interaction, which is the basic ingredient of a public life (**Figures 13 & 14**). According to Scruton, in the absence of a public life with which to contrast its inner isolation, the individual cannot achieve its true security of private life. He writes, "[In] this "decontaminated" world [of separate zones] there can be no objective order. All is subjectivity, the isolated and unjustified "I want," built upon itself in a thousand repetitions."³⁵ Hannah Arendt's profound observation on this issue is also worth quoting:

the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. . . . The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective. [This could happen] under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were member of one family, each multiply and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor. In both instances, men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, or being seen and being heard by them.³⁶

More recently, Jameson presents the pathological dimension of the planners and architects who seek to restore normality to the placelessness of our contemporary cities.³⁷ Jameson claims that our fascination for movement and willingness to live in a temporal space have produced spaces where multivalent images constantly disorient spectators. The cure Jameson conjures up for this is the ability to cognitively map the space, which, of course, is likely to depend on the physical spatial layout. For this he

emphasizes the importance of the configuration of the boundary, which is the primary device to map--both cognitively and physically--the space in which we operate. However, we need to make the boundary visible, not only because it is a primary tool to conceptualize space, as Jameson suggests, but also because, as Krieger writes,

a lack of boundary simply creates a kind of chaotic environment which none of us feel very proprietary towards--neither the residents nor the rest of the community nor certainly outsiders.. . . Making boundaries is akin to stabilizing the city so that its virtues remain across generations rather than seeming to be temporary, not like those houses that gather feet and go away. So create edges and boundaries. Make them very strong. They are akin to making a defined environment, a series of places of stasis which, in all of our cities, are the places that we most enjoy and love.³⁸

From the above discussion it then becomes quite apparent that for several reasons the configuration of the boundary maybe a useful tool in reconstituting the sense of placeness in the urban environment of contemporary cities: First, it the most elementary cognitive tool for mapping the built environment. Second, it is the most elementary physical act of differentiation in the built environment. Third, it is the most elementary visible tool used in organizing the built environment. Fourth, it is the most elementary physical act of permanence in the built environment. And lastly, it is the most elementary act of initiating a process of growth in the built environment. However, these may still not explain explicitly how the configuration of the boundary may help us to minimize the destructive dimensions of the unregulated consumption in contemporary cities. We discuss the issue next.



Figure 13: Nolli's Plan of Rome (1748) shows how the city had sustained a structural relationship between its private and public domains through the articulation of the boundary. (Source: Stanford Anderson, *On Streets*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.)

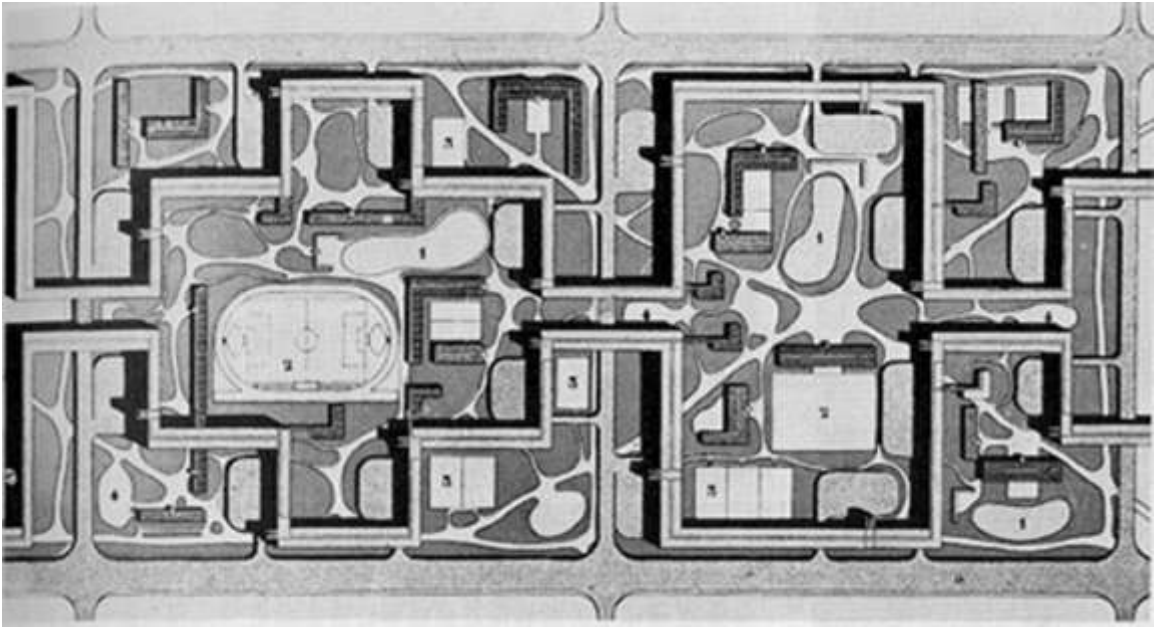


Figure 14: In "La Ville Verte" (1930) Le Corbusier conceives the open space independently of the buildings. Hence, the articulation of the space becomes a matter of cosmetic treatment rather than of structural definition. The boundary loses its significance as a structural element of the city. (Source: Le Corbusier, *Radiant City*.)

Can the boundary work against the consumptive attitudes of the post-industrial society?

Henri Lefebvre in *Le Production de l'Espace* has claimed that capitalism pulverizes space into homogenized, and fragmented parcels, and thus is able to utilize spaces as one of its tactics for survival--occupying it, producing with it, withdrawing from it and destroying it by transforming use into exchange value, or social space into abstract space. In the end, an uneven pattern of development appears across the surface of the city, enabling parts of the city to make profit at the expense of the suffering of others.³⁹ However, some of the most fatal consequences of capitalism's consumptive attitude toward land or space are not always intentional, and hence have eluded our concern for a long time. A general term for such phenomena is *externality*. Externality, an abbreviation for external economies and diseconomies, is

defined as certain unpriced and perhaps non-monetary effects of the activity of one element upon other elements in the urban system.⁴⁰ Fairly standard examples of externalities in our cities include the loss of time due to traffic congestion, the noise and pollution arising from vehicles and industries, and the loss of life consequent upon the increase in air or ground traffic. Externalities exist as "spatial fields" of effects. Effects of these spatial fields may vary in intensity and extent depending on the type of function or use. Externality fields may be negative or positive, or sometimes, both. For example, an airport has important benefits for employment and movement, but it also is a major source of pollution and noise. Very little is known about the shape and form of these externality fields in an urban environment, but there can be no doubt that their locations have powerful impacts. Even though such external effects can arise from both private and public activity, it can be argued that basis of these effects lies in economic self-interest. That is because it is always cheaper for a person to discharge his wastes directly into the commons than it is to purify these first.

For last few decades economics and relevant public institutions have been busy internalizing the externality effects, which requires that a positive market price be imputed to the currently unpriced though scarce resource. However, the possibility of internalizing an external effect does not mean that the creation of an adverse external effect need not make things worse. The introduction of an adverse external effect into the economy is a bad thing no matter how the economy adapts to it. Furthermore, we simply do not have necessary legal and technological means, and relevant market mechanism to control *three-dimensional* territories within which humans inhabit. For example, we simply do not know how to keep the air above our land clean without covering the land itself with a geodesic dome, or how to save the trees on our land due to a fall of the water-table because of an increase in the rate of water consumption of the city. It is unlikely that we will gain the means to control these externalities in any foreseeable future.⁴¹

The absence of any easy solution to externality effects in our built environment reveals to us the importance of the *situation ethics*, which defines an act as a function of the state of the system at the time it is performed.⁴² For example, to use the commons as a subject of private interest does not harm the general public in a low density settlement; however, the same behavior in a dense city may be unbearable. We have invented administrative laws to augment statutory laws in order to take care of different situations. However, since these situations may vary infinitely, no amount of legal invention may be sufficient to control an unpredictable future.

Under the above mentioned circumstances, the best solution to the problem of externality effects may be to plan for a condition where no such effects are generated, or where such effects are minimized. It is conceivable that boundaries can be stipulated in ways so as to reduce, or to eliminate the spatial field effects of externalities. That is because some of the basic city planning features, such as land use pattern, future growth management, and protection of the valued resources, depend on the stipulation of the boundary. More importantly, the boundary defines the manner in which the individual and collective come together in the world of action. Its character and disposition signal our relationship to the world outside, or how we perceive our relationship to nature. According to J. B. Jackson, "a boundary is what makes it possible for a society to have its own individuality. . . It is a subject every environmental planner should explore: what should be included within a boundary and how are to locate them? for boundary is an essential element in the public landscape."⁴³ Similarly, Reinhold Niebuhr writes: "The fence and the boundary line are the symbols of the spirit of justice. They set the limits upon each man's interest to prevent one from taking advantage of the other".⁴⁴ As long as the boundary depends on the dimensions of ethical practice--where the myth of progress is defined by the symbiotic limits of the individual and the collective, of man and nature--we can expect that it will not only prevent one from taking advantage of the other, but also enhance the qualities of our built environment as a whole.

Reference Notes

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¹⁹ Plato, *Statesman*, ed. by C. J. Rowe (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1995), 305e.

²⁰ Source: Clive Dilnot, "The Ethical Structure of Architectural Form," in *GSD News*, Harvard University Graduate School of Design (Summer, 1993).

²¹ Ibid.

²² For Hannah Arendt, the "common world" signifies the "public" in its permanent material form, hence is available to everybody in the society. For further details, see: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 54.

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²⁴ Ibid., pp. 63-64.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

²⁶ For details, see: Cassirer, op. cit.

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²⁸ Ibid., p. 154.

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