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Borderland
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Abstract
Urban borderlands are the sociomaterial spaces in-between sociospatially dissimilar, adjacent parts of cities. They can facilitate the social and economic interaction between disparate and otherwise disjointed social groups. This, in turn, can contribute to the emergence of shared understandings and sociospatial identities for these groups. Research on urban borderlands can inform strategies toward integration of underprivileged socioeconomic, ethnic, or otherwise marginalized groups.

Keywords:
borders and boundaries, coexistence, enclaves, identity, stratification and inequality

Main Text

Urban borderlands are the sociomaterial spaces in-between sociospatially dissimilar, adjacent parts of cities. Urban borderlands can facilitate the social and economic interaction between disparate and otherwise disjointed social groups. This, in turn, can contribute to the emergence of shared understandings and sociospatial identities for these groups.

The study of urban borderlands is important in that it improves our understanding of typically urban phenomena emerging from or related to urban coexistence. This includes the processes and outcomes of international and rural-to-urban migration; urban redevelopment and regeneration; urban informality and resilience; urban complexity; urban infrastructure multi-modality; and many other themes that define and affect contemporary urban transformations.

Boundaries, borders, and borderlands have traditionally been studied in disciplinary fields like political and economic geography. There, boundaries denote the vertical planes that cut through surfaces to separate areas. They are established through delimitation (drawing a boundary), definition (agreeing on a boundary formally and in writing), and demarcation (marking of the border using physical means, such as fences and walls).

Based on their genealogy, boundaries are categorized as antecedent, subsequent, or superimposed. Antecedent boundaries precede human settlement. They are natural and physical boundaries, such as mountains, deserts, and waters. Subsequent boundaries coincide and coevolve with cultural differences, including language, customs, and religion. Superimposed boundaries are delimited as straight lines or arcs. They are established by colonial, conquering, or other outside forces, ignoring pre-existing cultural patterns. Examples include boundaries in Africa as delineated by European powers during the 19th century.

Boundaries, regardless of their genealogy, have the capacity to influence and change the cultural and social organization of the wider area within which they exist in multiple ways. Where borders are closed and rigid, they usually divide very different social and economic spaces. Where they are open and pervious, they enable sociospatial transition and the emergence of hybrid trans-border regions. The development and nature of border regions depends on the permeability of the border in question.
Borders are functions of national, regional, political, or otherwise defined identity. They represent the physical communication of sociospatial difference (van Houtum 2005). They are Janus-faced in that they are the symbolic expressions of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). They can be spaces of assimilation (bonds) and spaces of defense (barriers). A structure-agency reading regards borders as connecting the actions of people (agency) with limitations imposed by structural factors (structure).

Research in political geography focuses predominantly on the impact of boundaries on economic activities, the attitudes of border residents, and on state policy around state borders. In anthropology, research explores boundaries as the socio-spatially constructed difference between cultures.

Barth (1969) found that distinct ethnic groups develop specific characteristics based on the processes on the boundaries they inhabit. He identified four possible alternatives for the state of coexistence: (1) if groups occupy distinct environmental niches without having to compete for scarce resources, they are only minimally interdependent. Despite their co-residence, their interactions are mainly of economic nature. (2) If groups monopolize distinct niches and compete for resources, they establish a stable condition through negotiation and border politics. (3) If groups occupy reciprocal niches and provide goods and services to each other, they are closely interdependent in political, economic, and other fields. Their relationship is symbiotic. (4) Finally, if groups compete for resources within the same niche, eventually one group will displace the other(s). This is considered an unstable situation.

The field of border studies, mostly concerned with borders between nation states regards borders as processes, rather than consolidated entities, as they require constant renegotiation and maintenance. Power relations are part of the bordering process. Bordering generates economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and other types of boundaries, as well as notions of borderlands.

The term “borderland” was introduced by noted geographer Stephen B. Jones, who examined the US-Canada border in the 1930s. The notion was then developed further, for instance in work on the US-Mexican border. It refers the areas in closest proximity to borders. Boundaries impact on the spatial and cultural development of their borderlands. Sociospatial transition between core areas is reflected in the emergence of trans-boundary regions through a process of hybridization. As such, trans-boundary regions are contact zones.

The concept of urban borderlands emerged from the long and important engagement of scholars with different backgrounds with the processes of urban segregation and stratification. Chicago School sociologists, influenced by the advances of the time in human ecology, looked at boundaries as the mechanisms of exchange between different parts of the city as an organism. Anthropologists explored, not unrelated to Chicago School approaches, findings from the study of ecological niches and the behaviour of “primitive” tribes to see if and how such knowledge and approaches can be applied to cities. The bordering processes between distinct fragments of urban space resemble those on the larger, international scale, which have been traditionally studied in the field of border studies.

Border phenomena appear across scales and typologies (Boggs 1932, Minghi 1963). They can manifest between states, regions, cities, neighborhoods, plots, and individual spaces. Contemporary cities are increasingly marked by conditions of sociospatial coexistence. Different socioeconomic groups occupy distinct urban spaces. Boundaries on the scale of the city can be drawn encompassing urban units – and sometimes explicitly urban enclaves – on the basis of their natural environmental limits; their function; their governance and administration; their spatial morphology; their ownership; or socially constructed parameters such as identity. Identity can be dominated by ethnicity, socioeconomic status,
religious beliefs, place of origin, occupation, political views, age, or even sexual orientation, among many other possible markers.

Urban enclaves have been typical for human settlements throughout history. They have traditionally been based on the separation of functions (such as residential, religious, commercial) and later increasingly on segregation according to socioeconomic status, race, and other identity characteristics. Contemporary global patterns of commodification and socioeconomic differentiation contribute to the emergence of so-called enclave urbanism. Enclaves can take the shape of favelas, slums, and gated communities; they can be found in Latin America, Africa, and South-East Asia. East Asian cities face real estate bubbles and a slow-down of urban renewal, leading to an increasing divergence in the quality of urban residential neighborhoods.

Urban borders and enclaves are not the hallmark of cities in the “developing world.” They can be increasingly found everywhere. European cities are struggling with the consequences of in-migration and austerity regimes, including the radical stratification of urban populations and the types and quality of the neighborhoods that they inhabit. In industrialized countries like Germany, enclaves usually develop on the grounds of ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic standing; their boundaries are blurry and only rarely explicitly demarcated. In newly industrialized and rapidly urbanizing countries like China, enclaves are often the result of state-led gentrification and manifest as segregation on the premises of socioeconomic status.

In China’s cities, old and frequently dilapidated urban quarters, as well as urban villages, sit side by side with ever-expanding urban middle-class enclaves. Old neighborhoods consist of single-story, low-rise and frequently self-built structures linked by narrow multi-functional alleys. Their residents are mostly elderly urban poor and rural-to-urban migrants who share impossibly small accommodations and make do with sometimes dismal living conditions. Although shops, restaurants, and services are usually located on the perimeter and access to the network of alleys is normally monitored by volunteers or guards, the boundaries of such neighborhoods are only rarely explicitly demarcated by fences or walls. China’s new urban enclaves are usually sitting on top of underground parking garages and made up of multiple high-rise buildings surrounded by landscaped green spaces. Their residents are members of the newer Chinese middle class who often view their accommodation as financial investment and only temporary. Typical gated communities, these enclaves are surrounded by see-through fences or solid walls and access is controlled by professional guards at designated gates.

The border between these vastly different urban neighborhoods serves as the interface of interaction and exchange. Here, formal and informal boundary demarcations, delimitations, and definitions are undone and hybrid, urban borderlands emerge. The co-presence of different social groups on both sides of the border necessitates that they adopt strategies of coexistence in their everyday lives so as to accommodate the presence and practices of the respective other. Urban coexistence can take three distinct modes: recognition (or even symbiotic coexistence), tolerance (implying power-relations and hierarchies), or conflict (when no balance can be found). Recognition is desirable as the best possible mode. It implies stable coexistence through the negotiation of conflict in everyday encounter. This, however, is only possible if borders are porous and permeable.

In the context of urban China, urban borders are appropriated by actors to accommodate their immediate spatial needs. The negotiation of coexistence may include contesting priorities for the use of shared space; appropriating private space for public use and vice versa, for example, in sharing space to perform practices otherwise considered private (such as practices of personal hygiene); engaging in client-customer relations; or taking part in deliberate practices of conviviality (Iossifova 2015). In the long term, this
everyday negotiation may result in recognition. It has impact on individual and group
identities and may give rise to new and shared urban culture.

Ethnically, socioeconomically or otherwise defined enclaves adjacent to each other
give rise to various city- and community-shaping processes along their boundaries.
Essentially, borderlands as new and hybrid zones between core areas can only emerge if the
boundary works as an interface and contact zone (rather than a barrier) and if contact between
different groups is possible. The borderland is the hybrid space that contains and modifies the
variety of characteristics that can be found in the core spaces which it separates or joins: old
and new, traditional and modern, rural and urban, socialist and capitalist, among many other
properties.

The increasingly common phenomenon of sociospatial borderlands in and around
cities is of utmost importance to our understanding of coexistence under globalization, rapid
urbanization, rampant urban redevelopment, and unprecedented levels of international and
rural-to-urban migration. A shared research agenda should include the study of boundary
demarcation, boundary management, transition zones and borderlands, border perceptions,
boundary opening and removal, and borders and power relations (Newman 2003).

Research in urban studies can contribute much to an improved understanding of
borderlands at all scales. Scholars will need to uncover, among other urgent issues, the
mechanisms behind the processes of boundary delimitation; the strategies and tactics of co-
present urban groups to maintain or negotiate borders; the impact of borderland coexistence
on individual and group identities. Such scholarship can then inform policy, design, and
planning towards more appropriate decision making. Research on urban borderlands can
inform strategies toward integration of underprivileged socioeconomic, ethnic, or otherwise
marginalized groups.

SEE ALSO [cross-references]
EURS0089 Enclave Urbanism
EURS0080 Divided Cities
EURS0092 Ethnic enclave
EURS0108 Gated Communities/Fortified Enclaves
EURS0525 Splintering urbanism

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Suggested Readings


**Author Mini-Biography:**
Deljana Iossifova is Senior Lecturer in Urban Studies at the University of Manchester. She holds a degree in Architecture from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and a PhD in Public Policy Design from Tokyo Institute of Technology. She is co-editor of *Defining the Urban: Interdisciplinary and Professional Perspectives* (Routledge, 2017).