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# The eradication of public space

## Dissolving liminal states

**EURAU'12**

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*ABSTRACT. Whilst European cities have become a test-bed for multicultural habitation, the 2005 riots in France have demonstrated that the consequent social organization of space has not resulted in a greater integration of communities. As socio-economic space expands, socio-urban space is becoming increasingly segregated and fortified. Gated communities and the urban periphery are examined as a process of symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis, revealing a risk of urban systems breaking down into progressively autonomous agglomerations. It is argued that the twentieth century's obsession with communication provoked a retreat from a Foucauldian disciplinary society into an autopoietic schismogenic return to ancient forms of fortified habitation.*

*KEYWORDS. gated communities, liminality, periphery, public space, schismogenesis.*

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## 1. Introduction

In the past half century, modern communication technologies, globalization, and political and economic integration policies, have led to an increasingly dynamic movement of individuals and diminished physical distances between urban dwellers of different cultures, ethnicities, or social status, consequently turning contemporary cities, and European cities in particular, into veritable test-beds for multiple cultures sharing the same physical space. However, as the 2005 French riots have demonstrated, the consequent social organization of space has not resulted in a greater integration of communities. Whilst borderless space and its ensuing multicultural habitation has gained greater complexity, it is also becoming increasingly fragmented and fortified, separating rather than integrating. As such, the dissolution of socio-economic borders seems to be going hand in hand with the establishment of new socio-urban borders, experienced through a return to ancient forms of fortified habitation and particularly exemplified by the development, and proliferation, of gated communities.

## 2. An enduring practice

Whilst it is generally assumed that cities are treasured as sites of socialization and cultural mixing, dwellers of gated communities are often criticised for going against this mode of thought by bunkering in homogenous communities and minimising social interaction outside their gates. An undesirable behaviour in contemporary society perhaps, but, as Simon Richards has noted (RICHARDS, 2007), one that nevertheless constitutes the prominent mode of Western urban thought since at least Plato's Republic first introduced the tripartite notion of a just society segregated according to rulers, warriors, and producers in the 'beautiful city' of *Kallipolis*. Such segregationist credos have continuously been consolidated into city planning. Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* for instance, echoes Plato's *Kallipolis* by partitioning society into the same three groups of governors, enforcers, and providers. Fontana-Giusti notes that not only did Alberti suggest that the divided city has historically deterred civil discord but equally, and as a consequence, proposed erecting intraurban segregationist walls "so high as to dominate the roofs of any private houses" (Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, as cited in, FONTANA-GIUSTI, 2011. 321). The material history of socio-urban segregation has an equally long pedigree, from Foucault's disciplinary societies and leprosariums of the Middle Ages (FOUCAULT, 2006), cells and penitentiary chambers of early Christianity, through the partitioned Chinese imperial capital of Chang'an (YORK et al, 2011; SMITH, 2010; see Fig.1), to the very birth of the city, which Lewis Mumford designated as a "birdlike claim of territoriality" (MUMFORD, 1963. 6) - a union between the Neolithic and Palaeolithic, fortress and shrine, militarising and institutionalising the original sacred grounds into walled compounds.

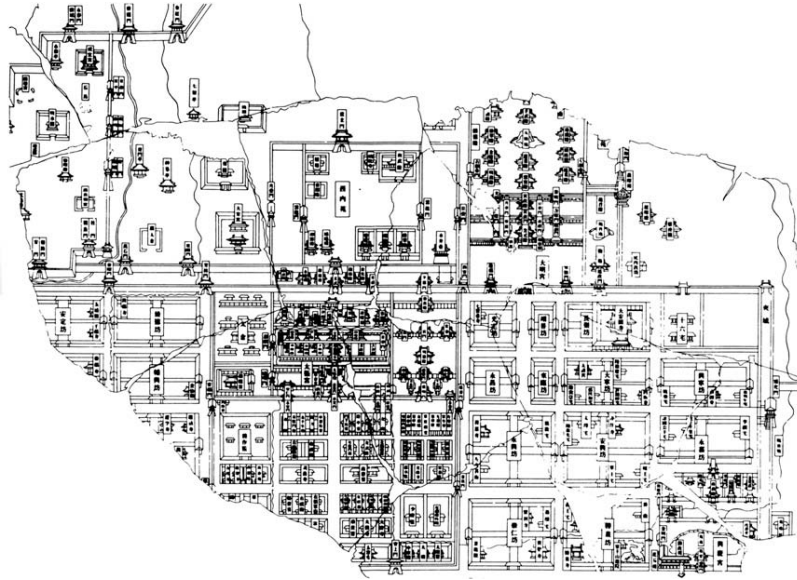


Fig.1

Categorical notions of the city as a place of social interaction and multicultural integration are therefore a relatively new phenomenon. Narratives criticising contemporary urbanities and longing for a return to ancient sites of burgeoning public discourse, such as the ancient Greek agora, ignore the fact that whilst open to all citizens, this space was excluded from the majority of the population (CRAWFORD, 1995). Malcolm Miles has gone as far as to argue that a history of public spaces can thus be termed a "history of a lack of such spaces" (MILES, 2006. 1), presenting the agora as either discriminatory or regular market, whereas the fabled medieval square represented a site of state power and public executions.

Everything changed however, with the technological revolution of the beginning of the last century. In effect, the advent of modern communication technologies and borderless spaces we currently enjoy coincided with the large scale adoption of the modernist agenda set forth in 1933. What is intriguing is that whilst the Athens Charter constituted a break with previous socio-urban segregationist policies, it failed to extinguish socio-urban divisions. Burgin reminds us that for all the obsession with communication, transport and transparency in modernism, its main outcome was imposed silence and isolation, so eloquently portrayed in *Playtime*, whence we can only but wonder whether Jacques Tati had the modern city or early Christian cells in mind when building his *TatiVille* (see Fig.2):

We may remember, then, that as much as modernity is the locus of transparency in architecture, it is also at the origin of the social isolation in and between high-rise apartment houses, the death of the street as a site of social interaction. (BURGIN, 1996. 146)

But while much of the criticism on the modern movement's legacy is directed at its rationalist planning and zoning policies, its obsession with communication and transparency is likewise at the origin of considerable ongoing socio-urban

disintegration. If under the hand of Corbusier modernism possessed an agenda to organize society with a view to eliminate social divisions, it reduced this to an eradication of physical boundaries, leading to a heightened dominance of ocularcentric design (PALLASMAA, 2008), augmenting what during the post-war period had become a "race of seers" (BUCHANAN et al., 2005), and a visual dominance already noted in the 19th century through Simmel's appraisal of agoraphobia and 'fear of touching' (VIDLER, 2001) or Degas' rendition of 'Place de la Concorde' in 1875 where, "classes coexisted but did not touch ... each absorbed in a kind of dream" (T. J. Clark on Degas' painting, as cited in CALDEIRA, 2000. 214). As much as there is a relationship between walling and social segregation, so is there one between transparency and social isolation. By eliminating urban borders, we can argue that the modern movement's obsession with openness - along with the deindustrialization and liberal economics of the 1970s and 80s - provoked a transformation from Foucault's institutionalised disciplinary society into an autopoietic schismogenic society that is progressively returning to ancient forms of fortified habitation.



Fig.2

### 3. Liminality and schismogenesis

It is becoming increasingly apparent that we *need* borders in order to identify ourselves, and consequently, to identify with others. A recurring train of thought in socio-urban studies, following Simmel (1997), Certeau (1988), Deleuze (2007) and Leach (2006), is that socio-urban borders not only constitute the building blocks of spatiality, but are also the first step towards social integration:

This is a paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them. (CERTEAU, 1988. 127)

These frontier spaces have been defined by Turner (1969) as liminal spaces of transition, whereupon during a passage between two unique planes of existence, so great is the incompatibility between both states that the liminal phase is a necessary intermediate stage. Whilst this initial separatist step towards a process of becoming is perceived by a contemporary society based on ideals of equality as an abject condition, it is likewise a necessary step towards a true process of integration. A process, which Simmel famously acknowledged when he affirmed that "things must first be separated from one another in order to be together" (SIMMEL, 1997. 66). Borders and thresholds are therefore perceived as vital parts of a process of identification and posterior integration. As such, the progressive erasure of borderlines in modern cities can be interpreted as one of the principal causes of an autopoietic return to fortified habitations by transforming dwellers of the postmodern city into *liminal personas*, structurally invisible and in a state of limbo, or *permanent liminality*, unable to cross from one plane to another in what are essentially generic cities. This state however, cannot last. Liminality is by definition a temporary state, and it is here that schismogenesis, as defined by Bateson (1987), aids us in understanding conditions of permanent liminality, whereupon a vicious circle of positive feedback and progressive differentiation leads to either symmetrical differentiation or complementary differentiation.

Bateson posited that upon contact, differentiated communities will display a process of interaction that can be defined as symmetrical differentiation, complementary differentiation, or reciprocity (BATESON, 1987). Perceiving the growing hostilities in Europe at the eve of the Second World War, it was the schismogenic processes of differentiation that Bateson was most interested in, having adapted the actual concept from Lewis Richardson's 1919 mathematical model of the arms race (ABRAHAM, 1990). Whereas mechanical or organismic systems tend to reach a state of equilibrium (either by design or through constant adaptation), in a schismatic system recurrent processes lead to increased differentiation of its constituent elements, whereupon:

the interests of the elements take precedence over the interests of the system, and in their quest for autonomy, serve as an internal force for system change. Its fundamental tendency is to fragment and disintegrate into a series of independent systems rather than to survive as a unified entity (MORGAN, 1981. 24)

Symmetrical schismogenesis, or differentiation, exists when both communities are equals and exhibit the same goals and behavioural patterns in response to each other's actions, what cybernetics would later term 'positive feedback'. In such a situation, an action by one group receives an identical response by the other group, leading to increasing rivalry and the eventual breakdown of the system. This can be seen by the exponential growth of gated communities currently taking place in America, whereupon the act of gating by one community promotes the act of gating by another. A recent census on American habitation illustrates this point (see Fig.3). Complementary schismogenesis takes place when there is an unequal balance and both communities exhibit different goals and behavioural patterns in response to each other's actions, what in cybernetics would later be termed 'negative feedback'. In such a situation, an action by one group receives a different, but complementary, reaction by the other group. This is typically illustrated through relationships comprising dominance and submission, where dominance promotes further submission, which in turn promotes further dominance, leading to progressive differentiation and the breakdown of the system. This can be seen in the 2005 French riots, where the socio-political distance between centre and suburb became so great that a constituent element of the system acted to destroy its dominant symbols.

While schismogenesis can create long periods of unstructured liminality, Bateson follows Turner in acknowledging that all liminality must eventually dissolve, as it is by definition a state of transition. The main particularity of the schismogenic system is that it does not tend to equilibrium: the suburban riots witnessed in France can be seen as a breakdown of this schismogenic liminal state. In effect, the riots of 2005 were an attempt at altering the social environment of French suburbs and their relative importance in political and social discourse (BONELLI, 2006). When our institutions and urban landscape fail to cater for a changing population, altering our urban environment is a social and moral responsibility. Whilst this is a natural process we all take a part in, what is troubling is that during the autumn of 2005 in France, this alteration involved the actual destruction of the environment. A case of complementary schismogenesis that through the, "progressive unilateral distortion of the personalities of the members of both groups ... results in mutual hostility between them and must end in the break-down of the system" (BATESON, 1987. 68).

#### **4. Conclusion**

If we accept the notion that cities, in addition to social organizations and international relations, can be analysed as schismogenic systems, then a series of compensating mechanisms or renegotiation of flows within the socio-urban network will be required to prevent the inherent breakdown of the system, a topic outside the scope of this discourse. Nevertheless, having observed the consequences of a simple case of localised complementary schismogenesis, Bateson's concept should provide us with caution as to what is arguably the main concern of contemporary urbanities, in the form of gated communities and symmetrical schismogenesis.

Whilst sharing a long immaterial history, complementary and symmetrical urban processes of differentiation exhibit increasingly different forms and scales of occupation. In their study on gated communities in the US, Blakely & Snyder (1997) acknowledge that segregation has always been a feature of urban socio-spatiality. Nonetheless, they stress that contemporary gated communities go much further than modern urban segregation by developing two key characteristics: they create physical barriers to residential space and, moreover, they create physical barriers to community space. By privatizing "community space, not merely individual space" this form of habitation "undermines the very concept of civitas" and endangering the ideal of democracy (BLAKELY et al., 1997. 85), whereupon in Los Angeles "genuinely democratic space is virtually extinct" as the "pleasure domes of the elite Westside rely upon the social imprisonment of a third-world service proletariat in increasingly repressive ghettos and barrios." (DAVIS, 1992. 162). In the same year that Blakely and Snyder published their seminal work, the Chilean government launched the ZODUC (*Zonas de Desarrollo Urbano Condicionado*, or 'zones of constrained urban development'), constituting the first regulatory instrument that would give rise to the largest and most comprehensive form of gated communities observed thus far: the *Ciudades Valladas*, or 'gated cities' (HIDALGO et al., 2005). The spearhead of this form of urban habitation is the *Piedra Roja* masterplan in Chicureo, north of the capital Santiago de Chile. Currently under construction, this presently inhabited 'gated city' expects to be fully complete by 2022, with an estimated population of 65 000 and a total investment of US\$ 1.8 billion, comprising within its walls 10 schools, 2 universities, 9 sports centres, 17 shopping centres, 2 hospitals, 5 places of worship, and an artificial lake (BORSODORF et al., 2008). This type of development effectively establishes a break with gated communities and entails the privatization of the city, and for Borsdorf and Hidalgo, the need to re-evaluate the very concept of the contemporary city,

whereupon, added "to the exclusion from public space, this exclusive provision with goods and services marks the most decisive break with the idea of the city." (BORSODORF et al., 2008. 156).

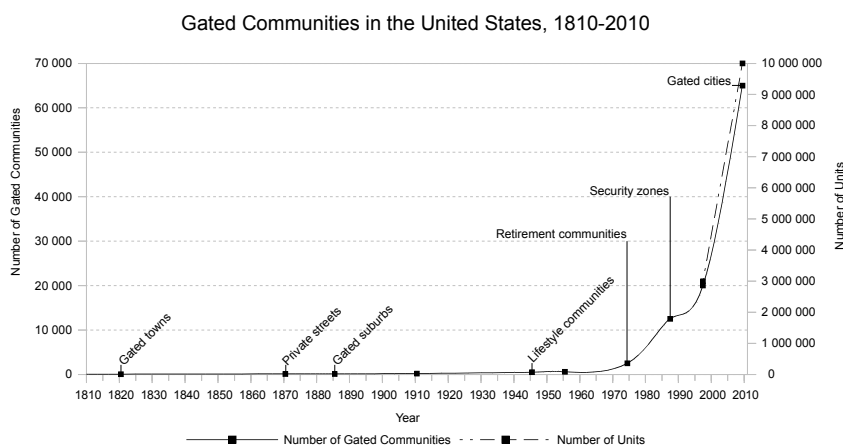


Fig.3

Considering the dramatic growth of gated communities exhibited in the past ten years alone (see Fig.3), certain cautions on mid-term future developments are called for. Specifically, the most problematic feature of 'gated cities' is that they can be interpreted as an advanced guard of urban and suburban nodes in the development of parallel private governance on a continental scale. Providing fuel to this argument lie two distinct developments. Along with the development of 'gated cities' in Santiago de Chile, it was necessary to develop not just the services within, but equally the infrastructure without. As such, roads and highways were built to connect 'gated cities' to each other and the main national and international transport hubs. As these were primarily private investments, one of the side effects of gated cities is the constitution of 'private roads', accessible only to residents and excluded from the general public. Coupled with developments in Brazil whereupon gated community dwellers in São Paulo have foregone the street completely in favour of airborne transport, sponsoring the development of the world's largest fleet of private helicopters (ALSAYYAD et al., 2006. 5), or the exclusive air and road transport network that links fortified aid compounds in Sudan to form a gated "spatial archipelago of international aid" (DUFFIELD, 2010. 467), such developments endorse the thesis that the former polarised spatial divide between rich and poor has not only transformed into a fragmented socio-urban model, but can be interpreted as developing into a 'spatial archipelago' of interconnected gated communities and privatized spaces.

Writing before the advent of major 'gated cities', Low noted that the "social and symbolic damage of these built forms - just like the prisons and mental institutions we have produced - will remain", by which time "those within the gates, then, will not be concerned about those outside" (LOW, 1997. 55, 68). The recent material developments in gated communities such as privatized public space, transport networks, and public services, coupled with the notion that symmetrical schismogenesis inevitably tends to a breakdown of the greater social system as a unified entity, accordingly counsels an urgency in the study and prognosis of such breakdowns (to understand when and where future rifts may occur) and the

application of compensating mechanisms within the socio-urban network (through complimentary integrative action patterns), before the complete breakdown of the system, by which point we will be left merely with a privatized network of segregated autonomous communities and the memory of an eradicated notion of public space.

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## 6. Legends

Fig.1: Portion of Chang'an (China), showing the rectangular walled wards or *fang*. From a stone map of AD 1080, in (SMITH, 2010).

Fig.2: Still frame from Maurice, B. & Silvera, R. (Producers), & Tati, J. (Director). (2004). *Playtime*. UK: bfi. Originally screened in, 1967.

Fig.3: Gated Communities in the United States with their principal typologies, 1810-2010. Adapted from graph in (BLAKELY et al., 1997. 7). Updated to reflect the 2009 US Census (USCB, 2011) and an augmented date and typology range. Note: number of gated communities for 2009 represents an estimate based on number of units identified by the US Census Bureau (USCB, 2011). Number of units for 1997 represents an estimate based on number of gated communities identified by Christine Amado (BLAKELY et al., 1997).

## 7. Biography

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