Reconstituting Traditional Urban Values: The Role of the Boundary in the Contemporary City

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Critics have pointed out 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. Contemporary cities very often lack the sense of placeness, vibrant public life, and harmonious relationship between man and nature characteristic of the traditional urban environment. This article studies how the configuration of the physical boundary may be used as an important tool to reconstitute these values in contemporary cities. It suggests that the boundary is more than an abstract pattern of lines. Rather, it is integral to life within the city, and should possess greater significance in the design of the built environment.

The word “boundary,” as found in standard English-language dictionaries, means “that which bounds, divides, or separates,” or “something that indicates a border or limit.” In its generally accepted meaning, the concept of boundary is used to describe the physical landscape at various levels of granularity. In some cases, it may be used to describe the shape and size of individual plots; in others, it may be used to describe the configuration of much bigger units, such as urban blocks, census tracts, districts, etc.; and in others, it may be used to describe the configuration of cities, regions, and countries. Such uses imply that the concept of boundary is an important elementary device in the conceptualization of the physical landscape, that it helps people map the landscape they inhabit (FIG.1).

In none of the standard uses of the concept of boundary, however, is there a recognition that the manmade physical landscape is more than an agglomeration of land plots. Nor does a clear sense emerge that the concept of boundary-making involves more than the
CONTEMPORARY CITIES AND THE STATUS OF THE BOUNDARY

The term “contemporary cities” is used in this article to refer to a class of built environment probably best exemplified by cities in the Sunbelt region of the United States. The region, as commonly defined, includes Southern California; the states of Arizona, Texas, New Mexico and Florida; and perhaps other Southern states such as Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia. Of course, not all the cities in this region possess the characteristic features of contemporary cities. Likewise, cities outside the region may possess many of these qualities. A list of contemporary cities might include Albuquerque, Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Orlando, Phoenix, Portland, Tampa and Tucson. In order to facilitate a finer description of the nature of urbanism in these cities, authors have used such terms as exurbs, technourbs, urban villages, supersuburbs, and edge cities. In this article, the term “contemporary cities” is used in a generic sense to include all these types of built environment.

Among the primary attributes of contemporary cities is that they seem to have a nonhierarchical structure. Instead of a single, dominant center, these cities have a number of equally dominant centers. More specifically, the cities normally comprise 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 characterized by a society which Daniel Bell has called “post-industrial.” However, it would be a mistake to suggest that Bell’s post-industrial society exists only in such locales. In fact, the mentality underlying post-industrial society seems to be more pervasive, and may be found even in more traditional American cities. But, while it may be possible to map the socio-political dimensions of a post-industrial society onto the physical domain of a so-called contemporary city, it may not be possible to do so onto the physical domain of a more traditional city.

One important feature of post-industrial society is the existence of a tension between reality and image. According to Richard Bolton, 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.” Jean Baudrillard identified four successive phases in the use of images. First, as representations, images reflect reality; second, they distort reality; third, they mask the absence of reality; and finally, they bear no relationship to reality whatsoever. In the last phase, images are their own simulacra. Baudrillard believes that the use of images in post-industrial soci-

establishment of sets of abstract lines. In common usage, the word thus fails to convey a sense of the importance of human actions that define the physical world through the disposition and configuration of boundaries.

In contrast to the standard uses of the word, Ernst Cassirer wrote in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, “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.” For Cassirer, then, the boundary is not a passive divider, but something intrinsically related to the object it defines. Such a view suggests that the problem of proper conceptualization of the boundary is to be determined through the action which puts the whole in relation to its parts. Put another way, Cassirer’s concept implies that in physical-spatial domains such as the built environment, the problem of the boundary must be resolved with respect to various actions and processes incessantly occurring in these domains. Hence, any understanding of the built environment requires exploration of how societies create the need for specific spatial concepts, and how these concepts are materialized through the creation of various types of boundary.

Among architectural and urban theorists, Amos Rapoport has proposed a definition of the boundary which is comparable to that of Cassirer. According to Rapoport, urban form may be considered, at least partly, in terms of the articulation of boundaries — i.e., which elements or domains are linked, and which separated; and what barriers or rules define their levels of interaction, inclusion or exclusion, etc. Rapoport also suggests that the choice of which boundaries to use and how to arrange them in different physical domains demands an understanding of the prevailing socio-cultural system and its behavioral, spatial and symbolic components. In other words, according to Rapoport, to understand the status of the physical boundary in the landscape of contemporary cities requires an understanding first of the basic socio-cultural and socio-political dimensions of these cities, and then of how these dimensions are realized in spatial forms.
Another important feature of post-industrial society is its emphasis on modes of consumption. Charles Leven has suggested that while “old” cities were designed to maximize production, “new” cities are determined spatially to maximize consumption. An undifferentiated proliferation of malls, offices, hotels, drive-in theaters, and fast-food restaurants may exemplify the nature of this kind of urbanism in contemporary cities. Margaret Crawford has used the shopping mall to illustrate the spectacle of consumption, arguing that the design of malls is calculated in every respect to stimulate consumption. In the mall, time, space and weather are suspended; connections to real places are replaced by a spectacle of exotic attractions and diversions; and images of commodities are used in attractive ways to enhance consumption. According to Crawford, shopping malls provide clues to why and how contemporary cities impoverish the richness of traditional urbanity. She claims malls essentially provide a symbolic rejection of the diversity of street life. The safe, controlled, clean environment of the mall is calculated to serve a socioeconomically homogeneous clientele and to exclude those who do not fit the profile (Fig. 3). Instead of providing inhabitants with a real interface between the private and public realms of the city, such privatized worlds simulate a public realm in order to fulfill fantasies of desire and consumption. Thus, the presence of people, instead of generating a body politic, masks a true condition of alienation.

The kind of urbanism offered by contemporary cities has been summarized by Ellen Dunham-Jones: “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.”

In contemporary cities, one might add, the concept of place has lost ground to the sense of a universal, placeless...
domain. And since the act of differentiation based on a sense of placeness has largely been reduced to the undifferentiated "singularity" of a placeless domain, the role of the boundary as a significant physical-spatial device to create differentiation has been greatly reduced as well. Any intrinsic differentiation is little more significant, because modern life is enchanted with small, insignificant differences. Such differentiation is certainly not what Emile Durkheim had in mind when he tied organic solidarity to the rise of differentiation in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

Durkheim failed to see that any differentiation taken to its extreme can collapse into an anonymous "singularity," where the sense of intrinsic, significant differentiation will be lost (Figs. 4, 5). This is possibly what led Melvin Webber to coin such terms as "community without propinquity" or "non-place urban realm" to rationalize the loss of civic domain in post-industrial society.

Figures 6-10 present a set of very different boundary conditions in the physical landscape of the United States. They serve to help visualize the nature of the transformations within the landscape of the contemporary city. One of the most significant human interventions in the landscape of the United States was the laying down of a rectilinear grid over a vast territory of the country in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. This grid, which covered most of the Sunbelt region, gave political definition to the territory, and throughout the nineteenth century it was used as a primary tool for organizing the urban landscape (Fig. 6). Generally, within cities of the

![Figure 4](image-url)  
*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](image-url)  
*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. Reprinted by permission of Phaidon Press.)
period, a hierarchy of streets ensured a sufficient level of differentiation in the locational attributes of plots within the grid. Such attributes facilitated different types of land uses, ensuring a diversity in urban life (Fig. 7). However, by the mid-twentieth century, various socioeconomic and technological inventions could no longer be accommodated within the political boundaries defined by the earlier grid. Instead of supporting a diversity of urban life, the built environment was now seen as comprising a set of zones containing specialized functions. In some cases, the grid was totally ignored to ensure a homogeneity of locational attributes for a socioeconomically homogeneous clientele (Fig. 8). In others, the grid accommodated networks of freeways in ways that introduced discontinuity into the fabric of the city (Fig. 9). More recently, the grid has been ignored for purely economic reasons. For example, it is now profitable to build shopping centers, hotels, and recreational facilities in clusters, and most of the time such huge complexes destroy several blocks within the grid to facilitate the easy movement of people and goods (Fig. 10).

Paradoxically, critics argue, as the boundary is losing its value at the level of physical space, it is becoming more important in terms of time. As people are becoming more used to movement, breaks in continuity occur less within the boundary of a physical space than within a span of time, which is being incessantly restructured by advanced technology and industrial redeployment. Now urban space is no longer designated simply by a line between here and there, but it has become synonymous with the programming of a “time schedule.” For example, the theory of “shared jobs” offers each member a community an alternative plan in which shared timetables open onto whole new ways of sharing space. Paul Virilio has suggested that it has become imperative to deal with the question of “technological space-time.” He has written:

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 axiality 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

FIGURE 6. A landscape yet to be urbanized. The grid defines the political boundary. (From D. Canty, ed., The New City. © 1969 by Urban America Inc. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Co., Inc.)

FIGURE 7. A landscape of public-private dialectics. The boundary serves in 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 community life in this environment. (Source: Georgia Aerial Survey, Inc., 1995.)

FIGURE 8. (TOP LEFT) 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 definition of blocks, and the lack of open spaces at local levels may discourage community life in this environment. (From D. Canty, ed., The New City. © 1969 by Urban America Inc. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Co., Inc.)

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. Martin Heidegger has written that technology, which once revealed natural conditions and provided access to natural resources, now conceals nature. Heidegger distinguished between modern technology, which exploits nature and treats it as a standing reserve, and premodern technology, which revealed nature. He traced the root of the word “technology” back to the Greek word for art, *techne*, meaning a crafted art that expressed constructional logic poetically. Such “technology,” he wrote, is related to nature in the sense that it reveals it; modern technology, by contrast, distances man from nature by minimizing the effects of time, distance, climate, topography, and even physical presence.¹⁶

If neither traditional forms nor modern technology is able to impede the process of impoverishment within the built environment of the contemporary city, how can this process be resisted? Perhaps the most pertinent message on this issue is contained in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Here, Kant suggested that no amount of rule may be sufficient to ensure a prescribed end.¹⁷ Even when everything knowable is known, it may still be necessary to depend on the ability to recognize what the Greeks called *kairos*, i.e., knowing when to speak, and in what manner. *Kairos* cannot be understood by reference to a set of prescribed rules, or to the *techne*. It is part of practical reason and therefore inextricably bound up with the notion of the good. Plato advanced an analogy for this in *The Statesman*, where he compared political craft to artistry in weaving. Like weaving, he suggested, politics also must weave opposing factors into unity from an acute sense of what constitutes the good in life.¹⁸ Urbanism surely belongs in such company, because its dialectic must be driven by something like *kairos*. In order to constitute the good in cities, residents of those cities 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 distance between self and world. As Cassirer has claimed, the boundary is not simply an instrument of spatial organization; it does not merely contain life led within the city, but it is integral to it, and therefore possesses great significance in the process of city building. It is therefore necessary to understand the full dimensions of the bond between boundary and society and situate architecture and urbanism according to these dimensions. Designers and planners within the contemporary city have, however, often failed to recognize this bond between the boundary and the life contained within it, and so trace only the abstract pattern of lines on a map. They fail to recognize that the configuration of boundaries has profound significance within the physical landscape, and that the interaction between different domains of city life may depend to great extent on the nature of the interface provided by the configuration of the intervening boundary.

How has the boundary lost its concrete specificity both within modern consciousness and within the modern built

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¹⁶ This bond between the boundary and the life contained within

¹⁷ It is not enough simply to reveal the fact that the boundary is losing its value as a physical-spatial device, that the built environment is losing its sense of placeness, and that old distinctions between center and periphery, public and private, far and near, are fading. It may be necessary to decide whether to enhance this process of dematerialization and universalization, to create a homogenous, placeless domain without boundaries; or whether to restrict the process, and allow the boundary to serve its traditional purpose as the interface between self and environment. But an intermediate approach may also exist, as suggested by Paul Ricoeur: to achieve both ends — i.e., to take part in universalization while at the same time returning to traditional sources.⁷

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**THE CONTEMPORARY CITY AND THE RICOEUR OBJECTIVE**

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 simple-minded imitation of the past. Studies of premodern cultures reveal that material order in such cultures became meaningful only in relation to an invisible order that revealed the place of man not only within society and the built environment, but within a cosmological totality. Without such purposeful, invisible order, no amount of structure was sufficient to generate a meaningful environment.

The problem in the modern world is that no such intrinsic relationship between material form and invisible order exists. Neither does it seem likely that this archetypal ground of meaning can be made accessible from any set prescription. This may partly explain why zoning ordinances used by city authorities have failed to impede the process of impoverishment within the built environment of contemporary cities.

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**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.)
environment? One answer may lie in the persistent confusion between ethics and morality.

ETHICS, MORALITY, AND THE EROSION OF THE BOUNDARY

Etymological investigation of the words “morality” and “ethics” reveals that both are connected to the idea of custom, or of 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 is more vague. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sought to limit Platonic intellectualism, and founded ethics as a discipline independent of metaphysics. Aristotle emphasized the contingent nature of ethics, as opposed to Plato’s extreme mathematical exactness.

To Plato, good was an external unchanging ideal, an object of contemplation removed from the world. Aristotle, however, observed that each situation in a person’s life is profoundly different from every other, and that it is a person’s actions that give a situation its fundamentally inimitable quality. Hence, in his ethics the realization of the good comes about as an ongoing critique of the concrete actions of people in specific situations. In other words, in Aristotelian philosophy, ethics arises out of the recognition that there is a complex reciprocal relationship between a situation 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 notion of the “ethical,” which pertains more to civic or legal legitimacy. “Morbidity” in such a system has a clearly transcendent dimension. The distinction between ethics and morality is best expressed by Gilles Deleuze: “Ethics is a typology of immanent modes of existence, whereas morality always refers existence to transcendental values.”

The above distinction between ethics and morality has clear implications to an understanding of the built environment: 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 determinately bear upon the more immediate aspects related to humans. According to Clive Dilnot: “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 not merely contractually (as a legal principle), or as a formal idea (as a morality), but substantively, as a making.” On the basis of such a view, it would seem that any architectural decision may inherently be an ethical one which relates both to the political (i.e., how to build) as well as the social (i.e., how to live). This would also seem to imply that from an ethical viewpoint it is more important to judge the built environment against a set of concrete and immanent issues, than it is to evaluate it in terms of its attainment in relation to an ideal state.

However, in today’s context, due to an overemphasis on the “moral,” designers and planners have lost sight of the immediate, concrete aspects of the built environment. According to Hannah Arendt, such overemphasis on the “moral” is a by-product of the rise of the “social”:

> 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 world, 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.”

Thus, instead of the dichotomy between private and public realms typical of a Classical Greek polis or a Roman town, what has become important since the rise of Christian ideology has been a hierarchical social structure where relationships between members are an issue of morality. According to Arendt, such a sense of 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 artifact, 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.”

One of the implications of the onset of such an overarching concept of morality was a diminishment in the sense of the concrete responsibility of individuals in society to each other and to the collective. Thenceforth, goodness would be dependent on an individual’s relation to a set of predefined codes of morality; as long as individuals in a society followed these codes, the good of society was secured. Thus, in its aspiration to create an ideal state, Christian ideology turned away from an immediate accounting of the consequences of individual
action, and undermined previous notions of responsibility among individuals, and between individuals and the collective. The advent of such a powerful new concept also changed the notion of the boundary. The demarcation of boundaries had once been a matter of ethical responsibility, related to context and to immediate actions and relations. But the new sense of morality proposed that the boundary was an empty vessel, devoid of any kind of permanence, into which the “social” could be poured, or onto which an external use could be stamped as an obligation from without. Far from conjoining man and his artifice, the boundary now denoted their real, abyssal separation. Under such a condition, the relationship between artifice and its “otherness” became inherently problematic and unstable. By constantly forcing artifice into an external relationship with the other, the new sense of morality caused one of two things: either it led to the collapse of the physical boundary configuration into the social, thereby threatening whatever sense of meaning the boundary offered; or it resulted 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 consciousness the complex relationship between human beings and their artifice.

One way to disentangle the “ethical” from the “moral” may be to disentangle the “public” from the “social” — which, as Arendt would argue, is possible only by understanding the “non-private” part of the private realm, and without which, as John Locke has 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 which appeared in the realm of the city at the boundaries between one household and another. The law was originally identified with the boundary line, which in ancient times was actually a space, a kind of no-man’s land between the private and the public. Though the law of the Classical Greek polis transcended the ancient Greek understanding, it retained the original spatial significance of the boundary. Arendt has written about this as follows:

> 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.\(^{26}\)

Elsewhere, Arendt has remarked on contrasts between premodern 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.\(^{27}\)

According to 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 public realms, as well as the loss of the sense of responsibility of the public to the private or of the private to the public. Subsequently, all these factors contributed 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. This would also seem to imply that the configuration of the physical boundary might serve as an important tool in the rediscovery of the lost sense of placeness, in the redefinition of the public and private realms, and in the minimization of the destructive dimensions of those present patterns of unregulated consumption that have resulted from a lack of mutual responsibility between public and private domains in contemporary cities.

**TIME, SPACE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BOUNDARY**

As noted above, critics now agree the physical boundary has lost much of its relevance in contemporary cities because of a lack of interest in the intrinsic differentiation of placeness, and because of a shift in emphasis from the spatial to the temporal domain. It can be argued, however, that the distinction between “of space” and “of time” that underlies this commonly held view cannot be totally correct. Critics use such a distinction to argue that time is becoming increasingly more important than space in contemporary cities. But these two domains are, in fact, inseparable, because ultimately both have to converge in the spatial-temporal mode of understanding.\(^{28}\) Put another way, 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, it must be important in space. Thus, Heidegger’s famous description of a Black Forest farmhouse in the article “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” depended equally on the tem-
poral and spatial dimensions of dwelling and building. He wrote: “The nature of building is letting dwell. . . . Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.”

More recently, Fredric Jameson wrote that contemporary cities are impoverished mostly because they do not allow their residents to cognitively map their space of action. He argued that, in their fascination with movement and temporal space, architects and planners have undermined the importance of physical space in these cities. For Jameson, the ability to cognitively map physical space is essential in order to ensure a lively urban environment. Hence, he emphasized the importance of the configuration of the boundary, which is the primary device to map — both cognitively and physically.

THE SENSE OF PLACENESS

In “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger favored the concept of raum, as a phenomenologically bounded clearing or domain, over the concept of infinite space, which he called spatio in extensio. For him, the boundary was important because it marked the beginning of the sense of placeness. He wrote: “A boundary is not that at which something stops, but as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.” This sense of presencing, according to Heidegger, involved 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 claimed that to live detached from place and community was to inhabit without dwelling, to exist without being.

In contrast to Heidegger, in The Human Condition, Arendt defined the necessity of placeness from a political point of view. She proposed at least three distinctive features of the public realm with direct relevance to the sense of placeness: 1) that the public realm was where things or actions were made visible and accessible; 2) that the public realm was what everybody held in common; and 3) that the public realm was what allowed human beings to acquire a sense of immortality. She wrote:

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 man. . . . Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible.

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.”

The definition of boundaries is important precisely because it is the first step of human intervention in the physical landscape which guards against the futility of individual life, and which can define a space of relative permanence (figs. 11, 12). Some contemporary architects have put forward a similar viewpoint. For example, according to Krieger:

. . . 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.

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENTIATION

The necessity for apparent separation for the purpose of bringing together perhaps finds its first expression in the Sophist, where Plato wrote: “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.” We can find a similar theme in the

FIGURE 11. Savannah in 1734. According to Martin Heidegger, “A boundary is not that at which something stops, but . . . that from which something begins in presencing.” (Source: M. Lane, Savannah Revisited: A Pictorial History, Savannah: Beehive Press, 1973.)
Timeaus, where Plato identified similarity and differentiation as two of the three basic elements out of which the whole universe is created. Thus, even for Plato, who considered the good to be an external unchanging ideal, the demarcation of the boundary became an important act in his ideal city. Arendt described this as follows:

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.

On the one hand, the permanent visible presence of the boundary separates and protects people from falling onto one another; on the other, it allows for a unity because separate individuals can relate to it and thus create a common world out of difference. Arendt has written: “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 world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”

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. In order to create a unity out of diversity which all may call “public,” suitable ways must be found to define this intervening boundary in today’s cities. In this regard, an over-defined or too — rigidly defined boundary may be as harmful as a lack of boundary. Thus, the concept of zoning in modern planning has often resulted in too-rigidly defined boundaries that have segregated urban life into isolated functions; such boundaries eliminate the possibility of encounter and interaction, which is the basic ingredient of a public life (FIGS.13,14). According to Roger Scruton, in the absence of a public life with which to contrast his or her inner isolation, the individual cannot achieve a truly secure private life. “[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.” 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 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.”

ATTITUDES AND CONSUMPTION

Some of the most fatal consequences of the consumptive attitude of post-industrial society toward the physical landscape are not always intentional, and hence have long eluded concern. A general term for such phenomena is “externality.” An abbreviation for external economies and diseconomies, externalities are unpriced and perhaps nonmonetary effects of the activity of one element upon other elements in an urban system. Some fairly standard examples of urban externalities are loss of time due to traffic congestion, noise and pollution arising from vehicles and industries, and 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 is also 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 may arise from both private and public activities, it can be argued that their basis lies in economic self-interest. This is because it is usually cheaper to discharge waste products directly into the commons than to purify them first.

One way to internalize externality effects is to put a positive market price on currently unpriced scarce resources. However, the internalization of an external effect does not mean that its potentially adverse impact will be removed. The introduction of an adverse external effect into the economy is a bad thing no matter how the economy adapts to it. Furthermore, the necessary legal and technological means and relevant market mechanisms do not exist to control three-dimensional territory, and it is unlikely that the means to control these externalities will be developed in the foreseeable future.

The absence of any easy solution to externality effects in the built environment reveals the importance of situation ethics, which define an act as a function of the state of the system at the time it is performed. For example, to use the com-
mons as a subject of private interest may not harm the general public in a low-density settlement; however, the same behavior in a dense city may be unbearable. Administrative laws are invented 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 these 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. In this regard, it is conceivable that boundaries can be stipulated in ways so as to reduce, or to eliminate the spatial field effects of externalities. This is because many basic city-planning tools, such as land-use plans, future-growth controls, and measures used to protect valued resources depend on the stipulation of boundaries. More importantly, the boundary defines the manner in which the individual and collective come together in the world of action. The character and disposition of boundaries signal our relationship to the world outside, or how we perceive our relationship to nature. As Reinhold Niebuhr has written: “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.”

In sum, it is possible to suggest that for several reasons the configuration of the boundary maybe a useful tool in reconstituting some of the traditional values in the urban environment of contemporary cities. First, it is the most elementary cognitive tool used to map 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 the organization of the built environment. Fourth, it is the most elementary physical act of permanence in the built environment. And, fifth, it is the most elementary act of initiating a process of growth in the built environment. By implication, then, the configuration of the boundary must be treated as one of the most important planning tools used in the organization of the built environment. As long as its configuration 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 — it is possible to expect it will not only prevent one from taking advantage of the other, but also that it will enhance the qualities of the built environment as a whole.
REFERENCE NOTES

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1. Webster’s Dictionary.
8. Ibid., p.237.
10. Ibid., p.28.
22. Ibid.
23. For Hannah Arendt, the “common world” signifies the “public” in its permanent material form, hence it is available to everybody in a society. For further details, see: H. Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.54.
24. Ibid., pp.52-53.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., pp.63-64.
27. Ibid., pp.71-72.
28. For details, see: Cassire, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.
42. Ibid., pp.126-27.