

Complexity and simultaneity. The border as spatial condition

Marc Schoonderbeek

Delft University of Technology, Border Conditions & Territories
Research Group
(m.g.h.schoonderbeek@tudelft.nl)

Con l'implementazione spaziale delle frontiere, gli stati-nazione, come pure le differenze sociali e politiche a essi collegate, divengono evidenti. L'articolo discute le varie possibili concettualizzazioni del confine nel discorso architettonico, elaborando le caratteristiche spaziali delle frontiere (ad esempio, le forme contemporanee del pensiero di confine) e analizzando una gamma di condizioni e pratiche di frontiera contemporanee. Le concettualizzazioni qui proposte sono: la frontiera come limite, come spazio territoriale, come luogo politico, come luogo di ritrovo e spazio dell'incontro. Nonostante la ricca e rapida espansione della letteratura accademica relativa ai border studies, la loro complessità spaziale rimane tuttora poco studiata. Il contributo propone una comprensione sintetica della frontiera come spazio di simultaneità

Parole chiave: condizioni di frontiera; analisi spaziale; simultaneità

«Architecture is the source, the origin, a boundary in time and space and the transcendence and transgression of that boundary. And all of this in a very concrete, bodily, nonmetaphysical way. In order to understand architecture, we need to return to the boundary, [...] to the moment that men lined together with nature, in other words, brought order into the chaos, set up a cohesive arrangement, gave the rambling, anonymous world a name, created, as Bataille put it, 'human order'» (Geert Bekaert, 1988)

Introduction

The growing interest in spaces of conflict, since the turn of the millennium, has focused attention to border studies in a seemingly unprecedented way. The discourses on borders have expanded considerably, also because the general political and societal tendencies have, on a global scale, seen a decisive return to an emphasis on national identity, ethnic origin and religious backgrounds (Bollens, 2000). The recent unrest in Ukraine is only the latest in a range of latent and emerging conflicts, even if the Ukrainian conflicts had already been 'in the making' through the policies of extensive relocation of the population during the era of the Soviet Union. Especially the failure of the Soviet experiments towards social engineering, in their attempt to get beyond rooted or grounded identities, have been mentioned frequently as one of the examples when describing the re-instatement of the importance of borders in general (Wimmer, 2002). At the same time, the emergence of global terrorist networks around 2001 has also played a significant role in bringing to the forefront issues of security related to protective borders.

Given these developments, it would seem consequential that borders in architecture have been mostly discussed and investigated as spatial elements that initiate and maintain division and segregation within transnational, political, social, ethnic and/or religious contexts. Of course, it is commonplace to state that there can be no architecture without boundaries of some sort, but recent developments are indicating that the renewed interest in borders is mostly limited to the literal constitution of the border as physical object. This literal interpretation of the border seems rather peculiar, and even in opposition to the changed and expanded understandings of the notion of 'space' in architectural discourse. The various theoretical debates, which started five decades ago with the emergence of post-modernism, had already been emphasizing the fragmented nature of the discipline. The more recent developments have not only confirmed

this sense of fragmentation, but have additionally resulted in the vast expansion of the very definitions with which 'space' is nowadays described and conceptualized. Especially during this last decade, a complete range of highly specific understandings of space has been developed, influenced by the very social, ideological, economical and political changes and debates mentioned previously (Kwinter, 1992).

Spatial thinking has benefited greatly from the various insights and discoveries in both the sciences and philosophy, contributing such notions as warped space, friction space, smooth space or oligoptic space (Latour and Hermant, 1998; Vidler, 2000; Picon and Ponte, 2003). However, this expanding range of conceptualizations does not stem from these more general developments only as the outburst of spatial concepts is only partly related to the mutual influencing of disciplines and their related discourses. Interstitial space, global space, border space, territorial integrity, liminal space, in-between spaces, 'extra muros' are but a few of the recent conceptualizations of space (Cupers and Miessen, 2002; Chora and Bunschoten *et al.*, 2001) that specifically focus attention on the condition of the edge, boundary, limit and/or border. In addition to, or perhaps as a result of these developments, spatial thinking is more and more emphasizing the degree of complexity, multiplicity, in(st)ability and insecurity within spatial experience, features confirmed by the various forms of spatiality that have been discussed in adjacent disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics or computer sciences (Multiplicity, 2003). It is my contention that border studies and border theorizations nowadays should work towards a much more complex understanding of the border as well (Parker and Vaughan-Williams *et al.*, 2009). First, because spaces of conflict have gone global, which has caused the logistical dissolving of boundaries under influence of a global economy to be combined with the rather conservative, political reflex that reinstalls the emphasis on the nation state, or even smaller ethnically and/or religiously determined spatial entities, with all the variety of spatial practices of exclusion that come with it. Second, because spatial thinking itself has gained tremendously from the continuous decomposition or disentanglement of disciplinary boundaries, resulting in the enriching and breaking open of border terminology (Easterling, 2005).

Border as limit and as territorial space

In practices of spatial analysis, borders are nowadays mostly analysed as the formal outcome of a cultural, political or juridical decision process that has been implemented and constructed within a specific territorial setting. Through their formation, borders acquire a spatial presence that gives them a physical appearance that is indicative of its intended juridical resolution, its cultural and political signification and of its anticipated transgressions. Additionally, the border, as spatial demarcation, inflicts the finalization of a territory, as it either confirms an agreed upon status quo or implements a 'fact on the ground' by an entity of power that operates with either a protective or colonial intent. It is obviously this latter category of borders that are mostly contested and, consequently, focused upon in spatially oriented border studies.

These contested borders are the ones that cultivate a division or segregation and operate almost exclusively as limit (Glasson

Deschaumes and Iveković, 2003; Scholar, 2006; Calame and Charlesworth, 2009; Nightingale, 2012). Although always inflicting a certain extensive constraint on the individual through its implementing of bodily limitations, borders are both the inward and outward expressions of collective social entities. As limit, borders enclose a collective while simultaneously separating this collective from others, thus implementing an apparatus of differentiation that has been given physical, material, spatial and territorial form.

The border as architectural element has, for the last decade, been the object of study of the Border Conditions (BC) research group¹. Through the employment and consequential development of specific mapping techniques (Cosgrove, 1990; Schoonderbeek, 2010), the research group was able to trace the full range of characteristics of the complex spatial conditions located around particular contemporary borders. Initially focusing on urban areas of conflict only, the group's investigations later shifted towards a more eclectic understanding of the border and the subsequent urban condition it was located in. As a result, three spatial understandings of the contemporary condition of the border were initially formulated in relation to our investigative studies (namely: border as limit, territory or political place). When the border is understood as limit, as described above, both shape and materiality of the border are of interest from an architectural point of view. In first instance we remained within this limited scope, concentrating on borders as spatial elements that initiated division and maintained segregation within transnational, political, social, ethnic and/or religious contexts. In this part of the BC research, particular European spaces of conflict were given central attention, which resulted in the study of long-standing conflicts that had reached stalemate status.

The investigated contested borders in Belfast, Nicosia and Ceuta, for instance, proved to be very sophisticated systems of control, although none of these were completely successful in that respect. In each case, the border as limit turned out to have specific states of exception incorporated into its vary fabric.

Since this particular understanding of the border (as limit) proved to be rather limited, as became apparent through our investigations, an elaboration of the specific properties and spatial characteristics of the border revealed a second conceptualization of the border.

When we visited the sites of the former Berlin Wall, for instance, both the historical reconstruction of the former border zone as well as the contemporary redevelopments within that strip through the heart of the city made it undeniably clear that borders are spatial zones: they have an extent rather than being a form of finality, and this extent is flexible, multi-dimensional and layered (Bouvy, 2002; Cupers and Miessen, 2002). Evidently, the implementation of the border is already subject to a process of scaling embedded within maps, as any drawn line on a map needs to physically obtain a certain dimension. Moreover, since borders also have an influence on their 'hinterland', they should be perceived as performative zones out of which a variety of 'border conditions' can emerge². Rather than being a simple dividing line, the border constitutes a spatial zone that can turn out to be of territorial proportions. This type of border is no longer a fixed boundary, but a space of differentiation that consists of a multiplicity of various limits: the border also constitutes a territorial space (Rose, 2005).

Border as political place

As already indicated, the border has been a dominant theme in the discourses involving the self and the other in the context of national identity (Krickus, 2002). In architectural discourse, the debates on the relationship between politics and architecture have, until recently at least, either focused on clarifying the implications of political ideas on spatial relations or on analysing the implementations of political decision making processes in space. In the first case, especially (neo-)Marxist thought on labour and production has been at the core of the critical assessment of the spatial implications of capitalist commodification. In the second case, spatial analysis has been attempting to indicate either the direct relationship between (absolute) political power and the spatial implementation of strategic decisions or the indirect relationship between democratic decision processes and its consequences towards a 'public' space. With respect to the relationships between political bodies and space, Michel Foucault's delineations of the way power is exercised both spatially and socially have been illuminating as he distinguished three aspects of power that have a direct effect on spatial properties, namely sovereignty, discipline and security. The socio-political implementation of power becomes, according to Foucault, operational differently with «sovereignty being exercised within the border of a territory, discipline being exercised on the bodies of individuals, and security being exercised over a whole population» (Foucault, 2007, p. 12).

The earlier reference to the commonplace that there is no architecture without borders has, historically, a comparable reference in urbanism, namely that there is no city without the protective techniques developed for warfare. Though coming from completely different backgrounds and through their distinct argumentations, both Lewis Mumford and Paul Virilio have dwelled on this point extensively. Through his historical investigations, Mumford proved convincingly that the city was essentially the result of military considerations with a specific emphasis on defensive organization and protective constructions (Mumford, 1961). Through his philosophical deliberations, Virilio tried to show that architecture and urbanism have been and still are directly and fundamentally transformed by the latest developments in military technologies and possibilities (Virilio, 1991). Additionally, in his latest works, Virilio was pointing out that the spatial discourses were always lagging behind the military discipline (Virilio, 1977). Numerous are the examples of military installations and defence systems that had been incorporated in the territory becoming obsolete once other technological developments in military capabilities came about that surpassed the protective mechanisms. For both scholars, to study the city automatically means studying politics: the spatial organization within cities not only reveals political power, but also military power and principles of military organization. The consequence for border conceptualization has been that both issues of territory and trajectory had to be incorporated. Space and time had become intrinsically related through movement. When previously discussing the border as a spatial territorial extension, the border is conceived as a territorial network rather than an architectural object. The conceptualization of the border thus changes from a topographical to a topological understanding. This results in another type of border thinking, one in which the border is not only the place from which border conditions



In-between space in Havana (Cuba)
Source: photo by T. Boerendonk

emerge, but constitutes in itself already a border condition, finding relevance or legitimacy through this in-between position. In other words, borders not only have spatial effects, whether as limit or as territorial extension, but also constitute a place. For Virilio, space was at the centre of his argument, emphasizing the importance of defensive barriers and offensive operations in war. The argument brought forward here, though, is that precisely the distinction between space and place is relevant for border thinking: place is of importance when defensive acts and structures are being constructed, while space is a much more relevant term when discussing the possibilities of offensive operations. In more recent times, these relationships between space and place versus defence and offense seem to have been reversed. Where place used to be confined to the city as defence system and space was considered to be of territorial scale, nowadays place, as site-to-be-defended, has become of territorial proportions while space has been miniaturized through technological developments that allow non-human technical apparatuses (drones, for instance) to manage and control from a distance and no longer require physical or bodily engagement (Virilio, 1991).

Border as space of encounter

The insight that a border not only defines a territorial space, but constitutes a place in itself has historical as well as philosophical significance. In Roman town founding rituals, the boundary of the future town would be indicated by means of a simple ditch carved into the soil through the use of a bronze plough. This fabricated line formed the city's outside perimeter and would ultimately become the city's protective walls. Since this ditched line formed the sacred bond between earth and heaven, crossing this line would make one «an enemy of the life which that union had guaranteed» (Rykwert, 1976, p. 135). The openings within the boundary had, in other words, to be constructed carefully: at the places where gates were to be erected, the plough was literally lifted from the boundary outline, so that the divine unity was temporarily interrupted. The gates to the city that were positioned accordingly, were thus regarded as bridges and were cared after by Janus, the god of beginnings. The embedded spatial directionality, or sets of relations, related to the fabrication of the border (i.e. heaven-earth, line-gate), is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's philosophical concept of the fourfold (which treats earth, sky, mortals and divinities). Particularly in his influential essay on the relationship between building, dwelling and thinking, Heidegger used this concept in order to clarify how 'space' comes into existence under the strict presupposition that a 'location' will have to be prepared for space to emerge. According to Heidegger, «a space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek *peras*» (Heidegger, 1951; Leach, 1997, p. 105).

This boundary, however, is for Heidegger not a framing and limitation of space, i.e. not an ending of space, but rather its beginning. Here, the boundary is a demarcation in space «from which something begins its *presencing*» (Heidegger, 1951; Leach, 1997, p. 105). In Roman founding rituals as well as in Heidegger's argument, presence is considered to be originating from the boundary. The previous claim that borders are expressive of social collectives, combined with the viewpoint that

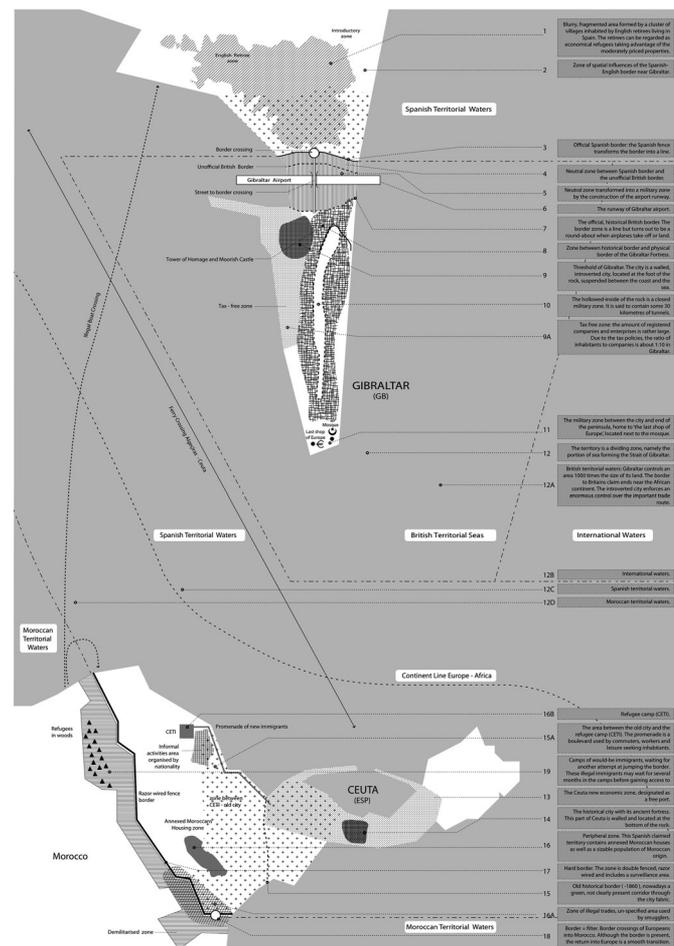


New York (Usa)
Source: photo by M. Schoonderbeek

conceives borders as a spatial point of origin, implies that the border actually constitutes these collectives both physically and mentally. In a way, the border is the place where a social group gathers itself spatially and culturally. As a consequence, the border can be investigated by mapping out the characteristics of this gathering, i.e. by carefully clarifying the cultural discourses as well as social relations around the border. Evidently, spatial practices of a wide variety are inscribing their borders into space on a daily basis. These spatial border inscriptions are hardly ever mutually exclusive, but, rather, intermingle, strengthen, underline each other. Even the most utilitarian of contemporary border structures, such as the Mexican-American border fences, or the 'security fence' the Israeli government has been constructing around the Gaza strip, the West Bank and the border with Egypt, have practices of spatial appropriation, pictorial response, material resistance and ideological cultivation around them. While these last examples might be considered extreme, making the argument appear un-nuanced, even in these most oppressive of circumstances have border practices emerged that counteract the border's system of oppression and exclusion with other means than the strict military, violent or transgressive ones (Taylor, 2010). Not only these extreme examples, but in fact all border practices activate the border as a local space of encounter, whether factual or virtual. It becomes a gathering place of different individuals and groups, who are engaged in a place that is frictional since, more often than not, each involved have conflicting interests, habits and desires. This strange amalgam of complex border practices, all in need of a cultural identity that needs to be translated into space, is dynamic and evolving as it is produced on a daily basis. It is precisely this production that turns border spaces into spaces of negotiation. In general, spatial practices of the everyday are already understood as confirming and resisting social networks, juridical practices and political ideologies. In the case of border practices (of the everyday), border inscriptions are expressive of a extensive range of conflicting interests, habits and desires. Within this liminal space of frictions, the border practices of everyday life will hardly ever completely exclude each other, but rather intermingle, strengthen, underline but also undermine other practices. The border is thus a place of gathering, a space of encounter and a space of negotiation, all at the same time.

Border as space of simultaneity

Especially this last aspect of spatial practices around borders leads to the proposed conceptualization of the understanding of the border 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



Border Conditions. Gibraltar Ceuta Map
Source: Schoonderbeek, 2010, p. 73

differences and similarities. As described in Borges's 1949 story, the Aleph is a densified point in space where an infinite array of understandings, interpretations and readings converge into one gaze. This synthetic understanding of the border claims to be open to the manifold of social border practices gathered around a border as well as the multitude of border thinking discourses. Additionally, these emerging spaces are not only places of real transitions and transactions, but also places of longing and imagination. The simultaneity of the Aleph instantaneously creates a liminality in the finite world, because the «central problem is unresolvable», namely the enumeration, even it is a partial one, of an infinite whole (Borges, 1949). Any spatial analysis of this liminal space of simultaneity is both complex and challenging, as the border is simultaneous fluid, 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 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 in an encountering process of similarities. The argument that is proposed here is to think the border not only as an element of division and segregation, and also not only as a filter that, however selectively, regulates passage and obstruction but also as a space of simultaneity, which is the meeting point of different practices in the same place or time. These four distinctive understandings of the border would preferably need to be incorporated in any contemporary form of spatial analysis of the border. With this understanding, the border becomes also a threshold space where spatial practices simultaneously confirm and resist social networks, juridical practices and political ideologies. The discussion of the border as threshold space thus culminates in the proposed conclusion that the border is the moment of demarcation, but not only, as is conventionally understood, in order to allow for separation and differentiation but to allow for a space of encounter to emerge as well. The border is the Heideggerian bridge, the point where a connection is established between two sides. The spatial gathering the border implies is actually a literal bridging: in this space of the simultaneous, border practices establish connections that initiate temporal trajectories of the simultaneous as well as spatial divisions of differences.

Notes

1. The Border Conditions research group was established at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology in 2002, and has since 2010 operated more independently, expanding its field of discursive activities within an international field of border studies, initiatives and other forms of cooperation.
2. The first series of spatial explorations and investigations of contemporary border conditions by the BC group were presented in Schoonderbeek, 2010.

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