

# READING AND REACTING: FROM THE RESEARCH OF BORDER CONDITIONS TO EXPERIMENTAL METHODS IN ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN DESIGN.

Marc Schoonderbeek and Klaske Havik

## **Spatial analysis and architectural design in border conditions**

It is in marginal urban areas, borders of states, territories and cities that limits of normal behaviour are transgressed and social and political differences become apparent. Such sites, where other spatial conditions have emerged, and that are “teeming with suggestive meanings and unexpected potential”, have hardly been analyzed and discussed within the contemporary architectural discourse (Schoonderbeek, 2009, 30). Even though the spatial analysis of the city and the territory are seemingly well established practices in architectural discourse, the incorporation of characteristics of border conditions via these analyses have also hardly been discussed. The “operationalization of the contextual” within architectural design strategies remains conspicuously absent in reflections on architectural design procedures. Our paper addresses the speculative nature of the relationship between the spatial analysis of border conditions and architectural design by emphasizing and clarifying the “modus operandi” of an architectural project.

By taking an experimental approach to spatial analysis and architectural design, we intend to challenge disciplinary borders. If borders are seen as the marginal urban regions where the “other” resides, it becomes important to provide alternative models to read the spatial, social and temporal conditions at hand. Therefore, we suggest bringing into play methods of spatial analysis such as mapping or literary techniques in the investigation of urban fringes, and in the speculative design of alternative urban realities. With this paper, we argue that an intrinsic relationship might exist between methods of spatial analysis and methods of architectural design. This text tries to clarify the underlying theoretical considerations of these architectural investigations and design projects. In order to achieve this, the article will first present four specific understandings of the border, namely as space of differentiation, as zone of performance, as space of encounter and as space of simultaneity. This part speculates on how this border space as a space of simultaneity should be explored. Second, the article brings to the fore how the border between architecture and literature can be employed for the reading of exactly such border spaces, and by extension, how to use methods deriving from the meeting of these disciplines in reacting upon border spaces through design interventions.

## **Exploring Liminal Simultaneity: The Border as Aleph Space**

While reflecting on the relationship between building, dwelling and thinking, Martin Heidegger argued that a location is turned into a “place” via the act of physical construction (building), and both the acts of building and of dwelling essentially constitute Being. Additionally, Heidegger claimed that space could only come about once a location allows for it to emerge: “a space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek

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*peras*” (Heidegger 1951, 105). In order to clarify this intrinsic relatedness of the way we dwell and the way we build, Heidegger used the bridge as example, namely as a spatial object that establishes connections and “*gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream”. In Heidegger’s reasoning, the boundary is a spatial element that separates while the bridge connects and gathers. With respect to the boundary, he proposed it should not be regarded as an ending but as a beginning, namely that “from which something begins its *presencing*” (Heidegger, 1951, 105).

Heidegger’s philosophical reasoning is based in etymology, but issues of the border and the bridge can also be discussed historically by referring to the way space was ‘defined’ in Antiquity. In Roman town founding rituals, for instance, the gate to the city was regarded as a bridge (cared for by Janus, the god of beginnings) while the boundary formed the sacred bond between earth and heaven. Crossing the line that indicates this unity between earth and heaven, i.e. crossing the boundary, made one “an enemy of the life which that union had guaranteed” (Rykwert, 1976, 135-141). During the founding ritual, a bronze plough was used to create a simple ditched line that indicated the boundary. At the places where gates were to be erected the plough was literally lifted from the boundary outline fabrication, so that the divine unity was temporarily interrupted. Both in the Roman rituals as in Heidegger’s argument, presence is considered to be originating from the boundary. Furthermore, the spatial gathering that the border implies is actually a literal bridging (which is in Heidegger’s case the bridging of the fourfold, namely earth and sky, divinities and mortals).

In contemporary times, this religious understanding of the border has become rather mundane. Nowadays, the religious connotations of the border seem to be limited to the “clash of civilizations” that has emerged from the intensification of the political and social debates after the Al-Qaida terrorist attacks on New York, Madrid and London. Issues regarding borders had been significantly less present, at least on the discursive agendas, during the post-Communism years, but they became, once again, a fiercely “guarded” topic in the political debates about the global spaces of conflict as well as on issues of migration, ethnicity and religion. At the same time, and in seeming opposition to these developments, the importance of borders as spatial and cultural elements were questioned; the ongoing processes of modernization and globalization as well as the growing importance of digital networks, had turned borders into objects that needed to be dismantled and/or whose influence had to be decreased. Thus ensuring the emergence of a smooth space for flows of people, knowledge, communication and goods.<sup>1</sup> The possibility of a borderless world seems to have caused an almost instantaneous reflexive response towards identity, protectionism and even nationalism. Borders are nowadays seen as the spatial manifestation of a cultural, political or juridical decision that is given form<sup>2</sup> and through their form they acquire a physical presence that gives them

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Shapiro, Michael J. and Alker, Hayward R. (eds.), *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Though obviously beyond the scope of this article, more on this relationship between space, law and politics can be found in the extensive discussions by Michel Foucault, amongst others in his lectures at the Collège de France. See, for instance: Foucault, Michel *Security, Territory, Population; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.

an apparent permanence. This embedded impression of permanence is at the same time negated, however, by the constant possibility of the border's transgression. Any border thus has an embedded contradiction incorporated into its construction, making the limit it intends to demarcate subject to constant testing. It is these contradictions embedded within borders that spatial analyses have intended to detect, frame, describe and, ultimately, theorize during the last decade. Three spatial understandings of borders that had emerged out of these discussions were initially subject to particular investigation in our research (and related educational programme) and will be clarified first, before a more synthetic understanding of the border will be speculated about later.

Following the renewed interest in the spaces of conflict at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as mentioned earlier, the discussions on and investigations of borders in the spatial disciplines have mainly emphasized two distinct features. First, borders are considered spatial elements that initiate and maintain division and segregation within transnational, political, social, ethnic and/or religious contexts.<sup>3</sup> Second, as borders also have an influence on their 'hinterland', they are perceived as performative zones out of which several 'border conditions' emerge.<sup>4</sup> In our own research, some of the European spaces of conflict have been given central attention, with even long-standing conflicts that seemed to have reached an almost stalemate status being placed under scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> Our investigations into these border conditions concentrated on tracing the various ways in which borders tend to spatialize difference(s). By using techniques of mapping, we were able to indicate the array of complex and spatial spheres of influences across the territory, which are located around the border.<sup>6</sup>

As is indicated by Heidegger's notion of "gathering", borders can also be regarded as spaces of encounter. This (third) understanding treats the border as a threshold space where spatial practices simultaneously confirm and resist social networks, juridical practices and political ideologies. A wide variety of spatial practices are inscribing their borders into space on a daily basis, which turns the border into a gathering place of different individuals and groups, which have, more often than not, conflicting interests, habits and desires. Within this liminal space of frictions, the spatial practices of everyday life will hardly ever completely exclude

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<sup>3</sup> See: Calame, Jon and Charlesworth, Esther, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009; Scholar, Richard (ed.), *Divided Cities* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Wimmer, Andreas, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict; Shadows of Modernity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; and Segal, Rafi and Weizman, Eyal (eds.), *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture* Tel Aviv: Israel Association of United Architects (IAUA), 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Uncertain States of Europe (USE), *The Urban Age Project* by the London School of Economics and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society and Paul Virilio's projects *Unknown Quantity* and *Native Land/Stop Eject*.

<sup>5</sup> See the research and design projects developed at the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Architecture by through the 'Border Conditions' (BC) program on Belfast, Nicosia, Helsinki-Tallinn, Gibraltar-Ceuta and Kaliningrad, presented in Schoonderbeek, 2010. All BC projects mentioned can also be found on [www.borderconditions.org](http://www.borderconditions.org), under the 'projects' tab.

<sup>6</sup> See BC projects on Berlin, Marseille and Istanbul.

each other, but rather intermingle, strengthen, underline but also undermine other practices.<sup>7</sup>

Especially this last aspect of spatial practices around borders points towards a fourth possible understanding of the border, namely as a space of simultaneity. As described thus far, the important issue of the border's other side is only present as potentiality, namely through the embedded possibility of transgression, and not as the possibility of the literal "other side" of the border. Rather than regarding 'space as interval', as Heidegger suggested, indicating that (border) spaces are a temporary postponement, prolonging or state of exception, this understanding of the border regards the other side not as one of radical difference, but as an 'other' place that might potentially include certain similarities. Here, the border is no longer the dividing space that separates and differentiates, nor a space that gathers the territory around it (making it a space of encounter), but an aleph space that incorporates spatial as well as temporal differences and similarities. As described in Borges's wonderful story, the Aleph is a densified point in space where an infinite array of understandings, interpretations and readings converge into one gaze (Borges 1949). As a result, the border becomes a place of origination.

The simultaneity of the Aleph instantaneously creates a liminality in the finite world, because the "central problem is unresolvable", namely "the enumeration, even a partial enumeration, of an infinite whole". A spatial analysis of this liminal space of the simultaneous is equally problematic, as the border is both fluidic, dynamic, temporal yet concrete, all at the same time. Furthermore, since neither the infinity of the Aleph space nor the possibility of transgression can be an a-priori 'known' (simply because the act of transgression cannot be foreseen and only be attempted through border practices), contemporary investigations into the condition of the border, both in terms of theoretical reflections as in terms of spatial analysis, are therefore experimental by default. To experiment is to test and to test is to explore an infinite amount of possibilities and potentialities. Contemporary spatial analyses should incorporate the four understandings of borders mentioned thus far into one research model that thus regards the border as a *terra incognita*. The exploration of these border conditions, which are both 'thick lines' and 'spaces', is no longer aimed at exclusion but bridges the divide and allows one to enter into an encountering process of similarities.

### **A literary approach to investigate border conditions**

Then I saw the Aleph. . . . the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass . . . . In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous . . . . and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon – the unimaginable universe. (Borges 1971, 10-14)

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<sup>7</sup> See BC projects for instance on Havana, Marseille and Kaliningrad.

The literary space of the Aleph is an inclusive space, in which impressions, imaginations, memories and real spatial experiences come together in a simultaneous experience. Geographer Edward Soja also refers to the Aleph when discussing Lefebvre's concept of Lived space<sup>8</sup>, and his own Thirdspace, stating that "space is simultaneously objective and subjective, material and metaphorical, a medium and outcome of social life; actively both an immediate milieu and an originating presupposition, empirical and theorizable, instrumental, strategic, essential" (Soja, 1999, 45). The border can be seen as the ultimate example of such a space of simultaneity, a space in which all kinds of spatial experiences, both real and imagined come together, seen from all angles and in different temporalities. This understanding thus calls for an approach that enables different times and spaces to be brought together. Such a literary approach allows for the incorporation of four understandings of borders, bridging not only the divide between the "thick lines" and "space", but also other seemingly opposite notions. The ambiguity that is at stake in the very border spaces we are addressing can only be dealt with if we are able to balance between here and there, subject and object, individual and collective, and reality and imagination. In novels and poems, these fields of tensions are challenged almost by definition. The gaze of the literary writer enables us to shift between these seemingly binary oppositions, illustrating that in fact, the reading of marginal urban places is a matter of both. Literary instruments such as character, narrative, metaphor and scenario offer valuable means for the investigation of urban border conditions, and for their design.

Through the development of a method for analysis and design<sup>9</sup>, which derives from the meeting of architecture and literature<sup>10</sup>, a step can be made towards a design approach that allows imagination to generate multiple perspectives on space. Such a literary gaze provides a productive perspective towards marginal urban sites where notions such as border, territory and the 'other' are at stake. Hence, we propose that urban planners and architects make use of the gaze of the literary writer. By no means do we suggest that the results of such a literary gaze should be limited to literary texts: rather, our different modes of operating such as mapping, as mentioned

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<sup>8</sup> Closely following Lefebvre's Lived Space, Soja proposes another term, Thirdspace, which he defines as: "a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices", Soja, Edward, *Thirdspace, journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999 (1996), p.31

<sup>9</sup> The search for alternative methods for design, capable to address contemporary urban and architectural questions, has been brought to the fore by for instance Cross, Nigel *Designerly Ways of Knowing* London: Springer Verlag 2006; Awan, Nishat, Schneider, Tatjana and Till, Jeremy, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, London: Routledge, 2011

<sup>10</sup> The use of literary instruments in architectural and urban research has been explored by Jane Rendell for instance 'Writing in place of speaking', in: Kivland, Sharon (ed.), *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, (Sheffield 2003) and Katja Grillner in: Grillner, Katja 'Writing Architecture', in: *01.AKAD Beginnings- Experimental Research in Architecture and Design*, (Stockholm, AKAD, 2005) pp.64-67.



above, can be charged by the use of literary techniques as narrative and character. The following paragraphs discuss three issues we consider specific to the investigation of and design for marginal urban sites: atmosphere, appropriation and indeterminacy, and we propose to approach these questions through a literary gaze. Three interrelated perspectives: description (focusing on the perception of space), transcription (discussing the role of the user) and prescription (addressing the uncertain future by means of scenarios)<sup>11</sup> offer a theoretical framework and practical tools for the analysis of and design for border sites.

First, rather than focusing on measurable, factual data, there is a need to focus on the experiential aspects of borders, and to carefully investigate the site-specific qualities and atmosphere of each site at hand<sup>12</sup>. Atmosphere is precisely such a term bridging two seemingly opposite notions: as Gernot Böhme argues, atmosphere exists by the coexistence of subject and object<sup>13</sup>. Atmospheric qualities are found in the objective arrangement of spatial aspects -objects as well as light, temperature, and material properties- combined with the physical presence of a perceiving subject. For architects and planners, the ambiguous field of tension between subject and object seems difficult to address, while in literature, the subject-object relationship is much more dynamic. Think for instance of the way the experience of places changes through time and through the changing view of the observer in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Times*. The mode of site analysis we propose to investigate this notion of atmosphere is *description*, a phenomenological form of fieldwork indeed bringing into play the relationship between objective spatial arrangements and subjective experience. Description implies that multiple layers of a site are described by means of "close reading", in which different sensory perceptions come into play. Here, the poetic aspects of such "spaces of simultaneity" are given a clear position and importance in spatial analysis. Descriptive techniques also come in to play in the phase of design, as they encourage the researcher or designer to "look" with different senses than only the visual, and to develop sensitivity to atmospheric aspects of spatial settings.

Second, the role of local actors such as users and inhabitants becomes crucial: precisely because they are the ones who experience, appropriate and develop their

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<sup>11</sup> These three perspectives have been introduced and explored in the dissertation of Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy*, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> In recent years, alternative approaches regarding urban development have appeared in which experiential aspects are taken into consideration, see for instance Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilisation. Culture, Innovation and Urban Order*, London: Weidenfeld 1998; Charles Landry, *The Creative City- a toolkit for urban innovators*, London: Comedia / Earthscan, 2000. For further discussion, see Panu Lehtovuori and Klaske Havik, "Alternative politics in urban innovation", in: Lily Kong and Justin O'Connor (eds.), *Creative Cities Creative Economies*, London/New York: Springer 2009

<sup>13</sup> Gernot Böhme, *Architektur und Atmosphäre*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 2006, see also Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as Mindful Physical Presence in Space" in: Klaske Havik, Gus Tielens and Hans Teerds (eds.), *OASE #91 Building Atmospheres* Rotterdam: NAi010Publishers, 2013.

environment. It is through their eyes that we can read border spaces as spaces of performance and of encounter. In literature, the border between space, the user and the author is often transgressed. In novels such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, or Italo Calvino's *Upon a Winters Night a Traveller...*, the reader is actively addressed as a co-producer of the narrative - indeed, it is the reader who appropriates the story and makes it his or her own. As an experimental literary tool, we propose *transcription*, which takes into account this dynamic relationship between space, user and author/designer. It investigates the way a site can be appropriated by its users, and thus addresses the relationship between the space and its use. Transcription generates a deepened knowledge about the site by the use of narratives, involving characters such as the user, inhabitant or other stakeholders. Transcriptive site research thereby offers ways to include users' perspectives and investigates the social spatial practices at stake. Needs and ambitions are thus formulated and site-specific data are connected to the possibility of new programs and activities. It also poses the question of how findings from the descriptive phase can be *transcribed* to legible maps and to stepping stones for an architectural design.

Third, designers dealing with such complex border spaces have to find ways to address indeterminacy. In urban planning in general, the traditional urban master plan is no longer seen as the key instrument, because of the increasing mobility of people and labour, and the uncertainty of the economic context. Urban developments around borders are even more unclear, ephemeral and indeterminate. This means that in border conditions, the design becomes a kind of a fiction: the designer is compelled to position him/herself between the existing reality and an uncertain future. New techniques and approaches thus have to be developed that address these themes in a productive way, and that, rather than traditional master plans, offer accurate frameworks which are resilient to future change (Havik, Patteuw, Teerds 2011). In literature, the relationship between reality and fiction is challenged by definition. Novels can be realistic accounts of reality, critical views or radical scenarios for alternative futures. In surrealist literature, the borders between fiction and reality are pushed to the extreme, while the magic realism of Latin-American literature takes the magic embedded in reality as a point of departure. For design in border conditions, this dynamic interplay between real, surreal and fiction could become a third *modus operandi*. As third literary tool, *prescription* takes into account one of the most challenging aspects of design: the evocation of what is not yet there. It offers ways to deal with the reality of a given site – precisely by immediately countering it with imagination. Prescriptive instruments derived from, amongst others, surrealist writers, generate associative connections and metaphors, allowing a look at sites from a very specific viewpoint, informed by a (fictional) hypothesis or metaphor. This way of site interpretation can generate extremely precise and focused details that would otherwise have slipped by without being noticed. Prescriptive site research and design thus opens up new themes and conditions for design. When designing for border conditions, “prescription” is the act of constructing new situations, while acknowledging that there is always an aspect of chance involved. It is here, that the reading of border spaces from different perspectives (social, spatial, aesthetic and experiential), transcribed into maps and strategies, is paired with the speculative act of architectural and urban design.

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## Biographies

**Marc Schoonderbeek** is the coordinator of the research group 'Borders & Territories' and is currently working on a doctoral thesis within this group, on the relationship between architectural theory, representation and design. After graduating from the TU Eindhoven, he has practised architecture in the Netherlands, Germany (Studio Libeskind) and Israel. In 1998, he founded with Pnina Avidar '12PM-Architecture', an Amsterdam-based firm for architecture and urban design. At present, he is editor of Footprint, lectures at a regular basis at several architecture institutes, and is a regular contributor to architectural magazines. In January 2004, he co-founded 66EAST-Centre for Urban Culture in Amsterdam and published, in 2008, the book 'Houses in Transformation: interventions in European gentrification' together with JJ Berg, T Kaminer, and J Zonneveld.

**Klaske Havik** is associate professor of Architecture, Methods & Analysis at Delft University of Technology. She studied architecture in Delft and Helsinki, and literary writing in Amsterdam. Her PhD research (TU Delft, 2012) developed a literary approach to architecture and urban regeneration, proposing the three notions description, transcription and prescription. Her book based upon this investigation *Urban Literacy. Reading and Writing Architecture* is published by nai010 publishers (2014). She co-edited the anthology *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (SUN Publishers 2009). Havik writes regularly for architectural reviews in the Netherlands and Nordic countries and is editor of architecture journal OASE. As a practicing architect, she has been involved in the redevelopment of ship wharf NDSM in Amsterdam. Havik's literary work appeared in Dutch poetry collections and literary magazines.

**Border Conditions & Territories research group** is based at the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands, which also runs a research and design diploma studio. The group is engaged in experimental projects based on investigations of socio-political contexts by tracing contemporary spatial phenomena and conditions in cities, and charting the specific characteristics of the built environment. In an attempt to understand the contemporary workings of architecture, special attention is focused on experimental techniques such as mapping and creative writing as tools to register and interpret these urban processes and to turn these findings into the guiding principles for spatial interventions. In 2009, the

group published the book *Border Conditions* (Amsterdam: Architecture & Natura Press, 2010 edited by Marc Schoonderbeek).

### **Summary**

It is in marginal urban areas, borders of states, territories and cities, that marginal urban practices tend to take place. Limits of “normal” behaviour are transgressed and social and political differences become apparent. Such sites, where “other” spatial conditions have emerged, and that are “teeming with suggestive meanings and unexpected potential” (Schoonderbeek 2010), have hardly been analysed and discussed within the contemporary architectural discourse. This paper addresses such marginal urban conditions from an experimental approach to urban analysis and architectural design. Methods such as mapping, navigation, and literary techniques such as character and scenario are brought into play in the analysis of urban fringes, and in the speculative design of alternative urban realities. With this experimental approach comes as well a certain understanding and appreciation of the border as a space of simultaneity, much like the *Aleph* of Borges. Drawing on this literary connection, the last part of the text proposes a method for border analysis and design by means of seeking the borders between architecture and literature.

**Keywords:** architecture, borders, urban design, experimental research, mapping, literary techniques