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FRAMEWORK OF PLACES

Review paper

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Abstract

A wall, an inner wall, a fence: elements that are between the inside and the outside, often seen on plans as linear elements with a protective force, are nevertheless zones that crown and frame the work, i.e. the designed space. Properly designed, with a tangible thickness, they can stratify and become on their own spaces of recesses, niches, hollows and even corridors or passages. Solid, thick and heavy or, on the contrary, light, openwork and filled with air, they frame the interiors of buildings and the urban space. They operate bi-directionally, although they belong to a single object. They speak of the interiority and exteriority of an architectural object at the same time. On a plan and in a large scale they are perceived as boundaries, barriers, but in closer perspective and deeper understanding they can become soft edges enclosing the delicate matter of a building or a part of a city. The article deals with the theme of edges and verges in the context of the architecture of buildings and the city, the issues of the framework of parts of urban space. In relation to both buildings and city districts, they appear to be important spatial elements, yet which are often treated with insufficient attention. The article considers several examples of urban frameworks to illustrate their role in creating places.

Keywords

urban architecture, public space, edge, boundary, place, experiencing architectural space, feeling architecture

Introduction

The concept of place, defined and described by many authors, refers to the relationship between space and experience. Space itself is not yet a place, because it is only when it is individualised, considered in the context of events, objects, actions, individual, specific features that it acquires an identity. This is one of the reasons why the architectural discourse uses the notion of identity of place rather than the identity of space. The space seems infinite, boundless. In order to become more specific, it needs to be specified in terms of location or function. We are talking about urban space, space of a square or gallery interior. A place, on the other hand, demands at most an addition related to the language of meanings or events: a place of remembrance, a meeting place, etc., and it is framed by a specific material and immaterial framework. I study the issues of frames, edges, verges in the context of architecture and places.

It is not difficult to see that modern cities suffer from a shortage of places. The language of describing the cities is dominated by spaces: urban, public, social ones. It is very noticeable how the modernist paradigm of flowing, limitless space, combined with radical functionalism, have left their mark on cities, filling large areas with blocks of separate buildings. By attempting to create geometric compositions from separate elements, many cities have been deprived of continuity; moreover, a kind of sense of disorientation and anxiety appeared, backed by the question “Where am I actually?”. Functional ideas proved difficult when confronted “with the persistent opacity of the form of a place (...). The place ‘resisted’ the construction of modernity and comfort, and in the ‘light’, it revealed its ‘ugliness’, because, deprived of decoration, it gained nothing in return,”¹ writes Jacek Dominiczak, who also draws attention to the fact that the historical European city is an undeniable phenomenon of Western culture, its image and atmosphere attracting not only tourists². It is a city with a clear spatial framework: edges, boundaries, both in terms of buildings and small areas, neighbourhoods. Their form seems to have a significant impact on the identity of places and cities, and is often treated with insufficient attention. A wall, an inner wall, a façade, a fence are elements with the power to protect; they crown and frame the designed space considered as a work. In their thickness they can stratify and become a space on their own.

Borders

When I look at objects, especially the utilitarian ones, the closest ones, like a chair, a cup or a tablecloth, I carefully study the way their edges are finished: the outer surfaces and the borders. Then, I engage all my senses: I look and touch, I sometimes sniff. In the case of larger objects, such as a building: a house or a tenement, or larger city areas, such as urban quarters, housing estates or districts,

1 J.Dominiczak, *Miasto dialogiczne i inne teksty rozproszone*, Gdańsk, 2016, p. 49

2 J.Dominiczak, p. 125

details seem to lose their importance and the sensory perception is limited to the sight. However, these are the details of the edges, the surfaces of walls and masonry, their geometries and tectonics, and their material qualities that play a huge role in shaping the character and identity of places. These elements work bi-directionally: they are the ‘edging’ of the object and at the same time they imprint their form on the empty space. They create a framework for the surrounding air masses, both in the closed interior and in the open space of streets and squares. Their qualities influence whether events, situations, experiences and feelings occur between them, and consequently whether the places so produced gain a timeless character³.

Kevin Lynch in the book *The Image of the City* introduces and describes the five main elements that make up the title image of the city. He mentions edges on the second place and devotes a large part of the book to them, trying to define and describe what they actually are and what role they play in creating the image of the city. Lynch defines edges as linear elements that are not treated as roads and are usually, but not always, boundaries between two kinds of areas⁴. He describes the types of spatial edges and the strength of their impact on urban space: in this case, the space of several mid-20th-century American cities, which certainly contributes to the timeliness of his considerations. He uses many terms to describe different types of edges, including: boundary, break in continuity, barrier, wall, edge and even seam. In doing so, he reveals the diverse nature of edges, which are important organising features for people, especially when they tie together more general areas, as inside a city encircled by water or a wall⁵. The edge, however, is, in my opinion, a concept that rather refers and belongs to the object. We are talking about the edge of a pavement or the edge of a table. An edge, therefore, is related more to the mass of a solid or a surface, something tangible, material. We think of the edge of land, the edge of a rock, the edge of a roof, something specific, with a clear shape, behind which there may already be ‘nothing’, an undefined mass of air.

The same applies to the border that can be the verge of something. Unlike an edge, however, a border certainly **separates** two areas; it is a kind of contact between them, a strip of a certain width, a field of meeting or a line of demarcation. A border is a kind of fill in between, a stitching combining together two urban textures. It is the border that would be much closer to the concept of a seam. An edge is always part of an object, not an area that extends beyond its form. Due to their morphology and their importance in the urban space, these are separate elements. So, when Lynch extends the notion of edge to the meaning of boundary, he introduces a kind of imprecision.

3 S.Z. Sosak, *W poszukiwaniu scen, których nie widać*, „Rzut. Kwartalnik Architektoniczny”, 5 (2014), pp.38-44.

4 K. Lynch, *Obraz miasta*, transl. T. Jeleński, Kraków 2011, p. 72.

5 K. Lynch, *Obraz miasta*, p. 54.

Frames

However, elsewhere in his book, Lynch formulates an idea that seems to define edges as we intuitively sense them. According to him, an edge can be more than simply an exposed barrier if it allows some kind of physical or visual penetration; if, to a certain depth, it is somehow built into the region on either side⁶.

This idea seems to contain the essence of edge considered as an extreme part of an object or area, something that is 'built into the region'. The edge is thus an element that closes the extent of the area: another element of the city image, which, at the same time, imprints its 'pattern' on the neighbouring area. Lynch cites examples of very distinct edges: the frontage of tall buildings by the Central Park, the waterfront on a seaside boulevard, the wall of a medieval city. Urban edges defined in this way are like the frames of paintings hanging in a gallery. They belong to a region or an object, they are its integral finish. They also play a role in emphasising the importance of what they are the edge of, like the hem of a tablecloth emphasising its form, its material, but also marking the edge as an essential part of the whole to which attention is due. In the architectural and urban contexts, edges are perceptible from the outside and convey a kind of message that we are entering a different space. Their role is therefore extremely important: they can be barriers or they can have a permeating, binding character.

From the historic perspective, urban edges originally had a primarily functional character, manifested in the form of defensive walls. The conscious design of edges as a compositional element of urban complexes, based on the notion of beauty, only appeared in the periods of Renaissance and Baroque. Later, in the 19th-century, fast-growing cities, the inner-city edges, such as street frontages or developments at the junction with park layouts, were consciously composed to create areas with a high degree of local identity, carefully separating public and private spaces and enhancing residential values⁷.

Edges of Venice

Venice, a city at the crossroads of Europe's trade and cultural routes, has never been enclosed by walls. The protective function was for centuries provided by the lagoon, leaving the town open and visible from afar. It is thus difficult to clearly define what constitutes the edges of the city: it is at the same time surrounded and permeated by water, which in its vast part constitutes a kind of street floor and a component of the urban interior system. The walls of the buildings, well anchored to the ground of the lagoon, are the endless edges of the city, separating the inner from the outer. The multi-layered façades thus highlight the role of walls as a frame that acts bi-directionally: towards private spaces

6 K. Lynch, *Obraz miasta*, p. 116.

7 Z. Paszkowski, *Mieszkać na krawędzi*, „Czasopismo Techniczne”, z. 3-A (2007), pp. 203-214.

and towards public spaces. Carved, stratified, enriched with loggias, arcades, staircases, overhangs and full of ornamental details, they are like hand-embroidered edges of collars or ball gowns.



Fig. 1. Venice, photo: Iwona Kalenik.

As written by Christopher Alexander, a building with a living edge is connected to its surroundings, makes an integral part of the social fabric of the city, a component of the life of every person who lives or passes nearby⁸. Alexander even postulates treating the edge of a building as a separate entity, a place that has a definite volume and is not just a line devoid of thickness or a surface of contact between different interactions⁹.

Interior of the interior

Edges can be defined, described and designed as an element equal with others, play a significant role in building the continuity of a city and in strengthening the identity of its different areas. The city districts: smaller areas organised “from the inside” and having their own character, framed by edges, become individual interior systems of streets and squares. They somehow are interiors inside the city. An urban park or garden surrounded by an elegant fence with a main entrance in the form of a magnificent gate and several side gates seems to gain in uniqueness. We truly **enter** the park. We are inside the garden space enclosed by the openwork fence and we feel its separate character. The wrought-iron fence or an open-work wall act as its frame or edge, emphasising the uniqueness of the place of which they are a part. The park is here and the street is there. Similarly, the wall of the university campus

8 Ch. Alexander, *Język wzorców. Miasta, budynki, konstrukcja*, transl. A. Kaczanowska, K. Maliszewska, M. Trzebiatowska, Gdańsk 2008, p. 764.

9 Ch. Alexander, *Język wzorców. Miasta, budynki, konstrukcja*, p. 765.

in the city centre seems to say to the passer-by that a different space begins here, and that passing through the tall stately gate leads into a world of different experiences. The public interiors of the university created by the walls present inside the public interiors of the city have their own character, often a different spatial layout and atmosphere. These are examples of very clear, visible frameworks enclosing, but not isolating, a small urban part.

The frontage of the Myśliwiecka Street in Warsaw is an interesting edge of the inner-city area: it is the border between the park and a small complex of eighteen single-family houses known as Kolonia Profesorska. The detached houses and their connecting fences form a coherent continuous wall surface along the surrounding streets, in which entrances to private gardens, niches, entrance recesses, hollows and small details such as openings for letterboxes or bells can be found. In some places there are hollows in the walls, so that the curious passer-by could look inside the complex of buildings. There is no doubt that we are walking along the edge of a very individualised place. What is more, at one point, between two buildings, the frontage somehow opens up to make room for a wrought-iron gate opening onto a long staircase: a passageway through the colony, bearing the name Profesorska Street. We are inside the colony: on the nameless squares, courtyards and micro-scale streets. Undoubtedly, the strong articulation of edges in this neighbourhood underlines its specificity and unique architectural identity.



Fig. 2. Warsaw, photo: Iwona Kalenik.

Let me now refer to an example of a completely different nature: the fencing of the redevelopment area of a large section of the city, observed a few years ago in Berlin. The thin fence, made of tin segments, had an explicitly protective role: it did not allow a random person to enter the construction site. However, its outer surface was covered with careful printing: information aimed at residents, and several of its bays had a kind of “portholes” through which the progress of the works could be seen. The thin tin “wall” was not a mute barrier. It was designed to be an integral, important part of the construction site. However, its purely functional role was supplemented by the possibility of

influencing the experiences of residents. As a result, the ordinary place of a construction site became a kind of event.

Bi-directionality

In 1952 the Italian architect Luigi Moretti wrote an essay "Structures and Sequences of Spaces" in which he proposed to read the space of several architectural objects by means of plaster models of their "air masses", i.e. negatives of space. By removing the visible forms of the objects and turning the void into a sculptural solid, he enabled the precise perception of the shape of the models' inner space as if from the outside. This measure also allowed to see the 'surface' of invisible air filling the objects and the important role of the wall in creating the shape of the space. I relate this experiment consecrated to the architectural interior to the urban space. The tradition of architecture defined as interior is based on the assumption that a building is not seen as an external form, but as the outer surface of an interior space. This is a particularly interesting approach in relation to the city space, as it allows us to understand the role of edges as a framework for city fragments, but also, in the architectural context, as a framework that captures the space of buildings. The wall of a building both defines the space inside and shapes the space outside. In combination with the surface of the street floor and the conventionally adopted air ceiling, it forms a public urban interior. It therefore works in two directions: into the private space and into the public space. It separates and connects different areas, while defining their spatial shape.

Unusual spatial situations demonstrating the power of the edges of buildings can be encountered in the streets of Rome when passing the open gate of a church. In the street frontage, from the level of the human eye, they are sometimes unnoticeable, inscribing themselves into the rhythm of the tenement houses. However, an attentive passer-by will notice a façade rich in ornamentation or a slight change in the geometry of the street, which at this point can become a tiny square. The interior of the church reveals its presence with a cool breeze from the inside of the temple. The thick, sculpted wall hides behind it a public, but unique, different space. Treated as a sculptural mass that allows the creation of niches, hollows, cornices, recesses and openings, it becomes a two-sided form, a space in itself, a field of negotiation between the interior and the exterior.

In the case of the thin, completely transparent glass façade of an office building in the centre of a large city, this kind of negotiation will not occur. The glass is a thin line raised to the third dimension, seemingly demarcating spaces. Seemingly, because these spaces are visually interpenetrating. In the evening, this invisible hard barrier cuts off the interior light from the darkness of the street with a strong cut of glass. The edge serves here as a finely honed blade. However, it has no power of moulding or imprinting. It is an unambiguous, strong but silent gesture to mark the belonging of the area.

Layering

It is not necessary, however, to build a thick solid wall in order to separate and emphasise the individual character of the two meeting spaces and to give shape to each of them. In the Japanese tradition, which values dimness, the walls of traditional buildings are constructed of many thin layers of wood and paper. As explained by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki in his *In Praise of Shadows*, the simplicity of the Japanese house astonishes the Westerners, who feel they are seeing bare grey walls without any embellishment. According to Tanizaki this is understandable and results from the fact that they cannot penetrate the mystery of twilight¹⁰. Here the ornament consists of a blip of light, a moving shadow on the wall or floor. The moving and overlapping *shoji* walls create the layers necessary to filter the light and thus emphasise the uniqueness of the twilight present in the given interior. And what frames the interior is another layer made of verandas, corridors, arcades or partitions of varying permeability. They emphasise the uniqueness of the spaces they separate, while at the same time being spaces on their own.

The layers of the building's façade thus allow for the construction of a peculiar dramaturgy of experiencing the separated but in a way interpenetrating spaces of the interior and the exterior, as well as the space of this separation itself. In one of the streets of Braga (Portugal), you can find a house the wooden façade of which, decorated with plaiting, is a kind of spectacle of opening and closing. Made up of dozens of small shutters, the surface is superimposed at a certain distance on the actual wall of the building, making its edge an additional space with the permeability depending on the weather conditions, the light intensity or the different needs of the inhabitants of the house. It is them who decide how this edge of the building will look, how much it will reveal, how much it will allow passers-by to see. The interior of the street and the interior of the house intermingle in a controlled, variable way. The edge of this extraordinary building offers the possibility of creating countless combinations of openings and closings, filtering image, light, sound through its stratified structure.

10 J. Tanizaki, *Pochwała cienia*, transl. H.Lipszyc, Kraków 2016, p. 39.



Fig. 3. Braga, photo: Iwona Kalenik.

Carlo Scarpa, an Italian architect and professor at the School of Architecture in Venice, who attached great importance to details, combinations, and choice of materials, looked with sensitivity at the problem of departing from the materiality of late 20th-century architecture, noting that the sense of space is not communicated by pictorial order, but always by physical phenomena, that is, by the matter, the sense of mass, the weight of the wall¹¹. The carefully planned architectural elements, the sequences of thoughtful spaces of his buildings are an extremely nuanced theatre on the scale of the room and the building they frame¹². According to Scarpa, spatial relationships are created above all by all the openings, crevices, niches, folds, small architectural gestures in the mass of walls and therefore in the area of the edges of buildings. In the spaces of buildings, children's playgrounds and public spaces he designed, this idea is very clearly visible.

When we find ourselves in the urban interiors of Venice, we very quickly feel and understand the validity of these observations. The outer surfaces of the walls of the buildings, but also the floors, are a kind of reliefs imprinting their patterns on the interiors of canals, passages, small streets or squares, courts and courtyards. It is perhaps thanks to these nuanced façade forms that we have the feeling of being in an unusual space.

11 C. Scarpa, *Furnishings*, [in:] *Carlo Scarpa. Complete works*, ed. F. Dal Co, G. Mazzariol, London 1986, p. 282.

12 M.A. Steane, *The Architecture of Light. Recent Approaches to Designing with Natural Light*, Abingdon 2011, p. 57.



Fig. 4. Venice, photo: Iwona Kalenik.

Experiencing the edge

Robert McCarter writes about the vitally important experience of the interior as the source of the experience of architecture in general. Analysing various views, statements and texts on architecture, he proves that in the embodied experience of the interior, the space literally surrounds us with its mass, engaging all the senses and creating a feeling of haptic intimacy and closeness. It is precisely the tectonics of the surfaces of the walls, which McCarter considers to be the key to creating experiences. He thus comes closer to a purely spatial concept, in which walls are no longer seen as structural elements, but are given a void-forming role. As written by Robert McCarter in his book *The space within. Interior experience as the origin of architecture*, the relationship between inside and outside is complemented by the relationship between the solid and the void, in which the shape of the void is entirely dependent on the solid: the shape of the mass. The space receives its shape and therefore its visibility as a result of its relationship with the wall. The space emerges when the walls are established¹³. This professional architect and educator takes a deeper look at architecture, focusing its definition around the tradition of building and place-making, while leaving style and aesthetics aside. He considers that in this sense, architecture is much less interested in what a building looks like and

much more interested in how its spaces are organised, how they are constructed and how they affect the experience of the residents¹⁴.

Interestingly, he devotes much space in his reflections to boundaries understood as frames, forms of a definite mass being “in between”. However, he does not use the concept of an edge, but of a boundary treated as an area and relates it to walls, which brings him closer to treating the walls as separate spatial creations similar to Christopher Alexander.

In the context of place, Tim Ingold’s concept seems very interesting. He visualises the world and the human in it as a mutual entanglement, intertwining. According to him, we may be embodied, but our bodies are not limited or closed; they rather expand, grow in many directions along paths of entanglement in the fabric of the world¹⁵.

Strongly contesting the concept of place as an area defined by form and meaning, characterised by some kind of a “middle”, Ingold leans towards the idea that places rather happen, appear, they are the result of a continuous “weaving” of space. Here Ingold touches upon the question of continuity of space and its layering, a kind of palimpsest that happens in the urban space every day. He gets close to the idea that architecture is a kind of process, a sequence of experiences, which is only framed in material terms. Such a perspective is far from the purely visual, aesthetising and essentially passive perception of the surrounding reality so commonly present in the contemporary design.

Architecture is less and less a response to the life processes occurring within it. This has led to a situation where the surrounding space is neutral and inert as it does not receive or generate life¹⁶.

It seems that the contemporary city needs to return to a gradual build-up, to the construction of scenes of life, framed by clear frames: walls, inner walls that contain a kind of relief, an imprint of the space they form. This can be supported by attaching more attention to designing the edges in such a way that they become carriers of the identity of the place the verges of which they form, as well as by stitching together disconnected areas and finding a framework for the zone **in between** by giving the edges appropriate forms and meanings.

14 Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington University in St.Luis: <https://samfoxschool.wustl.edu/people/faculty/169-robert-mc-carter> [accessed: 01/03/2022].

15 T. Ingold, *Splatać otwarty świat*, transl. E. Klekot, D. Wąsik, Kraków 2018, p. 93.

16 S.Z. Sosak, *W poszukiwaniu scen, których nie widać*, p. 39.

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The additional inner parenthesis [] in the bibliographic entry contains the year of the first issue, which allows you to get a better idea of the period from which the text originated.

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