

ACADEMIA | Letters

*Borders and Boundaries of Control*

Socrates Stratis

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To Richard Sennett  
Another week of confinement  
Nicosia  
January 2021

**Borders and Boundaries of Control**

Dear Richard,

I am coming from one of those regions of the world where boundaries are manifestations of violent conflicts. Territoriality goes hand in hand with identity politics of human subjects based on ethnicity, religion, and race. It also goes with uncompromising claims of ownership. Space is weaponized. Urban development is turned into a militarized tool. We live, after all, in the aftermath of colonialism, yet immersed into new kinds of colonialism and ethnocratic regimes.

Your precious ideas regarding the notions of boundaries and borders have been an inspiration to my work and a valuable companion that helps me keep my intellectual sanity while being immersed into such a context. We say no to boundaries that are sealed-off, you suggest. We say yes to borders that are porous, alive borders, you bring forward. Porous borders should determine the politics of edges, not dead boundaries. Borders should be like thresholds allowing for exchange among different kinds of people. Stavros Stavrides tells us that thresholds are about dynamic processes of traversing urban edges. They support the urban commons. You “have been thinking how to give new life to the Left’ by focusing on such spaces. You urge us, the Left, to encourage the politics of the everydayness by supporting spaces where politics as process take place. I am not sure whether you had in mind this part of the world

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when you were writing these inspiring ideas. I felt, however, that I was entitled to be part of the recipients.

I wish to share with you some thoughts about my visit to Haifa, Israel, and about a project for the future of Famagusta city in Cyprus, titled ‘Hands-on Famagusta’. I felt a great parallelism between the two experiences.

I was walking up Haifa’s sloppy topography, the Carmel mountain in Jewish, the Mar Elias mountain in Arabic, where the Jews settled in Haifa at the beginning of the 20th century, you know. I ran into some buildings of the British Mandate, a former courthouse and a municipal hall. They are located on Hassan Shukri street at the edge of Hadar neighborhood, above the downtown area. Along the same street, some buildings were used as police stations or temporary control posts. Similarly, in Famagusta, a British colonial courthouse and a hospital with a municipal hall, built later by the Republic of Cyprus, are located along Independence road, just outside the walled city.

In fact, it seems like the British followed your suggestion. They located administration buildings on the edge between the Jewish and Palestinian quarters in Haifa and between the Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots’ areas in Famagusta.

Dear Richard, you are most probably asking yourself: have I ever given out such suggestion? No, of course not. Yet, the British logic of placing administration buildings between enclaves follows the logic of the Marqueta in Spanish Harlem. Well, not really. You have admitted that the decision of the team in which you participated back in the 1980s, to place the Marqueta in the center of the Spanish Harlem defeated its purpose. It didn’t encourage different kinds of people to meet. You wished that you had located it at the edge of the enclave to allow for bodily encounters of different users, coming from different ethnicities and race, poor and rich.

I was skeptical at that time when I read your short article in the 10th Venice Biennale of Architecture Catalogue 2006, because I thought that despite your suggestions, the poor remain poor and their rich neighbours continue to live well-off... I was convinced about your point regarding edge politics after reading an article of yours in 2017, titled ‘Edges: Self and the City’, where you associate the everyday political space with the creation of ‘socially skilled’ people.

Thanks to such an association between self and the city, I gained hope as a spatial practitioner, having realised the potentiality of space to have active agency towards micro-societal

changes. I said to myself: 'Imagine, socially skilled people who live in areas across divides, in enclaves to be empowered by such porous edges. They may gain their urban subjectivity, putting on the background their ethnic, racial or religious ones. They may celebrate their presence in the city. This is Saskia Sassen's hypothesis, by the way.

Let's go back to my argument about the Marqueta in Harlem and the administration buildings in Haifa and Famagusta. A market place has nothing to do with administration buildings, indeed. Yet, the logic of addressing the enclaves' edges, by locating a public program, could go either way, couldn't it? On the one hand, by placing a public program, such as a Marqueta, bodily encounters and exchange among different kinds of city inhabitants may take place. On the other hand, by placing the British Empire's administration buildings, control and security prevail over such kind of encounters. 'Divide and rule' comes to my mind.

In your article, in the catalogue of the 10th Venice Biennale of Architecture Catalogue, at page eighty-six, you have referred to urban walls, historic walls, that while in wartime they were hermetically closed but in time of peace were the place of clustering of "exiles, prostitutes, Jews, gays and illicit traders". In other words, the same urban artefact is turned from an alive border into a dead boundary when peace is turned into war.

I ask myself, dear Richard, what happens when war and peace are not anymore that distinct? How can we keep borders alive, when we are immersed into an increasingly weaponized space of undeclared war where security and control prevail?

Dear Richard, I remember still sitting by the colonial buildings in Haifa. Those in Famagusta come to my mind. My eyes were wandering to find physical evidence of the enclaves' edges. Mean-while, in Haifa, the Palestinians are being pushed further down the Carmel mountain by the Israeli municipal authorities. Yet, since the Palestinians are increasingly gaining a middle-class status, they insist on climbing up the mountain to find a place to live. The process of climbing up the mountain is turned into a sort of a social status elevator. In Famagusta, the Greek Cypriots are pushed further south of the UN cease fire zone, since the 1974 Turkish invasion, that took place just after a coup d'état instigated by the Greek military regime. The Turkish Cypriots, have come out of the walled city enclave, yet they are being recolonized by Turkey's geopolitical expansionism.

Where is the edge?, I ask myself. I suddenly realize that it is so thick that we don't see it anymore. Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forma call it the Political Equator. It stretches across the planet through the USA / Mexico boundary, passes through Middle East and goes all the way

to Asia. You know, it separates the north, the well-off part of the planet from the south one with conflicts and poverty. Yet, not even Teddy's and Fonna's Political Equator may define the thick edge we live in. I dare say that it is everywhere. It crosses or surrounds every city center. It seems that there is no exteriority anymore, is there? Still, trying to figure it out...

How could we support the creation of socially skilled people when living in deeply divided and conflictual societies? When urban space consolidates the uncompromising claims of ownership and 'sacred' soil?

Thomas Sieverts' fine grain of the 'Zwischenstadt' comes to my mind. I met him in Haifa at a conference about the Public Life of In-between Cities, back in the summer of 2010. Shouldn't we start looking into the fine grain of this generalized thick edge to reformulate our posture regarding the politics of edges?

What if we profit from such can-go-both-ways-possibility of the space between enclaves' edges? We could map strategically located colonial institutions, former and new ones, and identify possibilities of turning the vector from 'divide and rule' to 'converge and co-govern'. Well, easier said than done, having in mind that they are part of the weaponized space.

What if we, firstly, depart by changing the urban imaginaries that bind such institutions?

Then, our role as creative practitioners, according to Dana Cuff, is to propose new practices that do offer new urban imaginaries.

Then, our role is to enhance refuges where instant publics could exercise exceptional dialogical practices, according to the 'Hands-on Famagusta' project.

Then, our role is keep introducing poisonous doubts, to keep asking questions, as you suggest.

To move away from a theological posture of architecture into an entrepreneurial one, Keller Easterling tells us. To avoid, in other words, a direct confrontation with the dominant powers and to profit from 'unreasonable inversions' and from the power of the multiplier that the entrepreneurial activist in architecture may engender. Keller uses an excerpt from *Les Paysans* of Honoré de Balzac:

“My children, you mustn't go at things head-on,  
you are too weak;  
take it from me and take it on an angle....  
Play dead, play the sleeping dog”

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Well, I play the sleeping dog, dear Richard...

Yours faithfully,  
Socrates

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