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OPINION

Urban Fortification: Segregation, Mobility, and Control

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All around the world, cities are being fortified in response to social and political conflicts. For most people, transportation may not seem like an obvious component of urban fortification, but due to its critical role in everyone's lives, it has served as an effective instrument of segregation in fortified cities. It is indirectly and directly used as a tool to marginalize, separate, and control the movement of certain sectors of the population. In the newly emerging urban environments arising from extreme measures of fortification and militarization, transportation is one of the major elements that is drastically transformed.

As an essential part of our daily lives, transportation allows us to pursue jobs, education, and social services. Since the invention of the automobile, car ownership has dictated the availability of opportunities for many people. Transportation planning is highly politicized, involving the ideas and opinions of many different actors with conflicting agendas. Social inequity is further exacerbated by the physical separation created by fortified cities. The consequences of urban fortification on mobility can be observed in two very different places: São Paulo and Israel.

The erection of walls in these two locations is the result of very different social and political forces, yet the outcomes are surprisingly similar. São Paulo's evolution into a conglomeration of private enclaves is fueled by private efforts as a reaction to increasing economic disparity and heightened levels of fear regarding crime, leading to a separation of the poor and upper classes. On the other hand, the process of militarization in Israel is due mainly to political and territorial conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. The evolution of walled and militarized cities has led to an expansion of homogeneous communities, further diminishing people's tolerance for different people.

Transportation is not the primary method of separation, but in a world where mobility and access dictates one's level of participation in a vibrant economy, a lack of transportation options limits the opportunities of the underprivileged. Privileged groups resort to the comfort and security of private automobiles, while others must rely on public transit and human powered transportation. In conjunction with physical separations, transportation becomes a method of segregation.

In Israel, Palestinians are cut off from jobs in the central cities and forced to spend hours every day waiting at checkpoints to get into the city. They are restricted from driving through the checkpoints, which immediately puts them at a disadvantage. A short trip from one side of the wall into the Israeli territory can take several hours, entailing miles of walking to the checkpoint followed by hours of waiting in line. Even then, a Palestinian resident can never be certain they will be granted passage. Thus every day is met with the fear that they can simply be sent back after hours spent waiting and hoping. On the other hand, Israelis are allowed to pass freely in and out of the city in their cars. The transportation system is manipulated to create two distinct social classes. These limits to mobility are deliberately designed into the function of the walls, aiming to disrupt and demoralize Palestinians by subjecting them to constant surveillance and separation.

São Paulo did not experience the same systematic control of movement and spatial control, but the emergence of walls in the city points to a similar outcome. The poor are locked out of secured private enclaves guarded and watched by private security employed by the middle and upper class. The poor are only allowed to enter the compounds to perform service work for the wealthy. They are subjected to separate service entrances to avoid intermingling with the residents and their guests. Ironically, the wealthy residents are dependent on the labor of the poor to carry out their lives in their private worlds.

Although São Paulo does not have the same regulatory barriers against driving, those who cannot afford cars are at a clear disadvantage. The city and new private enclaves are designed exclusively for automobiles,

often inaccessible by public transit, creating hostile environments for pedestrians. The upper class has largely abandoned life in the public realm, including the use of public transportation. They retreat to the safety and comfort of their private automobiles, while the poor and vulnerable are forced to walk and ride transit within the confines of newly erected walls. Children are taught that buses and subways are dangerous and should be avoided, while walking is stigmatized and pedestrians viewed as suspicious. The patterns of residential forms, designed to be accessed exclusively by automobiles, reject pedestrians. Streets lack sidewalks and other pedestrian-friendly design features.

Within the urban framework of São Paulo, the poor residents face many of the same challenges as the Palestinians. It is noteworthy that the militarization efforts undertaken in São Paulo are not supported by the government, but have been primarily a private endeavor. More and more of the city is becoming privatized into enclaves that are only accessible by the residents. Everyday activities, shopping, and employment flourish within the enclaves, while the rest of the city collapses without adequate economic activity. While more people move into these fortified spaces, the poor are outcast into the shrinking public sphere out of fear and misunderstanding.

The establishment of bifurcated cities in places such as Brazil and Israel harms the quality of life for all residents. The fortification of cities creates a tangible physical stratification between two groups of people, placing everyone on one side of the wall or the other. This inevitably creates tension and intolerance between groups, often leading to a desire for more separation. Healthy, sustainable cities require the

coexistence of different people with different skills, which these stratified and segregated cities lack.

The direct effects of security barriers on the daily lives of urban residents may seem obvious, but the analysis often falls short of critiquing the use of circulation controls as a tool for marginalization and proposing remedies for this form of oppression. It will be difficult to dismantle the existing fabric of walls and fortification without radical changes to the social and political framework within which they operate. In the meantime, finding ways to increase mobility within the existing built environment and diminishing physical limitations to circulation will make it possible for marginalized people to access jobs and services and create conditions under which walls will be challenged. Thus, by increasing the mobility of marginalized groups, we can simultaneously improve their condition and empower them to work towards the long-term eradication of barriers.

Taylor Choe is a recent graduate from UCLA in Urban and Regional Planning with a concentration in transportation planning and design. Her undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley focused on architecture and legal studies, and her background includes experience in architecture, physical planning, and parking consulting. She is currently a consultant in green design.

Lead Photograph

“Traffic at the Qalandiya checkpoint in Jerusalem. In the background, Israel’s separation wall that divides Jerusalem from the West Bank.” Photo courtesy of Alaa Milbes.