

# Architecture of the Known and Unknown: Defining and Inhabiting Peripheries

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**ABSTRACT:** The establishment of an edge, of limits, or a periphery, is fundamental to architecture. It is the foundation of the difference between the known and unknown, inside and outside, the zone of significant energy transfers, and the making of 'place.' The term 'placemaking' may be a cliché, but there is an essential truth in the concept that makes it worth re-evaluation and definition in the context of current discourse. With that in mind, this paper will investigate how architectural peripheries are established, how they operate to mediate inside from outside, the transfer of information, and how humans then fully establish their possession of a place in the world.

This paper investigates (1) how architectural peripheries are established and their intentions; (2) the context of the familiar: how the known prepares us for the unknown; (3) how edges may not simply be a recognition of differences, but the invention of difference; (4) how difference between inside (known) and outside (unknown) is more than a conclusive barrier, but a mediation of degrees of enclosure; (5) how human activities occasion familiarity or possession of a place; (6) the notion that recently we have experienced an inversion of the inside as the place of contentment and outside as the location of unease; and (7) preliminary conclusions, mainly, the case for openness and vulnerability as modeled by a range of edges and the possibility of architecture as a model for the productive entanglement of known and unknown.

Citing specific aspects of architecture and the natural world from diverse cultures in which the values of edges, information transfer, human interaction, and designed spaces are represented, this paper examines the nature of peripheries, the inhabitation of edges, the making of degrees of enclosure, and the particularizing layers of space that intervene between inside and outside that create "difference."

**KEYWORDS:** known, unknown, surprising and familiar, edges, periphery

## INTRODUCTION

Architecture has always insinuated itself into the unknown as it is invented and re-invented, and located, structure by structure, in unfamiliar or undeveloped terrain in order to establish someplace that is to become a "known." This "known" would be a place that is deemed safe and secure, capable of being "possessed," predictable, manageable, familiar, comfortable, and engaging. This is accomplished, initially, by the architectural act of establishing a physical periphery, an edge, a boundary, that distinguishes inside from outside. This is, of course directly related to the notion of establishing a "place," which Suzanne Langer referred to as the establishment of "ethnic domain." (Langer 1953, 100)

Architecturally and culturally, an edge signifies the making of a 'place', the domain that supports human inhabitation. (Langer 1953, 100) Inside this place is where relative certainties become available to us. But when we position ourselves at the edge and consider the outside, conceptually and psychically, we encounter the unknown: that which our designed boundaries are meant to manage for us. We generally assume, and with some justification, that these edges separate us cleanly from something. But, they do more than that. They mediate the territory between known and unknown in ways that connect us to that which is unfamiliar and enhance our understanding of both.

## 1.0 METHODOLOGY

As an investigation into architectural edges, the zone between inside and outside, known and unknown, this study cannot be all-inclusive. Instead, it will suffice to be selective and suggestive, focused on the examination of seven specific points worth consideration.

With that in mind, this paper investigates (1) how architectural peripheries are established and the range of their intentions; (2) the context of the familiar: how the known prepares us for the unknown; (3) how the establishment of edges may not simply be a recognition of differences, but, in fact, the deliberate invention of difference; (4) how the difference between inside (known) and outside (unknown) is often more than a conclusive barrier, but may be a mediation of degrees of enclosure across which information is exchanged, (5) how human activities occasion the familiarity or possession of a place; (6) a consideration of the notion that in recent times we have experienced something of an inversion of the inside as the place of contentment and outside as the location of unease; and (7) some preliminary conclusions, mainly, the case for openness and vulnerability as modeled by a range of edges; and the possibility of architecture as a model for the productive entanglement of known and unknown.

## 2.0 EDGES

### 2.1 The establishment and constitution of architectural edges

The establishment of an edge is intrinsic to architecture. The understanding of limits or a periphery is essential to the making of architecture. The periphery is the foundation of the distinction between inside and outside, the creation of here and there. It is the zone of significant energy transfers. It is the difference between the predictable and unpredictable, the known and unknown. And, as we will see, the constructed edge has the power to reconstrue, accommodate, and invert known and unknown.

The wall is the basic unit of security. It establishes privacy as it reinforces the integrity of the individual. It mitigates perceived threats from the outside, for example, in the form of weather, which is, additionally, a threat to the material integrity of our edges, our walls and roofs. An edge, when constituted of natural materials, weathers and develops; it often looks better over time, but requires frequent attention lest its tendency to yield to weather leads to deterioration, a capitulation to the unknown.

The construction of our walls represents, at the same time, what we think of as our mastery of a natural world, which has been tamed to serve our purposes. The edge organizes, enforces patterns, and orders us. The irony here is that we make walls and roofs and then we need to find safe ways to make holes in them again. We need light, air, views, and accessibility as much as we need deliberate peripheries. For these reasons, our edges are nearly always permeable. And this permeability requires attention. Our doors, windows, curtains, shutters need to be in the right place, they mustn't admit water, and they usually need to permit us to see out, often without others seeing in. This (apparent) one-way permeability appears to confirm our successful management of the unknown. We curate intrusions.

Edges do double duty: they are ambiguous. Robert Venturi wrote: "Architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces of use and space," which clearly points to the fact that interior and exterior forces press on edges and shape them. (Venturi 1966, 88-89) Suzanne Langer also wrote about this meeting of forces:

...architecture as *envisagement of an ethnic domain*, has some interesting consequences...architecture proceeds from the inside to the outside of a building, so that the façade is never a thing separately conceived, but like the skin or carapace of a living creature is the outer limit of a vital system, its protection against the world and at the same time its point of contact and interaction with the world. (Langer 1953, 100)

In their role as accommodations, edges acquire special qualities. Beyond the establishment of a boundary, they offer special kinesthetic and psychic experiences of the simultaneous known and unknown. There are special qualities of feeling associated with the experience of being at an edge. Although the banality of most construction shrinks from the potential for authentic expression of any heightened experience, there is a natural thrill, a gasp, associated with being at or near an edge, particularly when that edge is articulated by a dramatic change of level, geography, or accentuated view. Consider natural edges such as the seashore, the canyon, and the pier; and designed edges such as the wall, the tower, the cliff, the window seat or bay window, the balcony, the rooftop. Even those of us who are immune to the dizziness of acrophobia have experienced the gripping, near-fearful physical reaction to seeing the ground from a height of more than a single story, the view down into a canyon, the sight of the sea or lake from a pier or dock, as we cannot help but imagine what one false step might bring.



**Figure 1:** Living at the edge of the known and unknown: A window seat at the Louhisaari Manor House, Askainen, Finland. Source: (Author 1987)

The bay window, which, by definition, is located at an edge, positions us to float magically over and into a landscape, subject to an imaginable fall, but comforted, tucked into a human-scaled seat. (Figure 1) We are projected into the delectable and contradictory consciousness of mastery over a great view while confounding imminent catastrophe; situated in comfort, yet engrossed in the peril of the unknown. We seek the emotional charge of things that threaten—if we also feel safe.

### 2.2 The encounter between the known and the unknown

The familiar is the context for the unfamiliar. What the cited edge-challenging examples share is this exchange: the known prepares us for the unknown by making the latter bearable; and in a reciprocal way, the unfamiliar makes the familiar more profound and astonishing. The known is comprehended in a new way. The familiar plays host to the unanticipated, heightening the experience of both.

More than once, the expectation of a secure edge has evolved into more than that. The Roman emperor Hadrian (76 - 138 AD) built his eponymous wall across the north of England to defend the empire's hold on the furthest western reach of the Roman Empire from "the dreaded Caledonians—those supposedly "poison-breathing

savages," who, for the most part, casually tended their sheep. (Volner 2019, 51) Instead of strictly enforcing security, the wall attracted people to it. Romans enlisted its foreign troops exclusively to watch over its borders, which, in yet another way, brought together people from around the empire to trade and to partake of the benefits of Roman technology and civilization. Hadrian's Wall and its guardians drew small communities, whose inhabitants traded with and worked for the Romans. Intended to repel, the wall became an attractor, (Volner 2019) bringing together the known and unknown, the surprising and the familiar.

Opportunities to take advantage of the ambiguous periphery have expanded in the modern era with the reassignment of structural responsibilities from bearing wall to column grid. As evidence, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown endorsed experiences that they referred to as "both, and." (Or as we say in the axiom expressive of our time, "two things can be true at once.") The both/and condition is a version of Venturi's earlier formulation, "ordinary and extra-ordinary." Venturi said that he and Scott-Brown: "...learn from the ordinary as well as from the extraordinary." (Belogolovsky 2018) These observations call upon the observer to look closely at things that may, at first, seem familiar, but are not necessarily so.

Similarly, conditions that at first appear to preclude another condition, instead may turn out to be complementary. Lisa Heschong explored this experience in her book, *Thermal Delight in Architecture*, in which her most striking observation is how humans take so much pleasure in thermal and daylighted situations that are rich in conflicting sensations: being outside on a cold day, with snow on the ground, but in clear sky and blazing sun; or of jumping into the cold water after sitting in the marginally-tolerable inferno of a sauna. (Heschong 1979) These both/and experiences also may occur at five designed edge conditions: transparent edges, articulated edges, inhabited edges, layered edges, and embedded spaces.

In the case of *transparent edges*, where there appears to be no edge, the transparency and translucency present ambiguous peripheries where the known and unknown overlap each other. At the Glass Pavilion, in Toledo, Ohio, USA, the edge at first appears to have been eliminated. (Figure 2) The two layers of glass that define the perimeter of the building (and most interior spaces) serve primarily to regulate the thermal environment, and minimally to define inside and outside. But it becomes apparent that the many layers of glass, including those at the building perimeter, establish layers of reflections and re-reflections that preclude unencumbered visibility. The glass records the known and unknown and repeats it.



**Figure 2:** Transparent edges: Glass Pavilion, Toledo, Ohio; SANAA, 2006. Source: (Author 2023)

*Articulated edges* respond circumstantially to specific interior and exterior forces: those of the site, program, light and no light, heat and cold. (Figure 3)

*Inhabited edges* enable us to live within spaces carved out of a wall, establishing a zone of simultaneous habitability and security at the periphery. Thickened but still limited in depth, this massive wall condition capitalizes on the fact that people enjoy tucking themselves into spaces that are closely scaled to their bodies, enhancing the feeling of security, while stationed immediately adjacent to the unknown. (Figure 4)



**Figure 3:** Articulated edges: UCSB Faculty Club, Santa Barbara, California; MLTW 1968. Source: (Author 2012)

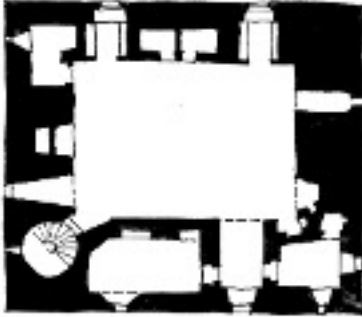
The small, carefully scaled space, especially when adjacent to a much larger, monumentally scaled space or, poised above and immediately next to that which is unknown or threatening, resolves the discomfort, and affords us a special appreciation of the overscaled volume: "...the intimate character of these interstitial spaces..." enables us to

...confront, at the same time, the measurable dimension of the objects around [us] and the immeasurable dimension of the surrounding world outside. (Cacciatore 2016, 107)

In the architecture of Louis Kahn and followers such as MLTW,

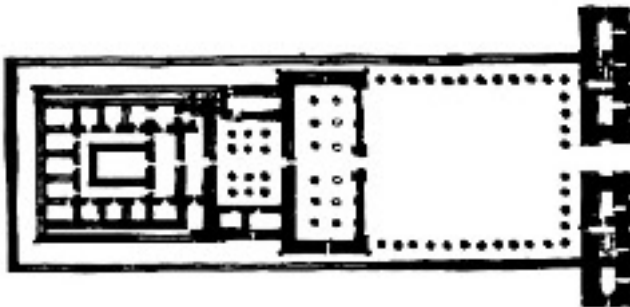
the wall, as the building's boundary, ceased to be a passive consequence of the enclosing function or the main place for the mere transmission of purely constructive or representational aspects and became the most dense and meaningful instance in the spatial experience. (Cacciatore 2016, 35)

The wall became a "living place." (Cacciatore 2016)

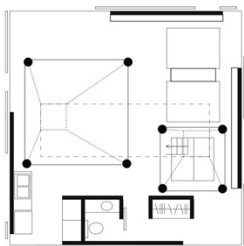


**Figure 4:** Inhabitable edges: Comlongan Castle, Clarencefield, Scotland, plan; late 15th or early 16th century. Source: (Author 2024)

The *layered edge* is a configuration of parallel walls and spaces that protect an inner realm in progressively interiorized zones. (Figure 5) These are solid and void compositions in which the innermost space is commonly a place of sacred or political significance, or of intense privacy, the importance of which is intensified by the evident difficulty of access through multiple edges. The repeated layers of wall and space are hierarchical, with each layer mutually supportive, aware of the other in an alternating rhythm of the known and unknown. A variant of the layered edge might be called the *embedded space*, and defined as a nestling of things inside things. (Figure 6)



**Figure 5:** Layered edges: Temple of Horus, Edfu, Egypt; Imhotep, 237 – 57 BCE. Source: (Author 2024)



**Figure 6:** Embedded spaces: Moore House, Orinda, California, plan; Charles W. Moore, 1962. Source: (Author 2021)

As we go to such efforts to delineate inside and outside, it becomes increasingly evident that differentiation is vitally important to humans.

### 3.0 DIFFERENTIATION FOR ITS OWN SAKE

#### 3.1 The invention of difference

What lies behind the assertion of individual space and the reinforcement of group affiliation? In architecture, we have come to call this act, "placemaking," and it may be understood as the predilection of humans to project their understanding of the world as received through individual body awareness. This may be associated with the critical individual monitoring of orientation: up, down, front, back, side-to-side, and so forth, and to project it into the

environment in order to organize and verify our safety within it. (Plowright 2020) (Moore, Bloomer 1977) Our senses of security and orientation are linked to our bodies. Our architecture makes sense if it enhances and secures these mental and physical awarenesses. The body is the center of the world and we envelop ourselves with degrees of enclosure to protect ourselves. We do this to reinforce, to gather closely what we know and can manage in the face of the unknown.

According to Ian Volner, "The [Biblical] wall of Jericho wasn't created to articulate a difference. It invented one." (Urist 2019) That is, the periphery itself transformed familiarity, creating a new distinction, inventing a known and unknown. The need to differentiate, to convey individuation, seems altogether human and as we seem to shape our architecture as embodiments of the self, it would seem entirely reasonable that we would use it to accentuate our cultural identities. (Plowright 2020)

Volner said that

Walls inevitably engender more difference than existed prior. That begins with Jericho and extends straight through. (Urist 2019)

He writes that the wall at Biblical Jericho,

the earliest of its kind, may not have appeared for any particular reason; instead, it created its own rationale — *the idea itself of difference* — that there could be not only an 'us,' but a 'them.' (Volner 2019, 18)

He cites archeological evidence indicating that the 10,000-year-old settlement we believe to have been "Jericho" was active during a period of peace, not war, and that the citizens' lives and activities were similar to that of groups living outside the walls. This suggests that the wall was an expression of identity, an advertisement of self, and not meant to repel anyone so much as to "invite them in." (Volner 2019, 17) Volner concludes that walls are nearly a "precondition" of culture (Volner 2019, 15). There is a term for this condition. The term, "schizmogogenesis," was invented by anthropologist Gregory Bateson to describe the tendency of individuals to define themselves in contrast to each other; he further contended that this process operates at a cultural level. David Graeber and David Wengrow, discussing pronounced agricultural and internal hierarchical distinctions between Native American cultures in the northwest of what is now the U.S., also propose that this occurs between societies, stating that "People come to define themselves against their neighbours." (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 57)

Inherent in human nature is a need to differentiate. This is a constituent element of our need to order our worlds, to identify patterns that assist us in verifying internal security and comfort, while supporting the simultaneous need to engage with the incoming flow of the unknown. We cannot possibly relate to others and to the unknown without being able to distinguish between ourselves and others, and between inside and outside. Architecture plays an essential role in this process.

### 3.2 The mediation of enclosure from inside to outside: achieving degrees of enclosure

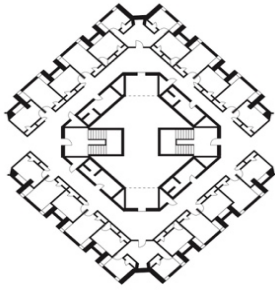
Although, we have historically constructed and described our designed edges in terms that evoke images of the impenetrable barrier, absolute opacity would make them hopelessly impractical. The history of edges provides evidence of their two-way operation, sometimes explicitly intended and at other times their complementary operation having evolved to serve multiple needs.

According to Donlyn Lyndon,

Space, a splendid construct of the human mind, is one of several useful perceptual devices for creating the illusion of place. Sometimes it is appropriate to form it in a way that suggests indefinite extension, but seldom...The architect particularizes...Our work has for some time been concerned with establishing several degrees of 'inside'... (Lyndon 1965, 31)

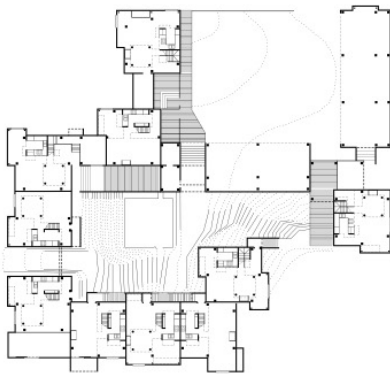
This designed interchange, between inside and outside, was articulated for Lyndon and his colleagues including Charles Moore, by Louis Kahn who proposed a "servant / served" diagram. Kahn suggested, and delineated in his work, an experiential hierarchy of place, of zones for human habitation and zones that exist primarily to support habitation. As we have seen, Kahn keenly observed the differentiating and habitable functions of the thickened wall. His plan sketches of Comlongan Castle in Scotland reveal his fascination with an inhabited edge (servant space), which recognized inside and outside, defined a greater served space, and overlapped known and unknown simultaneously at the periphery.

Kahn's edges became fully-realized, inhabitable edges. (Figure 7) They were a real and effective mediation of inside to outside. Public and private, servant and served, relationships are established as defined zones, but are also interdependent as they support each other mutually in the layered, recursive, solid-void pattern of periphery and space. Important semi-public space is created and often located at the center to make a newly-fashioned, invented outside with some of the characteristics of the courtyard. The mediation of known and unknown is alternated, interdependent, and operates at a range of scales. Kahn's diagrammatic hierarchy soon becomes ambiguous. At Erdman Hall at Bryn Mawr College or at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, which spaces are servant and which are served?



**Figure 7:** Inhabitable edges: Erdman Hall, Bryn Mawr College, partial plan, Pennsylvania; Louis Kahn, 1965. Source: (Author 2025)

The California architecture firm known as MLTW—Lyndon and Moore with William Turnbull, primarily—all students of Kahn, explored the possibilities and ambiguities of the servant/served, inside and outside diagram at various scales. (Figure 8) They created spaces embedded inside spaces, solids in voids and voids in solids, at large and small scales, to evoke a feeling of belonging in a particular place while having access to (knowledge of) larger, adjacent spaces. This layering of spaces, carefully scaled, arouses an even stronger sense, that which we might call, "possession" of a space. The mediation of spaces, their alternation and interdependence, placing us at the point of differentiation, lends us a sense of possession.



**Figure 8:** Embedded spaces: Condominium One, plan, Sea Ranch, California; MLTW, 1965. Source: (Author 2022)

## 4.0 THE POSSESSION OF PLACE

### 4.1 Making the known, known

How we come to possess a place. The exchange of ideas across peripheries, as we have seen, is not only essential; to some degree it is the objective of edges. Edges are not simple, impregnable boundaries, but lively engagements, and at their best, they are designed to be such. It is not enough to keep the bad weather or undesirable people out of our predictably safe inside places. We want to see the rain and snow, those clouds, the sleet, the hot sun, the approaching eccentrics and solicitors—from the inside. We need the view and the verification of what is going on outside. Confidence about the inside can only be verified when we can confirm outside conditions. A certain amount of disorder is acceptable—even desired—if we feel that we belong in a place. Making inside spaces whose size closely approximates the size of our bodies, and controlled views, freedom of motion, and spatial options contribute as well. Belonging in or possession of a place establishes a firm base from which to confront the unknown.

### 4.2 Scale

We value closely scaled spaces, the proximity to enclosure, the close tactility of bounding surfaces, to achieve the sense that we are suitably enfolded and secure. In spaces that are too large, the sense of protection dissipates and we are loose in the unknown again. (Moore, Allen, Lyndon 1974)



**Figure 9:** Framed views: Villa Le Lac, Corseaux, Switzerland; Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, 1924. Source: (Author 2023)

### 4.3 Framed views

Framed views, (Figure 9) composed perspectives of the outside world, serve to domesticate that world, miniaturizing it and making it an ordered portion of the predictable inside. The admission of daylight and its changes across the day orient us in time. The simple act of framing a view, lends a new importance to it. These transfers of knowledge across edges help us to locate ourselves with confidence.

### 4.4 Movement

Movement through a space, the ability to move freely, to explore, the act of measuring a space step-by-step, the tactility of walking, to participate, enable us to feel as if we possess a place. "Movement allows us to access other places, people, things." (Plowright 2020, 136) Through movement, we realize options and take possession.

### 4.5 Options

The simultaneity of presence implicit in these ideas, the notion that we might be free enough to manage and adjust our location in space, the "bothness" in which we experience known and unknown as we wish, engage us. This is central to a confident and measured confrontation with the unknown. In this condition we have options, the agency to act freely, the perception of control: possession.

## 5.0 AN INVERSION OF THE KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

### 5.1 Inside out

Amidst our entanglement with the unknown, we now exist in a condition in which the known and the unknown have, in a sense, been reversed. (Moore 1986) Modern architecture and cities have become deserts of placelessness. (Bloomer and Moore 1977) The security and tactility of appropriately scaled enclosure are ignored or misunderstood and have resulted in a sense of the unfamiliar and unknown. We now often find more comfort and familiarity with the outside, the natural world, than in the presumably safe interiors we have made. We have become dissatisfied with and alienated from the interior and urban spaces we have configured for ourselves. We admire and seek out nature, the complexity of its rich, overlapping orders, and its varieties of enclosure and openness. Our reversed relationship with things outside our established perimeters is an expression of our values. Our understanding of how we think about the limits of our knowledge of the world is represented and may be understood by how we manage, configure, and accommodate our physical boundaries, those that protect us from the unpredictable, while also, vitally, connecting us to it.

## CONCLUSION

We are capable of configuring the surprising and familiar. We can design ambiguity and agility such that we inhabit the inside and outside at the same time, designing spaces that incorporate the outside world. For example, we welcome the development of the atrium, incorporated into contemporary architecture for daylight and thermal control, but also for views and for light from more than one side. Atriums, court, piazzas, bay windows and such devices create "degrees of enclosure," a permeable, flexible, variable periphery, open to improvisation and meaningful experiences of peripheries.

Rich edges, evident yet permeable, make us receptive to new things. Ideas are exchanged, the existing challenged by the novel, and the interchanges celebrated. This is a reckoning of known and unknown in which we can discern what we can make from what we already know—or think we know. We need these edges as they prepare us and put us in mind of ideas we have not yet confronted; they dare us to reflect and engage.

Architecture, in this way, might be a model for a rich entanglement with the unknown in that it is a physical, visible, tactile, auditory revelation of how we encounter the unfamiliar. This attitude is vulnerable yet wise, secure and receptive as it gathers the unknown and folds it into what we already know, even as those things may seem muddled. It is in the midst of this complex, messy entanglement that we comprehend the unknown.

In an allusion to what might be considered the known and unknown, Adam Gopnik recently wrote,

There aren't any sharp margins between the irrational and the rational, between what we guess at and what we are sure of, between the wisdom we revere and the fakery we mistrust. We never know exactly who is who, or which is which, just as we will never know exactly where we are. The ambiguities...remain a lesson in whom to call wise, and why to call them so. All knowledge is labile, all identity liminal. (Gopnik 2023)

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