

# URBAN PLANET, WALLED WORLD: QUESTIONING THE NATURE OF THE URBAN BOND

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## Abstract

Probably not many urban forms are as ancient and as contemporary at the same time as walls are. While the mediatic impact of the fall of the Berlin wall coincided with the consensual rejection of the presence of walls, ghettos or segregated communities within cities in the European discourse, the examples of the Peace Lines in Belfast, a recent wall built in Padua and the encircling walls in the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, show the contrary. Thus, it is pertinent to question how urban walls affect the nature of the urban bond. In doing so, this paper will discuss the different dimensions of city-walls, the role walls play in shaping contemporary cities and, consequently, how their presence relates to the processes of identity formation in the urban space. Finally, in the conclusions, I refer to the situationist claim, *le droit à la ville*, in a plea for walls that play a role in creating shared urban experiences rather than producing fragmented cities.

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\*\* The essay submitted is the work of only the individual whose name appears in this front page as the author; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay.

## Introduction

Cities are made of multiple and different parts that are connected or isolated from each other, but in either case give form and reflect the social relations which the functioning of the city produces. In shaping these divisions boundaries and margins often play a more constitutive role than what conventional, often centre-oriented policymaking discourses, show. In this paper I discuss one specific urban form, namely walls. I take walls as the concrete embodiment and the symbolic metaphor for the nature and reproduction of these urban social divisions, which paradoxically shape as unity the city-fabric. I begin by describing the ancient, but still valid, role walls have played in the definition of the urban experience. Subsequently, relying on the concrete examples of current walls standing in Europe, I discuss whether their presence in contemporary cities is a sign of the unity of the city or its progressive fragmentation and disintegration. This debate necessarily leads to a discussion on the nature of the urban bond and the way it affects the process of identity formation and the role they play in shaping the nature of the urban experience. Finally, in the conclusions, I recall the situationist claim, *le droit à la ville*, to argue for the need of walls that protect urban experiences rather than conceal them.

## City-walls

Probably not many urban forms are as ancient and as contemporary at the same time as walls are. Indeed, even if there are discrepancies among classic urban theorist about how essential walls have been to define the city, for instance between Max Weber's *The City* or Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*, both authors would agree on walls' centrality and prominence for the organization of urban life.<sup>1</sup> Urbanity in Europe has been historically defined by the presence of walls. Walls have symbolized not only the nature of the urban order, but the way in which cities became a receptacle of common processes of identification, defining who is to be recognized as a member of the polity -i.e. citizen- and who is explicitly excluded from it or signified as a threat.

Urban walls have various functions: in some cases they are used to fortify and protect the city or parts of the city quarters; they are used to trace the boundaries between the private/public domains; they express the existence of conflicts of multiple kinds and the impossibility to solve them on discursive consensual bases; they are used as a means to divide, to categorize and to keep urban populations under control, defining the scope of citizens' daily activities and existing institutional segregation patterns.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, walls serve to keep people in as much as to keep people out. Walls represent a brutal exhibition and display of power: concrete as well as symbolic. For some they might signify security and regularity, freedom and protection, identity and difference as experiences to be held either inside or outside the wall-line; for others they represent exclusion, marginalisation and

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<sup>1</sup> For references regarding the history and role of walls for city-life see M. Weber *The City*. New York: Free Press, 1958; L. Mumford *The city in history: its origins, its transformations and its prospects*. London: Secker and Warburg 1961; Morris, A.E.J. *History of urban form*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994; S. Kostof *The city assembled: The elements of urban form through history*. London: Thames and Hudson 1999; J. Tracy (ed.) *City Walls. The urban enceinte in global perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Compulsory references are the works of P. Marcuse: "Dual city: A muddy metaphor for a quartered city" in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 13 (4), 1989; "What's so new about divided cities?" in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17 (3), 1993; "Not chaos, but walls: Post-modernism and the partitioned city" in S. Watson and Gibson, K. *Post-modern cities and spaces*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994; as well as his edited volumes with R. van Kempen, *Globalizing cities: A new spatial order?* Oxford: Blackwell, 2000 and *On states and cities. The partitioning of urban space*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

stigma. In sum, walls demarcate, they chart the city fabric, they shape people's civic spirit and engagements, they draw the frontier between friends/enemies defining as well the terms and conditions for any possibility and form of social (inter) actions<sup>3</sup> in the urban space.

Political geographers, urban planners, urban historians and political scientists and theorists have observed walls as artefacts that shape urban territories, conflicts and their possible solutions, as well as people's liberties, especially in terms of expression and mobility.<sup>4</sup> In July 2004, the *Index on censorship* published a special issue on walls entitled *Writing on the walls*. But, what has historically been written about walls -beyond their function to define borders? The issue interestingly described the ordinary life situations of several communities affected by the presence of walls in their immediate urban environments *and* the paradoxically powerful experience created by the walls enforced border, namely that of being neighbours.

As man-made built borders, walls often aim to solve and contain existing conflicts, or built as actual reflection and reinforcement of such conflict. No matter how often in history the construction of walls has proven to be a less than efficient means of containing conflicts, the inclination to solve problems following strategies that separate and divide -at micro and macro levels- the confronting parts, prevails.<sup>5</sup> No matter how many times, it has been claimed in different languages, stating out of different contexts, that the urban experience is the experience of multiplicity, plurality and of diversity; walls continue to be built as control, security and elusive pacification methods. Yet, there is an explicit contradiction between the apparent need of urban communities to erect a wall in order to feel free and protected from the interference of *others* on the one hand, and the current promotion of flexibility, circulation and mobility in a modern/global society, on the other.

### **Walls: Holding the city together or putting the city under siege?**

Recent European history reflects this contradiction in an exemplary way. Indeed, no reflection on the role walls play for urban life can avoid stating the impact and influence of the Berlin Wall and its collapse in November 1989. This event demarcated the end of the Cold War, anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union and its explicit revolutionary ideology, and highlighted the incipient crisis affecting the post-war European welfare state. It also signified the paradigm that would shape contemporary Europe: with no wall, in a very short scope of time, its internal borders became progressively flexible and porous, while its external borders have become increasingly policed. Interestingly enough, in the same Europe, recently a wall has been rapidly built in Padua in July 2006. The wall in Padua signifies another substantive feature of contemporary Europe: in spite of highly controlled frontiers, European cities are currently confronted with a rising and pressing problem of

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<sup>3</sup> Translating this debate to current debates in political theory, for the antagonistic version of politics compulsory references is the use of Carl Schmitt done by the works of C. Mouffe, especially in *The democratic paradox* New York: Verso, 2000 and *On the Political*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005; while for a pluralist understanding see W. Connolly *Identity/Difference. Democratic negotiations of political paradox*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991 and *Pluralism*, Durham: duke University Press, 2005 and B. Honig *Democracy and the foreigner*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> From the fields of political geography are especially relevant the works of Peter Taylor, while Peter Marcuse is central for urban planning. At the same time there is a current in American urbanism that has focused on describing the emergence of a new "architecture of community" based on gated communities, shopping centers and enclosed urban experience, see the works of Setha Low as reference. On the side of IR theories see the critical work on border politics in a global world of Pauln Ganster and David Lorey.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of these failures can be found in everyday news items regarding immigrants crossing the US/Mexican border or arriving on crowded canoes to the Spanish coasts.

(illegal) immigration, which increases the tension between the need to build up a non-discriminatory polity and the need to state clearly who are considered to be its members.

Obviously both cases are neither comparable in scale nor in historical importance, but both are clear examples of the contradictory ways in which urban walls have been used to symbolize the tensions and challenges affecting current urban experiences: while the collapse of the Berlin Wall signified the liberalization of GDR citizens and their will and opportunity to unify the city, with a potential impact on conceptions of “global Europe”; the erection of the Padua Wall built upon the request of its citizens, signifies an attempt by those defined as “legitimate” members of the city, to free themselves from the influence of unwanted residents, often illegal immigrants, for the well being of the city’s pre-established political community.

The cases of Padua;<sup>6</sup> the Belfast Peace Lines that have been built since the early 1970’s and remain more actual than ever in shaping the city fabric;<sup>7</sup> and the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla encircled by walls built in 1998 and 2001, respectively,<sup>8</sup> are just among the most emblematic examples of the role walls play in contemporary cities within the European territory.<sup>9</sup> All these examples of walling are defended as the more peaceful and efficient ways to solve existing conflicts; the politics embedded in these arguments and represented by the construction of the walls though recall the one exercised when the world was imagined under a bipolar perspective, before the fall of the Berlin wall: a world divided by between them/us As if it were innate, the politics of these walls signifies separation, a form of control operating by means of shaping the city-spaces and the possibilities people have to identify with them, tracing in the city fabric a division between specific political communities and individual practices.

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<sup>6</sup> The steel wall was erected in July 2006 to isolate the neighborhood of Via Anelli -a social housing area built in the 1980’s and inhabited today mostly by African immigrants- from the rest of the city. Being eighty four meters long and three meters high, the wall replaced a preexisting barbwire fence which for over ten years was the scenario of diverse drug dealing and prostitution. The wall has given rise to conflicting ideological debates between representatives from the left and right. In spite of the rationale for building the wall, a ghetto has in effect been created, and what was supposed to be a short-term solution has transformed into a substantive long-term institutional response for a deeper social problem.

<sup>7</sup> Over twenty “Peace Lines” have been built as provisional fences aiming to control religious, ethnic and nationalist violence between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. The brick or metal walls extend along the Eastern/Western and Southern/Northern parts of the city, are open at several points by gates that facilitate the circulation of emergency services. In spite of the political success of the peace agreements, the IRA ceasefire and apparent freedom enjoyed by each side, the temporary lines remain in place and social segregation and intolerance seems to have increased. Glenn Patterson, in “A strange kind of peace” in *Index on Censorship* 34 (4) 2004, describes how segregation has risen in Belfast since the “peace lines” were built (from two-thirds of Belfast citizens estimated to be living in segregated streets in the 1960’s to four-fifths in the 1980’s). Obviously, since the walls were built the points of contact and common experiences often offered by urban life have become increasingly distant and random, except for a flourishing “conflict tourism”, which paradoxically unifies the city under the gaze of outsiders.

<sup>8</sup> In northern Morocco, these Spanish autonomous cities are protected by fences built in order to control African immigrants intending to enter the European Union. This year, the current socialist administration has announced the construction of a third high-tech fence, in order to increase the control over the border of unwanted and undocumented immigrants. The fences have provoked explicit debates among politicians in Brussels: some wish to protect the European borders from illegal immigration; others claim that the problem needs to be tackled by increasing development aid to the immigrants’ origin countries, whilst others again caution against the progressive militarization of the EU frontiers.

<sup>9</sup> Across the world, the examples are unfortunately numerous, being the US/Mexican barrier, the Israeli wall in the West Bank, the Korean wall and the barrier in Afghanistan among the most outrageous, often declared illegal by the international community.

Walls act as urban forms imposed over individuals' practices, shaping in turn their sense of the collective. As the referred examples have shown, the functionality of walls varies according to the specific spatio-temporal context in which they are built: walls are erected for protection or as anti-terror instruments, as a means to control immigration, as internal contention barriers, as anti-traffic mechanisms to control people's mobility, drug smuggling or prostitution. In all these functions they express a way of facing social and political conflicts, of re-organizing and policing social life and of controlling people's actions and interactions. Other ways of explaining the presence of walls is by stressing how much they are needed for private/privacy protection, as if the wall would enable the realisation and support of a particular and privileged sense of identity against others. Identity and difference are often confronted experiences to be held either inside or outside an established wall-line. Indeed, while for some walls might symbolize security and regularity; freedom and protection from the threat of others.

The presence of walls in the city space acts in a twofold way: it concretely and symbolically defines who the legitimate city members are, while it also helps to structure and to organise civic life amid those inhabiting it. Since ancient times walls were used and erected as a necessary means for defence, making cities resemble fortresses in medieval times; today fortresses have been brought to the inside of the city fabric, increasing the control over the communicative conducts and the possible content of that communication among (social) interactions of the multiple segments shaping the increasingly complex fabric of extended cities. This means that, while an individual's right to reside inside the erected wall offers the freedom and responsibility to be considered a legitimate citizen, at the same time, those who remain excluded outside the wall line (or in a context of ghettoization, secluded inside) are excluded from the urban experience.

Since time immemorial, cities stood precisely because they were able to bridge differences, to connect to agricultural hinterland, rural villages, trading networks and sacred sites. Exchange beyond the city gates supported not only commerce, but also political action and cultural development. The existence of walls implied a process of learning "protocols of behaviour and interaction, some tacit and some explicit. For better or worse, as much as the wall demarcated and separated, it was also a means of connection and mediation".<sup>10</sup> Yet, it seems today walls have been deprived from their ability to mediate, reduced to their faculty to solidify confrontation amid conflicting sides.

### **What is the urban bond about: homogeneity vs. diversity?**

Walls reflect the hierarchy and distribution of social roles within the urban fabric. Indeed, the places people occupy within the city space reflect these inequalities. Following the description made by Peter Marcuse, current megacities' inhabitants can reside in five different types of cities within the same urban fabric: the controlling city or city of big decisions; the city of the advanced professional services; the city of direct production; the city of unskilled work and the informal economy; the residual city.<sup>11</sup> Walls demarcate these different division in hierarchical ways, conditioning clearly who belongs where and the role people play in the hierarchy of quarters.

As R. Sennett described in *The Uses of Disorder* (1996), human beings build their *spatialities* in the process of constructing their own identity, which has the potential to occur under

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<sup>10</sup> See W. Pullan "A one-sided wall" in *Writing in Walls*, Index on Censorship, 3, 2004, page 80.

<sup>11</sup> See P. Marcuse, "Not chaos, but walls: Post-modernism and the partitioned city" in S. Watson and Gibson, K. *Post-modern cities and spaces*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.

conditions of an active experience of self-assertion among strangers, or under an illusion of security and safety among those similar to oneself, provided by means of normalisation and discipline.

The process of identity formation normally requires by way of contrast some form of recognition and distinction. As has been described by D. Massey, for the inhabitants of contemporary cities there are four aspects which characterise this dialectic relationship between identity and recognition:

- “(a) the processual constitution of identity through interrelations;
- (b) the fact of the constant remaking of those identities;
- (c) the insistence that power is not an external relation ‘taking place’ between already preconstituted identities, but that it is part and parcel of the constitution of those identities themselves;
- (d) the insistence on the constitutive outside and necessary presence of the other within.”<sup>12</sup>

The spatialisation of identity claims within urban environments necessarily implies forms of differentiation, that reflect social divisions. Against rural-communitarian life, the potentiality of the city for identity formation is precisely its permeability: even if distinctions are traced by material and symbolic boundaries, for the sake of the city’s development, they exist in motion and continuous interaction with each other.

Any city opens up for its inhabitants a battleground within which different groups define their identities, stake their claims, win or lose their recognition battles. The forms these practices take reflect the ways in which certain experiences of the common, within the city space, underpin the socio-political, cultural and economic experiences of living in that city. Walls within the city operate by closing and opening up these possibilities: both are necessary mechanisms for the constitution of identities, since the *I* cannot exist without the *other*. “[I]f I wish to identify myself as a free agent, there must be some coherence between the social roles I am called upon to play and the purposes I adopt upon reflection”.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if the city’s air makes one free, freedom can only be conceivable under an exposed condition to the presence and interactions with and among others.

With this in mind, there are three presumed dimensions regarding the effects walls have over the experience of cities: they demarcate the different territorialities in the city-space; they trace and represent different clusters of identification, membership and belonging within the city-space; and they provide a sense of freedom and security, according to who is being walled-in and who is walled-out. In defending the hierarchical arrangements within the urban fabric, walls might become shelters for survival or for privileges, they can protect or they can control, they can exclude or they can connect.

While the patterns of differentiation among different quarters often respond to racial, gender, class or religious distinctions, the hierarchical quarters cannot, for their complete functioning, be hermetically closed. The boundary lines between them are dynamic, as the processes of identity formation are. Walls reflect this hierarchical status, but in spite of the concreteness of walls, this is a status that cannot be taken for granted, since it needs to be continually established and renegotiated.

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<sup>12</sup> See D. Massey “Thinking radical democracy spatially” in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13 (3), 1995, page: 280.

<sup>13</sup> See W. Connolly *Identity/Difference. Democratic negotiations of political paradox*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, page: 198.

## Conclusion: Looking for spaces through which the city connects to itself

According to G. Simmel, “the human being is a connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating”.<sup>14</sup> Tracing borders is indeed a way of making sense of the world, of stating one’s own identity and recognising the one of the others. To trace distinctions and borders that reflect social divisions is natural in the human condition and it is part of the nature of the city experience. Yet, problems emerge when these borders and distinctions dehumanise one of the sides, when the barriers are built in order to legitimise only one belonging criteria, establishing an agonistic relationships and confronting perceptions between the two sides of the wall. In sum, when walls provoke fractures and margins that create concrete and rigid borders that should remain elastic in the city fabric, they conceal the urban experience.<sup>15</sup>

Far from being an anachronistic form, walls are intrinsically modern in the way they give shape and meaning to current city-life. Walls order and control the city space, aiming to make social interactions in the city predictable and secured: “walls permit the populations behind them to grow horns. They foster a curious disengagement with reality, described in one Belfast study where they ‘allow people to see what they want to see on the other side, the image of their enemy’”.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, walls are a one-sidedly defined artefact, mainly used as means to control civilians, easily reduced to their static restrictive character.

Yet, as much as they divide, walls also bind. The mere existence of a wall embeds the idea, illusion or risk, of the connection between the divided parts. Establishing a possibility to bind and to divide walls reflect not only the nature of our cities, but of their future possibilities. In this sense, with walling happens as with the process of identity assertion: “*to establish an identity is to create social and conceptual space for it to be in ways that impinge on the spaces available to other possibilities...Identity is a site of multiple disjunctions in need of politicization as well as unities that enable life. The task is to identify those patterns of insistence in a society to idealize its own formations and then to project counter-strategies by which to expose multiple points of discrepancy between institutional idealizations and that which they contain or subjugate*”.<sup>17</sup>

Walls certainly reflect common expectations over what is good and desirable for society’s development: they provide a stage from where to think, to project and to act either in inclusionary or exclusionary terms. Thus, it is pertinent to question the normative terms under which walls are (or are not) connected to the principles of liberal democracy and economic neoliberalism that have underpinned the late urbanization processes.

It is doubtful that walls will disappear from our urban environments. Indeed, it is not even clear that their total disappearance is desirable in contemporary megacities. But, as P. Marcuse has stressed, “we need walls that welcome and shelter, not walls that exclude and oppress”.<sup>18</sup> We need cities where the potentialities opened by the urban experience are protected and not concealed by the presence of walls, where walls become part of the spaces that make available the concretion and fulfilment of the urban experience.

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<sup>14</sup> See G. Simmel ‘Bridge and Door’ in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (Eds.) *Simmel on Culture*. London: Sage, 1997, pages: 171.

<sup>15</sup> See W. Pullan “A one-sided wall” in *Writing in Walls*, Index on Censorship, 3, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 82.

<sup>17</sup> See W. Connolly *Identity/Difference. Democratic negotiations of political paradox*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, page: 160-163.

<sup>18</sup> See P. Marcuse, “Not chaos, but walls: Post-modernism and the partitioned city” in S. Watson and Gibson, K. *Post-modern cities and spaces*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994, page 251.