

The Fences We Build

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It seems fashionable these days to envisage building strong tall fences to protect people from their fellowmen.¹ In a way, there is nothing new about this; ever since its dawn, mankind has spent a lot of resources for designing and building defensive structures. However, during the last decades, our society appeared more open than ever, seemingly rendering the need to create and defend borders obsolete. A keen observer can nevertheless notice that, despite the unprecedented democratization of the city we are living in today, the apparent fading of differences between social classes and the economic development, the old physical and mental limits within the city — traditionally related to class, religion or ethnicity — are being replaced (or, on the contrary, restated) by new ones, subtler but no less effective in undermining the urban coherence and continuity. These are "the fences we build" — *we*, the society and/or *we*, the architects. As this fence-building appetency may look surprising, one can assume it is the result of some particular conjunctures that this article will try to pin down and explain, at least some of their genealogic features. On the one hand, it will focus on the controlled environments designed by the commercial architectural practice, such as shopping malls, gated communities, or theme parks. On the other hand, it will take a look at the manifesto projects of critical architecture. Both types of designs create "ego-systems," self-sufficient environments which cut themselves out from the actual world — the social realm, the urban fabric and the cultural context. The challenge of this paper is to retrace how and why these "ego-systems" have come to rule our world.

Building "borders"

One might say that architecture is about building borders: establishing limits in space, between interior and exterior or between spaces in general. But there are more functions and meanings of the borders that a building creates. In archaic societies, every household and every settlement was founded by the definition of a center and the tracing its limits. This was a founding act whose deep sense meant building a world, a *cosmos*, by cutting it out from the surrounding *chaos*; thus, building borders was also endowed with a magical sense:

"The same is the case with city walls: long before they were military erections, they were a magic defense, for they marked out from the midst of a 'chaotic' space, peopled with demons and phantoms, an enclosure, a place that was organized, made cosmic, in other words, provided with a 'center'."²

Almost every famous citadel has a story or legend related to its foundation. Usually, the founder was a mythical hero acquainted with the ancient rituals, or the walls were built by gods themselves, as in the case of Troy. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that building defensive walls also meant building and protecting a community, since kinship and the sense of belonging to a shared place were essential in traditional societies. Borders were meant, first and foremost, to unite the members of the community.

In modern times, when defensive walls became useless, their magical role also vanished, and they were replaced by new borders, brought about by new social customs. As privacy became

¹ The wall marking the border between the US and Mexico, or the walls that separate *barrios* or *favelas*, or gated communities, to name only a few.

² Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), 160.

increasingly valued, the roles and significance of borders also changed. They became more important for protecting the private life of the home from the public life of the city. Yet, although the nineteenth century marked a peak in distinguishing private from public space, the coherence of city life was not essentially disturbed by the new borders; neither was the unity of the urban fabric. Finally, the new borders acted as a unifying element, aesthetically reinforcing the coherence of the city, despite social divisions, inequities, and conflicts.

More intimately, inside the home, further borders were necessary to delimit each dweller's place within the house.³ The new spatial specialization transformed the less clearly defined and more communicative space of the home in a sensible juxtaposition of spatial individualities, accommodating privacies.

Both aspects were about to change starting with the twentieth century, when Frank Lloyd Wright "destroyed the box". He vividly described the context and his approach in the chapter "Building the New House" from his *Autobiography*:

"Dwellings of that period were cut up, advisedly and completely, with the grim determination that should go with any cutting process. The interiors consisted of boxes beside boxes or inside boxes, called *rooms*. All boxes were inside a complicated outside boxing. Each domestic function was properly box to box.

I could see little sense in this inhibition, this cellular sequestration that implied ancestors familiar with penal institutions, except for the privacy of the bedrooms on the upper floor. They were perhaps all right for sleeping boxes. So I declared the whole lower floor as one room, cutting off the kitchen as a laboratory, putting the servants' sleeping and living quarters next to the kitchen but semi-detached, on the ground floor. Then I screened various portions of the big room for certain domestic purposes like dinning, reading, receiving callers."⁴

His approach was bold and innovative: first, the separated rooms, confined to their defining walls, became interconnected and communicating through the dissolution of corners; then, the walls themselves, turned into slabs, were split and placed freely on the plan.⁵ Concepts derived from Wright's destruction of the box, like "open space" or "flowing space", were extensively spread a few decades later, through projects and manifestoes:⁶

"The new architecture is *anti-cubic*, that is to say, it does not try to freeze the different functional space cells in one close cube. Rather, it throws the functional space cells (as well as the overhanging planes, balcony volumes, etc.) centrifugally from the core of the cube. And through this means, *height, width, depth, and time* (i.e. an imaginary four-dimensional entity) approaches a totally new plastic expression in open spaces. In this way architecture acquires a more or less floating aspect that, so to speak, works against the gravitational forces of the nature."⁷

3 This was the time when specialized rooms developed, according to their status in the household. Each member of the household had a properly defined space to live in, and spaces where he/she was allowed to enter under certain circumstances, all properly defined as well. There were shared rooms, semipublic and more formal, like dining room, drawing room, parlor, morning room, and later the living room or the less formal, like the den and later the family room. There were also more private rooms like cabinet or boudoir, and specialized spaces like billiard room, smoking room, library or conservatory.

4 Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (Warwick, UK: Pomegranate Communications), 142.

5 H. Allen Brooks, "Frank Lloyd Wright and the Destruction of the Box", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38, 1 (Mar. 1979): 7 – 14, https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/12101291coordination/files/2013/01/Destruction_of_the_Box_FLW.pdf.

6 The works of F. L. Wright were known by European architects through his portfolios published by Wasmuth in 1910 and 1911 in Berlin. This design development was carried out especially by the works of the De Stijl architects, Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe.

7 Theo van Doesburg, *16 points of a Plastic Architecture*, apud. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 14. According to Kenneth Frampton, the design of the Schroeder House (1924) is maybe the best example for the "destruction of the box", following in many respects the eleventh point of the manifesto.

If, in building design, the destruction of the box has met the new aesthetic and functional expectations, and still meets people's needs for diversity in spatial choices, the effects are different for the city.

Since modern practice embraced the ideals of the functionalist city and Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, the new urban developments were no longer operating in terms of built, solid borders, but under the auspices of a universally accessible space in which buildings were "floating" freely. As these concepts were embraced by modern architectural practice, it seemed that a shift occurred, from building borders to fostering openness; the "open plan" and the "open city" seemed to embody the new society. However, dismantling the limits traditionally embedded in urban structures, and scaling up the principles of the free plan to accommodate the "free-planning" of the territory, turned out disorienting for people, disconnected them from places, and diminished communication among neighbors. Starting with the 1980s, the postmodern reflection on the city and its consequent practice have been rediscovering, reappraising and reusing the potential of clearly limited urban spaces (streets, places and gardens) and of the urban fabric (based on various built borders), in its attempt to reconnect real urban places, memory, and people.

Yet, this paper is not concerned with such planning direction, which translates the values of the traditional urban limits into a contemporary language. Rather, the paper focuses on the appearance of new types of borders, or limits, that have little in common with the "traditional" ones. They obey another logic (that we shall unveil), and undermine in a subtle way what we usually seek, namely the coherence of the urban organism that we generically call urbanity, and which the old borders had established. They are proliferating based on an escapist perception of reality, and are first instated by *us* – the society, then spatialized by *us* – the architects.

The lenses chosen to look through as we identify and discuss forms of the new barriers we build today are those of the economic context in which they have developed, considering the twofold impact on the social realm: blurring differences between classes, and diminishing cohesion. Attention will then turn to architectural consequences.

From Fordism to the "flexible accumulation"

In 1914, Henry Ford introduced the eight-hour working day, paid with five dollars, for his workers at the assembly line that he had established the year before. By combining the high efficiency of technology with the principles of scientific management (Taylorism), he succeeded in producing cars that were affordable even for his workers. Both the technology for mass standardized production and Taylor's theories were known at the time, so Ford's merit lies in his vision of a new world, where mass production was coupled with the generalized access and possibility of purchase. The industrial growth also led to the development of the working class. Large industries fostered powerful unions, and these organizations built a strong feeling of solidarity, a condition which was about to change with the economic crisis of the 1970's and the emergence of the system of "flexible accumulation".

After the Second World War, Fordism became the engine of economic growth as the US industry was the main provider for the reconstruction of Western Europe, but the situation changed in the late sixties. Markets in the US, Western Europe and Japan were saturated, and all these countries had a growing production of their own. The economic crisis from the beginning of the seventies meant the end of Fordism and the beginning of "flexible accumulation", in other words, the shift from a production-based economy to a consumption-based one, as defined by Harvey:

*"Flexible accumulation, as I shall tentatively call it, is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation."*⁸

8 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992), 174.

This system entailed changes not only in production management but also in habits of consumption and in labor relations. The production system, quite rigid in Fordism, became more flexible due to technological progress and market demand. The transition from a standardized production to mass-customization allowed for a larger variety of goods to fulfill people's need for identity. Consumption habits also changed. The mass-customization determined — or was determined by, as the causal relationship is difficult to establish definitively — an urge to build and assert a personal identity, as people were forced to leave the comfortable group status and to search for wellbeing on their own.

At the same time, the new technologies of production and organizational forms allowed for faster-paced turnover, which cannot work without an accelerated rate of demand. To stimulate consumption, “flexible accumulation” focused on accelerating changes in fashion, in all areas of life, entailing rapid cultural transformations, as well as new dynamics and models of the labor market and the social realm. The constant evolution of production technologies allowed for growing flexibility, and industries became more willing, eager even, to relocate to better or cheaper locations, carrying with them not only the economic, but the social and cultural relations as well. This was the start of the globalization of our consumption habits, and also of the manners in which we respond, including architecturally, to this phenomenon.

From Union to Entrepreneurship

The labor market crisis and the dissolution of the powerful unions of Fordism challenged the established societal structure. The sense of solidarity and belonging to a socio-professional group began to fade as people had to manage on their own and to develop an entrepreneurial and somehow egocentric behavior. As the traditional social classes were subject to profound transformations, so were the differences and borders that stood between them. As society shifted from class-based culture to mass culture, the judgment of taste was no longer an act of social standing, contributing to the impression that all the limits within the social realm were gradually disappearing.

The process is worth detailing. Fordism provided workers with fairly secure jobs, together with fixed working hours and payment, which was paralleled by the unprecedented development of working-class organizations. The unions not only defended their members' rights in relation to the employer, but they helped them on a solidarity-based system. The union membership, or just the feeling of belonging to a socio-professional group, were both very important in building social cohesion or, at least, a solidarity within the class. The flexible accumulation system changed this. The economic crisis and the relocation of industries in search for cheaper labor led to the decline of big factories in the US and the Western Europe. This meant the end of unions' power and, for many people, a change of status: from a member of a stable group, to the more insecure condition of an entrepreneur. The traditional social structures, including the ones behind the cultivation of taste, changed along with the transition towards flexible accumulation.

From class-based culture to mass-culture

Cultural and social structures — taste being an important part of them — are the main actors in establishing borders in the built environment. Taste, or rather the judgment of taste, can be regarded as a unifying agent of a group or class, and also as a differentiator in opposition to other groups.⁹ As Bourdieu writes, the judgment of taste was generated by the upper bourgeoisie, then adopted by the middle and petty bourgeoisie, and transformed into a generally accepted trend. Traditionally, working classes were not part of this system, as they had little economic capital to help them in earning cultural capital or higher education, but as the income of the working class (the so-called blue collars) began to rise in the US and Western Europe with Fordism, this

⁹ Monica Mihaela Iancău, *Gust, clasă și moralitate. Arhitectura caselor în satul Mănăstirea Humorului* [*Taste, Class, and Morality. The Architecture of Houses in the Village of Mănăstirea Humorului*] (PhD thesis, Bucharest: Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative, 2013), 3.

group became an important actor on the consumer market. Since they did not follow the trend established by the upper class, and yet represented a large segment of consumers, they began to impose their taste on the production of consumer goods. Thus, the shift from production to consumption was paralleled by the transfer of the judgment of taste from the upper classes' hands into the hands of marketing. And, whereas there was no style or artistic dogma left to rule, it seemed there was no benchmark left either, and that the last borders architecture had built would soon be history. As the old standards became obsolete, new ones were constructed, new criteria and new limits established. Following these transformations, we witness the transition from traditional social groups to tribes.

Tribes

In his article "Fashion", Georg Simmel noted the human need for a certain balance between self-expression and individualism on the one side, and the need for belonging to a group, on the other:

"Just as in the case of individualism and collectivism, there exists between the uniformity and the change of the contents of life a definite proportion of needs, which is tossed to and fro in the different fields and seeks to balance refusal in one by consent, however acquired, in another."¹⁰

The post-Fordist man is an individualist, whether he wants it or not. Compelled to manage on his own, and no longer having a defined social group to adhere to, he looks for, or even creates, ways for getting together with his peers. At the same time, due to globalization, the world is a much larger stage than before, where acknowledgment is more difficult to achieve. In this context, the field of marketing develops rapidly as it helps fulfill people's need of self-expression and aggregation in new forms of social organizations. Higher incomes open up a wider range of choices and greater expectations, beyond the old rational choices based on need, and turning into new demands for happiness, new aims for personal identity and experience.

People try to establish a "point of difference" in order to assert their identity in the globalized world. As an individual, being one of the many, self-expression became essential, yet difficult to achieve on your own. The shift from standardization to customization is now present in the identity people are building and asserting in society: they do not want to fulfil the requirements of a rigid social pattern or to meet some expectations which are not their own. So, they are building their own groups, they are organizing themselves in "tribes":

"As we've moved from one-size-fits-all economy to a mass-customization economy, the attention of marketing has shifted from features, to benefits, to experiences, to tribal identification. (...) This shift demonstrates that, while features and benefits are still important to people, personal identity has become even more important."¹¹

In what he calls "a manifesto about the end of mass market", Seth Godin asserts:

"Human beings prefer to organize in tribes, into groups of people who share a leader or a culture or a definition of normal. And the digital revolution has enabled and amplified these tribes, leaving us with millions of silos, groups of people who respect and admire and support choices that outsiders happily consider weird, but that those of us in the tribe realize are normal."¹²

The "tribes" are an answer to the unstable global world, since the dissolution of modern social structures is perceived as a loss of the points of reference. Modern "tribes" act like a refuge in a familiar, cozy and steady micro-universe, in an appropriate fiction. And, like any refuge, it is essentially defined by borders:

10 Georg Simmel, "Fashion", *International Quarterly* 10 (1904): 144.

11 Marty Neumeier, *The Brand Gap. How to Bridge the Distance between Business Strategy and Design* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2006), 38.

12 Seth Godin, *We are All Weird. The Rise of Tribes and The End of Normal* (UK Portfolio / Penguin, 2015), 6.

"The fact is we need divisions just as much as we need ways to transcend them. (...) The faster globalism removes barriers, the faster people erect new ones. They create intimate worlds they can understand, and where they can be somebody and feel as if they belong. They create tribes."¹³

Oppositions and Escapes. Narratives

In the chapter "Structures, *habitus*, practices" from "The Logic of Practice", Pierre Bourdieu presents the concept of *habitus*, a system of dispositions — meaning schemes of perception, thought and action that one acquires through social experience — that determine the way people place themselves in the social field. *Habitus* is an important instrument for social domination and cultural reproduction, and it introduces a kind of deterministic key in Bourdieu's theory:

"The practical world that is constituted in the relationship with the *habitus*, acting as a system of cognitive and motivating structures, is a world of already realized ends — procedures to follow, paths to take — and of objects endowed with 'permanent teleological character', in Husserl's phrase, tools or institutions."¹⁴

Trapped in *habitus*, the individual will feel, think and act according to a pattern — and will do this naturally, without being or feeling constrained, as this pattern is not a rational one — and will reject any attitude or action that do not meet the *habitus*:

"The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable."¹⁵

This deterministic approach seems to leave little room for individual choice. Although part of Bourdieu's theories — like the social origins of taste — are no longer entirely convincing, the way *habitus* influences people's behavior and actions is still evident today. Other authors talk about "practical intelligence",¹⁶ implying that people's capacity to reach their highest potential according to their intellectual possibilities depends on the socio-familial environment in which they grew up. This takes us back to the how limits are deeply rooted in human nature.

However, if borders in the real world cannot be "trespassed", they can be surpassed in fictional universes; things that are denied due to *habitus* can be achieved, or are admissible, in a space where this concept is no longer working. This space does not have to be entirely fictional; an imaginary world can be made up, "built" from scratch, and designed to work according to the rules established by its creator. At the same time, a fiction someone creates can be "inhabited" by others, too. This is the classic case of a narrative — either real or entirely fictional — where the listener becomes part of it by empathizing with its characters and sharing the same experiences with the other listeners.

With the expansion of entertainment industry, narratives have become key elements in people's lives. Actors turn into modern heroes and pop stars into idols when the story, the characters, the actors and the spectators' imagination are affecting each other. People want to live their heroes' lives, and to experience "the story", whether from a novel, a movie, a show or a computer game. In a sense, the narrative is used as an escape, and if the escape used to be only fictional and non-tangible, it has now begun to manifest itself into the real world through objects and spaces that we create.

In the case of architecture, the type of embodied narrative that concerns me in this paper is not the direct transfer of an ideology or a concept into an architectural object, but rather the cases where architectural elements are used to evoke a borrowed narrative, an external experience that is appropriated by the owner or the user. Once upon a time, this was the privilege of few, such as the famous (and eccentric) nineteenth century King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who built the Herrenchiemsee as a replica of Versailles, and the Neuschwanstein Schloss, a Romanesque revival

¹³ Neumeier, *The Brand Gap*, 40.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53-54.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

¹⁶ See Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers. The Story of Success* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 69-116.

palace that was to become, almost a century later, the inspiration for the Disney castle. More recently, with the widespread concepts of leisure and the increase of earnings, more and more people can find the time and money for exotic vacations and experiences of embodied fictional environments, either in theme parks or commercial centers, or even in their homes, via some elements of comfort “imported” into their everyday from the fantasy life of their dreams.

Confronted with a sense of instability, people today are searching for escapes in controlled, “guaranteed” environments, where they know what to expect. These escapes, either places or organizational forms (tribes), are governed by narratives that offer the opposite of what the world poses as a threatening or uncomfortable environment.

Before seeing how this tendency is operating in contemporary architecture, it is important to take a quick look at three kinds of escapes people are building in opposition to the globalized world: one in a more or less invented past, and two inspired from a specific (but not always authentic) place.

(1) *Present versus Past*. We live in a time when technological progress induces a pace of transformation never seen before, thus generating a feeling of instability. In this context, seeking refuge in the forms of the past is understandable, since these forms are references to a more familiar and stable world, at least at the level of perception. Nostalgia for the past has been an important catalyst for cultural and intellectual models, from Ancient philosophies and currents of thought, all the way to the re-appropriation of historic centers towards the end of the twentieth century.

“Nostalgia can be defined as a psychological, cultural and social phenomenon which leads to re-evaluating, often overvaluing, the past and everything connected with it. In order to find a basis for their existential searching, individuals imagine a past which was more beautiful and purer than it really was. A new concept of authenticity is now being imposed on the market, which considers the true, the authentic, to be the result of an idealized reconstruction of the past.”¹⁷

This is not nostalgia for one’s own past, filled with experiences that can be remembered with triggers like Proust’s madeleine; it is rather a sense of nostalgia implanted by branding strategies that try to activate certain images of the past in idealized or totally fictional forms. They acquire “authenticity” via marketing tools that sell them as “refuges” or “escapes”, as temporary distractions from the ugly or the banal realities of the everyday.

(2) *Global versus Local*. One of the most obvious effects of the globalization in our cities is the fading of local specificity. Often, contemporary urban developments are strikingly similar all over the world, and the architecture used in real estate projects looks alike, no matter the continent. In opposition to this, people are trying to find escapes in local specificities, which include traditional architecture. In many cases, some local flavor or element is added like a graft, when it is not a mere label put on a neutral container with the same function, structure, and even materials like anywhere else in the world. It is perfectly understandable that when facing a strong feeling of alienation, people are seeking support in elements pertaining to their local tradition. This is also a kind of refuge, a “security blanket” they hold to while their world is pretty much falling apart. But the elements which are now called “tradition” and seen as museum exhibits were once part of a living organism. To understand how this organism worked and to be wise enough to use and adapt it for the contemporary world is the real challenge from which a local architecture can emerge.

(3) *Local versus Exotic*. Globalization and delocalization, however, have another side too. Resulting from the loss of local specificity and the dull images placed instead, or maybe from the collision and blending of cultures due to global mobility, a new interest to “import” architectural elements from exotic cultures and places appears. This is not new either, as “exoticisms” were sometimes decisive cultural incentives. Yet, was it not an escapist approach, this can be regarded as the search for certain differentiators in a dull environment. As in the case of revivals, bringing to architecture

17 Michelle Fioroni, Garr Titterton, *Brand Storming. Managing Brands in the Era of Complexity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 24.

exotic elements — usually seen and admired on trips — used to be a privilege that only some wealthy and eccentric people could afford. But traveling abroad, even in far and exotic places, gradually became an affordable and therefore a largely spread habit. First, people referred to their trips through pictures and souvenirs exhibited in their living rooms, acting like triggers for nostalgic memories. Pretty soon, a new idea emerged: why not live all the time as if you were on holiday? As this is almost impossible for common people, they focused on bringing some specific elements (also triggers) into their homes to remind them of holidays, of exotic sunny places and a carefree living.

This appetite for the past or the exotic is fully satisfied by the architectural commercial practice, as we are about to see. When building a cozy place away from the pressure of the everyday life, the revival and the exotic are the first options. The past seems better than the present and so do the exotic holiday-like places; yet, transposed in the contemporary architecture, they are only simulacra, which finally means that new borders are being built within the city.

Architecture after Modernism

Against this background of economic, social and societal transformations, architecture underwent its own changes, and played its own role in creating new borders, whether they came from within the profession, or only answered the general context.

Although already a commonplace, I have to restate the idea that, while proclaiming the end of style, modernism soon became stylized itself,¹⁸ and its new aesthetic was publicly accepted. After 1945, in the United States, modernist architecture evolved from the European avant-garde movement to become the “official” and elitist style, “high modernism”, and spread all over the world in the years to come, as it represented the progressive enterprising spirit at its best. In the US, it was mainly adopted for office or for public buildings and far less by domestic architecture. Americans, although keen on progress, were quite reluctant to adopting this austere style for their homes, so they acted pragmatically in their choices: modernism for the companies’ headquarters, a domestic image for home and a whimsical one for the leisure facilities. These directions coexisted in architectural practice, and are best illustrated by the work of Mies van der Rohe and Morris Lapidus, as Anna Klingmann explains:

“The lingering schism between high modernist architecture and populist fantasy architecture, which Mies and Lapidus personify, gave rise to an environment that was, on the one hand, aggressively reformist – frequently producing abstract, lifeless, and repetitive buildings that were generic and unresponsive to their setting, that disregarded the atmospheric specificity of urban life completely, ignoring its subcultures, its regulatory forces, and the role of public life – and, on the other hand, whimsical and bold, driven by fantasy and escapism.”¹⁹

The schism Anna Klingmann describes marked architecture at the beginning of postmodern times, and still lingers in one way or another. As the rule of the modernist dogma was fading, architects faced a problem never seen before: there was no style left, no rules, no prescriptions to guide their work any longer. So, architects have split in two parties: the ones willing to provide a populist answer to clients’ demands — the commercial practice; and the ones whose critical manifest attitude created the avant-garde — the “theoretical practice”. This schism involved building new limits within the architectural practice, between architects and users, and between architecture and the actual world.

The process was somehow different in Europe, due to the particular context in the aftermath of World War II, but eventually generated the same split. Schematically, there were two ways in which modernism was widely adopted: one was the import from the US (together with Fordism), mainly for headquarters of multinational companies and for public buildings; the other was the European

18 See Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip C. Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1932).

19 Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: architecture in the experience economy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 174.

governments' answer to the housing crisis after the war, by embracing the modern principles of the "functionalist city" (both in urbanism and in architecture) as the only feasible choice.

Yet, there are significant differences in the critical resistance that modern architecture and urbanism generated in Europe and in United States. In the US, the rejection of modernist architecture was mainly the result of the quest for identity (postmodern) instead of uniformity (modern) or, in other words, for customization ("flexible accumulation") against mass-production (Fordism). Whereas in Europe, there was an opposition to the standardization of user's needs (as stated in the functionalist approach and fully applied in the post-war housing) and also against the loss of traditional urban space (denied by Le Corbusier's vision presented in *La Ville Radieuse* and his urban design projects) and of local identity. Therefore, the new avant-garde, the "theoretical practice" from United States, was focused on abstract concepts, while in Europe it showed a better connection with users (the participatory design) or place ("critical regionalism").

"Theoretical practice"

No longer endorsing a style, the avant-garde architects rally around a critical attitude towards society. Yet, this movement started as a journey and a quest for the roots of modernism by the "New York Five", a group of architects who presented their works in an exhibition in 1969, and whose common view was related to a kind of "autonomous architecture"²⁰ detached from rigid functionalism. In their later work, "the five" would go different ways: Meier to perfect a neo-Corbusian manner, Graves to embrace post-modernism and Eisenman to become one of the most representative architects of "theoretical practice". Influenced by Jacques Derrida's deconstructivism, Peter Eisenman tried to apply the philosopher's discourse in his architectural writings, in his manifesto projects and also in the built ones, such as House VI. Denying and deconstructing almost every established rule, his buildings are just an intellectual exercise, completely detached from user and context, and thus egocentric.

If Eisenman was the pioneer of deconstructivist architecture, it was Bernard Tschumi who built the first large scale project of the new avant-garde in Europe. After winning the competition for *Parc de La Villette* in Paris in 1982, Tschumi had the opportunity to build, in a representative public space, a manifesto of "theoretical practice". By superimposing three grids having no connection to one another and with the surroundings, Tschumi is stating his manifesto against consumer society and the control it exerts upon people's free choice, using the event as an instrument of social resistance, in opposition with the choreography of commercial practice.

"Theoretical practice" thus emerged, "both critical and constructive in its attitude towards reality", regarding architecture as "a mode of cultural discourse".²¹ Due to a need of endorsement through objective criteria, "theoretical practice" developed "concepts" to rely on — most of them abstract and totally detached from the user. Consequently, a new border appeared: as these ideas were not appropriated by people, neither was "theoretical practice", which did not care for reestablishing the architecture-user connection lost in modernism.

As for the other two trends that emerged as a reaction to modernist shortcomings — critical regionalism and participatory design — they stand within the "theoretical practice" framework due to their concern for the user's needs, aspirations and for local identity. Kenneth Frampton defines "critical regionalism" as a "critical practice" which assumes an "*arrière-garde* position" placing itself apart both from globalization and technological progress and from a nostalgic longing for the preindustrial past, a resistance movement able to cultivate an "identity-giving culture"²². Frampton advances some directions on which this resistant culture should be based on, but he also acknowledges the limits of this approach when facing the effects of globalization.

20 Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier. See Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 311.

21 Jonathan Hale, *Building ideas: an introduction to architectural theory* (UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 3.

22 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Bay Press, 1983), 20.

Participatory design is also an exception within “theoretical practice” as it has no avant-garde features. Focused on a real user, this approach involves the inhabitants in the designing process, thus eliminating the border between the final beneficiary/users and the architect. Such an approach is completely different from the “commercial practice” since it is not focused on following the client’s requests, but aims at delivering a professional answer to the user’s needs and wishes.

Commercial practice

While “theoretical practice” is based on a concept, commercial architectural practice used to choose a popular theme to build on. Thus, it provides a direct answer to the most obvious call, without any attempt to explore some deeper professional layers or to establish connections with the socio-economic and cultural system where it acts. Its model is Disneyland, which, when launched in 1955, was designed to provide an alternative to the real world, a refuge from the alienated city in a safe and predictable space, using “referential designs that celebrate a powerful mix of family virtue, nostalgia, optimism, and sentimentality — values that are readily understood and appreciated by the visitors who enter the parks”.²³ The settings are fantastic and exotic, and placed in a nostalgic past or in an exciting future. Activities and events are carefully staged according to a theme, and are highly comprehensible as they are based on experiences and not on some abstract or elitist codes, like in the case of the “theoretical practice”. In order to provide this perfect environment, Disneyland is completely isolated from the outside world in every sense. It has no visual connections with its surroundings to interfere with its settings, and a controlled visitor access, so no undesirable guest could intrude. Altogether, it is cut out from the actual environment, from the social reality and from the present and acts as a self-sufficient entity.

If this self-sufficiency could be accepted for amusement parks, it is not the same with the architectural practice, be it residential or commercial design. By using the Disney model, commercial practice is increasingly building borders to isolate architecture from both the urban and the social context. And these borders are becoming more real, as segregation is a one-way process.

“Ego-systems”

Speaking about the impact of Disneyland on the management of wildlife resources (natural parks), William T. Borrie highlights (quoting Margaret J. King) the self-sufficient character of theme parks and notices their peculiarity, since they are “not an ecosystem, but an ego-system, one viewed through a self-referential human lens — anthropomorphized, sentimentalized, and moralized.”²⁴ By setting their stories in a different time and place and appealing to the “lowest common denominator” to address as many customers as possible, they become “universal place-less place”, exactly as shopping malls do.²⁵

Living (in) a Fairytale

“It’s ok to live your fairytale. All in the name of fashion. Enjoy an enchanted shopping experience (...)” — thus begins a commercial for a shopping mall. With its *mise-en-scène* perfectly fitting visitors’ needs and wishes, Disney established a new standard not only for theme parks but also for commercial and other entertainment facilities. Disneyland’s faultless man-made environment creates new expectations even from the natural environment, because “it is difficult for some not to expect the ‘real’ world to also be this way”.²⁶ Therefore, the architectural borders are once again

²³ Klingmann, *Brandscapes*, 76.

²⁴ Quoted in William T. Borrie, “Disneyland and Disney World: Constructing the Environment, Designing the Visitor Experience”, *Loisir et Société / Society & Leisure* 22, 1 (1999), 71-82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

challenged. On the one hand, the limits of reality are forced by fiction as people want to live (in) a fairytale. On the other, the emerging “ego-systems” are building borders to separate and protect the new whimsical territories from the real world. Most of the traditional limits of architecture resulted from constraints; these are now strongly challenged, since, as Charles Jencks explains, people can choose:

“Why, if one can afford to live in different ages and cultures, restrict oneself to the present, the locale? Eclecticism is the natural evolution of a culture with choice.”²⁷

Gated communities and Shopping malls.

The “magic kingdom” is transferred by the commercial practice into everyday life. The successful brand has built in Florida, near Walt Disney World Resort a residential development “Celebration by Disney” where the company values materialize in dwelling and lifestyle. Here, the Disney theme can be seen in the traditional urban layout and architecture, in concealing the auxiliary services and in the ethical guidelines that the residents must follow. If establishing apart communities governed by their own rules — “intentional communities” like Fourier’s *phalanstère* — was traditionally based on ideology, more recent residential developments (like the “Celebration”) emerge from people’s wish to live in a safe and predictable environment, away from the common urban context and its contemporary problems. This drive towards isolation and full control of the residential areas is becoming more popular all over the world, generating “gated communities” segregated from the urban organism by establishing a controlled territory. Thus, public spaces like streets, squares or parks are accessible for “non-residents” only to a certain extent, as their public or semipublic character moves towards a semiprivate and private one.

Following the same line, in most cases, the architecture of “gated communities” seeks an escape from the present in its inspiration from an idyllic past or an exotic place, which appeals to a whimsical world each client has dreamt to live in. The residential project must have a name and a logo which both act not only as differentiators but also as an identity to be appropriated in order to fulfill the need for belonging, and sometimes to generate the whole theme and the architectural concept.

Things are pretty much the same in the case of shopping malls. Products of the consumer society, these commercial and entertainment centers are self-sufficient and are not trying to establish any functional or formal connection with the urban environment on which they have a huge impact by attracting a large number of people. Thus, they act within the city as completely introverted spaces, with no concern for their surroundings, in contradiction to the traditional logic of the urban public spaces.

The fences we build

The new borders architecture is building become evident when observing the escapist behavior that contemporary architecture encourages. They are mostly common products of the “commercial practice”, and can be identified in the three features shared by “gated communities” and shopping malls. The first is *self-sufficiency*, through disengagement on the urban and social level. In a sense, “gated communities” and shopping malls act like fortresses of the twenty first century, because they “cut themselves out” from the urban fabric by denying the permeability of borders. This spatial segregation does not stimulate, and sometimes does not even allow the contact between different social groups. By inducing indifference or even fear, segregation prompts caution and a feeling of insecurity and mistrust towards everything and everybody outside the community.

The theme is the second feature they share. Both residential developments and shopping malls have a theme that functions as an identity-building differentiator. Only in a few cases does the theme emerge from some aspects really related to or relevant for the surrounding place and present in

²⁷ Quoted in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 301.

the public awareness; most of the times there is made-up, unconnected and strange to places and people, thus increasing the feeling of alienation.

Thirdly, commercial practice is *market cautious*, meaning it does not take chances and it is addressing people at the most accessible level of understanding. In this way, it rejects opportunities to evolve and only maintains the *status quo*.

Throughout history, architectural borders have fallen as the constraints which had generated them have disappeared. Today, when defensive walls are useless and society seems more open than ever, people are building borders to define their own worlds, self-sufficient micro-universes abstracted from the *hic et nunc* of the larger universe of the actual society, which is perceived as imperfect and feared. These are the fences that we, the architects, are building in and on behalf of society.

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