WHAT WE BUILD
A NEW NARRATIVE FOR PUBLIC WORK

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KEYWORDS COLLECTIVE IDENTITY INFRASTRUCTURE URBAN PLANNING TEMENOS CITY WALLS WALLS NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE
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ABSTRACT

“The first wall was ephemeral and invisible, the boundary of the thermal and linguistic circle at the original bonfire, a space woven by warmth and words before it found architectural form. As it became material, it acquired additional meaning and weight, registered the dimensions of human habitation and construction, and provided temporary shelter from a sometimes hostile climate.” — William Sherman Firewall

From the beginning, Architecture served the role as medium of cultural meaning. A place for storytelling, a space for narrative. We built together, and we inscribed our stories on our constructions. The walls of antiquity carry the values and understanding of the past.

Just as architecture’s narrative potential began to be called into question by Gutenberg’s press, the first industrial age brought centralised infrastructure and changes in technology that liberated the wall from correspondence to its context. Freed from its need to correspond to classical relationships of weight and mass, climatic considerations, its obligation to carry cultural narrative, and human dimensions, the wall was left as a vacant place of pattern making.

Today, changes in technology have saturated our lives with images, and the speed at which we make and distribute them affects our minds, our architecture, and by extension, our physical world. Architecture is asked to compete with the hegemony of the image, and loses its voice in the noise. It becomes divorced from history, context, and cultural narratives in the internet age. Architecture becomes one more image in the rainfall of images in the background of our lives.

These shifts in culture have ontological and architectural implications which force us to question architecture’s perennial role as a communicator of cultural value, as a bridge in time. We’ve given up our role as the stewards of communal memory and communicators of cultural meaning.

“A return to the origin is an architecture that can participate in cultural narratives, an architecture of place and story. It is a collective undertaking, an act of community. It is a bonfire, blazing quietly in the dark. Here architecture can be a frame of the present, a dream of the future, a bridge to the past.” — Pallasmaa

THESIS STATEMENT

The archetypical manifestation of infrastructure and architecture is the shelter and provision of the primordial bonfire, a communal space of storytelling. To restore architecture to its role as a communicator of cultural meaning, architecture must reengage with its origins, with the cultural narratives that establish our consciousness and with community.
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“A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something beings it’s presencing.”

-Martin Heidegger
THE WALL

The first wall was invisible, ephemeral -- woven of words and warmth. The space around Virturivus’ bonfire. The birthplace of architecture and the birthplace of community were shared here, in this place of narrative, provision, and collective work.

This wall was made materrial and gained human dimensionality, weight, and meaning. We wrote our stories on these walls, and the constructions of antiquity carry the values of the past.

Changes in technology liberated the wall from its role as a storybook, and centralised infrastructure freed the wall from its correspondence to human dimensionality and climatic responsibility.

More changes in technology have saturated our lives in images, and the rate at which we make and distribute them effects our architecture, our world, and our psychosomatic health.

Architecture is asked to compete with the hedgemony of the image, and loses its voice in the noise. It becomes disconnected from history, context, and cultural narratives as one more image in the rainfall of images in the background of our lives.

So, a claim: A relamination of place and provision, a participation in the cultural narratives that establish our consciousness, can create a meaningful, multivalent architecture.

The vehicle to test the claim is a narrative. A dominant narrative of my home, New Orleans, is the claiming and control of the shifting, unstable land.

Scattered lighthouses and forts, built to mark the edge, the boundary of land and water float alone or sink into the water as a constructed record of our ambiguous line.
- Lighthouse
- Fortification
- Flood Protection
The climate brings the cycles of disaster and dream, failure and promise, the piecemeal construction of floodwalls, the devastation of breaches.

The city’s citing is its reason for existing and it’s biggest threat. Just two degrees of global warming removes the ambiguity of the wetlands, leaving only a thin line of concrete and steel separating the city from the water. New Orleans becomes an archipelago of walled islands.

Battures and additions, canals and subtractions are the human mark on this boundary, bending the edge to our will. These canals are cuts, cuts that have never healed.
One in particular, the Industrial Canal, has flooded the lower ninth ward since it’s construction notably in 1947, 1965, and in 2005.

To engage in this narrative is to engage in this boundary, drawing on the site as a cultural heritage, the project is an inheritance, started with the city’s citing and continued through it’s engineering.

The chosen site for this vehicle is the Industrial Canal breach of 2005, a three block long breach in the Lower Ninth Ward.

The project asks us to rebuild this wall differently, rather than replacing a concrete wall with another piece of a slightly different colored concrete, to fill this void with responsible and with recognition to what was lost.
The project takes two other notions of water infrastructure, The Well and The Reservoir, and laminates them into this flood wall. The largest bar, the well, is a place of provision, of daily routine. It responds to the food desert of the lower ninth ward in the program of a grocery. It is on the ground floor, adjacent to the street. Approachable. The solidity of the concrete folds in, subverting expectations, confusing the definition of the boundary.
The secon bar, The Resivoir, aligns itself to the river. It is a memorial, aiming to move the relationship with water from the background of our lives to the forefront of our existence. A memorial path frames views of other breaches, and gives access to the batture outside the city’s walls. The path culminates in a room that juts over the water. With change in the Industrial Canal’s water level access to the room is denied, providing a spatiotemporal metric for climate change.
At the intersection of the two bars is “The Bridge”. New Orleans was conceived of as a utopian, geometric walled city. These walls were only realized in sticks and mud rather than the stones of antiquity, but when the walls came downm they left room for some of New Orleans’ most beloved civic spaces, Congo Square, the U.S. Customs House, and the Old U.S. Mint. This intersection is in that tradition, a civic space stitching these two bars together.
The system we have asks us to wait for our boundary to fail, and when presented with a void to fill it in the same way. The project asks us, “Can our scars strengthen us?”
SCALE: FIRE

Therefore it was the discovery of fire that originally gave rise to the coming together of men, to the deliberative assembly, and to social intercourse. And so, as they kept coming together in greater numbers into one place, finding themselves naturally gifted beyond the other animals in not being obliged to walk with faces to the ground, but upright and gazing upon the splendour of the starry firmament, and also in being able to do with ease whatever they chose with their hands and fingers, they began in that first assembly to construct shelters.

—Vitruvius,
The Ten Books of Architecture [5]

Fire was the start of our societies and the birth of our architecture. Humans came into the light and stood, seeing each other’s faces framed by darkness. We told stories, fables, and fictions and created society. This happened in the architectural space provided by fire, a light in the darkness, a space in the chaos.

Over time, this first architectural space of light, warmth, and conversation was made material. The provision of shelter is at once a public and private act, the origin of social discourse and the formation of privacy. We bound and enclosed our sacred spaces, our homes, and our societies.

These first constructions, these walls, were a statement of intention, a mark of cultural history. They described an inside and an outside and proposed the human’s relationship to the world. The walls defined the scale and limits of privacy and private life and, conversely, those of the public. They were a stabilising force, offering a reservoir of memory and an invitation to create. As William Sherman states:

To construct a wall is to define one’s place in the world, to establish a boundary mediating between a dynamic environment and a place of contingent stasis. […] The fabrication of an interior space distinct from the environment is the founding act of civilization. [12]

Architecture became the material manifestation of the values, aspirations, fears, myths, and dreams of our societies.
It allowed a cultural, spatial context for generations to be born into and to contribute. Architecture became a medium for memories. Architecture was communicative and structural to societies.

As our societies grew and advanced, so did our architecture. Architecture's role as a storyteller of myth was replaced by the ease and power of Gutenberg's press. Its image was diluted by the rainfall of images of the information age. Architecture was liberated from its contextual responsibility by air conditioning and centralised energy infrastructure. It was liberated from its correspondence to the human hand and scale by advances in manufacturing. This separation of energy, communication, and provision of storage and shelter from architecture into distinct infrastructures led architecture’s skin—the wall—into a site for meaningless pattern making and vacant reflection. [12]

Simultaneously, an increasingly globalized world has led to cultural heterogeneity, where spatial and formal architectural symbols have a diverse audience, and messages are more likely to be lost.

This liberation and globalization results in a loss of accountability and scale. Heidegger summarizes this world in the quote:

What is happening here when, as a result of the abolition of great distances, everything is equally far and equally near? What is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near, as it were, without distance? [2]

The legacy of these questions is an architecture without a voice, without an opinion. An architecture of economy and ego. This is an unacceptable situation. An attempt to return to an architecture than can communicate must return to the fundamentals, to the origin, to the flame and the wall.

If, on the other hand, the wall itself performed the infrastructural function, consumption and combustion would be reordered in consciousness with the immediacy of the bonfire. In this new role, the architectural wall has the potential to become the critical agent in modulating the direction of the infrastructural flows. [13]
Accepting this we can see that the return to thinking about the archetypal, the wall, as a place of activity, of engaged civic and societal conversation, of integrated infrastructure presents the wall in the context humanity has always known it to belong.

Across scales, the thickened inhabitable wall bears elemental architectural images. The smallest scale is the Promethean bonfire, the Vitruvian Myth. The building scale carries with it the history and deep psychic roots of our home. The city scale implies our quest for an ideal society, and, at the largest scale we see the border, our discomfort with ourselves, and our fear of death.

Juhani Pallasmaa states in *The Embodied Image*:

In order to give structure and meaning to our existential experience, the art of architecture projects externalized mental structures and images which we occupy and live in.[9]

We carry these images with us and experience them all at once. They give meaning and context to our everyday lives, connecting us to the deep human history from which we come. This is the powerful architecture that connects and communicates to something base in humanity. The prototypical wall carries the fire, the home, the dream of utopia, and the notion of society. These images and metaphors speak to our very understanding of being in the world, restoring architecture to its role as a touchstone of the real.
BUILDING: HOME
THE HOUSE AS A CONTAINER OF MEMORY

“If I were asked to define the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.”

-- Gaston Bachelard

The home is the world we are born into. Our first home is the context we use, consciously or subconsciously, to evaluate the world. Gaston Bachelard makes clear in his Poetics of Space, the connection between the enclosure wall, the home, and the very essence of dwelling:

“All really inhabited space bears the essence of home. [...] The imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we see imagination build “walls” of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection – or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts.”

Human inhabitation is the projection of memories of our first home out into the world. Home is tied to feelings of security and safety and the walls that define the limits of safety. Like the space around the fire, the limits of the walls of our home are the limits of our vision and comfort. To the extent we feel protected, we feel sheltered. Shelter allows us to dream in peace. This peace is the light we shine into the chaos of the world. Bachelard continues:

“We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”

The house, defined by its protective nature, is a container of memory. We reconstruct these memories in our minds, and we return to these memories to give ourselves comfort, refuge. The protective role the house plays in our lives is fundamental to our understanding of security. In this way, the home recalls the origins of dwelling, the cave and the castle.

[1]
THE CASTLE AND THE HOME

In the Growth of the English Home John Alfred Batch traces the lineage of English home from the defensive architecture of a Norman Keep to the living rooms of traditional houses. He says,

"Everybody knows that an Englishman's house is his castle, but it should also be remembered that in early times an Englishman's castle was his house. Castles were not necessarily military strongholds; many of them were so, but many of them, again, were nothing more than fortified houses, and it is in these fortified houses that we must seek the first germs of our own homes, the earliest evidences of domestic architecture."[8]

The thickened walls of keeps kept stairways, windows, and defensive measures that varied depending upon the intricacy of the home. They served as a place of inclusion, family, community, security, and privacy. The thick inner walls of the keep protected the smallest community, a family. Louis Kahn famously studied Scottish castles and speaking of them said,

"The Scottish Castle. Thick, thick walls. Little openings to the enemy. Splayed inwardly to the occupant. A place to read, a place to sew... Places for the bed, for the stair... Sunlight. Fairy tale."[6]

Kahn's fascination with the inhabitable wall became a staple of his domestic architecture. The Fisher House, The Esherick House, and the Eshman Hall Dormitories are all applications of this diagram, a connection to the castles and to the prehistoric cave that is deeply imprinted on the human psyche. Kahn speaks of this monumentality in architecture,

"But we dare not discard the lessons [buildings of the past] teach for they have the common characteristics of greatness upon which the buildings of our future must, in one sense or another, rely."[9]
We look for a connection to the past to find context for our lives. Kahn was aware of this human need to feel connected to the past and designed walls to recall the active engagement and program of the walls of antiquity. These containers are houses for the smallest human societal unit, the family. The active, engaged walls of Kahn’s domestic architecture engage the family with architecture, their shelter and their boundary.

THE BUILDING AS MANDALA

Kahn’s reliance on the hollow structural form as a diagrammatic principal became so ubiquitous in his practice that in 1964 Sibyl Moholy-Nagy remarked, “I was very much impressed with the first sight of the Philadelphia sketches till I realized that these... towers are not the uniquely adequate solution of this and no other building, but are your trademark now: impartially imposed on anything you design.”[6]

This is never more evident than in Kahn’s National Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, characterized as a mandala, the sacred diagram of the structure of the universe. The Sanskrit word mandala means circle and center, and the National Assembly Building is a ring of offices, circulation, and other service programs encompassing the prayer hall, a perfect twenty-meter cube.[5]

Juhani Pallasmaa in The Embodied Image further characterizes the diagrammatic hollow structural form as a mandala, the object of concentrated meditation. The architecture that echoes the formal qualities of the mandala represents the attempts to fuse the divine and the human. Pallasmaa says,

“The aspiration to fuse the cosmic and the human, divine and mortal, spiritual and material, combined with the use of systems of proportion and measure gave architectural geometries their meaning and deep sense of spiritual self.”[5]

In Western traditions the mandala can be interpreted as the squaring of the circle -- the classic mathematical paradox that mystified the ancient Greeks and is present in Bramante’s plans for St. Peter’s Cathedral in Vatican City and in the lineage of churches that followed. Pallasmaa characterizes one of the primary advantages in an abstract architecture for its ability
to recall these abstract, geometric, and proportional heritage. He says,

“The ostensible abstractness of modern architecture also requires expressive power and emotional effect from the unconscious meanings of the forms it uses. However, in mannerist modernity forms have lost their archetypal, cosmic and symbolic meanings, and they remain as elements of mere visual aesthetics without an echo in our unconscious and collective memory.”

The consideration of the hollow structural form as mandala is an attempt to reconcile the disconnect man feels from the universe. This character is obvious in the works of Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mies van der Rohe. Fallasmaa goes on to say,

“Although the basic mandala image is a centralized and focusing gestalt, many modern architectural images, such as Mies van der Rohe’s Country House can be regarded as asymmetrical and dynamic spatial mandalas, modern devices for spatial mediation.”

The importance of the mandala reconciles the man-god divide focusing its concentration. The home and the church are objects that connect the family and the church body to the universe, becoming the mediator and protector of these societies from the unknown, from death.
2 | CITIES : UTOPIA

THE BIRTH OF CITIES

"...the same is the case with city walls: long before they were military erections, they were a magic defense, for they marked out from the midst of a 'chaotic' space [...] an enclosure, a place that was organised, made cosmic, in other words provided with a 'centre'." - Patterns in Comparative Religion, Mircea Eliade[6]

The delineation of the chaotic external world versus the controlled, centered inside is central to cities. This fundamental association of the wall with the of early cities is evidenced by the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for a city, a simple circle encompassing a cross, the boundary providing a center.[7]

The weight of this boundary was given more power with the founding rituals of a city. In Etruscan and Roman cities, a ditch was dug around the perimeter of the city as a foundation for the city wall. The word urvum describes the curve of a ploughshare and gives its name to our word urban.[8] Plutarch notes this ritual and its scared nature in his The Life of Romulus saying,

'Where he designed the foundation of the city wall, [Remus turned some pieces of work into ridicule, and obstructed others; at last, as he was in contempt leaping over it, some say Romulus himself struck him, others one of his companions. He fell however."

The founding twins Romulus and Remus construct the wall of Rome, and for the sacrilege of jumping over the sacred boundary, Romulus kills Remus. The walls are powerful, and the rites of entry are scared. The founding mythology of the city makes this clear as something fundamental.

The city's walls connect the citizen to these mythologies, histories, and the murky intersection of the two. They offer a concrete reality to the founding rituals, and it is in this remembrance that the city's walls take on their true power: the objectification in the landscape that serves as a link, connecting those who dwell in a city to those who built the walls. The walls of a city contain protect these memories and provide security against the unknown.
THE WALL AS UTOPIA

The histories of city planning, modern architecture, and, by extension, contemporary architecture cannot be divorced from the history and ambitions of Utopia. The term utopia comes from Thomas More's 1516 tome, Utopia. The book, inspired partly by Plato's Atlantis from Timaeus and Critias, describes precisely the geometric outlines of fifty-four perfect cities, where there are no hidden or small spaces for small sects to gather to plan upheavals. The members of the society must live practically in full view of each other. There is no privacy. The object is to remove the heterotopia, remove the other as a concept, and produce a homogeneous society. These ambitions closely parallel those of Plato in his Republic. In all fifty-four of More's cities and in Plato's Republic, the cities are walled. The walls focus the society, exclude impurity, and define the boundary of the utopian dreams from the ether. The exclusion of impurity is such a fundamental program for the wall it bears repeating. Implicitly or explicitly, from the walls that surround the cities of the Renaissance, to the Utopian dreams of the Modernists, the homogeneous society is the chief beneficiary of the architecture of Utopia.

Utopia and the Republic define the utopian paradigm. They were borne out of a time of societal or cultural upheaval, the rapid shifts of the early Renaissance the end of the Peloponnesian War, respectively. In Lewis Mumford's The Story of Utopias, he defines the prototypical utopian responses: escape or reconstruction. The more optimistic of these, reconstruction, has long provided inspiration for architectural designers. Responding to the destruction caused by World War I and using the new materials offered by the Industrial Revolution, the Modernist architects critiqued the societies in which they lived by proposing new cities, new societies, and a new Atlantis. These Utopian schemes build on the promises of Marxism to examine what society could come next after the psychic break caused by the Great War.

All dreams of Utopia are by definition unattainable. The etymology of the word belies this truth. Utopia is a combination of the Latin "eu-topos" (good place) and "ou-topos" (nowhere place). It is defined by its intangible nature.
THE TOWER AS AN ISLAND

The diagram of the skyscraper is an inversion of More’s Utopia. The heavy, habitable core of the building supports a ring of habitable space. Towers in a field are disconnected by air rather than water. These observations led Rem Koolhaas to call the New York skyscraper the “Utopia Degree Zero”.

“The skyscraper looks as if it will be the final, definitive topology. It has swallowed everything else. It can exist anywhere: in a rice field, or downtown - it makes no difference anymore. The towers no longer stand together; they are spaced so that they do not interact. Density in isolation is the ideal.”[33]

He calls New York an archipelago of 2,028 distinct islands. This observation turns New York into a dark extension of More’s Utopia, but one where the walls of society do nothing for the inhabitants, and capitalism is the primary driver. He references the New York athletic club as an example of distinct floorplates, each an island into itself, and each conceived indecent of the particular program inserted. Maximum flexibility ensures maximum returns.

The frame as tower as island is helpful when thinking about the utopian towers of the Modern movement. Plan Voisin, the Modernist patriarch Le Corbusier’s dream of Paris is an example of a Utopian dream that lives at the intersection of escape and reconstruction. Escapism comes from the literal demolition of the existing city, a violently definitive act that would have erased Paris as it was known and would have replaced it with the Modernist’s dream of rolling green fields punctuated by eighteen sixty-story housing structures.[33]

This imposition of ego is a trademark of the Modern Utopian designs. The projects reflect the scale of problem they attempt to solve and have the requisite confidence to execute societal change. Le Corbusier believed the plan would raise the standard of living for everyone, giving all access to parks and efficient modern design.
Corbusier’s bias as an European colonialist were present in the design of each of the housing structures holding a different socioeconomic class, making the invisible barriers of a society architectural. This is a fundamental problem in all utopian schemes, the implicit biases of the authors become obviously physical and social.

Though rejected by the Parisian government, the ideas in Plan Voisin informed the modern project, including those biases of economic segregation. Pruitt-Igoe is the most telling example, a social housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri. The thirty-three eleven-story buildings and the parks in between them were constructed in 1953, housing 13,000 people on 58 acres. The project had big aspirations, and was widely praised and publicised as a solution to St. Louis’ills when constructed, however, just twenty years later it was regarded as the modernisation of the “slums”. In 1972 the project had a 70% vacancy rate and was torn down. The failures of the project were many and are still disputed, but the convergent criticism is that the concentration of poverty and the lack of agency the tenants had for the building led to an unsustainable architecture. Architecture has a voice in the shaping of the civic realm, and there are often unknown and unforeseen consequences for the actions architects take. The legacy of the pilotis is divorce from the public arena, not engagement in it.[21]

THE WALL AS CONTRA-UTOPIA

The post-structuralist notion of independence between facade and volume typified in the utopian tower were common thread for the post-modernist utopian thinkers. They positioned themselves against the communist and capitalist generators that led to the modern utopias and created what Antone Picon calls “contra-utopias”, or Radical Architecture.[24]

Operating in a time of economic insecurity, where few architecture projects where being constructed, these paper architects explored the criticism of the Modern project through shockingly aggressive, hypothetical thought experiments. Superstudio’s Continuous Monument and Koolhaas’ Exodus are two examples of this post-modern response. Continuous Monument is
an architecture that takes its power away from itself with its ubiquity while simultaneously dominating the globe. The project seems to single out the international style in its uniform treatment of the globe. It allows itself to have its power lost through its standardised nature; it erases history, replacing it with a wall of “continuous consumption.”[4]

Koolhaas’ Exodux is a “voluntary prison” where you can surrender your body to escape capitalism and architecture. It’s an appropriation and fetishisation of the Berlin Wall applied to London. The wall is a means of escape from the ultimate evil – the world.[2]

Further, in Koolhaas’ City of the Captive Globe, Koolhaas almost explicitly criticizes the Modern utopias,

“The City of the Captive Globe is devoted to the artificial conception and accelerated birth of theories, interpretations, mental constructions, proposals and their infliction on the World. It is the capital of Ego where, science art poetry and forms of madness compete under ideal conditions to invent, destroy and restore the world of phenomenal Reality.”[2]

This project depicts the Utopian visions as their own islands, a criticism of the independence the ideas enjoy from context, the mirror held to itself. They offer a criticism to the notion of consumerism, globalisation, and standardisation, the perceived threats of the post-modernists. These “Radical Architects” employ smug reductio ad absurdum in lieu of the cheerful, if misguided, optimism of Le Corbusier.

When the economy recovered, the post-structuralist aggressive delamination of meaning and context paved the way for the quasi-utopian, objective iconographic architecture of Frank Ghery, Zaha Hadid, and the deconstructionists. However, in 2007, the architecture profession was forced to slow with the recession, and this economic turbulence has created its own utopian response.
The new Utopia is decentralised and undermining. It finds a voice in the death of authorship of the architect. LEED, Public Interest Design, and oversimplification of the design process is leading to an architecture without agency in its designs. There is no objectionable content in our architecture if environmental concerns are met and the community is considered. It is a reaction to the global climate and the economic bifurcation facing society. Design as a metric by which to evaluate architecture has been replaced with these non-metrics.

In reflection, we find that, in the words of Antoine Picon:

"...the real flaw is an excessive desire for reconciliation, as if the world could be pacified once and for all. It is a dangerous temptation for architecture to believe that it has the key to ending conflict rather than revealing its true nature. Similarly, the ambition of terminating history in the name of history is another major flaw, which has often prevented modern architecture and urbanism from adapting to changing conditions, despite claims to the contrary...I now return to the most common criticism of the utopian dimension in architecture, namely the assumption that it ultimately always failed; in fact, I believe that the main goals of utopian architecture have been achieved. One of these was to fully inhabit the earth, to equip and manage it as the "house of man". [...] In other words, the world no longer surrounds architecture, it is rather that architecture encloses the world."[24]

In this way, the fundamental element of Utopia, the wall, succeeds as the continuous monument but rather than creating sameness and division, the wall provides us with a center, a place in the chaos of the swirling, dark universe.
3 | NATION: THE BORDER

THE WALL AND THEM

“The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structures. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack.”

—Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger* [1]

The external boundary of a nation offers a definition to the society it holds by explicitly stating what it is not. The boundaries themselves are often imaginary. They separate the imagined rights of one group from the imagined rights of another. The margins of society are marginal because of their relationship to the boundary. This organization is a gradient of who we consider to be “us” and who we think of as “other.”

Douglas continues,

“All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of the fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins.” [2]

The power of the boundary is that it shapes the image of society. This is true in many ways. Certainly we can define a society by who is marginalized and how they are marginalized, but the edges of a society as a physical construction can speak more explicitly about inclusivity. Rituals and rites of entry become the checking of documents, searching of possessions, and interrogations. These rituals fortify the myth of the impenetrability of the imaginary line.

The solidity of the border protects the homogenous society. The dominant class in any society controls the boundary, and we decide the severity of the line it represents. The quest for purity in a society leads to a hard line. Purity, hard lines, and clear concepts are a
natural part of the human condition. Jean Paul Sartre speaks of this characteristic of humanity,

“There are people who are attracted by the permanence of stone. They would like to be solid and impenetrable, they do not want change: for who knows what change might bring? ... It is as if their own existence were perpetually in suspense. But they want to exist in all ways at once, and in one instant. They have no wish to acquire ideas, they want them to be innate. ... they want to adopt a mode of life in which reasoning and the quest for truth play only a subordinate part, in which nothing is sought except what has already been found, in which one never becomes anything else but what one already was.” [7]

In other words, purity is the enemy of growth. Purity opposes change and rejects new ideas. The paradox of purity is that rather than protecting a society, the quest for it leads us into the dangerous mode where the quest for truth is subordinate to nostalgia.

It can be said, then, that the boundary of a society, the border of a nation, is used to displace the hate a nation cultivates onto the other. The aspects of society that do not fall in line with the dominant way of thought are pushed over the border onto the other.

Politically, this displacement is epidemic. Noam Chomsky speaks of the architecture of the boundary,

“The US-Mexican border, like most borders, was established by violence - and its architecture is the architecture of violence [...] it is artificially imposed and, like those many other borders imposed by external powers, it bears no relationship to the interests or the concerns of the people of the country-and it has a history of horrible conflict and strife.”[17]

We make these boundaries and allow them to define us. Architecture has an obligation to address the ethics of this boundary. Just as there should be no “medicine of violence,” architecture must do everything it can to guarantee there does not exists an “architecture of violence.” It is the baseline ethical consideration, in a profession that is inescapably tied to ethics. As William Sherman states,

“A wall is never neutral. Every mark, every opening, recalls and redefines a cultural history, scaling our individual and collective identities in relation to the city and the world. Personal, environmental, and societal principles become implicit in the choice of the wall’s form, its functions, and its materials; the design process is inescapably a process of ethical inquiry.” [30]
THE WALL AND US

"Perhaps Shih Huang Ti walled in the empire because he knew it was fragile and he destroyed the books because he understood they were sacred books, or rather books that taught that which the entire universe teaches or the consciousness of every man. Maybe the burning of the libraries and the construction of the wall are operations that in a secret way cancel each other." [17]

In Jorge Luis Borges' The Wall and The Books, Borges describes the actions Shih Huang Ti took to usher in a homogenous society. In his quest for purity, Shih Huang Ti began to cull deviant thought by burning all the libraries as books spread dangerous ideas couldn't be trusted. To protect that action, Shih Huang Ti also began the construction of the Great Wall of China to keep new ideas out.

The construction of this wall lasted for 2,200 years. Fascinatingly, the wall was never built as a continuous line or border but rather was created in isolated segments. The enclosure was less definitive, more circumspect. The construction of the wall was described by Franz Kafka in The Great Wall of China,

"Now, at first one might think it would have been more advantageous in every way to build in continuous sections or at least continuously within two main sections. For the wall was conceived as a protection against the people of the north, as was commonly announced and universally known. But how can protection be provided by a wall which is not built continuously? In fact, not only can such a wall not protect, but the structure itself is in constant danger. [...] However, there was really no other way to carry out the construction except the way it happened. In order to understand this, one must consider the following: the wall was to become a protection for centuries; thus, the essential prerequisites for the work were the most careful construction, the use of the architectural wisdom of all known ages and peoples, and an enduring sense of personal responsibility in the builders." [18]
It was in this way that the construction of the wall, more than the wall itself, became a cultural institution. The builders felt an agency in the wall’s construction and were celebrated in the culture as those who provided this security from the hordes in the North. Kafka continues,

“The enthusiasm for labouring once again at the people’s work became irresistible. They set out from their houses earlier than necessary, and half the village accompanied them for a long way. On all the roads there were groups of people, pennants, banners—they had never seen how great and rich and beautiful and endearing their country was. Every countryman was a brother for whom they were building a protective wall and who would thank him with everything he had and was for all his life. Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a coordinated movement of the people, their blood no longer confined in the limited circulation of the body but rolling sweetly and yet still returning through the infinite extent of China. In view of all this, the system of piecemeal building becomes understandable.”

This is the degree zero of public work. This is a public building project that engages the public and the imagination. Architecture across cultures has been essential to these public projects. The aqueducts of Roman antiquity, the Indian stepwells, and other border walls of antiquity all serve as prototypical examples. Architecture has surrendered this fertile ground of communal memory and cultural connectivity to engineering and utility. This is an unacceptable situation.

Architecture needs projects such as these with this scale of ambition, with the program of protection and provision to foster connection and accessibility in the works we create, the projects we make. Likewise, engineering needs architecture to humanize and contextualize these projects in the public realm. Too often the great public works of our age are regarded as evil. They destroy the environment, the city, and our sense of place.
4 | Conclusion

The enclosure wall as an architectural element defines our earliest experiences in a family, our fears and dreams for our society, and our understanding of our country and the civic realm. This is a fundamental truth for all humans—birth, participation in a collective, and death are the certainty of us all. In between we dream in our homes of a better city and of a better society. The thickened walls, our boundaries, borders, walls—protect and provide for these dreams but not without the ethical complications that asks us, “How can we be better?” As William Sherman states,

“Breathing this new life into the modern wall involves the reversal of the dependency between architecture and the apparatus of the modern infrastructure. The infrastructure that liberated architecture from nature is also the terror at the heart of modernity: the inhuman scale of industrial and corporate power, the potential reach of the omnipotent modern state, our dependence on the immensely fragile network distributing fundamental human needs. We assert our civil humanity when we reverse the flow: when the infrastructure becomes dependent on individuals, when our actions extend our collective reach rather than presume an existing common ground. As the physical manifestation of our connectedness is transformed from an invisible, unidirectional infrastructure to a spatial, multidirectional network, the fire is created anew in the construction of each new wall.” [9]
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FLOODED ISLAND OF ORLEANS

New Orleans' perilous site is its reason for existence and its biggest threat. With just two degrees of global warming, the city will exist as an island, the nuance of wetlands will disappear, and only the tiniest sliver of the city will be above sea level. The city will only be kept dry by the levees and the flood walls. This is an eventuality for the city, if not in twenty years, then in one hundred. The severity of the situation cannot be overstated. We are facing the end of the City that Care Forgot. Too often the incredible engineering that makes our life here possible is regarded as heavy, inconvenient, and too often we naively dream of these barriers going away, returning us to our river.

Through the cycle of disaster and dream, of failure and reconstruction, New Orleans has created a piecemeal protection system that keeps itself safe, always with the caveat of “for the time being.” However, culturally this system is feared, distrusted, and misunderstood. The failure and reconstruction cycle we have allowed to build the system promises exactly that, failure.

Changing this cycle forces a change in the understanding of the boundary. It has to be understood for what it is—the greatest and most significant public work the city has undertaken. The city wants to stay here, and that desire is the inheritance of every new generation of New Orleanians.

The wall is an integral part of the city's landscape and history—a ribbon continuous through space and time. By rethinking our relationship to the levees and flood walls that encircle and bound our city, architecture can move the threat from the background of our lives to the forefront of our experience. Architecture can recreate the wall as a symbol that defines and unites culture, as an infrastructure that transcends engineering, as a container of memory, and as threshold.

The engineering needs an architecture that can re-imagine the city as contained within and supported by this wall. Our existence in this impossible place requires a cultural embrace of the infrastructure that supports us here.
SITE NARRATIVE

THE OLD CITY: VISIONS OF UTOPIA

The Vieux Carre—the Old Square or the French Quarter—is situated at the mouth of the river that drained the New World. The city was planned as a defensive outpost, protecting the city from the unknown, savage chaos it was dropped into and protecting the claim of ownership of its river.

In New Orleans' first 100 years, proposed designs for the city followed the Renaissance dreams of Plato's Ideal City. Symmetrical palisades and bastions clung to the river that made New Orleans desirable. Those dreams were independent of the muddy, flooding landscape into which they were imposed, and their realization was accomplished by sticks and earth, rather than the stones of antiquity.

The most prominent defensive structures where the bastions, the forts, named for Catholic Saints. Barely used as a military outpost, the forts were dismantled, and in their absence, new civic structures and spaces were borne.

Today, Congo Square, The United States Mint, and the Customs House all sit on the sites of those bastions. They, as public space, fortify the memory of the past and frame our understanding of the city in the present.
PROGRAM NARRATIVE

FOUND TYPOLOGIES
Drawing from the site as a cultural heritage, we find programmatic typologies, archetypes for intervention. The project is a continuation, an inheritance, and the conclusion of a trajectory that was established at the city's founding and continued through the city's engineering.

BANQUETTE: THE WALL/WALK
The Banquette is the line, the delineation of chaos from order and the wall of the city.

BASTION: THE FORTIFICATION
The Bastion is the castle, the keep, the warning of threat, and the promise of protection.

CORPS DE GUARD: THE GUARDHOUSE
The Corps de Guard houses the protectors of the city, those who walk the line and those who maintain the boundary. The guardhouses sit at the threshold of the city and ritualize the entry.
SITE

PLANNING + PROTECTION: VALUES IN THE LANDSCAPE

New Orleans has belonged to three different countries, and each left its mark on the cultural heritage and landscape.

The overlapping cadastral systems reveal two value systems: the French arpent, which values the river and higher ground; and, the Jeffersonian grid, which values universality, utility, and ease of application.

The cycle of disaster and dream, that defining narrative of Utopian thought, is present in the scattered, abandoned forts floating alone in the water, disconnected from the land and their place in history.

The incremental construction of the levees and floodwalls has created an archipelago of walled islands, connected by elevated bridges, recalling the archetypal Utopia of Thomas More.

We can read these walls, and the lines of the surveyor, and see the conflicting values of the people who have made the city. The city is a collage of truths, desires, ideas, and ambitions.
SITE
THE LOST LAND

The story of New Orleans is characterized by devastation and resilience. The increasing threat of sea level rise puts into context the dire situation the city and its citizens finds themselves in.

Long stretches of levee and flood walls are ubiquitous in the city of New Orleans. With the danger these barriers have kept at bay and the trauma that has passed through, they are a space—a infrastructure—of memory. These walls—considered holistically—circle and define the boundary of the city. Unlike most walled cities, they are a consequence of environmental factors rather than human.

Historically, city walls have been constructed for protective purposes but also as a way of identifying the boundaries of the city and, in doing so, the heart of the city. Walls allow people to be inside the city, giving the city a sense of place. With the climactic enemy at the gates, New Orleans may be one of the first in a new typology of walled city. The walls men have made to protect us from ourselves are still built, our ability to hurt ourselves has grown greater.
SITE

GATES + CONTROLS: RITUALIZED AND CONSTRUCTED ENTRY

The engineering of the river has led to rigid, systematized controls. Likewise, rigid systematize controls exist for the exit of the city's citizens. Elevated bridges and the view of water characterize every entry into the city. The power of this is removed by the speed of the highway and the elevated nature of the interstate system in major metropolitan areas.

This amount of control of the river and of the entry is vital to the city. The Red River Control Gate enforces that two-thirds of the river flows past the Crescent City, guaranteeing the strength of the port and the purpose of the city.

Likewise, the controlled entry is a consequence of the flood protection systems, we must pass over them every time we enter or exit New Orleans.
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THE RIVER THAT IS NOT
LCLA 2013 COMPETITION ENTRY

The River That Is Not by LCLA studios is a re-imagination of the existing river in Medellin, Columbia. The river suffers from pollution and lack of water, but its biggest ailment is the engineering that forces its course. As a consequence, there has been a push in Medellin to re-naturalize the river. LCLA says this desire is naive and impossible. The engineering is here to stay, and the city has built around it in ways that would destroy the urban fabric, and be outlandishly costly. Most importantly, there is simply not enough soil permeability to allow for a naturalized river without flooding.

To this end, LCLA chooses to embrace the existing conditions. Instead they use the budget of the project to invest in public programs, like libraries, kindergartens, and sports facilities. They have developed a typology of program, and they stitch the program along the river’s run, uniting sides of the city and bringing the public into interaction with the river in a new way.
PROGRAM | BASTIONS

“These platforms will host programs that are traditionally contained in public buildings (like libraries, kindergartens and sport facilities) and will be located exactly at the point where the streams meet with the polluted river, triggering the encounter of civic public occupation exactly at the points where it is still possible to provide meaningful landscape interventions along the canal.”
THE DRY LINE
BIG 2014 UNDER DEVELOPMENT

The Dry Line was a competition entry for HUD’s Rebuild By Design, hosted during the wake of Hurricane Sandy. The project aims not only to create a storm shield around the southern tip of Manhattan but to also marry into the project public and commercial programs to add people and amplify community.

The ambition of the project is to create outdoor flood-able space, to reclaim the perimeter road with public transport in phases, and engage the public into the infrastructural work.
"The Big U is a protective system that encircles Manhattan, responding to the needs and concerns of the island’s diverse communities. Stretching from West 57th Street south to The Battery and up to East 42nd Street, the Big U protects 10 continuous miles of low-lying geography that comprise an incredibly dense, vibrant, and vulnerable urban area. The team’s approach is rooted in the two concepts of social infrastructure and hedonistic sustainability. The Big U not only shields the city against floods and storm water; it provides social and environmental benefits to the community, and fosters an improved public realm. The team envisions three compartments that function independently to provide flood protection. Each compartment comprises a physically discrete flood-protection zone that can be isolated from flooding in adjacent zones. At the same time, each presents opportunities for integrated social and community planning. The compartments work in unison to protect and enhance the city, yet each compartment’s proposal is designed to stand on its own."
VALLETTA CITY GATES

RENZO PIANO 2015

The beauty of Piano’s City Gate for the historical, planned city of Valletta is in architectural language. He also designed the adjacent town hall and used the same colored stone of the gate and the wall, wrapping his new construction in the myth and reverence of antiquity. The language is carefully considered, understated, and evocative.

Simultaneously, the city hall re-energises the civic nature of the wall and provides access to the top of the walls for the public, giving the infrastructure to the people. Atop the wall is a linear park, a public amenity.
PROGRAM | CORPS DE GAURD

"The 'City Gate' project takes in the complete reorganisation of the principal entrance to the Maltese capital of Valletta. The project comprises four parts: the Valletta City Gate and its site immediately outside the city walls, the design for an open-air theatre 'machine' within the ruins of the former Royal Opera House, the construction of a new Parliament building and the landscaping of the ditch.

[...]

The first objective of the project was therefore to reinstate the ramparts' original feeling of depth and strength and to reinforce the narrowness of the entrance to the city, while opening up views of Republic Street. The new city gate is a 'breach' in the wall only 12m wide. The relationship between the original fortifications and those that have been reconstructed is made clear by the insertion of powerful 16mm-thick steel 'blades' that slice through the wall between old and new."
ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTION

EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

WATER

SELECTIVE INTERVENTION
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In looking for the architecture that communicates for a collective in a disparate society, we have to look for commonalities. The search becomes for an Architecture Degree Zero, the fundamental, the essential. Looking at the two functions architecture to serves, glorification and inhabitation, specify the bounds of the research. Bachelard’s Poetics of Space is a foundational work in the poetic imagery of the home. He writes about how the images of home impact our lives and our memories. These writings are exceptionally crafted and have helped frame a conversation in my research about the relationship to civic architecture and the home, notions of prospect and refuge, and the role the home plays in phenomenological and ontological discourse.

“What is happening here when, as a result of the abolition of great distances, everything is equally far and equally near? What is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near—is, as it were, without distance?”
Heidegger asks about the essential qualities of things, the poetic image. He interrogates this notion to try to find what is “the thing” and how can it be communicated. This critical, questioning perspective on the role of communication and the essence of objects is foundational to the writings of Pallasmaa in The Embodied Image, and foundational to the conversation concerning the communicative role of architecture.

In The Embodied Image, Pallasmaa lays bare the issues with an architecture of the “retinal image”, and the potential for a more communicative architecture of the “poetic image”. His writing about the origins of architecture, the role of architecture, and the communicative power of art and architecture to be a groundwork for this thesis.

This writing by Péres Gómes is the first I read in Graduate School at Tulane. It made clear to me then the conversation concerning the role of architecture versus the role of art, the trajectory of architecture. In it, he axiomatically and systematically describes the state of architecture through a criticism of the international style, and offers the quote “Our architecture must be ours, even if this means that our fragmented creations can only suggest the possibility of completion, or reflect merely a sliver of light, rather than the bright, positive luminosity of a scientific or theological certainty”. This humble embrace of doubt, and the later reference to the “primordial shared experiences of human beings” are critical to framing a critical conversation about the communicative capabilities of architecture.
WALL

Bök critically and comprehensively contextualizes and explains six projects that evoke larger conceptual ideas that run throughout the work of OMA. Among these is his thesis project, Exodus, which is a fascinating case study of a programmed wall in a urban setting. She asks interesting questions about how walls structure society and provides answers from historical figures such as Plato and Aristotle.


Douglas reacts to More’s Utopia and offers the opinion about the danger of purity, and the reality of the quest for purity as a reflection of self hatred.

Eliade offers a comprehensive examination of patterns across religious practices. Most interestingly to my thesis is the concept of temenos, the marking of sacred space with an enclosure of stones. This early wall-making helps craft the argument for the wall as a fundamental architecture, and evokes questions about containment as a primary provider of a conceptual “center” versus an edge.


In Delirious New York, Koolhaas first offers his definition of an autonumonument, bridging a connection between Barthes’ Monument Degree Zero and the chilling Auto-Icon of Jeremy Bentham. In the broader conversation about communal memory, monuments that make themselves have a cross cultural appeal and as such present a valid, interesting avenue of inquiry.

Koolhaas expands on the idea of an autonumonument in S, M, L, XL, and speaks more specifically about Bentham’s Auto-Icon project. His essay, “Field Trip” is an examination of the Berlin Wall as Architecture, and is a valuable lens to understand the psychic implications of an urban wall.


