

# From Boundary to Border

Mediation Interface at the Edge of Historic Centre in Genoa



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A B

### **Rereading Boundary**

Traditionally, city develops under the confines of boundary. As entity performances, city wall, moat, or natural barrier all serve to protect the city and defend against enemies. It is no exception in Genoa. Confronting with sea while backing the mountain, the historic centre of Genoa has the significance in the geographic location and its defensive role. From original centralized, physically demarcated urban structure, to nowadays divergent old town fabric, the border condition of historic centre has changed significantly. The defensive walls and fortress gradually opened up, allowing new city to merge into original urban fabric of historic centre. Only from dispersed city walls scattering in the city, we could trace earlier boundary.

The motivation of the research is from the proposal of new 'boundary' - 2001 Operational Plan for Historic Centre<sup>1</sup>, which is a conceptual boundary aiming for urban regeneration of the old town. The Operational Plan aims to retrieve the social and economic vitality of the historic centre. It is neither simply an overlap of one original boundary, nor the collective of old urban fabric of historic centre, creating ambiguities in-between the old town and new city. Under new urban situation, protected historic centre accumulate conflicts with outer city on the fringe area over time, which is represented as a complex and active edge condition.

In order to be aware of possible transformation brought by the new 'boundary', first we specify and discuss the boundary itself as the subject. As buffer zones connecting inner and outer city, those edge conditions inevitably contains conflicts among heterogeneous objects and fields. From urban to architectural scale, there also exists similar 'boundary' where conflicts happen. The city is no longer a entity. It consists of multiple heterogeneous fields, where dispersed edges negotiate and create new context.

### **Boundary - Border - Interface**

In 2017, Raphael Hefti's work was exhibited as one art piece of the series 'Sensory Spaces' in Boijmans Muse-

um, Rotterdam. By experimenting with the boundary of materials involved casting process, he overturns the traditional industrial casting process. Molten zinc was poured on the surface of black sand sculpture and, once the pre-liquified metal was exposed and cooled and a general form had formed, it was reconstructed - maintaining stability on the surface and fluidity inside [Fig. A]. In the freezing moment, the distortion and extrusion at the edge of those silver metals, create the boundary.

Differed from Raphael Hefti, artist Claire Harvey introduces another edge condition in her work Infinite Small Landscapes. She uses translucent papers to capture clips of character and scene. And through juxtaposing several pictures with removable scotch tapes, landscapes are produced. At the edge of frame, the overlapped semitransparent materials make the interior and exterior ambiguous. Overlapping constructs a border where different scenes share one territory. [Fig. B]

Above cases show that edges have two basic forms, related to Richard Sennett's contention that, 'the boundary is an edge where things end; while the border is an edge where groups interact' [Richard Sennett, 2007]<sup>2</sup>. If we look into the fringe condition of historic centre in Genoa, great shift from the notion of 'boundary' to 'border' has taken place. Ancient 'boundary' as defensive city walls and natural land-water interface has transformed into a porous 'border' due to the functional mediation on the fringe. Set waterfront as the example, docks, quays and piers are usually the essential physical structures or by-products of ports. As the continuous extension of land, they are not only infrastructures that 'mark the water, but also incorporate the territory of the water by creating harbour spaces' [Lauren Jacobi, 2014]<sup>3</sup> shifting the waterfront from a natural boundary to a controlled border. [Fig. C]

But Sennett's notions of 'boundary' and 'border' are still easily understood as subordinate enclosure serving the city centre. While from the case of Genoa, we could see the shift from 'boundary' to 'border' is, in-



1100



1493



1600s

deed, the result of interaction and accumulation among interfaces with diverse programme or attributes. In order to bring the spatial property into the discussion of edge, 'interface' is better used as the subject term instead of the cognition of merely 'enclosure'.

For interface, physical entity is not necessary. It is defined better by the relationship of adjacencies. Like Rachel Whiteread's work *House* (1993), her sculpture cast the negative space in the enclosed area. Even the enclosure is invisible, we could still recognize the space that surrounds and defines an object. The interface is perceivable from the visualized interior space and its surroundings.

The adjacent relationship is in terms of fields and its in-between interfaces. Based that, Norihiko Dan proposed two orders. The first refers to the original order that exists in every field; while the latter implies orders at the edge. The second order refers to how interface negotiate in a complicated environment, which means how diverse fields coexist at the fringe - separation, assimilation or mediation [Norihiko Dan, 2011]<sup>4</sup>. Order 2 is often overlooked. But it is consistent with 'blind fields' discussed by Henri Lefebvre, which exist 'between fields, are regions of force and conflict' [Henri Lefebvre, 2003]<sup>5</sup>. Conflict and force stimulate alienation and heterologous hybridization, making the interface have the possibility of polysemous 'locus' beyond fields' property and locality. And 'locus' correspond to three results of order 2.

Among three consequences of coexist, mediating interface could achieve the harmony in heterogeneity. And it is also closer to the notion of 'border', in which 'porosity' and 'resistance' of border make fields and interfaces retain their characteristics<sup>6</sup>. Literally, assimilation and mediation usually take place in an evolutionary process. Yet compared with assimilating into a larger entirety or centre, mediation has the potential to evolve over time adapted to the interrelationship between fields, no longer in a particular form. Norihiko Dan gives an example of Prosperous Suzhou to explain the mediation culture. Different scenes, appearing to be irrelevant and centerless, coexist in one space while their interfaces are multiple<sup>7</sup>. This is also how the port area of Genoa operates in recent years. Nowadays the waterfront has become a multi-identity interface where museum, public square, maritime activities coexist. Different scenes shared the exchange surface provided on the border and could easily transform into new scenario according to reprogramming or trans-programming. It is the mediation of waterfront makes the historic centre of Genoa possible to realize transformation from industry to tourism dependence. So mediation is the ideal form for the development of interface.

Therefore, the edge condition is considered as the notion of border in this essay. Its spatial manifestation, Interface, is a centerless concept about mediation, mainly defined by adjacent relationships. Its functionality and physical environments are in-de-

terminated and have variability in temporal dimension.

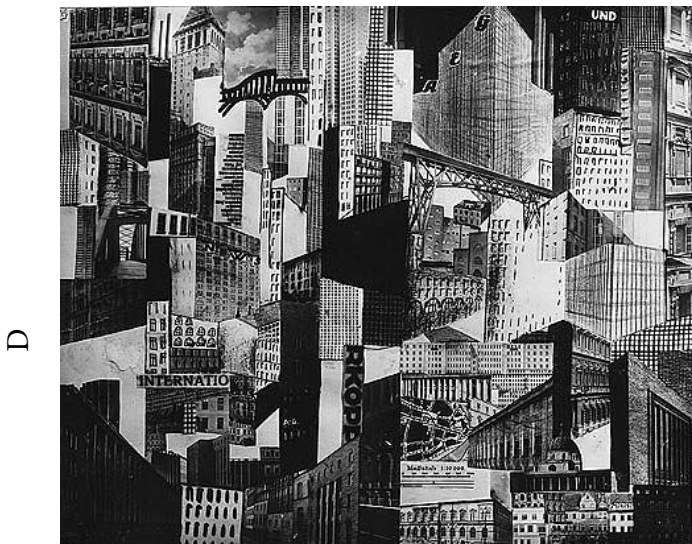
### Urban Mediation Culture

Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió has mentioned the style change of urban experience in the 20th century photography. From photomontage of architectural objects to urban narratives, urban experience observers gradually turn their focus on 'space as internal to the city yet external to its everyday use', defined as 'terrain vague' [Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, 1995]<sup>8</sup>. The shift indicates the urban experience perception is not the juxtaposition and accumulation of structuring fragments, instead, it should be signified by the manifestation of its physical surroundings. When we re-read Paul Citroen's photomontage - Metropolis [Fig. D], once the city is longer seen as an absolute unity, boundary doesn't exist. On the contrary, blanks among buildings and infrastructures intertwine indeterminate urban fabric. The contradiction of understanding city as the notion of a whole and architectural internal order is also contended by Mario Gandelsonas. In his essay, 'architecture is too slow or too fast'[ Mario Gandelsonas, 1998]<sup>9</sup>, so it could not be synchronous with current urban process. Therefore, vacancies appear between architecture and non-ar-

chitecture<sup>10</sup>.

No matter terrain vague in-between the internal and external order of the city, or the discrepancy among 'fast' and 'slow' building, is the order on the border discussed in former chapter. One interesting thing is that these terrain vague usually appear in the interface. It is because at the fringe of power, those spaces are easy left undetermined during the process of central power contention. Unlike Rubió's definition, terrain vague is not necessarily un-inhabited or un-productive, also, 'the mentally negative exterior in the physical interior of the city' [Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, 1995]<sup>11</sup>. There is a notion of 'marginal man'<sup>12</sup> in sociology. It is a condition that people circulates among different groups but not belong to any one. The mediation of Terrain Vague means taking surroundings into account as well. Interface act as terrain vague in the urban context. Their identities are undetermined, coexisting in the city, and mediates between different fields under particular circumstance. It is like image of urban narratives, as the interface of photograph and reality, steers in a particular direction, the imagination from physical to spiritual signals, constructing our urban experience and value judgments<sup>13</sup>.

From the perspective of urban fabric, there are a lot of vacant spaces, as above mentioned Terrain Vague, already exist at the fringe of historic centre in Genoa, generally used as public open space. With the appearance of new boundary - the Operational Plan - power contention or differentiation become more significant, which bring possibilities of new transformations. And such transformation has happened on the border since 2001 [Fig. E]. For instance, the reprogramming of Marina Park as new citizens' park; the transprogramming of Albergo dei Poveri from abandoned poor's hotel to university facility. Those transformations could shift rapidly so as to serve the both sides of city, which is more flexible than space







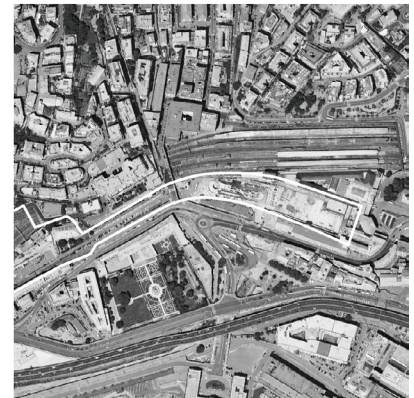
-2001 | Parking Lot-

-2001 | Abandoned Poor's Hotel  
& Farmland-

-2001 | Abandoned Railway-



-2017 | Sports Park-

-2017 | Faculty of Law and Political Sciences  
& Educational Facilities--2017 | Parking Lot  
& New Train Station Entrance-

within the historic centre. The emergence of 'new boundary' already brought a sensitive, thick border condition. Moreover, fragmented urban experience correspond to dispersed mediation means, which should be realized by interfaces on sensitive border. It is like the notion of 'a body without organs' [Gilles Deleuze, 2005]<sup>14</sup> proposed by Gilles Deleuze. The mediation of body should go beyond the control of organism. A mouth at a certain layer could become an anus on the other layer, or at a same layer with different force. Similarly, a section of border could be seen as the collection of several layers. It is the management of mediation determines objects peopling and passing across it and layer's manifestation.

### Centreless Spatial Awareness

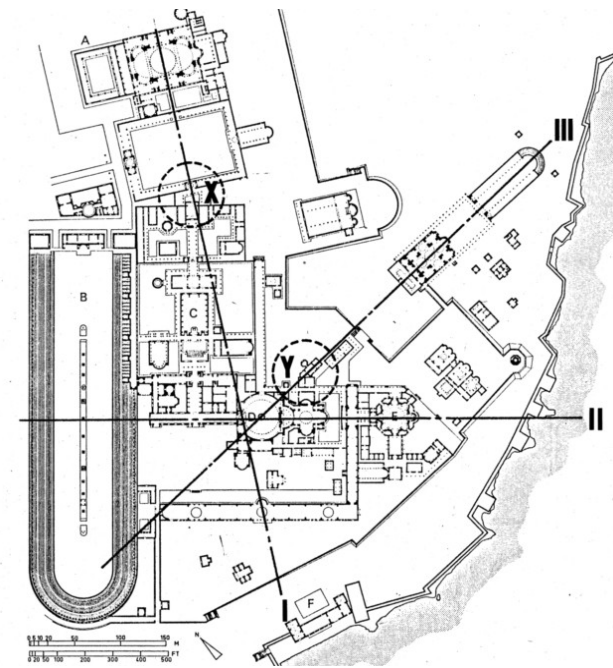
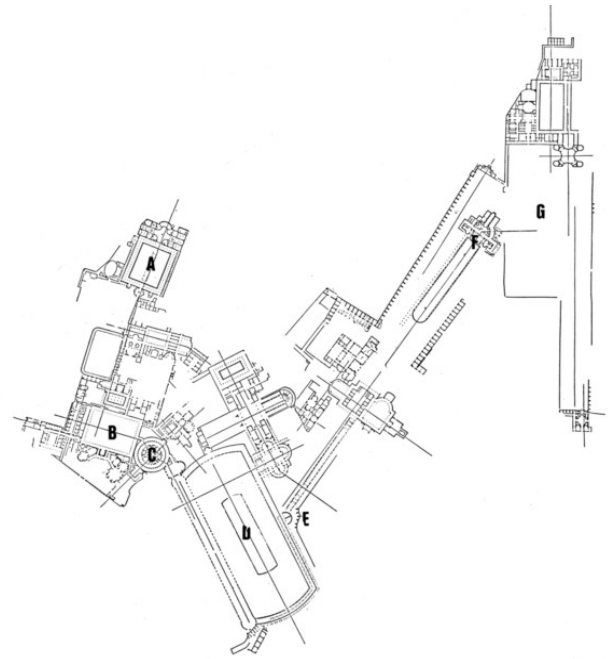
Although interfaces on the border in a state of flux could achieve mediation, as programmes accumulate, it is still possible for the border to evolve a new centre. In the history of Genoa, the original fortress

connecting city walls is the centre of the border. It is dominated, but at the same time it is fragile. While protecting the historic centre, once compromised, fortress will threaten the city reversely. That is why as an important part of original boundary, the Castelletto is excluded from the plan of historic centre. For the Genoese, it became the 'hated symbol of foreign domination'<sup>15</sup>. So, how to tell those terrain vague space will become a mediation rather than a new centre at the edge? The criterion is to distinguish term 'interface' and 'joint'.

The plan of Villa Adriana and Constantinopolis (Byzantium or Constantinople, later Istanbul in Turkey) are perhaps examples to illustrate the difference. Built in the 2nd century A.D., though Villa Adriana is not a city, but equipped with the function of the city. Individual buildings including Museion, library, Pharos, Dionysos theatre, are the collections of monuments from other parts of empire, in which new im-

F

age is reconstructed to express the original value and meaning. Those fragments were re-organised like collage and created misaligned angles at the junction. Emperor Hadrian use circular structures to reconcile heterogeneous elements, named 'mediation circle', making the plan infinitely extend [Fig. F]. Empire Constantine I, at the end of 3rd century, inspired by Villa Adriana, built palaces Constantinopolis which inherited values of the villa. Constantinopolis was the first Christian city [Fig. G]. The intersection on the plan is the religious, political, and administrative centre where all axes converged. The junction circle can be said to be supreme throughout the city. In Villa Adriana, circular structure is 'the space where two systems, subjects, organizations, etc. meet and interact'<sup>16</sup> whilst that in Constantinopolis is 'the space between the adjacent surfaces of two bodies joined and held together'<sup>17</sup>. Circles in Villa Adriana are the mediation interface among conflicts while that of Constantinopolis is the strengthened joint.



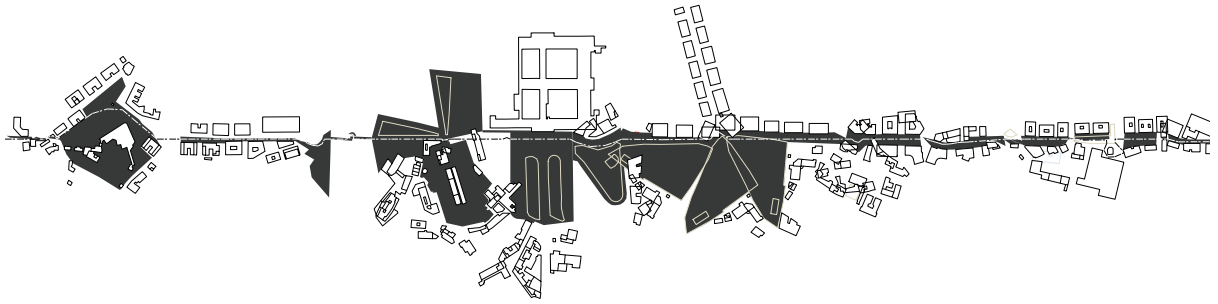
G

Like the spatial composition of Villa Adriana, there are many ambiguous spaces on the Genoa historic centre border, mediating heterogeneous spaces on both sides into a harmony, multi-identities configuration, i.e. green space on the mountain side is not only park but also the field expansion of private villa, or roof terrace. It belongs to all fields, but could also be no field. The outer city connects the inner one through sharing specific property of those open spaces, which gives particular meaning to the context reversely. As a conceptual boundary, the Operational Plan gives people freedom to perceive border condition through their physical urban experience. If we unfold this perceived boundary map [Fig. H], everything goes more clear at a glance. Overlap indicates its multiplicity and changeability as one interface corresponding to its context. This is also in line with the characteristic of Terrain Vague, represented as blank space in Paul Citroen's photomontage.

When we talk about the centreless mediation, we do not emphasize decentralization, instead, a state of flux. Take the open space on the border in Genoa as an example, the relationship between open space and buildings surrounding it is like curry, in which open space as interface is the curry soup and the function and space of surroundings is the foodstuff. The interface could be adapted to the 'external requirements' come from surrounding environments naturally. Thus, the spatial constellation is fluctuating.



H

out  
Border  
in

### Conscious Mediation

Defined by adjacent relationships while affected by surroundings, one might argue that, the ambiguity of interface is the compromise to the fields. But there is a kind of interface could be consciously reorganized, or redefined by the involvement of new gesture or behaviour and will not change the inwardness on both sides. In other words, reprogramming or transprogramming of interface is the way to create order on the border. We call it conscious mediation.

The Sliding, Folding, Swing door is an interesting mediation case [Fig. I]. The entrance was initially designed for a garage, and later turned into a temporary exhibition space. The space has the characteristics of being discernible from original gateway, with new built entrance revealing new identity and scale of visitors. Its functionality will not change with time, it is still an interface of interior and exterior, but partly redefined by adding new gesture of unfolding and swing. It is a mediation between past and present simultaneously where cars and individuals transit converge, instead of merely erasing built form for transprogramming.

Similar strategy in larger scale project, could show greater freedom and responsiveness to its environments. This could be found in Taiwan architect Shengyuan Huang's project, The Vascular Plan. Aiming at revitalizing the moat in Yilan, the project recreates the hydrological system that was gradually buried and forgotten in urban development. The redesign of riverbed opens demarcation structure in boundary-type, such as the fence, city dead ends etc.

Segmented design strategy with the scene shift, performing different types of programmatic intervention. To the Yilanese, it is many things. In the section of Guangfu Primary School, it is playground and pick-up area; Passing through Sanqing residential area, it is entry and social space; while next to the train station, it is temporary shelter for homeless youth. In the new spatial configuration, residents themselves and outsiders make up complex social structures.

If the spatial constellation set rules for mediation syntactically, then the conscious mediation is the semantic supplement for interface. Redefining how to use the interface, make the Heterotopia of spatial attributes possible. Do villa only act as private domain? On the border of Genoa historic centre, villa could be private garden, could be productive space



for crops, could be the faculty of university, or even temporary educational or exhibition space. That is how traditional spatial property respond to new urban environment and find balance between old and new program.

### Conclusion

The new boundary condition under new urban circumstance, will tremendously change Genoa's historic centre and also affect its adjacencies. The transformation from boundary to border I discussed, is an open relationship introducing more possibilities. Through the mediation among different relationships by interfaces, conflicts and heterogeneity can coexist and dialogue with citizens and city in a new form.

### Endnotes

- 1 In proposing The Operational Plan for historic center, the Municipality of Genoa stated that 'We need less degradation and more social 'mix': less shrouds closed, physical, social, and economic degradation, and more economic activities, security and cleanliness.', *Piano operativo per il centro storico* (Resource: [http://civis.comune.genova.it/piano\\_operativo](http://civis.comune.genova.it/piano_operativo)) in 2001.
- 2 Richard Sennett, *The Open City*, 2007, p.8.
- 3 Lauren Jacobi, *Territoriality, Fortifications and Port Cities in Early Modern*, MIT press, 2014, p.6.
- 4 Meizhen Zhu, *Interview of Japanese Architect Norihiko Dan*, Magazine Zhuangshi, 2011.
- 5 Henri Lefebvre, 'Blind Field', *The Urban Revolution*, Univ of Minnesota Press, 2003, p.29.
- 6 In discussion the notion of 'border', Richard Sennett use cell membrane as metaphor claiming it is both porous and resistant at the same time, *The Open City*, 2007, p.9.
- 7 The Properous Suzhou Norihiko Dan mentioned, is a anti-perspective drawing in 1759. In that drawing, commercial area, leisure activities, industrial activities intertwined with each other, with respectively scene property at the same time.
- 8 Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, *Terrain Vague*, 1995, p.119.
- 9 Mario Gandelsonas, 'The City as the Object of Architecture', *Assemblage*, No. 37, Dec., 1998, p.131.
- 10 From non-architecture to architecture, is a spontaneous reduction process. The part definitely under control is considered as architecture, while the other usually happens spontaneously.
- 11 Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, *Terrain Vague*, 1995,

p.120.

12 Marginal Man is 'The marginal man... is one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic cultures.... his mind is the crucible in which two different and refractory cultures may be said to melt and, either wholly or in part, fuse', Park, Robert Ezra. *Human migration and the marginal man*, American Journal of Sociology, 1928.

13 Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, *Terrain Vague*, 1995, p.119.

14 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Univ of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.153.

15 the Castelletto was original most important fortress in Genoa, later transformed into residential area. (Resource: <http://ceraunavoltagenova.blogspot.nl/2017/03/castelletto.html>)

16 Definition from Oxford Dictionary.

17 Idib.

### Bibliography

- 1 Richard Sennett, *The Open City*, 2007.
- 2 Lauren Jacobi, *Territoriality, Fortifications and Port Cities in Early Modern*, MIT press, 2014.
- 3 Meizhen Zhu, *Interview of Japanese Architect Norihiko Dan*, Magazine Zhuangshi, 2011.
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- 5 Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, *Terrain Vague*, 1995.
- 6 Mario Gandelsonas, 'The City as the Object of Architecture', *Assemblage*, No. 37, Dec., 1998.
- 7 Park, Robert Ezra. *Human migration and the marginal man*, American Journal of Sociology, 1928.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Univ of Minnesota Press, 1987.

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