Wall, Space and Violence

how the wall explores the twin role as the oppressor and potential liberator, a critique on the re-interpretation of its use, probing violence and peace

Since the collapse of the former bipolar system of international rivalry, there has been a tendency among architectural theorists to pay attention to the issue of violence in its diverse spatial manifestations. This propensity has imposed itself with renewed urgency, forcing architecture to acknowledge its relation to violence in a more pronounced way.

- Bechir Kenzari

I no longer know what there is behind the wall, I no longer know there is a wall, I no longer know this wall is a wall, I no longer know what is a wall. I no longer know that in my apartment there are walls, and that if there weren’t any walls, there would be no apartment.

- Georges Perec
Etymology

Ever since the birth of the binary system, “Good” or “Bad” and “Yes” or “No”, etymology has been given a new meaning; to side with emotions of love or hate as Sigmund Freud explored in Ambivalence and Ambiguity. In today’s culture we have come to associate boundaries to be a negative factor in society negating their honest nature. While we glee at the utopic idea of freedom and uniformity, that culture has time and time imbedded in us as the “Right” ideology (pun intended), anything “Left” of the right is frowned upon as oppressive, controlled, and confined. Yet much like the idea of Communism or Socialism has been frowned upon after the Cold War, it has become something our culture doesn’t question much for fear of defeatism and submission to the ideology that we seem so privileged too. Separation is quite frankly an inevitable factor in societies evolution, arguing its ethical purpose is not the point for the sooner we accept things for what they are and start creatively incorporating them into urban life, the more progress can be measured.

Good fences make good neighbors

Mending Wall is a poem written by Robert Frost whose use of great metaphors brilliantly illustrates the nature of creating boundaries in society. This piece is about two characters, X and Y, who are in fact neighbors, and every year they set an appointment to walk along this imaginary line that separates them as they fix there walls from either side respectively. As they are mending their walls, character X starts to speak about the nature of this wall and if it was really necessary. He argues that he has no cows that will go to his neighbor’s side and therefore, there was absolutely no need for this separation, and no need for this stone aged tradition. However, character Y determinedly replies by referring to an old saying that, «Good fences make good neighbors». This poem, pivots around the grand ideas of borders, separation and barrier building. Although it may seem on a surface understanding of this poem that Frost metaphorically represents two types of people, one that insists on this idea of freedom and transparency, while the other is somewhat perceived as close-minded, and anti-social, the poem really comments on the nature of having a wall separation and why character Y, which represents a demographic in society, has associated it with negative emotions. Ironically, the wall is the very first foundation of society and civilization. Civilizations created boundaries in order to recognize territories and independence from one another. On a level more applicable to Frost’s poem, barriers confine, yet they also encourage the act of freedom and productivity challenged by the framework one exists in1. This very notion of boundary and separation is inevitable in civilization. We are all different people, different cultures, different backgrounds and beliefs, but this is not a critique blaming the effects of globalizations. Separation makes the individual unique and different from another individual. This is why Robert Frost’s poem is very powerful in supporting my hypothesis on the inevitable boundaries man has created in order for evolution to grow within a certain confinement. This hypothesis is in no way

1 “Mending Walls” by Robert Frost. After having read this poem this is my interpretation of what I thought the metaphors were referring to.
a pessimistic observation of our modern world, but the contrary, stating its inevitability, the wall, a clear space divider, is probably the most honest expression of respective boundaries. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, this architectural typology has been criticized on its boldness to segregate space, its violence in preforming such rupture to either side of the wall. One has to agree that the physical wall to a certain extent does apply a very violent spatial definition of separation because of the very nature of its architecture, thick, solid and vertical. However, the argument in case is that binding violent events with violent spaces has been a subject of speculation and is widely understudied according to Bechir Kenzari, mostly because the binary relation of architecture/violence must be analyzed within the context of social-politics and psychoanalysis, not architecture alone. This has thus rendered the subject far more complex and subjective because of its diverse roots. However, having mentioned the nature of the wall as a magnet to violence, the real question that should be addressed is how the wall could depart from such pessimistic preconception. The wall like any other built architecture has a certain lifetime marked by the events around it. At its conceived birth, it is strong in its message of separation and division, yet overtime (and this example is seen throughout history with the Berlin Wall, and something we yet to see within the Middle East) these walls depart from their negative image of violence and journey into the iconic symbol of freedom, that one day when this boundary is transformed, it will become the symbol of liberation and hope.

A fly is caught in a jar with the lid on it, but its still okay, it can still fly

Urban politics has played a crucial role in the reshaping of cities and their geographic boundaries, but also in understanding society and how we have re-invented urbanism. In the 60’s urbanism and the role of the inhabitant of the city combined took center stage in theoretical writing. Notable theories were developed by the Situationists International, a group of revolutionaries who’s ideas where deeply rooted in Marxism apposing Capitalist ideology. Their theoretical work on the fulfillment of human desires influenced urbanism as they heavily criticized the fragmented modern city of Paris as a site of routine consumption where “the slavish existence of living, working, and recreation cannot possibly constitute the starting point for building or living environment”. They manifested this “rethinking the city” into a utopia that breaks down barriers between function and play. Their collective work on urbanism is a demand to an alternative urban life, one that is “less alienated, and more meaningful in the perpetual pursuit of the unknowable novelty of the city.” In broader terms, the situationists’ writings unravel the ideas of total freedom within a city. With their mechanism of the psychogeography, in which they define as “the precise effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, acting directly on the affective comportments of the

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3 McDonough, Tom. The Situationists and the City. London: Verso, 2009. Print. Having read the book entirely, this is my understanding on the values of the situationists and their arguments taken from their numerous articles.
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the Situationists criticized the boredom they experience as they practiced the act of “derive”, which was simply an attentive wander through the city. They wandered around the city of Paris specifically, and envisaged a city where “the principal activity of the inhabitants will be continuous derive...where couples will no longer spend their nights in their house dedicated to habitation and reception.” They also go as far as stating that the more a place is “set aside for freedom of play, the more it influences comportment and the greater is its force of attraction” drawing examples such as Monaco or Las Vegas.

Exodus, or the circle of life?

In his final year in 1972 at the Architectural Association, Rem Koolhaas and his colleagues worked on their thesis entitled “Exodus: Voluntary Prison of Architecture” in which it elaborates a narrative of a walled City within London. This thesis project is a great example that supports my hypothesis on the wall acting as a liberating factor rather then a volunteer for violence. Exodus is a project based on the factor of time. Time is an important factor in this project because it demonstrates the lifetime of the wall and how it has the capacity to change its original intentions of isolating. In Rem’s opening lines to introduce the thesis he mentions the context of the City divided into two parts, the good half, and the bad half.

The Wall was a masterpiece.

Originally no more than some pathetic strings of barbed wire abruptly dropped on the imaginary line of the border, its psychological and symbolic effects were infinitely more powerful than its physical appearance. The Good Half, now glimpsed only over the forbidding obstacle from an agonizing distance, became even more irresistible. Those trapped, left behind in the gloomy Bad Half, became obsessed with vain plans for escape. Hopelessness reigned supreme on the wrong side of the Wall.

As so often before in this history of mankind, architecture was the guilty instrument of despair.

In Rem’s project, he encapsulates the very nature of the wall’s existence in society. His project explores the effectiveness of this built separation, and how it has become a symbol of escape for the bad half. Furthermore, this wall that was built to separate the good from the bad, over time has become a repeated cycle where the good half was infiltrated by the bad half rendering the wall ineffective

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to separation. Clearly, Rem’s take on the nature of the wall is stated in his last sentence that its “architecture (is) the guilty instrument of despair”.

**Good Walls make terrible friends; a frontier scenario**

Eyal Weizman’s “Hollow Land” is a powerful analysis on the wall as an architectural structure that sustains the occupation of the Palestinian territories,” and also as a “conceptual way of understanding political issues as constructed realities”. 8 His believes that the nature of wall (boundaries) in modern day situations is, “a geography of stable, static places, and the balance across linear and fixed sovereign borders, frontiers are deep, shifting, fragmented and elastic territories.” 9 His mention of deep, fragmented and elastic territories is in reference to a specific wall/ border he is observing, the wall separating Palestinians from Palestine. He also mentions that “The Wall functioned very effectively as a powerful image within a media-economy of the conflict, one resonating within a Western historical imagination still engaged with unresolved memories of its colonial and Cold War legacies.”10 However that it also served to elevate the opposition to an international audience. The different semantics of the names given to the wall, whether “fence”, a “wall” or a “Wall” or a "barrier" also played a major role in describing the true potential of the boundary. His use of expressive etymology when discussing “political plastic”, a term coined to refer to the theoretical and physical shifting borders in Israel, 11 demonstrates the wall as a binary love/ hate scenario depending on what you call it and how it serves you. This helps create a feasible ground in which one can step back from the political and social issues embedded in the architecture, and start to see The Wall as the wall.

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“Walking Through Walls” in real time

The sophisticated manoeuvre conducted by Israeli military in 2002 on the city of Nablus in the West bank to “avoid using open streets and roads which defined the logic of movement through the city...rather they created pathways through domestic interiors” hollowing out the dense fabric of the city to and created what commander General Aviv Kochavi calls “inverse geometry” 12. This defied logic of movement reinterpreted, and reconfigured the concept of barriers. The IDF moved swiftly towards their threats, under the protection of the densely populated domestic infrastructure of the city. The abrupt penetration of war into the domestic domain was experienced by civilians who recall that “suddenly, that wall disappears with a deafening roar... and through the wall pours one soldier after another... pointing to another wall now covered by a bookcase... they blew up the wall and continued to our neighbor's house”13. General Aviv Kochavi clearly mentions how this mechanical tactic was used and defined as a “worm that eats it way forward... transgressing boundaries (with) conditions of smoothness”. 14 This new technique used in modern warfare comments on the nature of the wall as an architectural obstacle rendered useful in its contradictory function. These domestic walls or party walls, share the boundary of separation between households, however, this technique of walking through walls creates a new mode of circulation through the dense domestic walls of the city. However terrifying it may sound, it creates an opportunity for the people to move across the city without being subjected to the occupation. 15

“Un-walling the Wall”

In historical siege warfare, the signal of the walls destruction meant the defeat of the city-state. 16 In “Hollow Land” the subject of the wall is used throughout the totality of the book, either described as an obstacle or hinted between the lines about its potential for liberation. When discussing the subject of the wall in the present situation of Palestine, Eyal Weizman shares his well-researched opinions about these boundaries calling them plastic boundaries, boundaries that are constantly shifting and moving. This lively comment about the wall shows his belief that the wall should never be a static obstacle of separation, but a constantly changing border that somehow benefits both sides. What I also really

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enjoy is his between the lines hinting that the wall is a symbol of hope as history has shown and proven.

**Situationists are tree huggers**

However in the absence of restrictions, the same ones the situationists were political charged to abolish, how can one understand the built environments limitations? I argue that in the situation of presenting the path of freedom or that of a confined boundary space, the automatic response of today’s society would be that of freedom because it has been painted as the morally correct path. However, if these two ideologies where structurally manifested into architectural spaces through the nature of etymology, freedom would consist of boundless space, propelling the idea of limitless possibilities while confinement would be a clearly defined space within a framework. This framework, which clear defines a specific space, retains and attests its honest architectural materialization. While its antithetical, freedom, can only be manifested as non-architectural as boundaries are absent and due to our pessimistic nature we will always constitute a fear of one going to far out into boundary less space.

The pressing problem with the Situationists utopic manifesto is their protest for a city that does not function on the basis of a structured growth. “They aim to break own distinctions between private and public, inside and outside, and to replace private space with a fluid borderless public surface through which movement can be unexpected.” 17 The very idea of boundary is so often seen as a negative proposition for separation. Who would want to sleep and eat in the same place? Play and work? This is the creation of a chaotic city, where everything is happening everywhere. The lack of structure is a failure to the growth of the city because it relies on the people to share common interests. David Harvey discusses on the nature of society in Rebel Cities as “fragmented, and divided, multiple in its aims and needs, more often itinerant, disorganized and fluid rather than solidly implanted.” 18 The Situationists demands the “common” force of the urban dwellers to fight such structure, however sadly I don’t really think they understood the complexity of a nation of people. The truth is that we are a society of different aims and agenda’s, we might be able to live together, but we can't be forced to believe in the same things. This is why I argue that the Situationist’s belief in freedom and boundary-less cities is really an attack on the idea of private space and their hatred for bourgeois subjectivity. This really just makes their manifesto very subjective and useless to the discussion of the nature of boundaries or walls.

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On Rem

In Rem’s Exodus thesis project, which starts out with an incredible well-written text explaining the timeline of his proposal to divide the city in London, I felt it ended with a very satirical statement on the wall itself that I happen to agree too. He starts off by clearly identifying two types of people, the good and the bad who are separated by this symbolical strong wall. However, as time progresses in his project, the wall that was built to divide the city of London is rendered useless because it ends where it started. This is to say that the wall was strong in its message of division at first, however over time, the wall becomes powerless, as the bad half is able to invade the good half once again. Yet, if I was to analyze this design narrative statement by Rem, it seems that he also agrees that the wall does become ineffective as a boundary and potential a symbol of peace, as the good and the bad people get another chance at living together once again.

Subjectivity and the Wall

The “wall” or “boundary” is a very subjective topic in architecture. Seen as an architectural object it is a pillar in architecture as it has the function of barring weight and confining private and public space. However, put into a social and political context, the wall is given a new meaning, that of being politically charged with the hatred of separation. Nevertheless, the wall has pointed out the pessimistic nature of human beings. I say this because I truly believe that the wall, put into the context of social and political charge, is an honest manifestation of separation and confinement. Today although many of these “barriers of separation” are not physical the idea of confinement is being blurred into the urban life with the use of high sophisticated surveillance and tracking devices. Society is confused on what to believe anymore, the honest wall of confinement or the “physically” free nature of being, however not so honest really. Today we still believe that confinement is a physical object visually seen and that this spatial object hinders freedom. However we have forgotten that the presence of this wall is what has described freedom in the first place, such as the wall, which represents control, defining hope to those around it.
Bibliography:


