

BORDERLINE SYNDROME

Ole Bouman ruminates on the architecture of borders that punctuate everyday activities in the city like entering or leaving work in an office block or travelling on public transport. But what is the impact of spatial apartheid for those who fall on the wrong side of national boundaries and barriers?



There is no avoiding it: crossing borders is part of our daily life. We leave home, we enter our place of work, we return home. And then there's everything in between: the public transport turnstiles, the motorway toll gates, customs, speed detectors, security checkpoints, electronic surveillance systems, the checkout. When you think about it, you realise that it is scarcely possible to move without crossing one or another visible or invisible dividing line. It is the spatial regime of the modern world, where life is subject to compartmentalisation and protocols as if it were a scientific experiment to be carried out under strictly controlled conditions.

Yet for most of us this cross-border traffic is something that barely impinges on life itself. Of course, the idea that one is being continually checked up on and monitored is not a pleasant one. But for the time being it does not diminish one's sense of self-determination. Your movements may be monitored, but your motives for moving are as yet relatively unquestioned. But what if those motives were to become the object of monitoring? Imagine if 'they' not only wanted to know where you were going, but also why. Imagine if your 'name' were not just a matter of your personal identity but also of your spatial identity. Worse still, imagine if you were not only required to declare that you are going from A to B, but also why. And why it was that yesterday you went from B to A. A world in which the powers that be want to know who you are, where you are, where you were, why you were there, why you still are in fact, and so on.

To lead such a life is no longer to pass through checkpoints; it is to become a checkpoint. This is

architecture at its cruellest. A struggle for space and for control of space. A practice concerned with erecting borders and guarding them. A continual definition of inside and outside and a war about who should be allowed to do the defining. A war not conducted by people about people, but inside people. In the long run it could lead to a spatial policy more radical than deportation: exile from one's self. Before it comes to this, a lot will have had to happen in the way we try to come to terms with mass migration. There is so much more that still falls within the bounds of the humane and that results in something resembling society. There is no shortage of historical examples. If not nation building or melting pot, with an enlightened spatial policy of mixing programmes and people, then peaceful and respectful coexistence sustained by zoning, enclaves and, if need be, corridors. If not cohabitation, then straightforward restraint with gates and walls, strict surveillance, spying and other forms of spatial apartheid. And if that is not enough, there is still deportation, the simple removal of elements people are unable to come to terms with.

Despite their differing degrees of mutual trust, all these strategies attest to respect for other people's lives. But there is a form of mistrust that can no longer be conquered by the strategies that exist between community and removal. It is the state of constant scrutiny. Of endless monitoring and recording of someone's spatial history as an indication of their risk profile. For some, a stamp in a passport is a trophy of cosmopolitanism. For others, it is a nail in their coffin. Architecture cannot exist without its borders, any more than it can exist without a discussion about what these borders are. ▽

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On an industrial wasteland in Calais, France, in 2003, refugees and asylum seekers line up to receive food from the charity Secours Catholique, which feeds them two meals a day. After the Sangatte refugee camp closed down, an average of 200 refugees lived on the streets of Calais without food, money or accommodation, trying most nights to get to Britain. There were many different nationalities, mainly Iraqi and Afghani, but also Sudanese, Palestinian and Turkish, 95 per cent of whom were male, aged between 16 and 50.