

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2002)

Heft: 9

Artikel: Towards a theory of borders

Autor: Accossato, Katia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919231>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

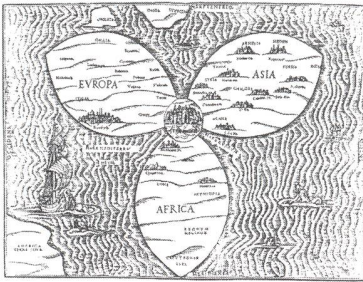
Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 08.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Towards a Theory of Borders



Map with Jerusalem in the center of the world
H. Bünting, *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripture*,
Magdeburg 1585

1 E. Bloch, „Verfremdungen II (Geographica)“
in: *Literarische Aufsätze*, Gesamtausgabe Band
9, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1965, pages
500-502.

2 “Territorial criticism of architecture“ is a cate-
gory that emerged during Vittorio Savi’s lecture
at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio,
April 2001.

3 Stable Form

H. von Foerster, „Cibernetica ed epistemologia: storia e prospettive“, in G. Bocchi, M. Ceruti (edited by), *“La sfida della complessità“*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1985, pages 112-140. See G. Bocchi, M. Ceruti, *“Disordine e costruzione. Un’interpretazione epistemologica dell’opera di Jean Piaget“*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1981, page 33. The authors analyze the contribution of Felix Klein (1872), who dissertates on the character of geometrical properties to remain unchanged against a specific group of transformations; they also quote a meaningful excerpt by Cassirer on the general problem of geometry: “Data una varietà ed in essa un gruppo di trasformazioni (...) si tratta di studiare quelle proprietà delle configurazioni appartenenti alla varietà che non sono cambiate dalle trasformazioni di gruppo“. On this topic, see also Carlos Martí Arís’s smart interpretation of some positions taken by Piaget’s *structuralism* on the concept of transformation of type in architecture. The *deep structures* of a phenomenon remain unchanged against its countless superficial changes. „La ricerca della struttura che soggiace a fenomeni diversi, si situa a un livello di astrazione tale che la natura dei fenomeni, quella che potremmo chiamare la loro condizione materiale, passa in secondo piano, lasciando in evidenza la forma nella quale questi si articolano, si compongono e si trasformano. Un processo analogo sottostà all’applicazione delle idee tipologiche nella conoscenza architettonica (...)“. C. Martí Arís, *“Le variazioni dell’identità. Il tipo in architettura“*, Città Studi, Milano 1990, p. 102-106.

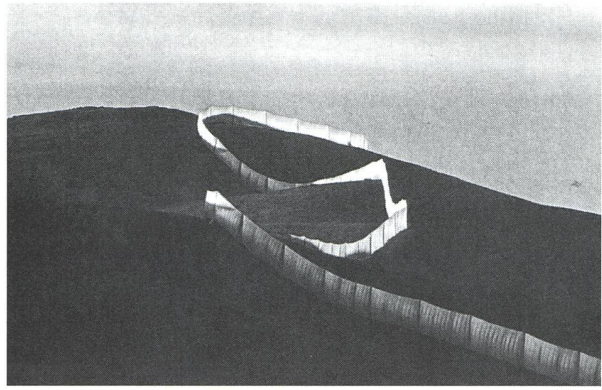
„Halt an der Grenze, durch eine Brücke bezeichnet. [...] Die Grenze ist überall Trennen und Öffnen zugleich, der erste Grenzort ist das Vorzimmer von drüben. Weil dem so ist und das Vorzimmer jeweils ein ganzes Land auf tun kann, sind die Grenzen nicht nur auf der Landkarte verschieden gefärbt.“

Ernst Bloch, *Geographica*¹

To begin with, it is worth pointing out that here the border, besides its strictly geographical meaning, also identifies an architectural place, and the meaning of “border“ is believed to be instrumental to a “territorial criticism of architecture“.² An extremely broad field of research opens up, which we shall try to restrict by taking a stand in the contemporary debate on architecture and urban design. For some time, the debate appears to have lost its initial polar opposition with a criticism on the historical city through its morphology on the one hand, and the discovery of the “diffused city“ on the other hand, with the need to restore the assets in a center-less periphery. The “border“ belongs to both worlds, and somehow it crosses over from one to the other. The border as a place of conflict and thus, conversely, a place of possible stability, is taken as the “new center“ for observing the territory in a quest for the “stable form“³, i.e. a form whose features remain unchanged in the territory and thus allows to potentially reorganize the territory itself.

The need to re-discuss the nature and function of borders has emerged only recently, as a facet of contemporary society and culture. On the one hand, for instance, the implementation of the European Union has led many to argue that we should no longer talk of borders. Following to the Schengen agreements and the introduction of the single currency, advocates of the so called “borderless Europe“ are gaining increasingly more momentum

as they emphasize “Europe of peoples“ and “of Regions“ as opposed to “Europe of States“. However, this momentum is running the risk of being overshadowed by the widespread murmurs of those who believe that the removal of frontiers gives rise to a dispute on conventional definitions of identities, i.e. those definitions that aimed at reducing peoples to States and including relationships and mixes within borderlines.



Christo, *Running Fence*, 1972-76, California

However, the system of individualities and their intertwining is so complex that the border barriers in Europe have been continuously rearranged. A comparison between the political map of Europe in 1914 and the present map shows how the number of States, especially in the central-eastern area, has increased. The two World Wars and the fall of the Berlin wall have not only held back the great continental empires but also replaced them with a myriad of political entities. In addition, it is undeniable that the rationale of divisions is strongly re-emerging also *within* the national borders. The major urban concentrations themselves are becoming increasingly more similar to multicultural, multiethnic state entities, within which rigorously separate and distinct “regions“, “zones“, and “areas“ are reproduced.⁴ The idea of region, as always determined by its borders, leads to another crucial topic in contemporary criticism, i.e. *regionalism* and *internationalism*.⁵

What do we mean by border as a space, and more specifically as an “architectural space“?

To answer this question, it is also necessary to study the word itself.⁶ In order to make an etymological analysis of the word “confine“ (border) in Italian - the same analysis in other languages would lead to identify interesting similarities - we related four couples of words that are conceptually pregnant and have different interpretations: *Terminus*-*margin*e, *regio*-*recinto*, *Limes*-*confine*, *frontière*-*barriera*.⁷ In our opinion, six “groups of meanings“ connected to the notion of “border“ emerge from this comparison:

- a) A “circular periphery“, subject only to visual control (border as “horizon“);
- b) Presence of opposite situations – humid or dry – such as to conditions the use of the periphery and to determine the passageways (border as “margin-term“ from the roots *mar* and *tar* indicating the contrast between water and ground);
- c) A “separation area“ marked also by a physical structure which, more than a barrier, acts as an “osmotic filter“ (border as *limes*);
- d) A mechanism for contractual division of property or sovereign rights on the territory (border as “boundary“);
- e) An offensive-defensive arrangement of the peripheral areas (border as “frontier“);
- f) A “theater“ where man can build a representation of himself (a “limit“ built in the *landscape*).⁸

These different meanings (except for the last) share the idea that the border, regardless of its indication, is a periphery “whose passageways are to be super-

4 This distinction is not only horizontal: in an urban context – dominated by sky-scrapers and high-rise buildings – or in a territory whose topography is dominated by mountains, such distinction can also be applied vertically.

5 A very brief overview of the positions taken by K. Frampton, J. Gubler, V. Magnago Lampugnani, M. Tafuri, W. Oechslin, V. Gregotti and others concerning regionalism is illustrated in a publication by the writer: “Architettura e insularità“, in *Architetti di Dublino, progetti nel paesaggio irlandese*, (edited by K. Accossato, C. Piva, S. McDonald, A. Vagge), in: *Archi*, n.4, August 2001, pages 8-13.

6 See P. Zanini, *Significati del confine. I limiti naturali, storici, mentali*, Mondadori, Milano 1997.

7 Due to space constraints, we skip the development of the etymological analysis, which is dealt with in detail by K. Accossato, in *Architettura di una terra di confine*, Dissertation for Architectural Composition Doctorate (supervisor D. Vitale, co-supervisor Fredi Drugman), IUAV, Venezia 1998. The dissertation also includes other issues related to the idea of border: the Sacred Mountains of the Alps, cartography on border and Max Frisch’s critical thought in the field of Swiss “national“ architecture. See also, by K. Accossato, “Una città al confine“, in: *Archi*, n.6, December 2000.

8 See E. Turri, *Il paesaggio come teatro. Dal territorio vissuto al territorio rappresentato*, Marsilio, Venezia 1998.

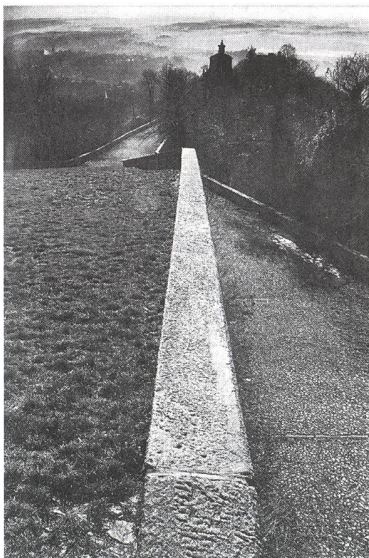


Sacro Monte, Varese,
Incisione di Federico Agnelli, 1656
(Raccolta Bertarelli Milano)

9 F. Demarchi, *Introduzione* a R. Gubert, *La situazione confinaria*, Lint, Trieste 1972, pages VII-XXXIX, page XX.

10 G. Devoto, G.C. Oli, *Il Vocabolario illustrato della Lingua Italiana*, F. Le Monnier, Firenze 1982, item: *confine*.

11 (Translated from Italian) Sundry Authors, *Atlante socioeconomico della Regione Insubrica*, Casagrande, Bellinzona 1997, page 15.



The *via sacra* of the *Sacro Monte* in Varese,
P. Zanzi

12 F. Demarchi, *Op. cit.*, page IX.

vised in order to protect the local economic activities of a group with military and legal means⁹. Depending on the historical and cultural background, such periphery can be defined as a distant area bearing no interest at all, or as a conflict area, or as a legally definable and administrable area, or as a transit territory. Here we wish to introduce a new meaning of border, i.e. one that is linked to the change from “border space“ to “border as a space“. An example that finds its origin in Renaissance and develops further in the Baroque offers the “border landscape“ of the *Sacri Monti* at the foothills of the Alps, as an actual “theatrical machine“.

Phenomenology of the Border. Naturalness and Artificialness of a Frontier

The Devoto - Oli Italian dictionary defines “confine“ (border) primarily as a “line that was naturally or artificially built in order to mark the limits of a territory or property, or the sovereignty of a State“.¹⁰ In fact, the “line“ is the ultimate result of a complex geo-political activity envisaging also the contribution of geographers and cartographers: “The map [...] materializes a geographical space in a symbolic form. It is therefore the result of a complex operation, although an intuitive one for the user: It organizes locations, makes arrangements visible and immediately perceivable, which would otherwise require pages of descriptive text. Ultimately, a map is a model.“¹¹ We may add that a map is a project. The fact that the border cannot be traced back to a simple “separation line“ between territories is also confirmed by several “clues“.

The *first* clue is to be found in our daily experience. Rather than in the “abstract“ space theorized in modern physics, we live in a space similar to the one conceptualized in Aristotelian physics. It consists in at least *six dimensions*, divided into three couples of antinomies: top-bottom, front-back, right-left. The six dimensions come into play when you are faced with any architectural structure or any confined space. Thinking “by borders“, on the other hand, means to apply a “double reduction“. The first implies assuming merely the “front-back“ logic; the second implies looking at the result of such reduction “from above“. It is exactly as when, in designing any architectural structure, you start by drawing the “plan“ and add the other dimensions only at a later stage, or when – in Switzerland – you start defining the volume of the “house to be“ from a series of pilings. “Tracing the boundaries“ is a tool to reach a specific result.

The *second* clue indicating the non-originality of the “naïve“ notion of border comes from the experience of social life. Even in the most formalized state organizations, one is interested in the persistence, “at their borders, of a group of customers, members, honorary citizens, (...) who may even take on a specific and legally protected organizational structure, like *métoikos* in Greek cities, espionage services in large corporations and empires, corporate entertainment clubs, and so one works out a way to formalize situations that are intentionally ambiguous and temporary which serve to channel more or less frequent cultural and material exchanges in the interest of both groups.“¹²

The *third* clue indicating the non-arbitrariness of the border and of its original autonomy from the state experience originates from the historical experience, i.e. from the presence and permanence over time, going beyond the historical

and political events, of more or less extended “no-man’s lands”, which are uninhabited because unsuitable to mankind but are used by two or more groups to isolate and identify themselves.

The *fourth* clue is given by the indissoluble link between border and land. As mentioned by Carl Schmitt, a medieval definition of international law states that it means “*occupation of a land*, foundation of cities, fortification, wars, slavery, lack of freedom, returns from prison, alliances and peace treaties, armistice, inviolability of ambassadors and bans to marry foreigners”.¹³ In short, boundaries can only be traced after occupying a land. At the same time, the border requires and generates an “otherness”. In fact, according to Carl Schmitt, the basic category of a “politician” is the contrast between *amicus-hostis*. Those “beyond” the border are “outside” my land and thus are potential enemies, and their identification is crucial in establishing my own identity. Placing a border is an original act in human experience. Any individual or community, when establishing any long-lasting relationship with the ground – regardless of the legal notions of “property” or “sovereignty” – feels the need to establish borders.¹⁴ This is not a need for a fixed, unchanging space. In fact, a typical feature of archaic societies was that the boundaries were extremely “mobile”.

However, while the act of tracing a border is natural, the result of such act is not. We refer to the notion of “natural” border as different from and opposed to the notion of “artificial” (or “political”) border.¹⁵

“Natural” borders are those that clearly follow the topography of the territory, mountain chains, rivers, or coastlines, i.e. relying on physical elements that are so obvious that they do not need any defining marks.¹⁶ On the other hand, “artificial” borders are those that do *not* rely on physical elements and therefore need artifacts built by man to be identified. The difference between a political map of Europe – with its extremely jagged borderlines – and a map of America or Africa – where borders are based on meridians and parallels – seems to confirm this basic distinction.

Thus, borders are “artificial”, which, however, does not mean that they are arbitrary. In fact, as was mentioned above, the “act of tracing” borders is natural, whereas the result of this act – the actual border – is artificial, though not at all contrived. It is defined as such because it is the result of an *ars*, an artifice, as is a house. For man, it is natural to dwell in a house, but this does not mean that houses appear on the territory as trees. Thus, it has been rightly

13 The Nomos of the Earth

From the Italian text: C. Schmitt, *Il Nomos della terra*, Adelphi, Milano 1991, page 22. Original title of Schmitt’s text: *Der Nomos der Erde*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1974. *Nomos* here means “first occupation of a land”, *measurement* and division of the ground. *Nomos* is thought of as a *wall*. As is the case with the separation lines forming the lattice of a Roman centuriation, this is the obvious expression of an order. It takes the form of a precise design on the territory and, if we give credit to the theory according to which the (Roman) *limitatio* derives from the Etruscan discipline, we have to consider the religious roots of such operation. This way, the validity of borders is guaranteed by referring it to a deity. Schmitt reviews, also mentioning the importance of map archives (especially for navigation), the history of lines traced on the earth and “around” the sea and he analyzes some key facts for international law. He comments on the so-called *global line* of 1494 between the North Pole and the South Pole (traced by Pope Alexander VI), the *friendship lines* that marked an extra-European fight area in the 16th and 17th century, and the *Hispano-Portuguese division lines* traced for an obvious distribution purpose. The leitmotiv of the whole work is the opposition between the sea and the ground, where tensions persist side by side, thus generating the *Nomos* of the Earth.

14 Mental Maps

The way in which the border is “built” by man can be described as follows: “The concept of border, intended as ‘limit’, is located at the center of the interest in the new propositions of the ‘geography of the perception’. Man, with some partial analogy with the animal, owns and perceives a specific territory where extension is, at first, a function of his ‘vissuto’ (span of life lived there). In this context, the border becomes a central notion and enters in strict relation with the action and the perception that man has about space. It is important, therefore, to define ‘mental maps’: the latter will inform the researcher about the effects exerted by the border at a perception level and of the regional identity.” R. Ratti, “The Study of the spatial Effects of the Borders: an Overview of different Approaches”, in Idem, *Regioni di frontiera. Teorie dello sviluppo e saggi politico-economici*, CCM, Lugano 1991, pages 49-62, page 60. An opposite position to the identification of man with the border comes from the anarchic-utopian doctrines that find their first reference in the modern world in Rousseau, which started their struggle to regenerate society from the abolition of borders. An example is to be found in the initial pages of “Discorso sull’origine e i fondamenti della disuguaglianza” of J. J. Rousseau (1754).

15 The dispute between “pure” and “political” geographers dates back to the 18th century. An obvious example is the contrast between the two schools of thought in Germany. In 1726, P. Leyser published a text against the political representation of the Earth surface. A reply was given by G. C. Hering (1728), who maintained that space should be given a name to be indissolubly linked to the political division. See F. Farinelli, *I segni del mondo. Immagine cartografica e discorso geografico in età moderna*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1992.

16 In fact, the natural border is a myth of the 19th century. We are faced with “marks” that are such not just *in rerum natura*, but also because “loaded” with meanings. There is nothing more “artificial” than a “natural” border since you need more imagination to give a meaning to something that already exists versus something that, like a sign or a boundary stone, has no other existence than the one given to it by man since the beginning. One of the several obvious examples is the location of the Sacred Mountains on the Italian northern border.

17 G. Simmel, *Soziologische Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, quoted in R. Gubert, *Op. cit.*, page 6.

18 Water as a Border

An interesting outline of the “classical” way of understanding the border in international law is given by V. Adami, in: *National Frontiers in relation to International Law*, Oxford University Press, London 1927. The author analyzes the military role of the mountain border. In general, such border does not follow the mountain crest but rather the watershed line and not always do the highest peaks of a mountain chain correspond to it (just think of the military importance of passes). The river, especially if significantly large, is the best military border. An immediate reference can be made to the Danube and the Rhine as borders of the Roman Empire. However, the river hardly became a real border between states because this contrasts with the use of a river as an axis for commercial communication. Another category that is analyzed is the lake border that is usually “traced” as a midline. The following quotation refers to a Swiss area: “The Swiss are the only people who have ever laid such a claim (against the state of Milan) to the whole of the lake of Lugano, because this lake has its origin in and takes its name from a portion of their territory; but after a long debate a contrary judgment was given on September 1678 in which it was ordered that the lake should be considered respectively Milanese or Swiss property as it lies entirely within the one or the other’s territory, and should be common property with alternative jurisdiction and use wherever it is situated between the two States”. The planning guidelines are often the result of an overlapping of roles of the two countries. However, the existence of the borderline has influenced the growth of settlements in that area.

19 Morphological Types of Borders

From a *morphological* standpoint, four main types of border can be identified: a) the *physical type*, where the border is supported by one of the geographical elements listed above (for example, the French-Spanish border along the Pyrenees, or the French-German border along the Rhine); b) the *geometric type*, where the border is established through astronomic measurements based on meridians and parallels, arcs or loxodromes (for instance, the majority of the African borders); c) the *anthropogeographic type*, where the border is established based on cultural, ethnic, language, religious criteria (for instance, the borders between States originating from the „dissolution“ of Yugoslavia); d) the *complex type*, originating from a combination of the previous types. From a *genetic* viewpoint, another classification can be made, which in our opinion is more correct as it is based on the relationship between the border and human settlement. The point is to know if the border was established *before* (*antecedent* border, for instance, the American-Canadian border), *during* (*subsequent* border, for instance, the majority of European borders), or *after* (*superimposed* border, for instance the Israeli border) the time when the populations defined the major elements of the anthropized landscape. See C. Raffestin, “Frontiers”, in: Sundry Authors, *Cartes et Figures de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1980, page 419.

20 A broad literature documents the continuous movement of artists and intellectuals from one side of the frontier to the other. An example for the Lombardy-Ticino area is given by the masters from Val d’Intelvi, artists from Ticino working at the Sacro Monte di Varese (those who, during the Baroque Age, reached the Capital Cities as well as the areas close to the border), Italian artists in Switzerland: Pellegrini at Riva S. Vitale (TI), and much later Chiattone in Mendrisio and Lugano, as well as Terragni in Lugano – competition for the regional library -, or E. N. Rogers in Lausanne (last but not least, also political exile favors the dissemination of ideas.)

said that “the border is not a special fact with sociological consequence, but a sociological fact that takes on a special form.”¹⁷ Data on natural experience – that are always difficult to establish – would be useless without an organization, control, or agreement, i.e. a political will and a legal system.

In fact, the doctrine of natural borders abandons a dangerous semantic misunderstanding, i.e. identifying as a “natural” extension

of a State places that exist *in rerum natura*, which, due to their specific characteristics, appeared to lend themselves to act as “separation lines”.

Thus, the frontier is not arbitrary but rather *conventional*. This approach allows to redeem some “intermediate situations” that the doctrine identified between natural and artificial borders: high-mountain areas, orographic crest lines, watershed lines, water stream lines.¹⁸ This is why no definition can be given of “what” a border is. If anything, only one or more typologies can be indicated.¹⁹

Border Types

There follows an analysis of three types of borders originating from the above considerations.

a) The *barrier-border*.

It is the way of experiencing the border that emphasizes its “separation” character, which gives rise to a penalizing situation. Neighboring States identify this as a “marginal” and “peripheral” area, and

assign a priority function to their “central” policies. Any form of contact between neighboring areas is discouraged. It is the least favorable situation for a “border architecture”, but is it interesting to observe the impact both in terms of *diversity* and in terms of *consistency* between the two areas;

b) The *filter-border*.

This border acts as a “discriminating mediator” between neighboring areas. It takes on a special meaning from an economic standpoint. According to the neoclassical theory, the economic frontier is the place where marginal costs equal price, i.e. where profits are zero. Introducing a political-institutional border acting as a “filter” requires a change in economic spaces and implies the appearance of a differential profit for both sides of the border that does not necessarily result into a zero sum (the cross-border commuting phenomenon.) As far as “border architecture” is concerned, it should be investigated whether this way of experiencing the border has had an impact on the movement of

operators – architects, engineers, urban designers, builders²⁰ – or whether it caused the adoption of special design solutions or materials;

c) The *open border*.

In this case, the border area does not play a separation function but rather favors contact between different areas. Its development does not stem from the political-institutional differential, as in the previous case, but rather from a mutual penetration of the two areas that are connected by a mutual interrelation. This is the most favorable way of experiencing the border for a “border architecture” if such definition is meant as “characteristic of a border situation”, i.e. if we think of an architecture with its own character as distinct from the two individual areas, although made of elements taken from both. However, we should not let an intellectual suggestion take over. A situation where the economic integration is well established does not necessarily originate an equally deep cultural and intellectual penetration.²¹

Border Situations: Cross-Border Regions, the Alps...

The notion of *open border* is probably the most interesting one. Suffice it to think of the architecture in the *Regio Basiliensis* and many other regions within the national Swiss borders, where different landscapes and cultures meet in several places. Moreover, the *open border* lays the conceptual ground to radically overcome the concept of border as mere “periphery”.²² Often, the need to overcome the border, in fact, takes on a *negative* connotation in terms of a deep dissatisfaction with several present borderlines, which, in an increasingly more integrated economy and culture, reveal their obvious “obsolescence”. Suffice it to think of the Italian-Slovenian border, or the “improper” situation of cities such as Gorizia and Trieste, where the gap between the economic-cultural area and the political-institutional area is becoming increasingly sharper.²³ Such gap continues to exist also where the institutional border barriers have actually been removed.²⁴

Similarly, besides the lively debate on the “contemporaneity” of borders (both present and *tout court*), today we are also witnessing the birth of “new” borders, not just or not only of *territorial* nature, but also and mainly of *functional*, personal, and organizational character, such as those deriving from the scope of a large trans-national corporation or by a powerful non-governmental organization.

All this, leads us to talk of a “border situation” rather than of “border” in a stricter sense.²⁵ The former is to be understood as a set of relations and relationships that are typical of those living in a “border area” which is not only “open” between the two neighboring areas but is such that, because it is able to experience this way of “being a border,” it abandons its function of “periphery” to take on the function of a “new center”. It is the place where it is most necessary to implement those “networks” – both technical and of play-

21 See R. Ratti, “L’evoluzione del concetto di frontiera: barriera, filtro o zona di contatto?”, in: Idem, *Regioni di frontiera*, cit., pages 65-70.

22 “Crediamo sia [...] fecondo, assumere la periferia come punto di vista, angolo privilegiato, dal quale osservare molto bene il territorio più generale e complessivo del nostro abitare, ma dal quale, anche, cogliere atteggiamenti e innescare proposte utili a una trasformazione e a un miglioramento nei modi di vivere i luoghi. Vedere che cosa capita ai margini, [...] corrisponde a un atteggiamento che [...] scioglie i problemi aggredendoli dal limite, dalle linee di contorno, anziché dai centri di irraggiamento. E’ un pensiero che si è soffermato sulle differenze, piuttosto che sulle identità, sui vuoti e sugli interstizi più che sul pieno e sul costruito, sulle crisi e sul silenzio, piuttosto che sulle strutture forti del linguaggio.” A. Isola, „Pensare il limite, abitare il limite”, in: A. Isola, C. Gianmarco, *Disegnare le periferie, il progetto del limite*, Nis, Roma 1993.

23 See Sundry Authors, *Città di confine. Conversazioni sul futuro di Gorizia e Nova Gorica*, Ediciclo, Portogruaro 1994; and P. Morawski, “Da Stettino a Trieste: viaggio alla ricerca della cortina di ferro”, in: *Limes, I nuovi muri*, n° 1, Roma 1996, pages 123-160.

24 **European Central Axis**

This is the case of the so-called “European central axis”, the new “fertile crescent,” stretching from southern England to Benelux, to continue between France and Germany along the Rhine valley, cutting through Switzerland to Basel, passing through Milan to reach the Mediterranean area in Genoa and Marseille. The areas that make up this actual “backbone of Europe” (also known as *hot European banana*, an even more imaginative definition stemming from its shape) belong to several Countries. However, such areas are much more similar to one another than they are to the rest of their own Country. Despite the fact that Shengen agreements largely contributed to making borders less relevant, part of the inhabitants of such areas claim new and different forms of economic as well as political autonomy.

25 R. Gubert, *Op.cit.*, page 500.

26 The Bridge and the Door

Concerning the border as a “central” space, see E. Trias, “Lógica del Límite”, *Ensayos/Destino*, Barcelona 1991. See also other philosophical contributions such as the concept of limit-antithesis in Hegel or the concept of bridge in G. Simmel, *Saggi estetici*, edited by M. Cacciari, Liviana ed., Padova 1972. The bridge conforms to the image of nature. The casualness of natural data is elevated to unity. The bridge is intended as unity and the “door” as a concept that potentially emphasizes the fact that separating and connecting are two aspects of the same act. Thus, the wall is mute while the door “talks”. The bridge only has one direction, while outside the door space is unlimited. The bridge can be crossed equally in both directions, while you “go in” or “go out” through the door. See R. Giannone, *Abitare la frontiera. Il moderno e lo spazio dei possibili*, edited by F. Rella, Cluva, Venezia 1985. The key issues in the text are “void”, multiplicity of languages, abandonment of the concept of image, the inner frontier of the city, *Zwischenstand* of the frontier, a space that does not require to be guaranteed by continuity with history. The topic should be further explored, though not exhaustively, in terms of form of connection and form of distinction: „Tutto ciò che appare, appare in quanto possiede una forma, che risulta dalla composizione di limitato e illimitante. [...] I due, gli assolutamente distinti, si connettono poichè mancano l'uno della verità dell'altro, e riconoscono in questa mancanza [...] proprio ciò che li costituisce“. M. Cacciari, “Geo-filosofia dell'Europa”, *Adelphi*, Milano 1994, pages 142-149.



The border between Switzerland and France, *La Suisse, Terre de travail et de liberté*,

ers – that today are considered to be the most crucial requirement for development. As already mentioned, this represents a change from a “border space” to the “border as a space”.²⁶

Based on the most recent research works that drew inspiration from this sort of “Copernican revolution”, “you can easily discredit a biased idea, probably deriving from the national philosophies of Europe of States, according to which there

is an Alpine area that is generically included among “peripheries” [...]. Instead, against the background at the end of the 20th century, the Alpine regions and particularly the two poles of the *Arge Alp* - Lombardy and Bavaria - appear, in the European context, as those strong regions on which part of the wider comparison, of the European challenge in a worldwide context, may depend.”²⁷

The Alpine world is one that has been able to experience its “hovering” on the border, its apparent marginality, as a key tool for preserving its own identity and, also for this reason, finds itself in a “twofold border” situation. In fact, on the one hand it is at the crossroads of several European nations (which, due to this reason, consider it as “peripheral”), while on the other hand it originated and developed “at a considerable altitude”. In fact, not only have peoples from the plains always seen the mountains as a “barrier”, but they have also always considered themselves as separate from the Alpine population, because unable to live at their heights, and thus have always somehow “assigned” the latter the task of acting as a hinge and as a bridge between the two. Therefore, starting from a height of 1,000 meters, a different population developed compared with the populations living on the plains.

The Alpine civilization, thus, could develop characteristics that now appear to be extraordinarily modern, turning into “everybody’s land” what might have been a “no-man’s land”. Suffice it to think that since its origin – and especially during the Middle Ages – it has represented an “open region”, as it was a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-national “border area” that managed to learn and explore different forms and ways of making different cultures live together, a result that would be extremely appropriate today if applied on a wider scale.²⁸

City and Territory. For a Border Architecture

We believe that there is sufficient evidence that a “border situation” does exist. It is now appropriate to wonder if it has an impact on architecture. In addition to this, architecture includes the concept of border as something that intimately belongs to it. Three aspects have to be underlined.

First, doing architecture implies a founding act that is similar to the act of establishing a border as it is based on the construction of a “fence”. “Fencing is an act of collective recognition and appropriation of a piece of land or physical

27 R. Ratti, „L’innovazione tecnologica nelle regioni dell’Arco alpino centrale: un nuovo ruolo delle frontiere quale contributo alla frammentarietà?“, in: Idem, *Regioni di frontiera*, cit., page 110.

space; it is the act that marks it and separates it from the rest of the world-nature. It grounds its topological, imaginary, geometrical, technical, internal and external regions, poses the problem of mental or physical constitution of the boundary, the border and its violation.²⁹ It can also be mentioned that the design activity itself has been defined as “practice of boundary”.³⁰

Secondly, the activity of border “materialization” implies (at least) three acts – definition, delimitation and marking – that are the same as the actions taken by the architect when implementing any project. In fact, the Arabic word *hinda-sah* means not only “measurement”, but also “geometry” and “architecture”. “It is too often forgotten that, even before building a set of techniques to give us a shelter against bad weather, architecture is a measurement instrument, a wealth of knowledge able to organize time and space in societies, allowing us to come to terms with the natural environment.”³¹

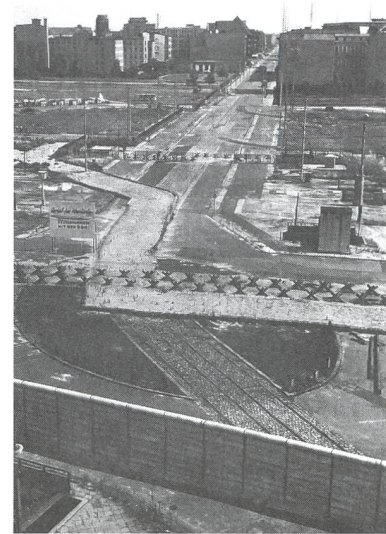
Thirdly, “placing a border” as well as “designing” have to do with “dwelling” and its connotations. For this reason, similarly to all architectural structures, the border marks are made with a view to “last over time”. How has the border actually impacted the architectural methods and forms? The border space is identified by a “section line” that “cuts” and highlights the “nodes” of cities, villages, countryside areas.

Calcutta, Bombay, San Francisco, Jerusalem, Sarajevo, Berlin, and London, all dealt with in a text edited by Antonio Calabrò³², are frontier cities where even the inner boundaries may become places of new stability, places for a potential architecture of contradictions turned into public places where anybody can identify himself/herself. Some cities express their “frontier nature” at best. San Francisco is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural: Time and cultural barriers add to huge geological and climatic frontiers, the contact point of two tectonic plates; the topography of the territory becomes a crucial factor in a continuous movement of the city construction in search of a stable form. Berlin is eccentric: The center represents the border between east and west, the wall, a line of pain and struggle, had somehow become a reference in the city. The difficult reconstruction of this center has been under discussion, not without contrasts, for quite some time. In the same line of thought, we could ask if it would have been possible to draw the border between Israel and Palestine with a spatial consciousness. “The Border is an architectural problem” (F. La Cecla, Lecture at the A.A. in Mendrisio, April 2002).

The notion of border is bound to radically change and, together with it, the architecture of these places should be re-thought with new reference points and new centers for urban and territorial settlement. What is needed is centers that are able to interpret – according to the needs of the common space – the same sacredness that was implied in the existence of a border. This is a major feature for an architecture that aims at representing new collective values, one that border areas have always had since their origin.

Katia Accossato, architect and doctor in Architectural Composition (IUAV Venice), is assistant at the ETHZ.

28 On the idea of internationalism of the Alps: L. Zanzi (a cura di), *Montagna, una cultura da salvare*, Fondazione Enrico Monti, Università di Pavia 1996, page 14. See E. Riedenaer, “Compiti e metodi della cartografia storica in relazione alla storia territoriale nell’area centrale delle Alpi”, in: Sundry Authors, *Lo spazio alpino: area di civiltà, regione cerniera*, Liguori, Napoli 1991, pages 23-48. On the role of the Alps in design and architectural utopia see Sundry Authors, *E. Viollet-le-Duc et le massif du mont-blanc 1868-1879*, Payot, Lausanne 1988; A. Corboz, “Geologia estrapolata: da Viollet-le-Duc a Bruno Taut (1985)”, in: Idem, *Ordine sparso. Saggi sull’arte, il metodo, la città e il territorio*, edited by Viganò, F. Angeli, Milano 1998, pages 124-137. See W. Kos, *Die Eroberung der Landschaft*, Falter, Wien 1992.



Berlin, Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz, 1967

29 (Translated from Italian) V. Gregotti, *Editoriale*, in: *Rassegna*, n.1, 1979, page 6.

30 F. Dal Co, *Il Progetto come pratica del limite*, in „Rassegna” cit, page 72.

31 P. Virilio, *Lo spazio critico*, Dedalo, Bari 1988, page 19.

32 Sundry Authors, *Frontiere*, (edited by A. Calabrò, preface by U. Eco) Il Sole 24 ore, Milano 2001.