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Home Space: Fences and Neighbors

Your home is a complex semiotic signaling system, presenting your, and your family's, "social face to the world," as the late Barrie B. Greenbie (1920–1998) writes in this selection from his book Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape (1981). Indeed, the walls, doors, yards, and gates of your home constitute a set of rules defining for visitors the boundaries of your personal territory and what behaviors are permitted within it. Greenbie's books include Design for Diversity (1976), Space and Spirit in Modern Japan (1988), and The Hole in the Heart Land: An American Mystery (1996).

Each of us resides in the center of a personal universe. Our most important boundary is our own skin; the most significant "home" for any of us is within our own bodies, for that is where all experience of whatever larger environments we may encounter resides. Our awareness of the multifold hierarchies of space that constitute our world radiates from that center, like the ripples formed by a butterfly on the surface of a pond, intersecting and reverberating with those of other things and beings.

The newborn infant is apparently quite unaware of boundaries, even that of its own skin. Its own needs and sensations are its world. But as children learn to cope with separateness from others in space, they also learn to perceive and to manipulate external objects to form various sets of boundaries within which they can feel secure. Other human beings become part of an increasingly complex environment, and physical structures take on new possibilities for shaping and controlling relations with other people. The very small child thinks of things and spaces in terms of "me"; the older child begins to think more and more in terms of "we." "My house" becomes "our house."

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung placed great emphasis on the house as a symbol of self, and many others have elaborated this idea.¹ Of course Jung considered "self" both in a social as well as individual sense, and in fact the concept of *self* has no meaning except in the context of *others*. Most of us share our houses with some sort of family group during most of our lives, and while parts of an adequately sized house may belong primarily to one or another individual, the boundaries of the home are usually those of a cluster

¹Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (London: Fontana Library Series, 1969). For an exceptionally good summary and elaboration, see Clare Cooper, "The House as Symbol of the Self," in *Designing for Human Behavior*, ed. J. Lang et al. (Stroudsburg, Pa.: Dowden, Hutchinson and Ross, 1974).

of selves which form a domestic unit. Even people who by choice or circumstance live alone express in their homes the images and traditions formed at one time in a family group.

The architects Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore view buildings as the projection into space of our awareness of our own bodies. Fundamental and obvious as this relationship might seem, it has been to a great extent ignored in contemporary architecture. A major exception to the rule is the single-family home. Bloomer and Moore sum up the personal situation very well in their book *Body, Memory, and Architecture*:

One tell-tale sign remains, in modern America, of a world based not on a Cartesian abstraction, but on our sense of ourselves extended beyond the boundaries of our bodies to the world around: that is the single-family house, free-standing like ourselves, with a face and a back, a hearth (like a heart) and a chimney, an attic full of recollections of *up*, and a basement harboring implications of *down*.²

Many North American tract houses fit this characterization less adequately than they might. But whatever the deficiencies of domestic and other kinds of contemporary architecture may be, they are as nothing compared to the shortcomings of most urban design. A good deal of excellent literature exists on the requirements of interior personal and family space. Far less thought is given to the out-of-doors relationships of one living space to another. This book will focus on the hierarchical structures that extend from the "skin" of the family home to the street and beyond.

As with the living body, the crucial elements of the building are the openings, through which life-giving exchanges take place with the outside world. The poet refers to the eyes as the windows of the soul; the architect should view windows as the eyes of the life within the house. The doors permit the exchanges and cohabitations that support and renew that life. The life of the home is of mind and spirit as well as body, a fact that so much mass housing, especially "public" housing, has overlooked.

The way human beings present the walls of their abodes to the world around them bears the same relation to family identity as clothing, hair style, and makeup do to the individuality of the person. In Amsterdam, Holland, the eighteenth-century houses of the burghers traditionally had elaborately decorated gables called *halsgevel* which were the personal emblems of each family. The forms and shapes, the symbols and meanings we put forth and read back from the facades of our homes are expressions of our individual personalities combined with those of our class, culture, and time. The often deplored "look-alike houses" of North American suburbs are as much a function of the physical and social mobility of the modern middle class as of mass taste and mass

²Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 1.

production. Houses that are really lived in for long do not look alike, any more than do the people who live in them.

The openings in the walls enclosing a space make the difference between a boundary and a barrier, between an enclave and a prison. As the house walls present our social face to the world, so they let the world come in to us. The important thing in both cases is the degree of control we exercise in the interchange. The environmental psychologist Irwin Altman considers all privacy as a matter of regulating interaction with other people.³ He distinguishes between "desired levels of privacy" and "achieved levels of privacy." In his model, if we desire less privacy than we have, we are lonely; if we desire more privacy, we feel crowded. This simple formula seems very useful when it comes to laying out and designing all aspects of the man-made landscape, but particularly that encompassing the home. Of course, we interact not only with other human beings but with the elements of nonhuman nature, and these too the walls serve to regulate. Windows of our houses let in air and sunlight; they also let in cold and wind. They reveal to us the events and forms of life outside; in the country the shade of trees and the sounds of birds, in town the moon and stars and the shapes of other people's houses. The landscape seen from the window is not the same as that seen from the street outside; the difference is precisely that one is revealed through an opening that is framed and that may be closed at will. Especially in the city, the activities of others may impinge on us too urgently for comfort. Indeed, for modern city dwellers the problems caused by unwanted interactions with other human beings are usually far more severe than those dealing with predators and weather, which historically has been a main function of shelter.

In the public places of towns and cities we are largely on our own as individuals; we exercise control over others to the extent of our position in the "absolute hierarchy," which is based on personal capacities derived from social or economic status, physical or psychological strength, or simply the possession of knowledge, that is, being "street-wise." If we do not rely on these, then we must rely on laws created and enforced by persons who do have such dominant characteristics in one way or another: the police, judges, and legislators. The implicit authority that derives from personal territory is a function almost entirely of ownership or possession of a particular piece of space. This authority, which home turf gives to all of us who are not homeless, is the most basic of human rights. It is recognized, at least in principle, by law in almost all societies, as suggested by the saying "a man's home is his castle." In a world which appears increasingly out of control to the ordinary citizen, the home at least still offers a bastion where every man can be king and every woman queen.

³Irwin Altman, *The Environment and Social Behavior* (Monterey, Cal.: Brooks Cole, 1975), pp. 5-31.

If this authority is confined to the spaces enclosed by building walls, feelings of influence over, and responsibility for, the larger public landscape are likely to be seriously diminished. If this authority extends outward in relative degree through transition zones into the public street, the street is much more likely to be an attractive, secure, and civilized place. The degree to which the rise of crime in American cities and in the cities of many other countries is related to their spatial design can only be guessed at. But at least one student of the subject, the architect Oscar Newman, has made a convincing case that the relationship in public housing is very strong. His observations, supported by data which have been the subject of some controversy, suggest that where large apartment buildings provide transitional spaces, which are perceived by residents and visitors alike to be under the proprietorship and surveillance of the occupants of the adjacent units, robbery, muggings, and all forms of street crime are greatly reduced. Newman calls such space "defensible space."⁴ The unfortunate realities of life in contemporary cities, especially in the pluralistic United States, make the term vividly appropriate. But it puts an unduly negative emphasis on the universal relationship between fences and neighbors.

Where crime is not a problem the existence of transition zones and the sense of enclave appear to be related strongly to a general sense of "community" and to the maintenance and general attractiveness of a residential area. A number of studies have shown that the degree to which residents of various types of housing know their neighbors is significantly less on through streets than on dead-end, or cul-de-sac, streets.⁵ While the shape, size, location, and degree of enclosure by fences or shrubs and trees will vary considerably with the style and period of the place, as well as with the culture of the residents, the structuring of transitional spaces between private and public places, allowing for different degrees of publicness and privateness, is important to all. The greater the degree of diversity in the outlook and life-style of neighbors, the more important such structuring becomes. Adequate spatial organization of the urban landscape is the prerequisite for social and cultural diversity. Expanding clusters of fences and gateways, of openings and closings, can give coherent and legible form to complex social behavior.

The transitional spaces between the house and the street have two different but related aspects. One is the transition between the inside and the outside of the home envelope, the "here" and "there" polarity that governs all human experience. This occurs first in the relation of the rooms to the house, and then in terms of house to yard, yard to street space, street to neighborhood, and so on. These establish the boundaries or extensions of "skin" between us and the material environment. The second aspect of transitional space involves the continuum between private and public. For those

⁴Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972).

⁵The relation of neighboring to street pattern is especially well described in John B. Lansing et al., *Planned Residential Environments* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1970). Interestingly, this study was done for a highway department.

who seek surcease from interminable interactions with our own kind, the most important aspect may be the transition between oneself and nonhuman nature; windows may look out over small walled gardens or distant views of mountains or sea. For those who find stimulation and creative satisfaction mainly in human interactions, the important transition between inside and outside, between our personal here and the larger there, may be in terms of the private built environment of our house or apartment and the built environment of the urban scene. Probably most of us seek some measure of both, but the proportions and priorities vary widely. Creative urban design will maximize free choice in all directions. Thus, we can look at transitional space as being between one level of physical enclosure and another, and simultaneously as being between one level of social enclosure and another. On the one hand it establishes a relationship between interior and exterior architecture, on the other between private and public life.

The egalitarian attitudes of American culture have led many people to think of fences entirely in terms of exclusion, of keeping something or somebody out. But more constructively, they should be viewed in terms of inclusion, of protecting something within. J. B. Jackson has stated it especially well, defining a boundary as "that which binds together."⁶ Apart from weather and serious crime situations, that something to be protected from within is largely psychological. It makes a difference whether we view the fence in terms of an intruder or visitor (photo 1), or as lord of our own domain (photo 2). Only the chronically homeless should see fences per se as exclusionary.

Aesthetically, fences provide form and texture in the urban landscape. Kinesthetically, they define the path space and serve as guides to our body orienting sense. The environmental psychologist J. J. Gibson has defined what he calls the "haptic system," a combination of the several tactile senses with information from our own muscles as we move. Bloomer and Moore, in their discussion of *Body, Memory, and Architecture*, have used the word *haptic* to describe that mentally extended sense of touch which comes about through the total experience of living and acting in a space.⁷ While Gibson distinguishes between the haptic system and the visual system, what we see is in fact blended with conscious and unconscious memories of what we have literally *felt* in past associations with the scene before us. Therefore it is appropriate to use the term *haptic* in connection with visual experience, as Bloomer and Moore have done, and as I will do throughout this book. But it is important to remember that it applies to seen objects which at one time or another have been touched and acted upon. For example, we cannot visualize a stairway as a stairway unless at one time or another we have climbed a

⁶Ervin H. Zube, ed., *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J. B. Jackson* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), p. 70.

⁷The concept of *haptic* is well developed for design purposes in Bloomer and Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture*, chap. 4. The source of the word is in J. J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), pp. 97-98.

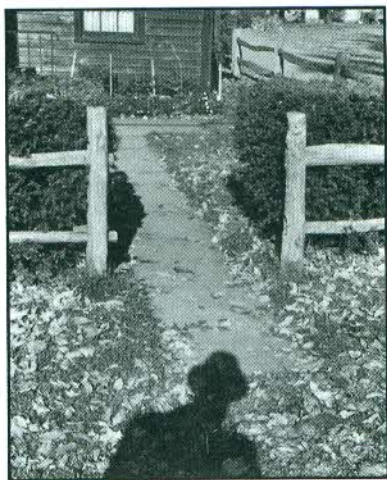


PHOTO 1

PHOTO 2



stair. If we have never done so, it will be merely an abstract form. Strictly speaking, only the astronauts who have walked on the moon can have haptic associations with that object, which has for so long been visualized in different ways. If the moon has haptic meaning for the rest of us, it is only because we associate it in our minds with something like a marble or the face of a man. Actually, because we have no physical, haptic associations with it, we can imagine it to be anything we want. Because we experience our earthly environment with all our senses, including smell and sound, the haptic

system puts us in imaginative physical contact with places and objects we once touched but now only see, hear, or smell. . . .

The concept of haptic experience is particularly important in considering fences because not only do they have texture in themselves (the pickets in photo 3) which we can reach out and feel, but they define the kinds of spaces through which we have at one time or another moved. In the human landscape, fences of the type shown permit us visually to enter spaces which we cannot, ought not, or wish not to enter physically; such fences enable us to experience vicariously other people's life space without involving ourselves with them or they with us. *The essence of civilized life is sharing space with others without intruding or being intruded upon.* All sorts of social conventions assist in this endeavor. Fences are high among them. Hold a hand over the shadow in the lower part of photo 1 and the scene becomes one of a tranquil domestic yard. When the hand is removed, the human form of the shadow immediately suggests an intruder. The shadow is even more menacing than an actual figure would be, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this book. The point here is that the fence creates a permeable boundary which controls but does not isolate.

The variety and aesthetic richness of fence designs in various landscape compositions, old and new, here and there, the world over, is limitless. At their best they rival any design form of which the human race is capable. Architecture has been called the mother of the arts. Surely, then, landscape architecture is the father of the arts. Perhaps the terms should be reversed to allow for "mother earth." In any case, both begin by confirming the boundaries of living space.

Photo 4 shows a group of houses quite typical of new suburban developments throughout North America, although the larger landscape in this case is quite special. These are essentially boxes, sitting on, rather than in, a generally undifferentiated space, the emptiness of which is only increased by contrast

PHOTO 3



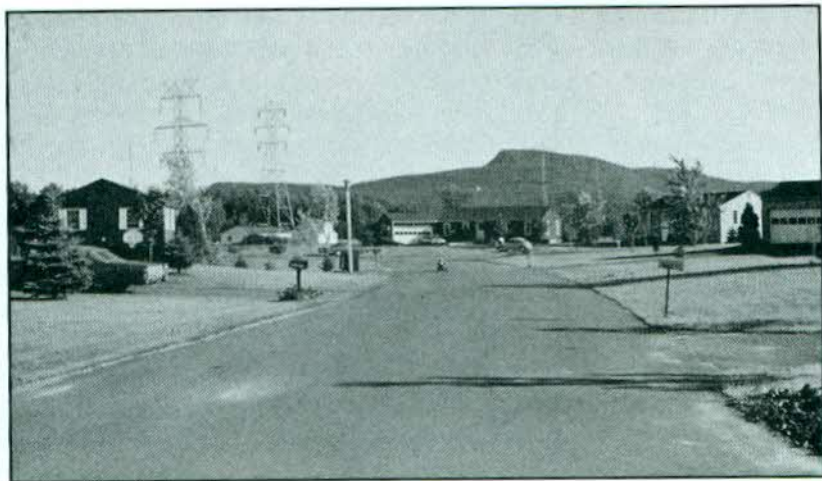


PHOTO 4

PHOTO 5



with the visually rich environment beyond. Real estate merchants call these buildings "Cape Cod" houses. Photo 5 shows a real Cape Cod house. It is on Cape Cod. It occupies a place, not merely a space. In time, of course, the scene in photo 4 will also become a place because the people who live in it will make it one. The trees will grow, shrubs and flowers will emerge, and, depending on the local culture, fences may appear. One way or another the void between the walls of the houses will become elaborated into transitional subspaces, defining both the family yards and the community street. Photo 6 presents a similar house but a very different environment. Although it will take no prizes in landscape

architecture, it provides a living space outside as well as in. The prototype of contemporary subdivisions was Levittown, Long Island. Photo 7 shows it as it appeared when newly constructed just after World War II. Today the bleak rows of look-alike "Cape Cod" houses have been transformed into a varied and sensually rich environment, full of interesting yard spaces and individual details. Photo 8 was taken in 1976. In the intervening thirty years, not only had the street trees grown, but shrubs had been planted, extensions added, and yards defined, each in its way expressing as well as enclosing a unique personality. Unfortunately the physical and social landscape around these now pleasant streets has not developed in the same way, and reportedly Levittown residents have been leaving for more secure, if not necessarily greener, pastures.

In the hierarchy of spaces between internal rooms and the street, a most important area is the threshold, which traditionally has been enhanced by some sort of porch. The porch is transitional, structurally as well as spatially, between inside and outside, offering shelter overhead and a raised floor below, but open to the sides. The feeling of being outdoors under a sheltering roof is quite a different spatial experience from that of being outside, exposed to the sky. Most animals, when approaching an open place, stop at the edge of the woods or whatever environment has sheltered them, a phenomenon well known to cat owners, who are forced to let summer flies or winter winds inside while pussy pauses between the jamb and the open door. Environmental sociologists and psychologists, and some landscape architects, are well aware of the tendency of human beings to congregate at the edges of an open

PHOTO 6





PHOTO 7

PHOTO 8



space rather than in the center. Most of us feel much more relaxed with a wall at our backs. These impulses had obvious evolutionary survival value. The feeling of pleasant security given by an overhead roof or canopy very likely originated in the arboreal environment of our primate ancestors, and of course there is a present basis for it in the protection it offers from rain or excessive sun while we enjoy the feeling of being out-of-doors. A terrace or deck without a roof also enables us to be out in the landscape but above it, securely connected to our house. The porch on the street or approach side offers an extension of the built living space out into the social environment, and generally it is

also a welcoming transitional area for visitors. On the porch one shares one's house with nonfamily members in a way that is much less intimate than inviting them inside. It is a much more pleasant way of dealing with salesmen, canvassers, and neighborly conversations, especially when the house is not in shape for visitors. Aesthetically, the porch presents to the person entering a visible architectural space rather than the sometimes forbidding side of a perforated box. Porches, porticoes, terraces, colonnades are as important to architecture as fenestration and as important to urban design as fences. When we think of the Acropolis in Athens we immediately visualize the Parthenon, which functionally is a portico surrounding a comparatively insignificant interior space. The Greeks, blessed with a benign climate, seemed to like to look outward from their buildings. Perhaps the most famous porch in the world is the Porch of the Caryatids on the Erechtheum, near the Parthenon. It is just as memorable as the Parthenon though not as typical.

The "capes" and "ranches" and "split-levels" packaged by the building business since World War II in American suburbia do have the free-standing quality described by Bloomer and Moore. But, at least when they are new, they are usually short on porches as well as defined front yard space. They really are boxes; one is either inside or out, with the consequences for our sense of privacy and publicness discussed above. Builders and developers will argue that porches are no longer put on houses because people do not seek to have them there. Fashion is often illogical and capricious, and the relationship of behavior to environment is rarely clear-cut. It is often hard to know if a given phenomenon is a cause or an effect. In contrast, most vernacular houses of the world do have porches of one sort or another, even the most primitive of them. Until World War II, most American houses did, too, and a great deal of socializing in towns and cities occurred in them. The "piazza" usually had a hammock and several chairs, and relaxing there, with or without visitors, permitted a pleasant relation to the life of the community which was not as private as being indoors and not as public as being on the street. One could enjoy the presence and casual company of neighbors and even strangers without any more involvement than one wished. For children, particularly, porches were fine play areas, and much visiting took place in rain or shine, with considerably less strain on adults inside. Older readers may recall the days when one of the ways of controlling the sexual behavior of adolescents was the convention of turning the front porch over to young people when they were courting. There is a limit to what is likely to take place on a front porch (even today), and as a result a very effective but indirect form of chaperonage took place. At present, some veranda socializing continues in older towns and the more stable older neighborhoods of cities, but the automobile has certainly changed things to a great extent.

In contemporary North American towns and suburbs, especially those inhabited by the middle classes, probably the most important yard spaces are not

in front but in back.⁸ As we turn the streets over to our children and our automobiles, adult socializing turns to the rear, and I found in one study that this is true also in older working-class areas where houses still have front porches. The term *backyard* used to imply a utility area where tools were stored and clothes were dried and children went or were sent. Now the backyard is the first to acquire fences, trees, shrubbery. The porch has been traded for the "patio." The sense of security, pleasure, and pride that human beings find in a piece of private landscape, away from the street, occurs on all levels of scale and affluence, and one can safely conclude that it is found the world over in all climes and times. Where space is adequate, the public urban landscape is greatly enhanced if backyard gardens can flow around side yards and are partially visible from the street without being too accessible.

However, in our increasingly crowded and resource hungry world, space is less and less available for such purposes. In attempting to cope with such a world, some planners and architects treat the desire for a single-family home on its own plot of land, no matter how small, as irrational and therefore dismissible, as they do so many other social and psychological realities. Irrational it may be, but dismissible it is not. Failure to consider the human "territorial imperative" has created at least as much hell on the domestic urban scene of most industrialized countries as it has on the international one. If we must learn to live on less acreage, as skyrocketing land prices and dwindling energy supplies suggest we must, the problem is to understand the spatial relationships involved so as to maintain the essentials at increased densities. . . .

READING THE TEXT

1. Explain in your own words why Greenbie claims that "the structuring of transitional spaces between private and public places, allowing for different degrees of publicness and privateness, is important to all" (para. 11).
2. Why does Greenbie see fences as inclusive structural features, not exclusive ones?
3. What does psychologist J. J. Gibson mean by "haptic system" (para. 14)?
4. Explain what Greenbie means when he contrasts houses that sit "on" space with those that are "in" the landscape.
5. What significance does Greenbie ascribe to thresholds, porches, and other entranceways, on the one hand, and to backyards, on the other?
6. What does architect Oscar Newman mean by "defensible space" (para. 10)?

⁸For a further discussion of the meaning of yards to North Americans, see J. B. Jackson, "Ghosts at the Door," *Landscape* 1, no. 1 (1951): 3-4, and Roger L. Welsch, "Front Door, Back Door," *Natural History* 88, no. 6 (1979): 76-82. For a more comprehensive anthropological view of front-back relationships, see Amos Rapoport, *Human Aspects of Urban Form* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1977).