

Study on the association between user preferences and the physical attributes of the boundary walls of public spaces

G. Saisanath*, and G. Subbaiyan, Tiruchirappalli

Abstract

Physical features, surface uses, physical access, and visual access are integral to the composition of boundary walls. They not only convey caution and access restrictions but also facilitate public address and visual interactions. Contrary to the prevailing negative connotations of boundary walls as undesirable socio-spatial impediments, their affective qualities as part of interdictory spaces are meticulously designed by professionals, shaping people's aspirations for exclusive spatial and material conditions. In this regard, this study explores the significance of the physical attributes of boundary walls and their user preferences in the public spaces of Tiruchirappalli city, Tamil Nadu, India. Physical attributes of the boundary walls are measured based on their contribution to the publicness of public spaces and the user preferences are measured through a questionnaire survey. The results revealed that user preferences differ significantly with respect to the varying physical attributes of boundary walls. By exploring the association between the likes and dislikes of the users and the varying physical attributes of boundary walls, this study contributes to the understanding of boundary walls from people's perspective.

Keywords: Boundary walls, Preferences, Publicness

Introduction

The relevance of boundary walls as simple yet efficient devices for delimiting space has shifted across many scales throughout history, reflecting changes in the notions of security and spatial organization (Brighenti, 2010; Marcuse, 1997). As part of hard controls, boundary walls are advocated as undesirable socio-spatial impediments, even though they are products that are meticulously designed to perform intended functions (Varna, 2014; Yacobi et al., 2016). Due to their locational characteristic boundary walls constitute an inevitable part of the urban public space experience (Madanipour, 2003; Franzen, 2001). In their deep association with ownership, control, access, and management

of public spaces (Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011; Varna, 2014), boundary walls can not only convey caution and access restrictions, but also facilitate public address and inside-outside interactions, particularly through their physical features, surface uses, physical access, and visual access. Given the contradiction between the negative connotations of the boundary walls in the narratives of the loss of publicness (Flusty, 2001; Varna, 2014; Franzen, 2001) and the significance of the affective qualities of the physical boundaries of contemporary public spaces, necessitates to develop an understanding of what people prefer regarding the physical attributes of the boundary walls

(Krafl & Adey, 2008; Lees, 2001; Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011). In this regard, this paper is an attempt to comprehend the positive contribution of boundary walls towards the publicness of public spaces.

Literature review

Boundary walls enable the production of difference and their presence is independent of the level of technological advancements (Tuan, 1979). Inherent with the capacity to represent social and psychological binaries of power-security and isolation-fear (Marcuse, 1997), the significance of boundary walls is spread across geographical, legal, social, cultural, economic, political, and architectural dimensions of the society. The transition from fortified city walls to independent-internal walls has formulated new socio-spatial relations that were reinforced by the disciplinary effects of the institutionalization of urban spaces, marking the decentralization of walling and its consolidation in the form of property boundaries (Brighenti, 2010; Fontana-Giusti, 2011; Marcuse, 1997).

Physical attributes of boundary walls and user preferences

The notion of the loss of publicness has provoked scholars from different disciplines to propose, verify, compare, and quantify the publicness of public spaces (Langstraat & Van Melik, 2013; Mantey, 2017; Mehta, 2014; Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011; Varna, 2014). Even though publicness models are based on objective measurement, Nemeth and Schmidt (2011) state that subjective measures provide insight into the actual practices and perceptions of the users of public spaces. However, studies that have explored the actual user perception and preferences regarding the physical attributes

of the boundary walls are very limited. As part of publicness models boundary walls have been considered only in terms of their presence, physical access restrictions, and visual accessibility. Assessing the quality of physical boundaries of public spaces through ownership, control, accessibility, uses and users, and civility dimensions reveals the contribution of boundary walls towards the publicness of public spaces (Saisanath & Subbaiyan, 2019). Spread across these dimensions are the four defining attributes of boundary walls – physical features (the technologies of marking boundaries such as barbwire, camouflaged motion sensors), surface uses (the visibility regimes of the wall surfaces such as posters, fliers, public art), physical access conditions (biometric access, security screening) and visual access conditions (Brighenti, 2009; Flusty, 2001; Hoek, 2016; Motoyama & Hanyu, 2014), which are designed to shape the edge conditions of public spaces by affecting user's perception and preference.

Preference is comprehension and processing of information, towards a choice that is conducive and engaging (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Degree of human influence is central to the preferences of natural areas, whereas the liking and disliking of the elements of built environment are driven by the identification of spatial functions, possible actions, and the “affective qualities of an object, its uses and users” (Brown & Gifford, 2001; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Nasar, 1989, p. 237). Boundary walls as a micro element are embedded with informational properties that are not only dictated by the function of the space, but also by the ability of the user to physically/visually participate in the activities of the enclosed space (Kaplan & Kaplan,

1989; Nasar, 1981; Purcell et al., 1994). In this regard, to create enabling environments for positive user experience, understanding “layperson’s design values and preferences” is a prerequisite for professionals and officials (Brown & Gifford, 2001, p. 94; Nasar, 1989; Gjerde, 2011).

Walling and the role of professionals

Examining the affective qualities of contemporary public spaces in India, Sadoway and Gopakumar (2017) identify boundaries (physical boundaries), intersections (road junctions), cul-de-sacs (gated and guarded lanes) and peopling (informality and public art) as four analytical concepts. As part of interdictory spaces, boundary walls demand a constant vigil, making them as not only “symbols of security” but also “symbols of uncertainty in the landscapes of fear” (Nayar, 2015, pp. 122). Even though the relevance of conventional public life persists in India, people’s aspirations are being directed by the expanding “conspicuous consumer culture”, wherein the articulated presence of the boundary walls of gated communities and shopping malls are shaping the collective urban imaginaries (Mathur, 2010, p. 212; Pike, 2009; Saisanath, 2018; Scheidegger, 2013; Srivatsava, 2015). These affective qualities of design, according to Kraftl and Adey (2008) are the social thrusts that can be articulated to produce both generic affects (comfort, pleasantness) and desired affects (exclusivity, prestige), stimulating intended feelings and actions.

The physical presence of boundary walls is preceded by their functional relevance, particularly in the architectural visualizations that are designed by the “image producers” (architects, designers, information scientists), to promote socially prestigious lifestyle

with pre-determined ideas for urban spaces (Scheidegger, 2013, p. 63; Yacobi et al., 2016). According to Maruani and Amit-Cohen (2013, p. 93) advertisements not only persuade people but also inform “socially desirable values and preferences”. The latent role of boundary walls in manufacturing the aspirational spaces is intricately devised in conjunction with the specific places, generic places and fictitious places, represented at different geographical scales and intended to convey different degrees of information (Almatarneh & Mansour, 2013; Fleming & Roth, 1991). Given the saturation of urban landscape with professional impositions, the necessity to look beyond the symbolic and into the actual user preferences for the physical attributes of boundary walls is imperative.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Tiruchirappalli city of Tamil Nadu state, which is known for its historic sites, industrial complexes and educational institutions. Being a part of the nation-wide smart city programme, city administration had initiated the redevelopment of public spaces as vibrant, safe, and secured spaces with emphasis on fitness, leisure, and knowledge (ISCM, 2015; Times of India, 2019). Twenty-five parks that have been recently completed were assessed for their quality of physical boundaries, in which eleven parks that are representative of the physical features, surface uses, physical access, and visual access of boundary walls are selected for this study (Figure 1). In assessing the contribution of boundary walls towards publicness of public spaces, the physical attributes of boundary walls are measured in terms of a five-point rating system. An objective measurement, in which lowest

Table 1: Measuring the three physical attributes of the boundaries of public spaces; Source: Authors

Physical features	Surface uses	Visual access
(1) Wall/fence having barbwire, glass pieces, etc.	(1) Surfaces not to be used	(1) Complete visual inaccessibility
(2) Wall only	(2) Unauthorized uses	(2) Less than 25 percent visual access
(3) Spikes only	(3) Unauthorized and authorized uses	(3) More than 50 percent visual access
(4) Chain-link fence only	(4) Owners only using the surfaces	(4) More than 75 percent visual access
(5) Posts/bollards/block-hedge	(5) Public art on surfaces	(5) Complete visual accessibility

Table 2: Physical attributes groups in the selected parks of Tiruchirappalli city, India.

	Physical features*	Surface uses**	Visual access**
Park 01	Wall having deterring features - (1)	Unauthorized and authorized surface uses - (3)	<25% visual access - (2)
Park 02	Wall having deterring features - (1)	Owners only using the surfaces - (4)	>50% visual access - (3)
Park 03	Wall only - (2)	Surfaces not to be used - (1)	<25% visual access - (2)
Park 04	Wall only- (2)	Public art on surfaces - (5)	>50% visual access - (3)
Park 05	Wall having deterring features - (1)	Public art on surfaces - (5)	>75% visual access - (4)
Park 06	Spikes only - (3)	Owners only using the surfaces - (4)	>50% visual access - (3)
Park 07	Wall only - (2)	Surfaces not to be used - (1)	Complete visual inaccessibility (1)
Park 08	Wall having deterring features - (1)	Surfaces not to be used - (1)	<25% visual access - (2)
Park 09	Wall having deterring features (1)	Surfaces not to be used - (1)	>75% visual access - (4)
Park 10	Spikes only - (3)	Public art on surfaces - (5)	>75% visual access - (4)
Park 11	Wall having deterring features - (1)	Public art on surfaces - (5)	>50% visual access - (3)

*Three groups under physical features of the boundary walls

**Four groups under surfaces uses, four groups under visual accessibility of the boundary walls

rating of one represents lower contribution and highest rating of five, represents higher contribution (Table 1). Since physical access condition of the parks was predominantly uniform, it was not considered for further analysis.

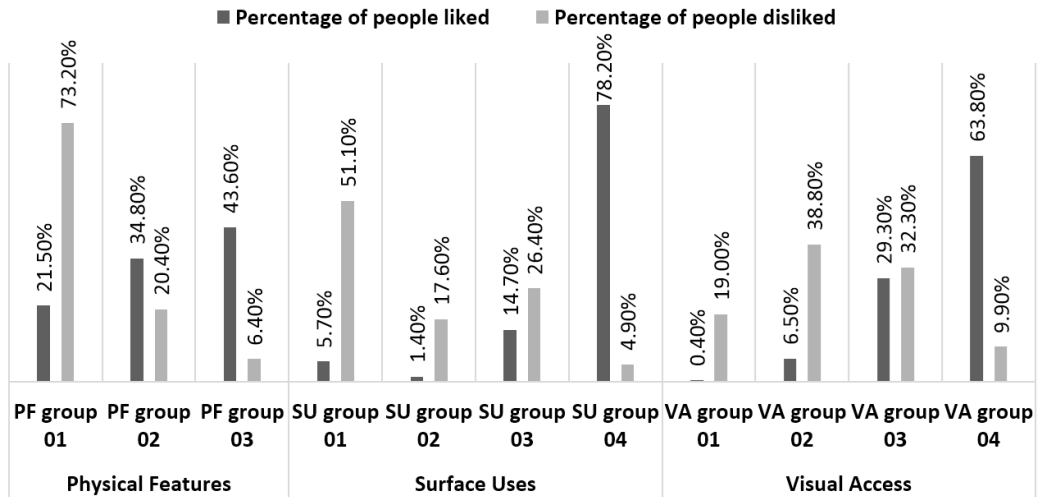
To understand the user preferences for the physical attributes of boundary walls, an in-situ questionnaire survey was considered appropriate. Even though photograph-based evaluations are predominant in preference studies, they are representations that are limited to the visual domain only (Scott & Canter, 1997). Apart from the ease of collecting large number of responses and

avoiding perceptive bias, understanding the preferences of actual users has been an important consideration of this study (Gillham, 2000; Scott & Canter, 1997). Being a subjective measure, the questionnaire consisted of respondent details followed by the preference statements for the physical features, surface uses, physical access, and visual access of boundary walls, such as: to what extent do you like the physical attributes of this boundary wall (01=dislike greatly; 05=like greatly). Obtaining permission from the department-level research committee, questionnaire survey in the parks was conducted on mornings and evenings, and on weekdays and weekends, between October

Table 3: Differences in the user preferences for the physical attributes of the boundary walls of public spaces

One-way ANOVA and Post-hoc test comparisons (Games-Howell)		
User preferences for the physical feature (PF) of boundary walls	F (2, 492) = 108.062, $p = 0.000$	PF group 01 ($n = 269$) – Wall with deterring features
	PF group 01 ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.731$)	PF group 02 ($n = 127$) – Wall only
	PF group 02 ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.004$)	PF group 03 ($n = 99$) – Spikes only
	PF group 03 ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.905$)	
User preferences for the surface uses (SU) of boundary walls	F (3, 491) = 239.717, $p = 0.000$	SU group 01 ($n = 157$) – Surfaces not to be used
	SU group 01 ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 0.554$)	SU group 02 ($n = 53$) – Unauthorized and authorized uses
	SU group 02 ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 0.735$)	SU group 03 ($n = 106$) – Owners only using surfaces
	SU group 03 ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.947$)	SU group 04 ($n = 179$) – Public art on surfaces
	SU group 04 ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.612$)	
User preferences for the visual accessibility (VA) of boundary walls	F (3, 491) = 111.698, $p = 0.000$	VA group 01 ($n = 51$) – Complete visual inaccessibility
	VA group 01 ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.280$)	VA group 02 ($n = 117$) – Less than 25 percent visual access
	VA group 02 ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.675$)	VA group 03 ($n = 153$) – More than 50 percent visual access
	VA group 03 ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.997$)	VA group 04 ($n = 174$) – More than 75 percent visually access
	VA group 04 ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.786$)	

Table 4: Likes and dislikes of public space users towards physical attributes groups



PF group 01 - Wall having deterring features; PF group 02 - Wall only; PF group 03 - Spikes only;
 SU group 01 - Surfaces not to be used; SU group 02 - Unauthorized and authorized uses;
 SU group 03 - Owners only using surfaces; SU group 04 - Public art on surfaces;
 VA group 01 - Complete visual inaccessibility; VA group 02 - Less than 25 percent visual access;
 VA group 03 - More than 50 percent visual access; VA group 04 - More than 75 percent visual access

2019 and December 2019. After explaining the intent of the study and getting the consent of the prospective participant, survey was commenced and carried out in English and local language, depending on respondent's convenience. Out of 495 participants, 42.2 percent are in the age group between 30 and 44, 59.8 percent are regular users of the space, 66.9 percent have university level education, 46.3 percent are working as employees and 66.9 percent are married. Further, using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 17, inferential statistical analysis was performed to the data consisting of the ratings for physical attributes of boundary walls and questionnaire survey responses. The analysis aims at examining the differences between the user preferences for the varying physical features, surface uses, and visual accessibility of boundary walls, followed by examining the user's likes and dislikes towards the same. The selected parks had three groups under physical features, four groups under surface uses, and four groups under visual accessibility of the boundary walls (Table 2).

Results and discussion

User preferences for the physical features of boundary walls

Post-hoc comparisons under one-way ANOVA analysis indicated statistically significant differences between the mean scores of user preferences for the three groups under physical features of boundary walls (Table 03). This can be due to the distinct forms of conveying intensities of control by the three physical features groups, which range from aiming to instill a deep sense of intimidation to milder forms of discouragement through blank walls and spikes. Cross-tabulation revealed a significant

association between user preferences and the physical features groups ($\chi^2 (2) = 145.560, p < 0.05$), wherein boundary walls that are less obtrusive with milder forms of discouragement were most liked (Table 04). These results correspond with the assertions in publicness literature that perimeter security is configured according to the intended levels of insulation and inside-outside interactions (Flusty, 2001; Madanipour, 2003, Varna, 2014). Boundary walls that aim to intimidate people lower the publicness of public spaces, but parks being functionally open spaces tend to evoke feelings of fear, leading to user's preference for the physical features that are less obtrusive with mild deterring features.

User preferences for the surface uses of boundary walls

Post-hoc comparisons under one-way ANOVA analysis indicated no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of user preferences for the 'surfaces not to be used' group and 'unauthorized and authorized uses' group (Table 3). Generating feelings of susceptibility is common to blank surfaces and unauthorized and authorized surface uses, the former evokes fear of unexpected encounters, whereas the latter evokes feelings of discomfort of being in uninviting/unmanaged (spatial) conditions. Surface uses of boundary walls are informational properties that range from asserting control on to the public side via blank surfaces to enabling public address via posters and public art. Cross-tabulation revealed a significant association between user preferences and the surface uses groups ($\chi^2 (3) = 295.657, p < 0.05$), wherein surfaces used for public purposes were most liked (Table 04), which can be due to their engaging and aesthetically appealing quality. This result is consistent

with the public address facet of boundary walls, performing mediated interaction and stimulating feelings of safety and comfort through its “surfaceality” (Brighenti, 2009, p. 65; Hoek, 2016; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Motoyama & Hanyu, 2014).

User preferences for the visual accessibility of boundary walls

Post-hoc comparisons under one-way ANOVA analysis indicated statistically significant differences between the mean scores of user preferences for the four groups under visual access of boundary walls (Table 3). This can be due to the varying levels of inviting and mediating capacities of visual accessibility that can enable inside-outside interactions and inside-outside insulations. Cross-tabulation revealed a significant association between user preferences and the visual access groups ($\chi^2(3) = 198.035$, $p < 0.05$), wherein boundary walls that have higher visual accessibility were most liked (Table 4), which can be due to the seamless visual continuity with the insides of the parks. These results corroborate with the past studies that users categorize by functional difference, scope for exploration and prefer spaces that are visually engaging, yet sensitive to the desirable spatial qualities that are appropriate, safe and comfortable (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Mehta, 2014; Nasar et al., 2005; Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011; Varna, 2014).

The deterring features of the boundary walls are vehemently opposed in publicness literature but are hardly assessed from the people’s perspective. The user preferences for the physical features of boundary walls are indicative of the acceptance of the milder forms of discouragement, which can be due to the deep notion associated with boundary walls

as property markers, symbols of security and control. This corroborates with the fact that boundary walls are an indispensable part of human society that are “present everywhere, taken for granted, accepted as desirable in one form or another, by everyone” (Marcuse, 1997, p. 104). Their ubiquitous presence is natural to human settlements, particularly as part of the “processes of a naturalness specific to relations between men” (Foucault, 2007, p. 349). The liking and disliking of the physical attributes of boundary walls as significant categories of perimeter solidification is not only based on the insulating and deterring capacities but also on the content and scope for exploration (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). In this regard, the results of this study affirm that surfaces of the free-standing boundary walls provide “spatial depth”, which used for public art purposes can accentuate the publicness of public spaces (Motoyama & Hanyu, 2014; Neumeyer, 2010, p. 258).

The significance of the visual access of boundary walls is consistent with the prevailing advocacy for complete visual accessibility, but it should be noted that boundary walls are more than their visual access conditions, since certain spatial functions demand visual insulations and the ubiquitous presence of surveillance technologies has overshadowed the social benefits of visually interactive edges. In the making of secured and exclusive spaces boundary walls are not standalone elements responsible in “creating managed environments”, instead their affective qualities are cumulative of the material and technological entanglements (Kraftl and Adey, 2008; Madanipour, 2003, p. 56; Nayar, 2015; Pike, 2009). The loss of publicness due to the proliferation of the managed environments has brought forward the role

of interdictory spaces, revealing the ambient yet instrumental form of power, whereas considering public preferences for the varying capacities of the physical attributes of boundary walls can reveal the facilitative form of power also (Allen, 2003).

Conclusion

Presence of boundary walls as part of urban experience is divided between the connotations of undesirability and exclusivity. The results of this study indicate that liking for boundary walls without deterring features, surface uses for public art purposes, and higher visual access conditions are dependent on their enabling capacities, specifically which stimulate by visual interaction or content. These findings are not only relevant to the scholars but also to officials and professionals because the variations in physical attributes provide scope to balance the intended levels of visual and physical engagement, thus contributing positively to the publicness of public spaces. Even though boundary walls are deeply context sensitive, minimizing the installation of deterring features, emphasizing visual connections and prioritizing boundary wall surfaces as sites for public art are the recommendations to realise the positive contribution of the physical boundaries of public spaces in Tiruchirappalli city. Since affective qualities of design are more important than their symbolic qualities (Kraftl & Adey, 2008), the design of built environment should be derived from the two-way processes of professionals informed by public opinion and public opinion enriched by novel ideas and approaches (Nasar et al., 2005). This study has two limitations – predominance of male participants in the questionnaire survey and not considering the preferences of officials and professionals.

Future research could focus on multiple space types and cross-cultural comparisons.

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G. Saisanath*, Research scholar,

G. Subbaiyan, Professor
Department of Architecture, National
Institute of Technology,
Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu - 620015

*Author for correspondence
E-mail: sanath.urp@gmail.com



Park 01
(Fort station park)



Park 02
(Anna nagar park)



Park 03
(Anbu nagar park)



Park 04
(Ramasamy park)



Park 05
(Mahalakshmi nagar park)



Park 06
(Royal road side park)

Fig. 1: Images of the selected eleven public spaces (parks); Source: Authors



Park 07
(Sathiavanimuthu park)



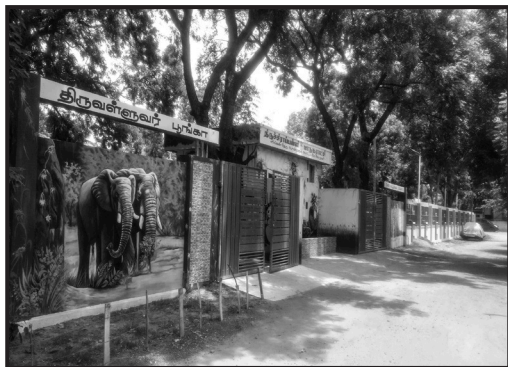
Park 08
(Bharathi park)



Park 09
(Mullai nagar park)



Park 10
(Periyar nagar park)



Park 11
(Thiruvalluar park)

Fig. 1: Images of the selected eleven public spaces (parks); Source: Authors