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EDITORIAL

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Urban Borderlands: Difference, Inequality, and Spatio-Temporal In-Betweenness in Cities

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Abstract

The concept of urban borderlands helps us to understand how divisions take *place* in the city. Urban borderlands expand territorially beyond the mere linear border, drawing together what exists in or across both sides of the divide. In that they are not merely physical, but of course always socially, culturally, and experientially densely charged, the notion of the urban borderland offers itself as a useful analytic in the study of urban conditions that are marked by contiguity and coexistence. Contributions in this issue explore the potential of urban borderline studies across global cities, spanning various scales and employing theoretical frameworks such as borderlands, liminality, and multiple identities. This issue emphasizes the importance of considering bordering processes in urban planning and design and shows that urban borderlands are sites of contestation, negotiation, and coexistence, offering valuable lessons for the future of urban research and practice.

Keywords

assemblages; borders; boundaries; categorization; coexistence; identity; liminality; practices; separation; urban borderlands

In this issue of *Urban Planning*, we ask how divisions take *place* in the city: How do they show up as physical, territorial expressions of the process of separating from one another? How do they organise what is—or ought to be—different across the various categories and hierarchies we create in our attempts to delineate and organise various aspects of urban life? Although we are often intuitively drawn to the spaces that make difference felt, palpable, present, it requires precision to identify what exactly it is that is being separated, and to then understand how and why such separation is intended and takes place. It becomes evident that,

oftentimes, the borders and boundaries discussed in urban scholarship are not rigid demarcations but rather expansive territories, spaces that condense complex processes of inter- and transaction.

In the city, borders and boundaries can be thought conceptually as border*lands* in that they expand territorially beyond the mere line of division to draw in and together that which exists on either or crosses across both sides of the border. Because "that which" can be different depending on context—a spatial type, maybe, or a marker of social identity—and because it is also constantly changing (no building lasts forever and no identity is fixed, after all), the notion of the borderland offers itself as a useful analytic in the study of urban conditions that are marked by contiguity and coexistence. In that they are not merely physical, but of course always socially, culturally, and experientially densely charged, borderlands are "thick space." They take place, quite literally, in-between different entities, fragments of the city, between the city and its hinterland, between regions and nations. Borderlands make space for synapse, transactions, and transmissions.

Borders and boundaries are at the heart of urban planning; they are the instruments of planners and designers seeking to device functional or otherwise defined zones in the city and the possible relations that such zones may establish or maintain with each other and through their inhabitants. Morales (2024, p. 2) juxtaposes segregation (signalling the division of social classes without the use of physical elements) with fragmentation (which is inherently looking into "the connections between planning policies and physical barriers, financial decisions, social practices, aspirations, legislation, and infrastructure"). Where municipalities fail to deliver called-for services, and cities lack instruments for habitability and inclusion, the gap between socio-economic classes tends to increase, she argues, giving rise to the physical expression of social divisions in the form of gated communities. Where such divisions are less starkly evident in the morphology of the city, people tend to generate their own definitions of borders through their "embodied experience with urban environments," as Barthel and Scott (2024, p. 11) argue. In this sense, borders—routinised and familiarised through everyday practices—play an essential role in forging individual and group identities through the provision of a sense of security, orientation, and belonging for those within such zones, defined by borders and their sociomaterial entanglement with neighbourhoods. Such a conceptualisation opens ways to think borders (as the entities that define and hold particular identities) as constantly negotiated in response to external and internal unsettling.

At the scale of the urban, borderlands take place in the everyday and through a multitude of practices that work, over time, to smudge—or harden—concrete lines of division. Eidenskog and Glad (2024, p. 2) highlight the importance of considering bordering processes in urban planning because "the built environment frames our everyday lives"—it can influence if we practice bordering as separation or bordering as coexistence, the fundamental qualities of any border. Rather than merely as social constructs, borders are here interpreted as both physical and "enactments in practice" (p. 2). Jatkar (2024, p. 15) examines changing socio-material borderland assemblages in the form of walls that can be dismantled to become temporal or "spaces between the city and nature that provide room for socio-religiosity."

In Tsavdaroglou et al. (2024), urban borderlands are the spaces within which the "commoning" practices of migrants are enabled as a result of their political and practical abandonment. They demonstrate how such spaces serve as the points of arrival and departure in Thessaloniki. In a similar vein, Agundez (2024) presents abandonment as tied to the production of a particular kind of built environment and architecture, which she interprets as a form of resistance to colonial urban policies and the continued categorisation of citizens in Spain's exclave, Ceuta.

Examining the flyovers of Karachi as "material forms [and] attendant gaps" (Haque, 2024, p. 2) that are transient, contested, and constantly remade, Haque studies their role in the construction and experience of difference through the imagination of the other and its everyday practices. Attending to what she calls "life in the interstices" through a careful ethnography of everyday practices (here, of driving, walking, working, and inhabitation), Haque finds that borders as objects reconfigure the elements of such practices—they change how often, when, why, and how they occur. Objects as borders do not, however, take on the same roles for everyone. It matters how such objects are identified, and by whom. Jatkar (2024) examines material assemblages at urban borderlands to find subaltern agency within colonial modernity. He finds that material assemblages can produce bordering effects along the lines of formal–informal, private–public, vehicular–pedestrian, but reads borderland processes as the undoing of modern binaries in that "subaltern agencies"—rather than simply rejecting such binaries—inhabit and transform them from within. He powerfully formulates the potential of the borderland analytic: "Learning from subaltern practices at urban borderlands would help dislodge urban theory and practice from its colonial modernist tendencies and generate a decolonial planning practice that supports a more liveable and open city" (Jatkar, 2024, p. 16).

Not all contributions to this issue choose to work with the borderland analytic. Authors engage related framings to examine ordering, categorisation, and separation as well as their inversion empirically, but also in terms of knowledge production practices. Importantly, Borofsky et al. (2024) identify that research itself is bordered, for instance in that it tends to apply certain methods and approaches in some (formal), but not in other (informal) urban areas. They call for the increased integration of methods and knowledge to inform policy making and planning. In their contribution, Valencio et al. (2024) examine economic dynamics, infrastructure development, and susceptibility to hazards in Brazil's state of Minas Gerais. Their analysis across multiple dimensions—from legal over administrative to political and economic—reveals borders and boundaries as well as the potential for new scalar categories, reminding us of the relevance and socially constructed nature of scale.

Mady (2024, p. 3) invokes the notion of liminal space, building on the definition of liminality as "the condition of in-betweenness" that "suggests a dynamic border position, without being on either side of it." In her contribution, she shows how urban actors respond to Beirut River's prolonged liminality by attempting to "re-stitch" (Mady, 2024, p. 15) the river's banks. In a different interpretation of liminality, Imai and Woite (2024, p. 2) use the notion to examine "transitional or in-between spaces where the everyday boundaries and structures of society are temporarily suspended or dissolved." Complicating notions of typology, they show how borders between subcultures and their specialised interests, varying age cohorts, and cultural preferences are temporarily dissolved within the liminal spaces of Tokyo's gaming arcades. They demonstrate how such spaces defy categorisation into a singular type.

In the contributions to this issue, we encounter cats (Eidenskog & Glad, 2024), pigeons (Haque, 2024), and other non-/more-than/other-than-humans as they enter borderland geographies, signalling a shift toward the recognition that our *Mitwelt* (shared world) is more than our *Umwelt* (surroundings; Gesa & Millay, 2010; Steiner, 2014); that we are part of a world that we undeniably share with others. How we delineate boundaries, how we plan and design them, and how much of the *mit* (with) rather than the *um* (around) this can include (without causing harm to the living organisms involved, now or in the future) appears a promising direction for future research on urban borderlands.

Urban borderlands hold lessons for the project of coexistence, a project more important than ever as we look in the face of the crises of war and environmental collapse that are likely to continue to unsettle accustomed order. They offer the advantage of being located at a scale small enough to allow for the analysis of human coexistence through bordering as social practice (Iossifova, 2020) and big enough to enable the study of the more abstract processes of urban transitions and transformations. The scale of urban borderlands combines the palpable of the on-the-ground with the abstract of the theoretical social. It allows us to be precise without losing sight of the big picture. The contributions to this issue look at urban borderlands as thick spaces to find what is hidden from view, what may not fit on one side of the border or the other, what may not conform with agreed systems of order, spatially or otherwise, permanently or temporarily. In so doing, they uncover all kinds of orders, of categories, of things, and of practices that urban planning may choose to name, to do away with, or to protect and nurture.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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