

Trans-frontier challenges

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Borders, and consequently border cities and border landscapes, represent a huge challenge because the players are not only 'us' but also the 'others', the others across the border. This challenge needs to be addressed by society in general but also, very specifically, by everybody involved in architecture and all the facets of planning. This is the reason, after all, why we are here and the reason why the UIA supports this event. The fact that this week's conference is the third of its kind means something. It carries a message. It testifies that the dialogues, exchanges and conclusions of the past two conferences have been meaningful. Congratulations to all who have contributed and greetings to the distinguished participants, from so many countries, present here in this hall.

In my presentation I will address a number of issues associated with borders. I will also be showing you some images. Hopefully this will all add up and give a clear picture of what I consider to be the essence of what borders mean to us, to our profession and to our future.

In trying to better understand the deeper political and geographical connotations of borders, I thought it interesting to examine the words used for borders in different languages and whether these words can be literally or only periphrastically translated into other languages. I asked architect friends to look into Portuguese, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Hindi, Tagalog, Sinhalese, Arabic and also African languages (1).

My starting point were the English words "border" and "frontier". We know that they do not mean exactly the same thing. What is less known is that whereas the word "frontier" means in both English and American English "extreme limit" i.e. "the frontiers of knowledge", it is only in American English that it means "part of a country bordering on another country".

The exact meanings in other languages of the words "border" and "frontier" extend to a great variety of notions, such as, to give only a few examples, identification line, linear land between two countries (or two people), edge (of a country), line touching the adjacent realm, transition area (which would have a measurable width), barrier, foremost front line (geographically or metaphorically), limit (physical, of spiritual) etc. It is to be noted that "in preliterate societies, and some still exist today, there is no concept of a border" (2). Land access systems evolve in relevance to tradition and customs.

The conclusion of this exercise in linguistics is that there is no conclusion. This should not be a surprise. Depending on the political, the geographical but also the social and cultural parameters existing in each specific border region, the words "border" and "frontier" take on different hues and nuances. This in turn leads us to the deduction that the problems and opportunities for border regions are necessarily case-specific.

Although I fully realise that the tri-national frontier zone of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay is an area of cooperation and collaboration, I think that it will help put things in perspective to see what borders mean elsewhere in the world.

We all know that our daily lives are regulated by barriers of many kinds – physical barriers, political barriers, security barriers, language barriers, barriers of prejudice, cultural barriers and barriers of communication and expression. Some are tangible, some are not. Some, like walls along frontiers, are imposed on us, others, like the prejudices of race, colour and creed have been inculcated in us by the forces of bigotry. The net result of all these barriers is that we are not as free, in every sense of the word, as we could and should be. This clearly suits the centres of power that prefer submissive citizens to free-thinking and free-moving potential overthrowers of the systems that govern us.

Borders are political barriers. But in fact they are far more than that. They impede or outright prohibit free movement whereas crossing borders, if not a political right, should in any case be a universal human right. Borders are instrumental in the de facto creation of frontier zones in which restrictive regulations are usually in force.

Borders are no longer lines on a map. They have become man-made physical barriers. In many instances, fences are being replaced by walls. No one knows where this is all going to end. A compartmented world? We are already living in it. A few exceptions, like the European Union, do not change the overall picture.

Yanis Varoufakis, in his Brecht Forum lecture in New York on “The Globalising Wall”, incisively analysed the evolution of walls and the political background that has been at the root of this evolution. He says, inter alia, that in times past walls lightly imprinted a country’s footprint on the land, they were porous walls, mere symbols of self-imposed limits, whereas now they have grown taller, more impenetrable, stronger and have acquired an unprecedented determination to divide.

Fences exclude. The fence and garrison mentality peels off onto most facets of life, onto architecture as well. We are living in a divided world, cut off from the “others”, be they on the other side of the frontier or, increasingly often, even within our own countries. Our “brothers” across the frontier or across the street have become the “others”. Our “brothers” inside the favellas are being further marginalised by walls sometimes built along the peripheries of their impoverished districts.

Fences and frontiers create barriers which we then try to humanise whereas they should never have existed at all. Border fences highlight the disparity of wealth between neighbouring countries. The global crisis did not have the same impact on all countries. “Globalisation was heralded as the process to dismantle all borders. It has done no such thing”⁽³⁾.

A world free of fences and barriers sounds like an unattainable utopian goal. Maybe it is, for the time being at any rate. What is certain is that unless borders become free-flowing two-way physical and cultural gateways among the peoples of this world, mistrust will never cease and peace will never come.

If the alternative to this utopian goal is the preservation of the status quo and the continuing proliferation of walls, there can be no more vivid way to take stock of what this entails than to see for ourselves, through the sensitive lens and evocative captions of Danae Stratou, who, together with Yanis Varoufakis, flew, drove and walked on “7 dividing lines, 7 scars on the planet’s surface, 7 cuts where political, economic, nationalist or religious tension erected walls between peoples with similar aspirations, similar lives, similar deaths on both sides of the division”(4).

The 7 dividing lines I will be showing you are spread over 4 continents and outwardly have nothing in common except that they constitute barriers.

- **KOSOVO : NORTH-SOUTH MITROVICA**
The Ibar river divides the Serbian–dominated North Mitrovica from the Albanian – dominated South Mitrovica. The unguarded footbridge over the river is the tenuous link between the two banks.
- **NORTHERN IRELAND : BELFAST**
Although peace has come to Northern Ireland, the euphemistically called “Peace Walls” become longer and taller. Insecurity still reigns in Belfast.
- **ETHIOPIA - ERITREA : BADME**
An underground wall separating two countries. The killing minefields persist ignoring the reality on the ground and a UN adjudication.
- **WEST BANK, PALESTINE : THE WALL**
A towering wall of concrete slabs slices the land meandering through occupied West Bank.
- **INDIAN - PAKISTANI ADMINISTERED KASHMIR : LINE OF CONTROL**
The line of control runs atop mountain ridges and along torrents making travel from one side of the divided Kashmir to the other almost impossible.
- **CYPRUS : GREEN LINE**
An artificial line astride the no-man’s land arbitrarily divides a city and a country. Like Belfast, and Berlin before the demolition of the wall, one city, Nicosia, has become two border cities.
- **MEXICO - USA : BORDER FENCE**
Between San Diego and Tijuana disused railway tracks stick out of the sand marking the end of the Mexico-USA border fence.

And now onto a more optimistic note with a look at the *status quo* on trans-frontier landscapes in the European Union. This can be a useful guide.

The European Landscape Convention was adopted in 2000 and came into force in 2004. The process for ratifying it was long. It can be said to have started way back in 1991 when the European Union’s European Environment Agency published “Europe’s environment : the Dobris assessment” which was an in-depth analysis of the state of and prospects for the environment in the greater Europe.

What is of interest to us here is Article 9 of the European Landscape Convention. It is entitled “Trans-frontier landscapes” and states the following :

“This article requires the parties to set up trans-frontier programmes for the identification, evaluation, protection, management and planning of landscapes which straddle borders. In doing so, they are asked to rely as far as possible, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle defined by the European Charter of Local Self-Government, on local and regional authorities, and to use the implementation tools advocated in the European Outline Convention on Trans-frontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities in Europe of 21 May 1980 and its additional protocols”.

Some of the more salient points in the European Landscape Convention are the following :

- Landscape must become a mainstream political concern
- In their diversity and quality, the cultural and natural values linked to landscapes are part of Europe’s heritage
- If people are given an active role in decision-making on landscape, they will be able to reinforce local and regional identity and distinctiveness and this will bring rewards in terms of individual, social and cultural fulfilment and may in turn help promote the sustainable development of the areas concerned
- The signatory countries are left the choice of means to be used within their internal legal systems to fulfil their obligations

I will refer to three tri-national locations in Europe that, although not directly similar to the Foz do Iguazu – Ciudad del Este – Puerto Iguazu case being debate here, can nevertheless be helpful in making comparisons and studying possible common principles in the way in which the urban fabrics and the rural landscapes are being protected and developed.

The one is the area where Maastricht in the Netherlands, Aachen in Germany and Liège in Belgium are located. Distances between these cities are short – 20 kms from Maastricht to Aachen and 38 kms from Maastricht to Liège.

The second case is the mainly forested area along the borders of Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic.

The third case is Basel in Switzerland, Weil-am-Rhein in Germany and the St. Louis / Mulhouse area in France, all three linked, and not divided by the Rhine, much like the Parana links the three countries here. For us architects it is the more interesting case because of the cultural focus on buildings of distinction and in particular because of the fact that the architectural highlights of all three neighbouring areas are usually viewed as a single cultural entity. In Basel there are the Fondation Beyeler Museum designed by Renzo Piano, Herzog and de Meuron’s St. Jacob Park football stadium and Mario Botta’s Tinguely Museum. Not far from Basel is the Goetheanum of the Austrian visionary and theosophist Rudolf Steiner, the man who had a horror of right angles. In Weil-am-Rhein one can see the Vitra Design Museum, one of the Frank Gehry’s earlier works. The Vitra complex also houses buildings by Tadao Ando and Zaha Hadid. Within an hour’s drive, in the French part, are Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp chapel and the historic Unterlinden Museum in Colmar.

Of importance is the fact that national and regional identities act as a bridge, not as a barrier. As a result, Basel has become a crossroads city with more immigrants and an openness and daring not so commonly found in Zurich or Geneva.

Border cities are usually far away from the centre or centres of a country's activities. They can develop in two ways. Either they will remain isolated and more or less cut off from the pulse of their countries or, if they are located at or near border crossing points, they will develop in a totally different way and become hubs of trans-frontier activity which in turn will affect the social mix of their inhabitants and influence social development in general.

The twin cultural influence that many border cities experience can result in cultural richness. This may be true for some facets of social life, rarely though do we see it in the architecture of these cities. Usually the mix results in an architectural mayhem that betrays the heritage of both countries. Our profession very definitely has a role to play here. After all, we too are caretakers of tradition and heritage. This becomes particularly important if one considers that the notion of heritage is often misused. It has been said to be "the bad example for the bad and the good example for the good"⁽⁵⁾. Are we architects not among the "good"?

Border cities are characterised by contrasts. Also by flux and mobility. Sometimes even by a daily to and fro of what could be called trans-frontier human resources. In the case of immigrants, border cities can be, as Italo Calvino said in his "Invisible Cities", places where one arrives for the first time but also, for others, places from where one leaves never to return.

"One half of a city is fixed, the other is temporary. When the moment comes, it is unnailed, dismantled, moved away to be replanted on the empty lands of the other half of the city"⁽⁶⁾. Or on the other side of the border.

The real meaning of these empty lands, the *terrains vagues* inside and on the fringe of cities, is that they epitomise the perpetual tension between the quest for space and the need for a better quality of life. They are our necessary breathing areas, but for many they are no more than spaces asking to be filled.

Development in cross-border areas, just like everywhere else, can be meaningful only if it goes hand in hand with the tenets of sustainability. With our planet in peril, it would be suicidal to think in any other way.

The extent to which we link development with sustainability will show whether we are serious about matters related to the environment or whether we only pay lip service to it. And those amongst us whose only concern is the profitability of development should at least have the integrity not to go public again on environmental issues or on the quality of life.

The important thing for us is, as Thomas Friedman epigrammatically said, to make our decisions as to who we are, what we value, what kind of world we want to live in and how we want to be remembered.

The criteria of future generations will, I am sure, be different from our present-day criteria. It is more than certain that, on environmental issues, they will be much stricter and that we will consequently stand accused of not having acted as we should have. Our inaction and lack of daring are in effect mortgaging the future of those who will succeed us. Antoine de St-Exupéry said it like this : "The earth does not belong to us, we simply borrow it from our children".

Development can be said to have started when man first intervened in the natural environment (7). Green development is a relatively recent term that sounds good to our ears and has become a sort of slogan. We know that green development is to a large extent dependent on the use of renewable energy sources. We also know that green development has a social dimension as well. Conversely, it follows that regional development programmes focused on the lessening of social inequalities should be taking into consideration environmental issues. How often is this the case?

Regional development programmes can be very effective in conveying the message for a more sane environmental policy. More so, cross-frontier development projects. They would have the added clout of a bi-national or tri-national “audience”. They would highlight the significance of a common use of resources and would act as reminders that the goals to be reached are the same on both sides of the fence.

I want to make the case for the use of wind energy as a symbol for trans-frontier policies that are friendly to the environment. I can visualise wind turbines straddling borders thus becoming living proof that sustainability is a *sine qua non* for all countries and all people, and a cross-border testimony of unity of purpose.

I realise that there are legitimate objections to the aesthetic impact of wind turbines on sensitive landscapes. But windmills, too, encroach on the skyline. We now cherish them as part of our cultural heritage. Are not today’s wind turbines the windmills of yesterday? To me it is clear that we need to compromise ourselves with the aesthetics of wind turbines because harnessing the wind is an inseparable part of the sustainable future that we all envisage.

Let us ponder a little on aesthetics. Our visual criteria for the way in which we accept or not accept something do not have absolute values. They are influenced by utilitarian parameters, but also by social and environmental parameters. Let us be honest and look back a little. Today’s “normality” with respect to the disabled was not always so. We did not quite accept, from a visual point of view, wheelchairs in our midst. We felt awkward and even embarrassed. We needed humanitarian awakenings of our consciences. I remember seeing, many years ago, in Gelsenkirchen (Germany), billboards reading “Wir nehmen die behinderte in unsere mitte” (8). Now we no longer need reminders. Acceptance as equals of the wheelchair-bound disabled has become part of our ethos.

I have made this diversion in order to highlight our continuously changing aesthetic criteria. Just like we needed time to visually accept wheelchairs at dining or conference tables, so will we need time to be visually at ease with wind turbines on mountains and plains. In the former case we have the twin notion of social values and aesthetics, in the latter the twin notion of environmental values and aesthetics. The parallel may not be too direct, but hopefully it will have conveyed my intent to show that our approach to the essential issues confronting us is not static and that, moreover, we ourselves can and should influence it.

Landscapes can only be deemed as a common good. Trans-frontier landscapes have an additional significance because they extend to two countries or, as is the case here, to three countries. Landscapes are the unifying force that links together border countries, and as such they must be cared for and protected in every possible way. Let us also never forget that interventions in the natural landscape of border areas will, more often than not, visually affect the “neighbours” as well.

The often barbaric intervention of man on landscapes has destroyed, and keeps on destroying, our natural heritage. The built environment is seldom in harmony with the natural environment. Greek painter Yanis Tsarouchis once said that “when a city has mountains, the landscape becomes particularly delicate because mountains are natural architectures that we need to respect” and also that it is “hubris to erect large buildings that compete with the magnificence and splendour of nature”. Frank Lloyd Wright said it in a different way when referring to buildings projecting above mountain crests. “No house must be above the hill. Houses must be from the hill, they must belong to the hill.”

I will now make the briefest of intermissions to show you a Pan-European prizing-winning one minute film by Greek student Kostas Karydas. Words are not necessary. It is our environmental conscience that speaks.

Trans-frontier collaboration has to be the basis of our endeavours in border territories, be they on open land or in cities. This is the only way to foster understanding and trust between neighbouring countries. It is the only way to make borders cease to be obstacles and become opportunities.

This collaboration can be achieved in many ways. Some of them fall directly within the remit of our professional lives, while some others touch the more sensitive chords of our commitment to society. Architectural trans-frontier collaboration can take the form of facilities for customs and immigration. This is obvious. What may be less obvious is the establishment of common institutional development projects, for example meeting places, halls, recreation areas and even learning facilities.

There is, however, another type of activity that would be very suited to common cross-border projects. I am referring to research and in particular to research focused on the major issues and challenges on either side of the borders. You have already taken a very big step in this direction by establishing this very significant technological park here in Itaipu. But one can visualise an expanded tri-national research centre funded not only by the countries concerned but also by international aid, which would surely be forthcoming for such a project. Such a tri-national research centre would be a think tank for new ideas and for applied technology. It could develop designs for simple, efficient and cost-effective housing, suited to local conditions and aimed at improving the living standards of the less fortunate of our fellow human beings, not least the homeless. Such a research centre could act as the lynchpin for the *in loco* application of renewable energy technologies in all its forms. One has only to admire what India has achieved in this respect, albeit at a larger scale, by evolving their own research programmes, programmes one hundred per cent orientated to local needs. The results, as we all know, have been spectacular – the Nano car, cheap medicines for tuberculosis, scabies etc., and so the list goes on. But let us not be unduly optimistic. For all this to happen, it is governments that must take the initiatives. To do so, they will need resources, political will and vision. The first two have little meaning if the vision is lacking.

The ownership of land has always been an area of contention, more particularly how much land is public and how much land is private. The encroachment of privately-owned land into public land is fraught with adverse effects on the landscape and on the environment. This is especially true in sensitive areas such as border territories.

Given that our goal is a more sustainable and a more environment-friendly future, we have to start from the premise that as much land as possible needs to be public. Private land is far less controllable when it comes to the enforcement of 'green' policies. So it is with sadness that one witnesses in so many of our cities, but also outside cities, what Greek journalist Xenia Kounalaki has aptly termed "the disappearance of public space", meaning the disappearance of public space that is freely accessible to all and not sold or leased to private interests.

Private space entails fences. Fences constitute visual barriers, they interrupt the continuity of landscapes especially when they become walls. The border and fence mentality demolishes the humanity of our cities and of our rural areas. It leads to fear and the gated communities that are increasingly springing up all over the world. The slow but steady transformation from humanity to the need for control has meant that the notion of "polis" is evolving to include "policing" as well (9).

Allow me here to refer to a personal experience. My country house is in a remote part of Greece near the sea and is set amidst olive groves. So are my neighbours' houses. I am the only one who has not fenced his property. As a result, passers by trespass. My house has been burgled three times and I have even had some of my olives picked. I also know that this may happen again. Yet I prefer it this way. Because for me all these 'minuses' are more than countered by the immense pleasure of the unbroken continuity of the landscape. What does it matter, after all, to be constantly visually reminded of where one's property ends and where somebody else's begins? Which leads me to what I consider to be a very crucial question, a question with obvious political and social strings. Who benefits from the present status quo on land ownership? Surely it can be modified to better serve the interests of the many rather than the few.

Borders and frontiers have been, from time immemorial, crossing points for migrants. Political factors and economic injustices make this flow inevitable. We witness this today all over the world. Stemming the flow of immigrants at the borderlines of countries may work for a while but it will never be able to alter what can almost be termed a law of nature, much like, in the animal world, the *wildebeest* migrations in Africa.

Cross-frontier migration forces are stronger than fences and walls. They disregard the conditions they will face when they get to the other side. I am reminded in this connection of one of Pablo Neruda's later poems, the *Barcarola*. In this he says "Seguir en el sueño alcanzando la otra orilla del mar que no tiene otra orilla" (10). For immigrants, the "otra orilla del mar", which signifies death in the poem, is the new hope, the promised land which, however, so often becomes for them a death of a different sort, the death of their cultural identity or, at any rate, the death of the physical and architectural attributes that constitute the environment in which they had been brought up to live and which represents their culture.

Colleagues and friends

Where do we go from here? What has the future in store for us? The famous Danish physicist Nils Bohr once remarked that “it is very difficult to make predictions, especially about the future”. This saying is undoubtedly clever. But it is also true.

All we can do as architects, and as members of the multidisciplinary teams that are increasingly necessary in order to arrive at positive results, is to pursue our tasks enlightened by the exchange of information from meetings such as this conference. And when the curtains are lifted one day on the artificial barriers of this world, in Palestine, in the Kashmir, on the 38th parallel of Korea and everywhere else, maybe the two sides will not look too different. This is our only hope.

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- (1) *Portuguese* : *borda, margem, fronteira*
Spanish : *borde, margen, orilla, frontera*
French : *bord, bordure, frontière, marge, limitrophe (pays)*
Chinese : *bean jeeyee, chee-an xian*
Japanese : *koku (kokkyou, kuni), kyou (sakai)*
Korean : *gook, gyung, jeon-seon*
Hindi : *sima, vistar*
Tagalog (Philippines) : *hangganan, gilid, unahan, harapan*
Sinhalese (Sri Lanka) : *desha seemawa*
Arabic : *had (houdoud, had adna)*
Greek : *orio, synoro, akro, methorios, parifi*
- (2) *Rodney Harber – Prof. of architecture, South Africa*
(3) *Yanis Varoufakis – Prof. of political economy, Greece*
(4) *Danae Stratou – Artist, Greece*
(5) *Yanis Tsarouchis – Painter, Greece*
(6) *Italo Calvino – Writer, Italy*
(7) *Nikos Androulakis – Civil Engineer, Greece*
(8) *We prefer the disabled in our midst*
(9) *Edward Soja – Political geographer, USA*
(10) *Continue in the dream to reach the other shore of the sea that has no other shore*

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