

Reflection

THE CURTAINS: ON THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC STREET BOUNDARY

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Msc4 Methods and Analysis: Positions in Practice

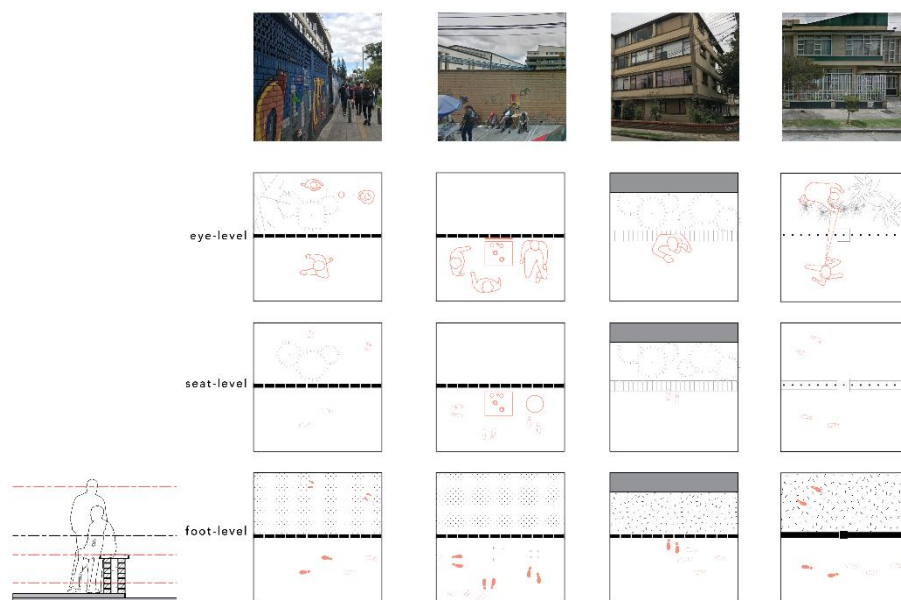
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1. Fascination

The exploration in Bogota under the conceptual framework of the studio, architecture as commons, opens an investigation on how architecture could propel an equivocal reading of the everyday environment. Strolling in Teusaquillo, the streets have displayed a wide variety of interactions between people and the street setting. The coexistence of multiple situations happening on the same street setting¹, some although do not conform with the planned use, contribute to a common construct of streetscape. Through the eyes of different actors, the street offers different meanings to them. This prompts me to dissect the streets through a theoretical instrument, the concept of 'affordance'², which refers to the capacity an environment offers for interaction with people.³

2. Research Question

Within the physical setting of a street, I am especially intrigued by the boundary walls, a prevalent element that shaped the street facade. These walls open a two-fold discovery that sharpens the importance of an equivocal environment. First, the prevailing definition of boundary walls as solid, blank, monotonous walls, has restricted the capacity of the original front-yard street planning⁴ to support public interactions. This always occurs at buildings which occupy long facades of street, especially schools. Schoolkids are walled safely throughout schooltime, regardless of how the world runs outside the wall. The second fold reveals the latent potentials at the boundary walls. In other encounters, there are people sitting and chatting on a short garden wall, vendors appropriating a wall as advertisement board (fig.1). Walls are no longer devices that defines territories, but structures where people, nature could project their own interpretation onto.



(fig. 1 Plans cut at multiple levels to reveal latent potentials of walls. Drawing by author)

¹ Stanford Anderson, "People in the Physical Environment: The Urban Ecology of Streets," in *On Streets*, ed. Anderson, Stanford (The MIT Press, 1978).

² James Jerome Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 127–37.

³ Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein, "A Rich Landscape of Affordances," *Ecological Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2014): 325–52.

⁴ Since the urbanization of Teusaquillo (1930s), there is a front-yard street planning. 'Front-yard' is a 3-meter setback from the official line, which has to be constructed by the private sector, but belongs to part of the public realm.

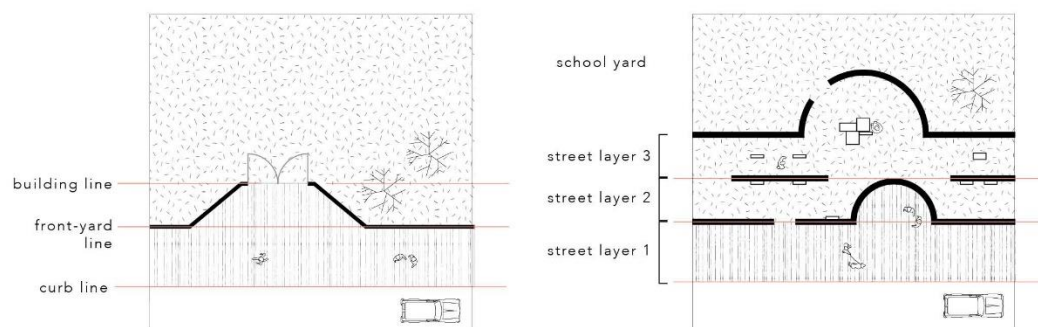
This graduation project probes into the latent potential of the boundary walls by intervening at the school boundary walls of two nearby schools along the junction of calle 45 and Parkway (fig.4). These walls occupied long street facades at a prominent junction of the district, where big roads, Parkway and the river meet. The project aims to find out how could these walls communicate an equivocal definition of street that embraces multiplicity. Furthermore, how do these walls contribute as part of public realm, to facilitate an interactive community between school and the neighbourhood.

3. Research Method and Approach

Based on empirical analysis of the existing boundary walls, the research approaches two parameters of a wall through architectural theory and etymology. I firstly approach through the parameter 'thickness', followed by an enlightening perspective on the 'performance' of a wall.

3.1 Thickness: The Multi-layering

A wall is not merely a line, but a 'skin of the architectural body'⁵. There exists a transitional zone that allow the exterior and interior to communicate, to establish a relationship. Through analysis on some precedents, it is evident that architects could create opportunities in the mass of walls to support more functions rather than only demarking a private territory. As an experiment referencing one of the precedents, Sonsbeek Pavilion (1966) by Aldo van Eyck⁶, the concerned boundary walls were multiplied to become a thickened boundary wall (fig.2). In this thickening exercise, the inter-layers between school and street allow more ambiguous activities to happen at the lost front-yard strip. However, the resulting expression still appears to be very solid and massive, which doesn't differ much from the current expression of boundary wall. After reflection, I noticed I have fallen into a superficial understanding of 'thickness', which is attained by only thickening the material mass. At this phase, I realised the 'thickness' I cherish is composed of the multi-layering, but it doesn't confine to the expression of massive solid walls.



(fig. 2 Overlying plan of Sonsbeek Pavilion onto the existing school boundary wall. Diagram by author)

⁵ Wolfgang Meisenheimer, "Of the Hollow Spaces in the Skin of the Architectural Body," *Daidalos: Berlin Architectural Journal* 13 (1984): 103–11.

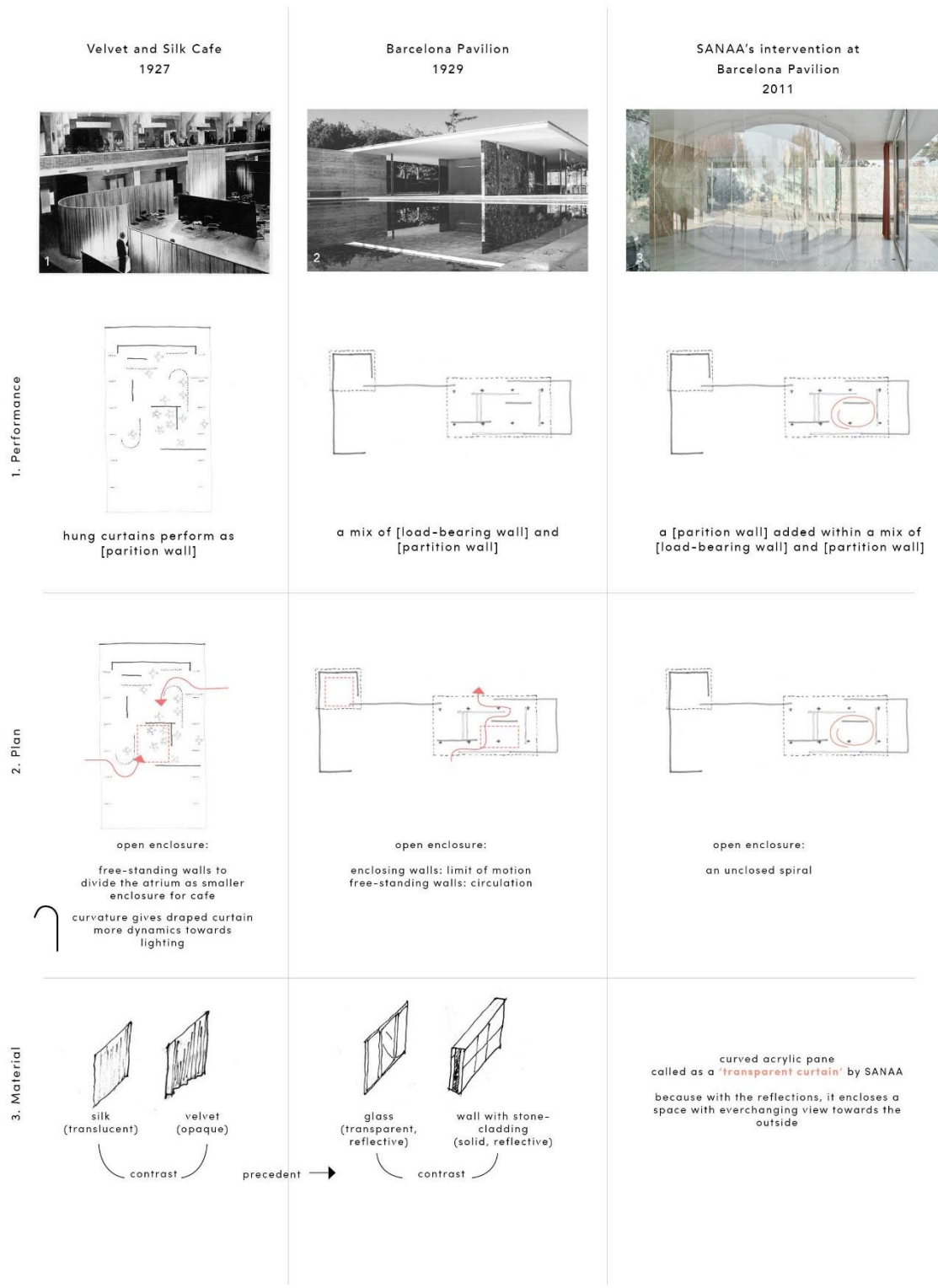
⁶ Aldo van Eyck and Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck: The Shape of Relativity* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 1998).

3.2 Performance of A Wall

By breaking away from the restrictive definition of 'thickness', it proceeds to challenging the solidness, opaqueness and unchangeability as the dominant definition of boundary walls in Teusaquillo. A literature review on Gottfried Semper's *Four Elements of Architecture* has opened an etymological reflection on the element 'wall'. In German language, the term 'wall' is further differentiated into *Mauer* and *Wand*. While *Mauer* refers to load-bearing walls, *Wand* refers to partition walls for enclosure. The word *Wand* and *Gewand* [dress] are derived from the same root, recalling the primitive woven carpet that were hung to separate space.⁷ Since performance of *Wand* focuses on the creation of enclosure rather than load-bearing capacity, it could therefore be as light as a veil. This investigation is further supported by conducting a comparative analysis on Mies van der Rohe's Velvet and Silk Café (1927), Barcelona Pavilion (1929) and SANAA's intervention at Barcelona Pavilion (2011) (fig.3).

In these projects, I recognise the walls performing as a composition of 'curtains', which I defined as 'partitions that give a constantly changing relationship between interior and exterior'. The changing reflections, opaque curtains and translucency of various partitions reshape how the interior communicates with the light, the breeze outside. Such changeable relationship further empowers the wall in response to the research question that pursues multiplicity. Reviewing on scenes happening at the school boundary walls, they are dynamic in the scale of time. Throughout a day, students go in and out of the wall while parents hang around it near the end of schooltime. Throughout the weekend, the school accommodates other activities for the district or adjacent church. These changing scenes call for a boundary that could cater these interactions in a more meaningful way. Therefore, the intervention envisions a 'curtain' at an urban scale, that could embrace the fluctuating variables on both sides of the partition.

⁷ Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, Reissue edition (Cambridge New York New Rochelle, Melbourne Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 104.



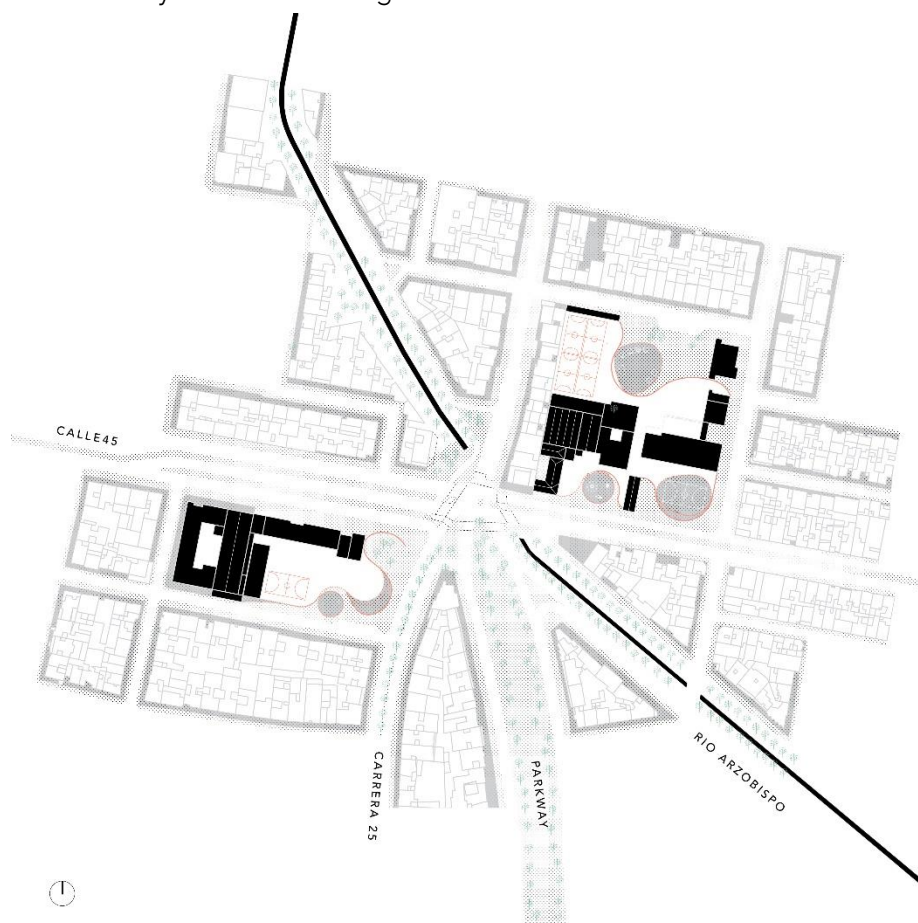
(fig. 3 Comparative analysis on Mies van der Rohe and Sanaa in the light of Semper's theory of *Wand*. Diagram by author, photo 1,2 from David Spaeth⁸, photo 3 from Foundation Mies van der Rohe⁹)

⁸ David Spaeth and Kenneth Frampton, *Mies Van Der Rohe*, 1st ed. edition (New York: Rizzoli, 1988).

⁹ "SANAA. Intervention in the Pavilion," Fundació Mies van der Rohe, <https://miesbcn.com/project/sanaa-intervention/>.

4. Relevance in Public Realm

The analysis in 'thickness' and 'performance' serves as a conceptual basis that allow me to redefine the school boundary walls as layers of curtain. This unlocks another performative potential of the boundary wall. This project proposes building an 'urban curtain', a series of multi-layered partition that fosters a changeable relationship between school and public street. The urban curtain no longer performs as a periphery wall that would only define school territory inwardly. It would also reshape the public street by breaking its correspondence to the official street line (fig.4). The curtain is pressed towards the schoolyard, forming an undulating street façade that is in-line with the existing school buildings. By operating the curtains, spaces enclosed within the layers could change its openness. For instance, during weekend, an enclosed activity court transforms into a shareable one that would fuse with the public street. The curtain becomes a morphing seam between school and the street, which contains spaces that are in flux. Happenings on site are constantly changing corresponding to how the curtains are operated. This changeability combats the static and monotonous boundary walls, and contributes to a dynamic private-public street boundary. It illustrates how private-sector i.e. the school authority could share part of its schoolyard to co-create a more interactive and elegant public realm. Walking along calle 45, people are no longer passing by a dull and blank brick wall. Instead, they encounter with a curtain that occasionally provides them with shade, that shows interesting perspectives of the school. To the students, the curtain unmarks the city and let them appreciate the street view through layers. It suspends a direct contact between school and city, and creates an ambiguous atmosphere that can evoke students' curiosity towards their neighbourhood.



(fig. 4 Masterplan of urban curtain at the two schools. Drawing by author)

5. Challenges

In contrast to a solid wall, an operable curtain undoubtedly poses certain social concerns, especially in security. Walling off the outside world to create a sanctuary for schoolkids might be the most straightforward way to resolve a boundary. However, it inhibits urban life around it. The long solid wall thus becomes a susceptible, unattended spot where crimes happen. I believe there could be another form of security that would be more productive to the neighbourhood. While the solid wall is built primarily for security, the urban curtain is built to activate urban life, which initiates security by public surveillance. As Jane Jacob argues, public surveillance for street safety is a voluntary act that depends on people's interest on the street.¹⁰ This interest grows from the vibrant scenes happening on street and the aesthetics of the street setting. This is where I, as an architect, could intervene to advocate this type of security. The urban curtain is therefore experimenting this type security that are co-operated, rather than a security device solely imposed by the school authority.

To achieve the changeability of boundary, the design relies on mechanisms that allow operation of these outdoor curtains on a daily basis. This urban curtain is comprised of layering three types of partition, the slidable wire-mesh, the hanging metal panel and the foldable polycarbonate panel. The overlaying of these three curtain types creates an ephemeral space that is filled with serenity. It performs as a seam of emptiness – neither the school nor the street, between the mixed palette of building languages on site. Instead of replicating the existing building languages, the curtain adds filters of transparency, ambiguity upon the view towards school, as well as towards the street. The tectonic focus of this project lies in striking a balance between the practicality and aesthetic expression of the ephemerality. While everything appears to be ephemeral and intangible, there underlies a structural system that make this expression possible in terms of construction. The layout of how each layer of curtain columns touch, involves a consideration of security and clarity of construction logic. Meanwhile, the anchoring and foundation of curtain plays a concealed role in altering the levelling and rhythm of adjacent paving.

6. Conclusion

Through investigating the wall itself, the discussion of thick walls evolves into the performance of wall, thus arrives at an innovative proposition. The solid, monotonous wall transcends into a multi-layer curtain at an urban scale. The development of this project reveals how we have lamentably took 'walls' the way they are for granted. In Bogota, wherever there are hostile environments that private sectors want to exclude, a wall is raised as the most effective solution. Since security is prioritized, the boundary's meaningfulness to the urban context is forgone. To go beyond improving the aesthetic value of the wall, this project further questions the performative values of a wall. The argument, the 'Wand-ness' of wall is then translated into an architectural project that evokes search for meaningfulness. A boundary that were only meant for separation, has now become a site of integration. By operating each layer of curtain, the various actors, the schoolkids, the parents, the public would explore their own interpretation of this ambiguous seam between school and street. Within this seam, is an inconspicuous yet sensitive testing ground that embodies how architect could craft capacity for an equivocal built environment.

¹⁰ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Reissue edition (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 29–54.

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