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**Dealing with Urban Borders**

**The Example of the Border between the “Fakulteta” Segregated Ethnic Roma Settlement  
and the Rest of Sofia**

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## **# Abstract**

Borders are pluridimensional codes in urban space. They provide structure to the city and at the same time identity. The most interesting thing is that they are elements with the dual function of connecting and separating. Unfortunately borders are usually used in a negative connotation, being linked to sociological terms like marginalisation and exclusion and being equally used as a barrier or a fence. Usually we think of borders in terms of defining other space, but not as a space category itself. This paper gives a definition of borders in their production and their function and shows the main problem with this urban space – the paradox of its dual function of separation and connection. Using the example of three aspects of the border between the ethnically segregated settlement of Fakulteta and the rest of Sofia, the author shows the complexity of dealing with borders from the perspective of urban planning. As a conclusion the paper summarises the main challenges for urban planning and urban development in dealing with existing borders and points out the necessity of producing clear borders within the city and including this urban code in future planning practices.

## **# Definition of Borders**

Before thinking about borders it is important to think about the concept of exclusion, marginalisation and integration. The terms exclusion and marginalisation view society as a core society with a clear centre and a clear margin or border. In the process of marginalisation, different social groups are put at/in the margins and have difficult access to the so-called centre of the society. In comparison to it, exclusion means that groups are on the other side of the margin and do not have any access to the core. These terms usually have a negative connotation. The core always contains the main political power and gives rise to the presumption that all social groups need to be in that centre and the marginalized or excluded groups are disadvantaged by not being inside.

Inclusion, the movement from the “bad” margin to the “good” centre, forms the concept of integration in our society. Häußerman and Siebel (Häußerman et al., 2004: 192-234) distinguish two models of integration: homogeneity and diversity. The model of

homogeneity contains the idea of the so-called “melting pot”, where through the mixing of two cultures a new culture occurs. Both groups are expected to change their own culture, structure and identity. Another consequence of the homogeneity model is the understanding of integration as the assimilation, where the culture of the dominant society stays the same and the other groups are expected to adapt. This model of integration (assimilation) is usually the main model used in politics and society because of our understanding of the core as something positive and the margin as something negative.

The model of difference is based on the coexistence of different groups without the need to adapt to each other. Georg Simmel talks also about the “urban indifference”, where the different individuals living in the city respect each other’s differences (Häußermann et al., 2004: 234). The theory of “multiculturalism” as the most common one occurs based on that integration model. It expects individuals from different groups to exist together in equality on the same territory. In practice, this model actually never works because there is always a group with greater political power defining the centre of the society. Another concept of difference appeared in 1925, created by the urban sociologist Robert Park. He called it the “mosaic of small worlds” existing in the city (Oswald, 2007: 75). The city here is a mosaic of areas with different cultural and ethnic identities, which are separated in the urban space. This concept contains the idea of free segregation, which is seen as inevitable and harmless for the integration process. This concept gives empowerment to all urban groups, without putting a stress on the centre or on one specific group. At the same time it implies a risk to the development of a parallel urban society. Addressing the opportunity for cultural and social diversity in the city and facing the risk of this model there is a need to give special attention to working with the borders, separating and connecting the mosaic-parts of the city, as the main part of the positive segregation and the mosaic coexistence.

Borders are produced by human beings to secure space. As a cultural product they are modifiable and shapeable processes and not a general static plan or material (fence). I would like to differentiate the process of border production in the act of its demarcation and the process of using it.

Wherever two elements have an interest in the same object, their coexistence depends on the demarcation within this object. The most important act of the demarcation is the

convention between both elements. De Certeau argues in “The Practice of Everyday Life” (de Certeau, 1988: 226-236) that this is the act of narration. This act of authorisation, to de Certeau the main goal of narration, is the main process of demarcation and determines the meaning and use of borders. Borders do not belong to any of the elements. Consequently this process of narration should be performed together by both elements interested in the production of the border.

In their function, borders include a dialectical character – the paradox of connection and separation at the same time. Their existence means both functions exist in one, simultaneously and equally. If a border loses one of the functions, it is no longer a border – it becomes a barrier or dissipates. The theoretical and political problem with borders comes from this paradox of the equality of the two functions separation and connection – to whom does this space belong? A border does not belong to any of the elements and at the same time to both of them. (de Certeau, 1988: 233; Davy, 2004: 73) On this point urban research and planning practice face the main problem in dealing with borders – the absence of semantics.

In German the word *Grenze* comes from *Grenzenmark* – a marginal space with poor or no settlement that divides two areas from each other. This transitional space is later reduced to a line on a map or a built fence. (Ante, 1995: 432) Morphologically, borders take the function of orientation within the city and are reference lines for the areas they are dividing and connecting. Kevin Lynch argues in “The Image of the City” (Lynch, 2007: 78-80) that borders are one of the crucial elements of the city for its whole functioning and perception. Although the function of borders is a very important one for the perception of the city I want to point out that borders can not be reduced to morphological lines in the urban landscape. Further, they have their own character shaped by spatial and political meaning, as well as by social, economic or cultural change, that constantly shapes the physical space again. In 1908 Simmel defined the social border as a social act between an individual and the collective that produces reciprocal relationship, clarity and security (Simmel, 1999: 698-702).

In the following part of the paper I will give an example of a border as a multidimensional code. It is based on field research in the capital of Bulgaria – Sofia – in 2008 and 2012 (Kokalanova, 2009).

## # The Example of Fakulteta

Roma are the largest ethnic minority group in Europe. Nonetheless, there is very little research about the Roma. They are a very heterogeneous group and about 80% of the Roma in Europe live in the countries that became members of the EU in 2004 and 2007. In Bulgaria, the Roma have been settled since the 14<sup>th</sup> century and usually do not have a nomadic way of life (Marushiakova, Popov, 1997).

Sofia is the capital city of Bulgaria and although the population of the whole country is shrinking, the capital is constantly growing. It has about 1.5 million inhabitants. More than 10% of the inhabitants are Roma. They mostly (99%) live in ethnically segregated settlements, situated in formally undefined spaces in the city. Three of the 19 existing Roma settlements – *Filipovtsi* (7,500), *Hristo Botev* (10,000) and Fakulteta (60,000) – are officially recognised by the formal planning structures (Kokalanova, 2009: 55).

Fakulteta is the largest Roma settlement in Sofia and after Shutka in Skopje the second largest in Europe. It developed in the 1930s and is developing and changing its structure further. It is not a spontaneous settlement or a slum; it is a functioning urban structure with its own organisation and way of development (Kokalanova, 2009: 55). Therefore it is not a margin or an area excluded from the core city, but there are borders between Fakulteta and the rest of Sofia. Below, I will show three aspects of this border – the material one, the planning system one and the mental one.

### *Material border between two different elements of the city*

The most obvious border is the material one. The built structure of the settlement is completely different from the structure of the surrounding areas. Between Fakulteta and the rest of the built city there is a clear physical border area with almost no settlement structure. This border area has its own character and structure and can be divided into different parts.

The entrance area functions as a link between both elements, as a split and meeting point. The so-called Vietnamese settlement is a settlement built in 1984 by the state as a temporary housing area for Vietnamese migrant workers. Since 1992 it has been a social housing estate given only to poor Roma families. In the perception of the ethnic Bulgarians it

belongs to Fakulteta, while Fakulteta inhabitants exclude the settlement from their own structure.

Physically there is a real border between the ethnically segregated settlement and the rest of the city that has through the years developed its own logic and space order. This space has the function of connecting and separating, but has never been a target of urban planning in its function as a border. One of the main reasons for the disregarding of this area is the border between the planning system and the adoption of space in Fakulteta.

### *The planning system and the built settlement (the adoption of space)*

Looking at the history of Fakulteta's settlement production it becomes obvious that on the level of the planning process there is no clear border between the planned city and the informal Roma settlement. By informal I mean a structure that is not illegal and not legal, but completely authorised by the state, part of the legal structure (Roy, AlSayyad, 2004). Ninety-five per cent of the houses in Fakulteta are built without planning permission; about 70% of the inhabitants do not own the land where their house is. A process of formalisation by the state has already begun by mapping Fakulteta on almost every plan of the city (excluding of course tourist maps), by giving the streets names and the inhabitants addresses. Compared with the reality, none of the addresses or the street names is based on the real situation, but at least there is a possibility for the dwellers to get registration and identity cards.

In 1958, the municipality gave a group of dwellers pipes to build a water supply and sewerage system on their own. Since then there has been constant rebuilding of the sewerage system adjusted to the growing housing structure. The system is nowadays overloaded and water supply does not meet demand. Wastewater frequently floods the neighbourhood settlements. The streets are not broad enough for ambulances, fire engines, garbage trucks or buses. As the whole city of Sofia has a problem with waste removal there are about 18 informal waste landfills in Fakulteta. Garbage is usually burnt by the inhabitants, causing air pollution across the whole city. After 1990 with the privatisation of public goods supply, Fakulteta was connected to the main city power supply, but there is a special mental barrier that was built a few years ago. Only in the Roma settlements have power supply

companies located their measurement devices at a height of seven metres above the streets, so as to prevent inhabitants from stealing power.

To this day there is no clear strategy for the development of Fakulteta. The current Master Plan defines an urgent need for planning action to “revitalise the Roma settlements on the territory of Sofia” (OGP Sofproect, 2003: 305), but it does not give a direction for any strategy – upgrading, legalising or relocating. There has been a municipal programme since 2006 which envisages building new houses and demolishing the existing ones, but it is not based on any research into the existing structures and does not deal with the real situation. The implementation and realisation of the programme has not started so far.

The example makes it obvious that planning is producing through its implementation not a border but a barrier between the plan and the real space. On the other hand there are some efforts in reducing the barrier in making it fully disappear and making the settlement a part of the dominant city structure and a part of a plan. On this level producing a border in terms of convention between both elements would mean for the city administration recognising the built structure of Fakulteta and implementing a real participation strategy for the demarcation. The main precondition for dealing with urban borders and producing them as conventions is the full recognition of the other.

### Image of the other

Finally, I would like to point out as a requirement for dealing with borders the mental border between Roma and non-Roma in our societies, one that produces urban policies itself. In both –the Bulgarian and Romani languages there is a language barrier in describing the other. The word *цигани*, *Zigeuner* comes from the Greek “atsingani” and means “people, that are difficult to contact”, while the word *gypsy*, *gitane* comes from the belief that the Roma come from Egypt. (Marushiakova, Popov, 2007: 126) From a language perspective it is clear that as a group we (the non-Roma) do not understand and are not interested in contacting the Roma. At the same time, the word *Roma* comes from *Rom*, which means a human in the Romani language, but there is a word for a non-Roma – *Gadze* – that directly translated would mean *non-human*. Language has put on both sides (Roma and non-Roma) separating barriers that are difficult to cross. That is why to me the visual narration is a very important part of the research. But building the image of the other is not an easy task as there has

been a stigmatisation and discrimination on both sides for years. It is very important to be aware of the ways of looking at the other when producing images. There are three main ways that we are used to looking at the Roma in – an exotic, a sentimental and a derogatory way (Garland Thomson, 2009). These are the images that produce politics and space in the whole society. None of them has anything to do with the reality.

### **# Challenges for Dealing with Borders in the City**

The example of Fakulteta makes it obvious that borders are spaces existing in the urban system, but which are not a target of urban planning. These places and spaces are not produced on purpose, but they exist informally, they connect and separate and define through their existence the other elements of the city. To develop a city as a space of integration and a body where everyone has their own space to develop it is necessary for planning to acknowledge the border as an area of its own, a transitional space between two other areas with the dual function of separation and connection and to address future planning activities to these urban spaces as well.

Borders are multidimensional spatial codes – not only a material phenomenon, but economic, social, political and cultural bodies as well. In the city, they are a complex phenomenon manifested in networks, interaction and separation practices in different areas and in different layers of the urban space. To deal with the phenomenon of the border and resolve the dilemma of to whom it actually belongs, de Certeau (1988: 235) suggests understanding borders as a transitional space – a third narrative space as a symbol of interaction and encountering. Planning for a transitional space that doesn't have its own semantics is the main challenge in understanding and dealing with borders. Understanding borders as a transitional space on the one hand allows planning not to stick to the product of a plan or built environment, but to concentrate on the process. On the other hand planning the border hides a risk of producing new areas with new borders or barriers within the urban body when giving a border area its own semantic. This is a paradox that planners should face in order to create a city for everyone. Research and policies should furthermore implement not only the position of the dominant power but also accept marginalised groups as decision



makers. Finally, integration happens on the borders and this code needs to be fully included in future research as well as in future planning practices.

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