

Walls as a Reflection of Society and Culture

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Beginning as an simple utilitarian element to defend a place or one's home from external threats, a wall reflects a society's culture. Walls express territoriality and are evident symbols of the perceived relationship between the public and private realms. Levi and del Rio discuss why understanding the meaning of walls is fundamental for planners and urban designers, and for any attempt to design and regulate place.

From historic walled cities to gated communities to the privacy walls surrounding homes, walls are an important factor in architecture and urban development. The rise of gated communities is a current topic for planners but the use of walls has been around a long time. Walls reflect the history, society and culture of a place; so understanding walls provides a way to see how society and culture get reflected in the built environment.

Purpose of Walls

Walls provide safety, security, comfort, and privacy; they separate private from public domains. Walls mark one's territory -- the perceived or actual control of a defined physical space (Gifford, 2007). Territoriality satisfies three important human needs: efficient use of the space, self-identity, and security. It helps to organize human behavior by defining access, use, and types of activities in places (Edney, 1976). For example, territoriality defines the appropriate behavioral customs of owners and visitors to a place. As an expression of territoriality,

walls and fences are a form of psychological ownership where people mark an area to identify their territorial intentions. They serve as preventive defenses that attempt to stop infringements on one's territory before it occurs.

Altman (1975) defines three types of territories: primary, secondary, and public. Primary territories are spaces that are owned or controlled on a relatively permanent basis by people and are central to their lives such as homes. Secondary territories are less important to people and their control can be rotated or shared with others, such as a classroom, a front yard, or a community garden. Public territories are open to anyone in the community, such as streets and squares.

Territoriality reflects social context, such as neighborhood climate and social class. In neighborhoods with good social relations, neighbors are able to recognize intruders, feel more responsibility for defending territory, and therefore experience less territory control problems (Taylor, Gottfredson, & Brower, 1981). In lower class neighborhoods in the U.S., the dwelling is one's primary territory and control often ends at the door (Taylor, 1988).

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In middle class suburban neighborhoods, control extends beyond the house to include yards and to some extent the street. Upper class neighborhoods may expand control to the entire neighborhood through the use of gated communities. Societies with limited space or complex social class hierarchies tend to use more walls separating public from private domains, and even the dwellings themselves may express this gradation in their internal architectural solutions (Rapoport, 1969).

Territoriality helps to make people feel more secure, and territorial marking may help to reduce crime. Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) examines the principles of design that increase one's sense of security and reduce crime (Casteel & Peek-Asa, 2000). There are two main principles: a) use real or symbolic barriers that separate public from private territory, and b) provide opportunities for surveillance of a territory by the owner and concerned neighbors.

All cultures are territorial, but territoriality is expressed differently in various cultures (Gifford, 2007). For example, North Americans view the sidewalk and street curb as part of their home territory so they often monitor and clean these areas, while Greeks view their territory as ending at one's door and the sidewalk as public and are less likely to care for them (Worchel & Lollis, 1982).

Reflection of History, Society and Culture

The use of walls to divide and structure communities has a long history. The Garden of Eden was walled to protect the chosen ones and to keep evil out, and the word paradise has its roots in the ancient Persian *pairidaeza* or "walled garden" (Miller, 2014). From historic walled cities to the privacy walls surrounding homes, the use of walls reflects how society and culture are expressed in the built environment. As symbolic and physical barriers that separate people and activities (Sillar, 2013), walls play a vital role in structuring society that reflects historical and social conditions, such as social class, land ownership, and social networks.

Walls are used to structure people's social organization and sense of community, and as a way to control the use of space they can create tensions and social divisions. Medieval cities used fortress walls to prevent access by outsiders, while privacy walls around homes in Latin America create a buffer between the family and the outside world. In contemporary Western societies a growing uses of walls is in gated communities.

Gated communities are the typical example of the privatization space (Low, 2008) and primarily occur in large-scale housing developments at the city edge or in rural areas. In the US, they first began to be used for the wealthy in the 1930s in Southern California and by the 1980s they had expanded to retirement communities, resorts, and suburban development. The 2010 Census data indicate that over 5% of US households live in communities surrounded by walls (Low, 2008).

Besides controlling access to homes, the walls of gated communities serve a number of purposes (Low, 2008). They control the use of streets and amenities –such as parks, swimming pools, and golf courses– and they create a perception of safety and security. They separate people socially, spatially, and racially from dangers or people one wants to avoid. Their exclusiveness displays social status, and they segregate the residents along social class, racial, and ethnic criteria.

As in the US, other regions in the world have a long history of residential gating (Hirt & Petrovic, 2011). In Latin and Islamic countries, for instance, wealthy homes have been traditionally walled off from urban life. But the current expanded use of gated communities is a global phenomenon that has spread from the Western, industrialized countries and represent socially homogeneous lifestyle enclaves with special services, rather than familial connections. The expansion of gated communities is a result of weaker social ties in urban communities, of increasing social and economic disparities, of fear of crime, and the failure of governments to provide services and security (Low, 2003).

Gated communities entrench social inequity and are a threat to the development of a sense of community (Low, 2003). The impact of gated communities is more social and racial segregation in housing, less support for the creation and maintenance of public spaces and services, increased insecurity and fear of crime, and decreased sense of community. Although gated communities are developed to provide security, their use in the US is not related to a decrease in crime rates.

Types of Walls

This work considers walls, fences and hedges as synonyms since they serve the same purpose: to define, enclose, divide, and provide security and privacy. A territory can be marked in the public's use and perception in five different ways.

No wall

Even when houses and buildings have no walls surrounding them, there are territorial markers. A setback to a house defines a territory separating private and public spaces, and even when a house abuts the start of private property is clear. Churches may use plazas and elaborate symbolic gateways to mark the transition from secular to sacred. Government buildings may use stairways, signs and other powerful gateways to mark the entrance to their territory.

Symbolic wall

Buildings may have walls, fences or hedges that symbolically mark the territory. The classic three-foot high picket fence around a US home marks the territory but does not prevent people from viewing the residence or easily climbing over the fence.

Security wall

A security wall is designed to prevent intruders from invading the building and its grounds such as high fences and walls with spikes or barbed wire. Sometimes, one can see through a security wall. As noted by CPTED research, the ability of neighbors being able to see through the wall increases security and reduces crime.

Privacy wall

A privacy wall or fence blocks vision from the street to the building. It is typically high enough to create both a visual and sound buffer from the street. Hedges can also be used for privacy, although they are less useful for blocking sound. Because it blocks surveillance by neighbors, a privacy wall may not provide security. Consequently, some buildings combine privacy and security walls. Privacy walls can be topped with spikes or broken glass for security.

Fortress wall

Fortress walls can be seen in historic walled cities and consist of a high (over 7 feet) and solid wall for defense and privacy. They may have extra security measures at the top such as spikes, barbed wire, security cameras, or places for guards. Nowadays they can be found in modern embassies and in gated communities for the very wealthy, particularly in regions where populations are socio-economical distress and the government does not guarantee public safety.

Walls and Building Types

There are different types of walls depending on the type of building. For example, there are different types of wall for residential buildings, churches, and government buildings. Walls around homes separate the public from the private. Walls around churches separate the secular from the sacred. Walls around government buildings separate government institutions from the public.

In the United States, there is a tradition of not having walls surrounding houses. Houses have front yard setbacks, rather than street walls, to display territory (Siembieda, 1996). Front yards are secondary territories that are neither private nor public. The open lawn expresses the egalitarian and democratic culture of the US. The landscaping and decoration of the yard displays social status. Their use helps to promote neighborhood and community relations. Symbolic markers rather than physical barriers often mark front yards.

For churches and religious buildings, it is important to clearly separate the secular from the sacred, but also to be inviting. Churches often use elaborate or awe-inspiring gateways rather than walls for entrances. Churches also desire to have private outdoor spaces for contemplation, meditation, rituals, and social activities. These may occur in walled areas behind the church.

Government buildings are often designed to show the power and authority of government institutions. In democratic America, the buildings may be open to the street to show trust and a positive relationship to the community. However, some government functions have security concerns that lead to the use of security walls around buildings, such as police or courthouses.

The Study

In order to better understand the social and cultural use of walls, photographs and observation notes were taken in various cities, and the use of walls was classified according to the five types of walls identified above. These informal observations were supplemented by a more formal survey of neighborhoods and the downtown in San Luis Obispo by a team of students in a Cal Poly Environmental Psychology class in 2013. The results of these observations can be summarized as follows.

San Luis Obispo, CA

The typical San Luis Obispo residence has no walls (50%), symbolic walls (40%), or privacy (10%) walls. There were very few security walls around individual homes, although there are gated communities in other parts of the County. Churches have no walls (50%) or symbolic walls (50%). However, even when



Figures 1 and 2: In San Luis Obispo, the Mission (left) and the County Offices building (right) have no walls and bear a direct relation to the public space. (Photos: D. Levi and V. del Rio)





Figures 3 and 4: The walls protecting the medieval fortress (above) and a typical street in Carcassonne, France. (Photos by D. Levi)



Figures 5 and 6: In Sitges, Spain, fences and walls protect public and private buildings. (Photos by D. Levi)



there were no walls, they often have steps and gateways to denote entering sacred space. Churches sometimes had privacy walls in the back, such as the Mission, that enclose private areas for contemplation and social activities. Government buildings primarily had no walls (70%) or symbolic walls (30%), with the exception of buildings with police functions, which may have security walls in the back or side.

Carcassonne, France

Carcassonne is a medium sized city in Southern France whose historic core contains the Cité, a medieval fortress city that is now an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Cité is surrounded by a double set of fortress walls with watch places for guards. Within these city walls, residences have no setback from the street, they share walls between them, and short walls separate backyard gardens. Churches have no walls but face plazas and have elaborate gateway entrances that define entering the sacred space. Government buildings are clustered and set behind a wall and moat that, in the old days, gave further protection if the city was invaded.

Sitges, Spain

In Sitges, a small Spanish coastal town near Barcelona, privacy walls surround nearly every residence, both individual homes and small apartment buildings. In some cases, these walls are combined with security elements (spikes primarily). In newer neighborhoods, a common solution was to combine wire fences with a hedge to provide both security and privacy. In some cases, the "hedge" consisted of plastic plants woven into the fence. Churches have plazas in front defining the sacred space but not walls, although most had privacy walls in the back enclosing a private outdoor space. Most government buildings had either no or symbolic walls, and only but a few had security walls. Sitges is similar in its use of walls to many Latin American countries.

Walls are a major part of Latin American vernacular architecture as an evolution of the influence of the Moorish centuries-long domination of the Iberian Peninsula and, later, of Spain's Law of the Indies (Siembieda, 1996). Compiled and enacted in 1573 for all territories dominated by Spain, the Law of the Indies defined procedures for town planning from how to lay down and plot a settlement to the size and use of plazas and the segregation of activities and social classes. Government, religious, and commercial buildings were built bordering plazas, and houses had walls surrounding them. In Latin America, walls are used around almost all houses, regardless of social class serving both symbolic and functional purposes (Siembieda, 1996). They mark the boundary between private and public space and provide privacy and security for the household. These Latin walls provide a variety of functions: cultural expression, family privacy, display of social status, and security.

Nong Khai, Thailand

Along the Mekong River, the medium sized city of Nong Khai is an important transportation link to Vientiane, Laos. The city layout and its buildings reflect collectivist Asian culture. In the older part of the city residences have no setbacks from the street, therefore no walls. In the newer residential areas there were yards but there were either no or symbolic walls. There were no privacy walls as in all East Asia privacy is primarily about social rules rather than physical barriers. For example, Japanese houses have paper interior walls made of paper.

The Buddhist wats (temple complexes) were typically surrounded by tall privacy walls creating quiet, contemplative areas as oases in the urban environment. The walls also provide a very clear separation of the sacred from the surrounding secular city. Although historically wats in small Thai towns did not have walls and they were owned and protected by the community, as cities grew larger walls were incorporated for protection from urban noise and crime.

The government buildings had symbolic or security walls. Northern Thailand is culturally different from the government center in Bangkok, which asserts authority over the northern regions. There is not a strong democratic history in Thailand, so government buildings are often separated with large setbacks and protected with security fences from the public.

Vientiane, Laos

Vientiane, capital of Laos, is a large city along the Mekong River. Culturally its people are similar to the people in nearby Thailand's Nong Khai. However, Vientiane's architecture and urban design has been largely impacted by French colonialism. Although many residential areas had no walls, there were middle and upper class historic, urban neighborhoods with security and fortress walls. These were different from the gated communities in the West as they were used to protect the French Colonial administrators from the Lao people they governed.

The Buddhist wats in Vientiane have symbolic walls which are architecturally similar to those surrounding the Thai wats, except that they were only 2 or 3 feet high. This is because in Laos social revolutions often start from activism at schools and monasteries located inside the wats, the government wanted the ability to monitor activities within them. On the other hand, government buildings have either security or fortress walls, reflecting the lack of trust between the government and people.

Conclusions

Walls mark one's territory and their use reflects history, culture, and society. History can be seen in the medieval fortress walls around cities and the fortress neighborhoods in post-Colonial countries like Laos. Culture and history can be seen



Figures 7 and 8: In Nong Khai, Thailand a government building with low walls (top) and a residence with no walls. (Photos by D. Levi)



Figures 9 and 10: In Vientiane, Laos a wall reflecting the French colonial past (top) and a low wall around a Buddhist wats (Photos by D. Levi)



in the walled homes and open plazas of Spain and Latin America. Social forces are presented in the open front yards of democratic United States, and the rise in gated communities linked to social inequity and increased security concerns.

The use of walls also depends on the type of building they surround. Residences use walls to mark territory, provide security and create privacy. Residences in collectivist cultures are less likely to have privacy walls because of increased social connections. Religious buildings use walls as a way to separate the secular from the sacred; however, this creates conflicts for them. Religious buildings want to be open and inviting, so they use awe-inspiring gateways. But they also have the need to create privacy and serenity, so Buddhist wats and Catholic Missions create quiet, meditative environments in walled areas in the back. Governments use walls and gateways to display power and authority and their relationship to the public. Secure democracies do not have imposing government walls – they are open to the people. Colonial governments do not trust the public and need to watch the natives to protect themselves, so they use security and fortress walls.

Walls tell us a lot about a place. They convey a variety of messages about the history, culture, and society of a place. They tell us whether we are welcome, how to behave, and the character of the people behind them. They reflect the characteristics of the community by defining the relationship between private versus public space.

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