

Sites of Narrativity and Spatial Debate

Fences in Neighbourhoods in the Port of Riga

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As objects in the built environment, fences are functionally and discursively influential. Aimed at the fragmentation of space, they transmit multiple boundary messages – those of separation, demarcation, enclosure, gathering, protection, etcetera. Regardless of the grounds on which certain segments of reality are set apart by walls or fences, circumscribing constructions exert a discriminating effect on both physical and social space and deeply shape how a place or environment is experienced. Dividing the space into insides and outsides, they create differential regimes of accessibility, safety and visibility. They also produce social discrepancies regarding authorization, entitlement and belonging as well as their opposites, exclusion and prohibition. Border narratives in themselves, walls and fences

provide the material surface for various kinds of graphic discursivity. Territories adjacent to fences frequently become zones of space appropriation debates and actions.

This article reacts to an observation that 'as a particular structuring element of urban space', walls, fences and their materiality are underrepresented in research.¹ Based on an ethnographic study of the neighbourhoods around the Port of Riga,² it examines people's engagement with fences surrounding the territory of the port. Much addressed by residents in conversation, these fences have served as targets of symbolic activities aimed at claiming the space and promoting dialogue between the parties involved in the formation of environmental relations in the lower Daugava area. The interpretive framework of the article derives from a number of approaches dealing with people's material, spatial and environmental experience as shaped in narration and action – material ecocriticism, environmental phenomenology and narrative studies among them.

Storied Fences

The concept of 'storied matter' comes from material ecocriticism, a research trend maintaining that 'the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be "read" and interpreted as forming narratives, stories'.³ This proposition, in fact, implies two interrelated suggestions. The first is the idea of legibility of the physical world. The other concerns the identification of that which is being read as a narrative. Both notions can be met in the thinking of diverse intellectual trends either in conjunction or separately. For instance, architecture and urban studies operate with a concept of urban and architectural legibility or urban literacy – 'the ability and skill to "read" the city' – advanced by urban theorist Charles Landry⁴ and expanded by Klaske Havik.⁵ The topic of the 'legibility' of the elements of the built environment (an elevator) is also picked up by Umberto Eco in his discussion of architectural semiotics. The metaphors of 'legibility' and 'reading' used to refer to the interpretive efforts of the human

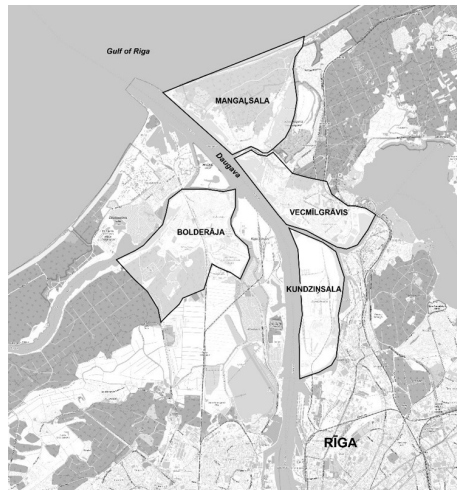


Fig. 1. A map, Google maps, Lidija Zaneripa:
The studied neighbourhoods on the map of Riga.

mind echo a broader idea of the communicative capacity of the material world. Combining a semiotic approach with phenomenological ideas, Eco reminds us: 'A phenomenological consideration of our relationship with architectural objects tells us that we commonly do experience architecture as communication, even while recognizing its functionality'.⁶

In other lines of thought, narratives step in to replace signs, messages or communication. Urban design studies, for instance, speak of 'built narratives', proposing that architectural forms be treated as the 'embodiment of stories'.⁷ In environmental anthropology, one can find an idea that 'the landscape tells – or rather *is* – a story'.⁸ That people not only translate events but also spatial encounters, into narratives or that these are perceived as stories was suggested earlier by cognitive science. In 1996, Mark Turner wrote: 'Action is not the only kind of story. Everywhere we look, we see spatial stories that do not contain animate actors. We see a wall collapse from age, water run downhill, leaves blowing in the wind. These are spatial stories'.⁹

The exploitation of narratives in this and similar ways has, however, engendered criticism. Objecting to a too loose conceptualization of narrative that equates it 'with thought in general',¹⁰ narratology insists on the necessity of making a distinction between 'being a narrative' and 'possessing narrativity'. At the same time, it supports the idea that an artefact might have narrativity, that is, the 'ability to evoke known or new stories'.¹¹ In accordance with this position is another critique, concerned about the excessive 'proliferation of narratives'; if a narrative lens is used to view physical reality, this supposedly imposes an anthropocentric perspective onto the nonhuman world.¹²

The majority of these considerations imply the presence of a human mind that engages with the meanings of material objects through signs, communication, or narratives. Karen Barad, whose notion of the discursivity of matter is based on a post-humanist attempt to relativize human-nonhuman ontological and epistemological distinctions, uses a slightly different

approach. According to her, 'materiality is discursive' in the sense of possessing a potential for 'dynamic articulation/configuration of the world'.¹³ Barad writes:

*In traditional humanist accounts, intelligibility requires an intellectual agent (that to which something is intelligible), and intellection is framed as a specifically human capacity. But in my agential realist account, intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differentially.*¹⁴

This article, however, focusses on human engagement with the narrativity of the physical world. I treat fences surrounding the territory of the Port of Riga as a 'storied matter', first, in the sense of a narrative subject matter appearing in the interviews of the lower Daugava residents. It is through narrative inquiry that I approach the ways in which these built structures influence people's experience of their environment.¹⁵ In addition, I contemplate the discursivity of the Port of Riga's fences as constituted by their function, enforced or disputed by spatial forms of discourse (signposts, warnings, graffiti) and shaped via symbolic activities of the involved parties, which both address place-appropriation issues and transform the communicative character of these spatial objects.

Neighbourhoods and Fences

'You cannot get anywhere, there are fences all over' – this is how the residents of Kundziņsala refer to the fact that their neighbourhood has been fully encircled by the Port of Riga. Because it is a relatively recent development, people have living environmental memories and a clear notion of how the character of the place changed with the erection of the fence that demarcates the boundary of the port. 'It was an island!', exclaims Renārs, a lawyer in his thirties, when asked to reflect on the transformations that



Fig. 2. The residents of Vecmīlgrāvis attempting to access the Daugava behind the port's fence. Photograph by the author.

Kundziņšala has undergone. 'Imagine,' he continues, 'it is an island in the Daugava, and you have no place with access to the water! Not a single place!' Kundziņšala represents the most radical case with regard to the impact that the expansion of the Port of Riga has had on the neighbourhoods in its vicinity. In this process, which also involved relocating the port away from the city centre and towards the mouth of the Daugava River, the residential area of the island has considerably shrunk and has been completely fenced off. Only a narrow zone on both sides of the bridge that connects Kundziņšala to the city is accessible out of the previous expanse, which the local community remembers with loving regret.

Though to a lesser extent than in Kundziņšala, walls and fences are influential participants (or actants) in the production of space or territoriality in all neighbourhoods bordering the Port of Riga. During the last two decades, the Freeport of Riga, having absorbed several former maritime agencies, has managed to gain jurisdiction over vast areas of land, over 10 per cent of the territory of the capital, a terrain that stretches along the Daugava River on both banks for 15 kilometres – half of the river's length within the confines of Riga. Even though the territory of the port is split into parts rented out to different companies, it has been encompassed by an uninterrupted border, which is not only a line on a map but has been physically demarcated by built constructions, at times having no other function than that of separating the riverbank from the neighbourhood and thus needlessly ignoring people's attraction to water or rendering it almost illegitimate.

As a result of legal action dating back to the early 2000s,¹⁶ walls and fences have rendered the port's territory isolated, inaccessible and cut out of the urban fabric – 'a capsule' destroying the public space of the city.¹⁷ Interviews testify that city dwellers perceive the port as a closed space and a misappropriated part of the neighbourhood. This can be seen in the way Edgars, a historian by education who lives in one of the neighbourhoods,

meditates on the lack of openness and reciprocity in the relationship between the port and the left bank neighbourhoods:

The port is a piece that has been torn out of Daugavgrīva and Bolderāja . . . If historically the port was a vivid hub of city life, today it's quite the opposite. And the port's concern consists in a maximum of containers and a minimum of people. Thus, all the development projects contradict the natural interests of the locals. The question is how high the fences around the port will be erected and how tight the restrictions for local inhabitants will be?

This legacy of territorial planning is also at odds with future aspirations for the development of the capital city, which envisage ensuring public access to waterfronts and port landscapes, allowing people to engage with the vistas of living water and aquatic activities.¹⁸

Fences in Narration

Figuring in the narratives of neighbourhood residents, the port's fences reveal people's place-experience with regard to the perception of inclusiveness, openness and protection. Two contradictory ideas emerge from these stories – the excessiveness and, at the same time, the inadequacy of the built constructions that separate the port's territory from the neighbourhoods. The latter represent the residents' vulnerability and ecological worry with regard to the frequent presence of odours, dust and noise pollution from the industrial operations of the port. Narratives of deficient protection come from homes located next to the port's logistic corridors in Kundziņsala, Mangaļsala and Vecmīlgrāvis, as well as from Bolderāja residents being exposed to the open-air coal reloading, which takes place on an adjacent island. 'Well, they built that fence,' sighs Aiva, a teacher from Bolderāja, questioning the functionality of the fencing of the coal terminal, 'but dust is dust . . . it comes over'.

More widespread, however, are narratives pondering the divisive, restrictive and transformative power of the fence. It is of special concern to the right bank inhabitants, who, from the last decades of the previous century, have witnessed a number of negative effects coupled with the port expansion and relocation processes, such as the expulsion of residents, limiting their access to water, and the loss or transfiguration of 'special places' cherished by the locals. In this context, port walls and fences epitomize unwanted change, a profound conversion of the sense and meaning of the place and, concomitantly, social identities. People who until recently lived in waterfront communities – connected to water by profession, daily routine and leisure – have become residents of commuter suburbs in which spatial movements no longer lead to the river bank, but are halted by a fence. Thus, the port's border walls, even when not explicitly mentioned, are tacitly present in nostalgic narratives recollecting previous lifestyles when 'the boat was a family member', when, having barely opened their eyes in the morning, children jumped straight into the river, when boys spent days and nights fishing on the river bank, when all festivals and family gatherings were celebrated by boating to beloved places in the lower Daugava area. Showing the fieldworkers around Kundziņsala, Gunārs, a passionate leisure fisherman, frames his narrative as a retrospective of a vanished reality and criticism of the present circumstances:

Once there was a bus terminal behind that willow. In the front, where you see these containers, we went swimming and fishing, and everyone kept their boats. Behind this fence, there was a canal. Willows grew on the bank of the canal. Now, we basically can't get to the Daugava. There is a small spot beside the bridge where we can unofficially keep our boats, but we are constantly being expelled even from there.

Boats no longer in use and parked in people's backyards are a typical sight in the lower Daugava neighbourhoods. They lie on this side of the

fence while the life in which they were needed has been left on the other, inaccessible, side.

Restricted access is one aspect of the functionality of walls and fences, another pertains to the visibility of urban landscape and has to do with the materiality of the built environment – the materials used in construction. Interviews show how materiality interacts with the narrativity of spatial objects. While modern, transparent metallic fences render port activities observable to Kundziņsala residents, concrete walls preserved from the Soviet times prevail in Vecmīlgrāvis. These prompt stories of an invisible world occupying a part of the neighbourhood and accommodating a hidden life. Narratives of various generations present different forms of interplay between the people, the wall and visibility. Boys' childhood memories recount an urge to see behind the wall, watch the boats, the operation of the cranes and other machinery; they also report on witty solutions to satisfy the forbidden desire. Adults refer to a commonly shared pastime of watching ships and the flow of water; they regret the height of the wall and the constructions behind it, which only allow a glimpse of the bigger vessels and none of the river. People who have had a chance to enter the territory behind the wall share their impressions of a visit to a secluded space, an entirely different locale living its own life of which the neighbourhood is completely ignorant even as it shelters it.

Whether dealing with unwanted seclusion, separation or, conversely, exposure, these narratives stem from bodily and sensory engagement with the urban environment and thus are a telling source for a multifaceted inquiry into human spatial encounters. In line with the thinking of material ecocriticism, they might be regarded as a 'palpable narrative instance of how matter and meaning can enter into a play of signification to produce intra-active relations between the human and the nonhuman'.¹⁹ With a view to spatial elaborations of actor network theory, the stories people tell are

indispensable for understanding of how places are co-constituted and co-constructed by 'the flows of ideas, people, and materials'.²⁰ They support post-phenomenological attempts to advance the 'focus on the subject of experience' by adopting the perspective of the people who interact with the urban space on a daily basis.²¹

Altered Narrativity

As a spatial divide and a barrier creating separated physical and social territories, walls and fences inherently possess a contested discursivity. Concurrently, they provide a material surface for a verbal and visual encounter of discordant views emanating from both sides of the divide. Fences in the lower Daugava neighbourhoods represent a site where narratives authored by the Port of Riga and local communities meet, at times clashing and, at others, seeking a dialogue. The message of control over territory, contained by the fence itself and sporadically bolstered by barbed wire, acquires verbal form on scattered signposts (issued by port authorities or tenant companies), declaring a customs zone, prohibiting entrance or demanding special authorisation.

The rest of the border surface, however, is not left blank. The muteness of the wall, noted by Georg Simmel,²² is enticing and provoking; to use the words of a graffiti artist from Vecmīlgrāvis, Matīss: 'A blank wall is an invitation.' Graffiti is one of the discursive techniques that transform the narrative of walls and fences surrounding the Port of Riga. Sometimes directly addressing troubles that the neighbourhoods perceive as emanating from the territory behind the fence, graffiti produces comments from 'the outside' on 'the inside'. Writings such as 'The terminal will kill us all' or 'Feel the beat!' point at the ecological burden – air pollution, noise and vibration – that the port imposes upon its neighbours. Others, not straightforwardly contextualized, participate in the place appropriation debate in the way graffiti usually does – by resisting 'powers that would inscribe a single legibility on urban space'.²³



Fig. 3. The narrative of isolation. .



Fig. 4. The green hedge of reconciliation.
Photographs by the author.

Alongside those kinds of competing monologic communication, the narrativity of walls and fences of the Port of Riga is modified by actions that might be regarded as spatial negotiations involving both parties: the port and the neighbourhoods. Recent attempts by the administration of the port to become more open and public-dialogue-oriented resulted, in 2017, in planting a green hedge along the port's metallic fence in Kundziņsala. Coupled with signposts indicating that the growing hedge is an outcome of joint efforts of Kundziņsala residents and port employees, it manifests a symbolic move towards an ecological and communicative reconciliation.

Even more telling and visually impressive are the murals covering the concrete wall in Vecmīlgrāvis, stretching about one kilometre. An activity initiated by the neighbourhood activists and supported by the Port Authority, pupils from all of the neighbourhood schools were involved in painting the mural, and, in the course of nine years, the grey wall turned into hundreds of narratives depicting maritime, underwater and other colourful scenes. The present appearance of the wall transmits a manifold narrative. It tells of the success of an aesthetic action in the appropriation of space – a symbolic act by which space is transformed into place. Creatively attacking the unidirectionally imposed spatial barrier, the neighbourhood residents have asserted their entitlement to the place and the right to speak for it. The port, for its part granting a space for the inhabitants' voice, has demonstrated an inclination towards sharing. The administrator of the port who took part in some painting sessions stated that, instead of separating, the wall is now uniting the people and the port. Those attempts at creating a dialogic narrative, as well as an aesthetic embellishment of dull constructed objects, even though esteemed by the neighbourhood residents, do not, however, address the core issue. They do not contribute to a more organic integration of the port's territory into the urban fabric, opening it up for the city inhabitants and providing a more inclusive public space.



Fig. 5.+ 6. Vecmīlgrāvis' murals. Photographs by the author.

To conclude, the aim of this article was to approach the built constructions – fences and walls – that fragment urban space from the residents' perspective. Oral narratives in this regard are an invaluable source, providing access to the ways in which people experience physical and social divisions created by these border objects and 'read' their boundary messages. Interviews with the lower Daugava communities show that walls and fences surrounding the Port of Riga have had a transformative impact on the meaning of place. Attention paid to the space appropriation activities performed by the neighbourhood residents gives an insight into people's engagement with imposed spatial meanings and their attempts to alter the narrativity of an unfriendly built environment.

- 1 Joachim Otto Habeck and Galina Belolyubskaya, 'Fences, Private and Public Spaces, and Traversability in a Siberian City', *Cities* 56 (2016), 119. Less often approached in urban studies (see, for example, Ali Madanipour, *Urban Design, Space and Society* (Basingstoke, 2014), 206-209), walls and fences are a more widely-discussed topic in border studies predominantly dealing with territorial divisions from a geopolitical perspective (see, for example, David Newman and Anssi Paasi, 'Fences and Neighbours in the Postmodern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 22 (1998), 186-207; Elisabeth Vallet (ed.), *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?* (London/New York, 2014).
- 2 This article is a result of a study in the project 'Living Next to the Port: Eco-Narratives, Local Histories, and Environmental Activism in the Daugava Delta' (Izp - 2018/1-0446), funded by the Latvian Council of Science and implemented at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia, 2018-2021. The oral narratives that constitute the empirical material of the article come from qualitative interviews with the residents (92 in total) of the four studied neighbourhoods.
- 3 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington/Indianapolis, 2014), 1.

- 4 Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (London, 2000), 246.
- 5 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam, 2014).
- 6 Umberto Eco, 'Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture', in: Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London/New York, 1997), 182.
- 7 Crystal Victoria Filep, Michelle Thompson-Fawcett and Murray Rae, 'Built Narratives', *Journal of Urban Design* 19 (2014), 310.
- 8 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of Environment* (London/New York, 2000), 189.
- 9 Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Oxford, 1996), 47.
- 10 Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Toward a Definition of Narrative', in: David Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge, 2007), 28.
- 11 Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/ Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (Ohio, 2016), 139.
- 12 Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge, 2019), 124-136.
- 13 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC/London, 2007), 151.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 15 See: Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, 2000).
- 16 The Free Port of Riga Law, adopted 3rd March 2000, envisages that the rented sectors of all companies within the port's territory be securely enclosed and guarded, see: likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/3435.
- 17 Alfredo Mela, 'Urban Public Space between Fragmentation, Control and Conflict', *City, Territory and Architecture* 1 (2014), 1-15.
- 18 *Rīgas ilgstpējīgas attīstības stratēģija līdz 2030. gadam* (Riga, 2014), 67.
- 19 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 'Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity', *Ecozon@* 3 (2012), 81.
- 20 Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, 'Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset', *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001), 664.
- 21 Nima Talebian and Turkan Ulusu Uraz, 'The Post-Phenomenology of Place: Moving Forward from Phenomenological to Post-Structural Readings of Place', *Open House International* 43 (2018), 15.
- 22 Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', in: Leach, *Rethinking Architecture*, op cit. (note 6), 66-69.
- 23 Evan Hennessy Carver, 'Graffiti Writing as Urban Narrative', *Literary Geographies* 4 (2018), 188.