Gang-Loci: How Neighborhood Gangs Are Defining Community Identity

MIGUEL PORRAS
Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

Street gangs are considered to be one of the major social problems of this century. Gang formation has held a special significance and has been widely studied throughout the branches of sociology, criminology, and the social science fields. Nevertheless, neighborhood gangs materialize and operate in the social spaces of communities, such as the sidewalk, the street, the public park, and the local school. Gang presence redefines formal and social spaces in suburban and urban neighborhoods in two scales in particular: the neighborhood street and public park.

Architects and planners have always been fascinated by the informalities that occur in the fabric of the built environment. It can be argued that we are fascinated more by these informalities than the things we design and plan. Why is it, then, that architects, designers and urban planners neglect the presence of gang culture in our city's streets, a condition that is deeply embedded in the fabric of the built environment? This study investigates the relationship between space and identity, by investigating how gangs manifest, materialize and establish identity in the built environment. The title Gang –Loci was derived from Norberg-Schulz's, genius loci; the definition of genius loci also know as spirit of place is challenged throughout the paper by examining identity and space through the lens of gang territory . Henri's Lefebvre theory on how diverse societies construct themselves and Jane Jacobs's views on ownership of urban space are explored as theoretical foils to rethink the way gangs use and redefine space. This paper raises questions on the crisis of gangs and their relationship with the built environment; its aim is not to seek for a set of premature solutions but rather a catalyst for architects and urban planners to begin exploring an urban problem that many communities have today – the neighborhood gang.

THE GANG

As of September 2008, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported gang membership in the United States was conservatively estimated at 1 million members, an increase from an estimated 800,000 members in 2005. Current estimates include approximately 900,000 gang members residing within local communities across the country.[1] In 2001, 59 percent of all homicides in Los Angeles and 53 percent in Chicago were gang related, with a total of 698 gang related homicides in these two cities combined. In that same year, 35 percent of suburban counties and 11 percent of rural counties in the United States reported gang activity.[2] These studies by the FBI indicate that the main reason for gang related crime is territorial dominance, often referred to as 'gang turf.'

Studies previously dealing with gang formation have concentrated mainly in socio-economics and criminology. In the United States the historical evolution of applying the term 'gang' to a group of individuals began with the western outlaws of the nineteenth century.[3] Other sociologists have been more successful in grounding the gang directly the built environment. Sociologist Frederic Thrasher (1927), later known to be part of the Chicago School in the late 1920s, explored the social patterns of large immigrant migrations in Ameri-

can cities during industrialization.[4] Their research focused on several aspects of the gang experience, like that of migration, which involved competition over territory. This new type of community, according to the sociologists, limited a newcomer's participation and made social exclusion a main driver for gang formation. These events fostered individual groups to seek collective identity and their own territory.[5] Thrasher has been a major influence on gang research and was one of the first sociologists to assert gang formation as: gangs emerge from disorganized neighborhoods, members lack opportunity to do other things, member's lack of skills and the drive to compete with others for jobs, and members are differentiated by age, all factors which facilitated delinquency.

However, this is a small sample of Thrasher's work and only one analysis on gang research. The complexity of these social groups, such as growth in membership, violent activities, use of weapons, and network communication (i.e. the Internet), has greatly changed since the 1920s. Over the last 80 years communities with a high level of gangs have produced heavily charged spaces of tension and conflict. As a result these heavily charged spaces have produced territorial configure neighborhoods. Formal spaces of communities now serve as generators for informalities of gang rituals. The augmentation and establishment of gangs throughout the United States has revamped the image of the community introducing a new genius loci; the neighborhood gang.

IDENTITY: MATERIALIZING SYMBOLIC MEANING

Gang ideology must be examined through its context in order to understand street gangs as a social mechanism in the built environment. Gangs are imbued with symbolism and meaning; codes, images, rituals, and language all constitute a collective ideology. The name of the gang plays a huge factor in gang membership and belonging, translating cultural iconic symbols such as religious symbolism plays a huge role as well. This ideology is adopted and fabricated by the gang through its built environment by various methods. Such methods include naming the gang after the street in which it originates. Latitude markers [North, East, South, and West] dictate direction and territory in communities with gangs. This is how gangs begin to set themselves apart in neighborhoods where there are many gangs. In Los Angeles, California considered by the FBI as the city with the most gangs members per capita in the United States, gangs of the Northern areas of the city affiliated themselves as *Nortenos* (Northerners) while gangs of the South are *Surenos* (Southerners) and these two North-South longitudinal markers constitute identity and rivalry.

Gang ideology is additionally accentuated by colors, signs, graffiti, and body marks.[6] Distinctive body marks ingrained into the skin of gang members dictate identity, belonging, and eternal commitment. These markings can be physical scars such as bullet wounds, stab wounds, and/or tattoos depicting the gang's name. Just as time imposes itself in materials and the built environment, so do these marking in the skin of gang members. These markings are used as trophies, rank, status and a sign of loyalty. Furthermore these symbols borrowed from the built environment and constructed by the gang evolved into the gang's cultural identity.

COMMUNITY: FROM IDENTITY TO TERRITORY

A negotiation between ritual and space is established [i.e. gang ideology and ritual co-exist thus establishing a bond between the community and the gang]. In *Islands in the Streets*, a research study on 37 street gangs in three American cities, sociologist Martin Sanchez Jankowski outlines four factors that illustrate why the gang needs to establish a relationship with its surrounding environment: (1) a gang needs a physical space to function, (2) gang needs to maintain close relationship with the community in order to recruit members, (3) the gang needs outside information from community members who venture beyond the neighborhood, and (4) the gang needs a sense of identity within the community and need to feel like they are protecting the community from other encroaching gangs. Cultivating a physical and symbolic relationship, the gang begins seeking its own spaces to perform its rituals.

If we step back from the prevailing negative connotations and stereotypes about gangs, we must ask ourselves: isn't this is what every society does in order to cultivate their culture? How does this mechanism work? How can we understand the street gang better by it?

TERRITORY: MANIFESTING GANG SPACE

Sociologist and philosopher Henry Lefebvre points out that the space in which individuals carry out their everyday lives is socially constructed, what he calls; the social product. Lefebvre's theory on how space is produced relates to how people occupy spaces and how they perceive their environment. This he labels as the "spatial triad," the perceived, the conceived and the lived space; as Lefebvre points out "social space is not a thing among other things, or a product among other products; rather it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their co-existence and simultaneity their relative order/disorder."[7] This model allows us to see that space and identity are layered and intertwined together.

Lefebvre comments that "ideology, the state, the commodity, money, value and class struggle-do not and cannot exist independently of space." This reenforces that a gang needs a physical space [community] in which it can refer their ideology [the gang culture, i.e. its Genius Loci].

The social product of neighborhood gangs evolves into the act of controlling space. The very act of controlling these public spaces in these neighborhoods is what in return transforms these spaces to "gang turf". As N. J. Habraken notes in *The Structure of the Ordinary*, which looks at issues such as control of space, territorial hierarchy, territorial structure and territory in different environments, "perhaps the most instinctive way by which humans have learned to understand the built environment is by division and separation."[8] To further understand how gang turf is manifested we define two community spaces, the neighborhood sidewalk/street and the neighborhood park.

SCALES OF TERRITORY: THE STREET

The street holds a strong significance to the neighborhood gang. The street is one of the first places in which a gang or group of individuals begins to establish a collective identity and often the gang itself is named after the street. The public domain of the street and sidewalk becomes an open canvas for members to patrol an area and claim it as their own. The street serves as a public event space in which a neighborhood gang performs drug deals, keeps watch for intruders, sets boundaries, and loiters to showcase their territory. A gang small in size often occupies one street, such that its members live in close proximity and are able to keep full watch. This is widely seen in areas of suburban communities where a sidewalk serves as the place where gang members gather. Alternately, a moderately sized gang might occupy several blocks of an urban or suburban community.

Territorial demarcations begin to shift from the scale of the street [local scale] to the scale of the city block [regional scale] (Figure 3). This territory can manifest itself as the gang which borders another gang territory [territorial boundaries face back to back] or neighborhood gangs which are located in different parts of the city or suburban neighborhood [territorial boundaries may leave gaps where territorial battles may occur] or neighborhood gangs which encroach into each own territory [this may be due conflict of territorial issues related to drug turf as well]. The quality of these streets where gang presence is evident plays a huge role in these spaces. Streets and sidewalks are often poorly lit and lack pedestrian activity. The use of the automobile bypasses the sidewalk, [such as in suburban communities] enhancing the lack of security and supervision. Many other spaces connected to the street can create these conditions such as, interstitial spaces, alley ways, empty vacant lots, business which operate only during the day, leaving empty vacuums in the built environment. Thus the street is not patrolled by the citizens, but the gang members.

Gang graffiti introduces yet another claim to neighborhood territorial borders in the street and the local park. Unlike graffiti writers who use tagging as a transient art to capture as much as audience as possible (i.e. subway cars, railroad carts, or billboards), gang graffiti is for one purpose only – to mark territory. This demarcation for gang members is often the graffiti wall in their jurisdiction, which serves as a territorial place-maker in the built environment.

SCALES OF TERRITORY: THE PARK

The scale shifts form the street to the neighborhood park. In general, the park is larger in size and accommodates more members than the street/sidewalk. The neighborhood park becomes a central hub for the gang members; a space to share information and meet. It becomes a refuge where mem-

bers can find other members of the same gang during any time of the day or night. It is also an area where community citizens and outsiders are quickly noticed. The layout of the park also nourishes gang activity. Racquetball courts, clubhouses, and playgrounds visually hide members from law enforcement. Objects such as garbage dumpsters provide small areas to conceal weapons and drugs. During dark hours these recreational areas are poorly lit, providing areas where impromptu meetings can be held and areas to loiter with out being noticed.

In many cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Dallas, and Miami poorly maintained recreational areas and public parks foster gang activity. As a result these public spaces become havens for violent acts which include drive-by shootings, fights, muggings, robberies and drug deals. These consequences induce fear in the community and, the streets are avoided at all cost, leaving the gang to gain control of these public spaces of the community. In many neighborhoods where there is gang presence, many of the residents are aware of the spaces used by the gang, but don't even bother to use them or alert the authorities due to retaliation.

CONSTRAINTS AS OPPORTUNITIES

We ask ourselves how can give back these public spaces to the community. Can we put eyes back in the streets as Jane Jacobs advocated in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*? Jacobs illustrates that the street and sidewalk must be supervised by the citizens, (1) a clear distinction between what is private and public. (2) the sidewalk should be the eyes in the street, what the author refers to as 'street proprietors' (3) should allow the users fair and continuous opportunity to view the street for security.[9] Is Jacobs' approach as an urban advocate a starting point in looking at these issues?

In Los Angeles, California, the Summer Nights Program designed to combat gang violence by keeping areas illuminated until midnight has been a huge success. Harvard Park, one of many parks that are in the program, reports that the rate of violence has decreased ever since the 'lights on' policy was implemented. Juan Duran, a local teen resident of the community, comments, "My school doesn't have summer school this year, so it's pretty cool to having this."[10] This program, although very small in scale, begins to combat gang issues with a very simple design solution. However these are only two design opportunities in a vast canvas of possibilities. Solutions like these can re-enforce and have a great impact on communities where resources are scarce.

REFLECTIONS: CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

Today, communities facing the challenges presented by gangs are beginning to question how they can combat these issues. This shift of identity occurring in these neighborhoods is due largely because their citizens no longer retain the power of the most reliable community resource – the neighborhood's public space. In July of 2009, The New York Times reported gang activity in the birthplace of modern suburbia, Levittown, Long Island, New York. Invented to escape the ills of the city sixty years ago, Levittown is a neighborhood that is now home to MS-13, one of the largest and most violent gangs in the country.

As students of architecture and design, we should ask ourselves how we can dive deeper into the informality of the built environment. Should the pedagogical realm be more of a collaborative process within the disciplines of sociology, the social sciences, urban design, urban planning, or even law enforcement? Can these conditions, such as the current gang activities in the built environment, serve as a catalyst for design opportunities? Can we begin to understand what territorial borders mean in gang communities? Are gang activities an opportunity to create design strategies for safer streets and parks?

ENDNOTES

1. "National Gang Threat Assessment 2009," National Gang Intelligence Center, January 2009, 13 Aug 2009 <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs32/32146/gangs.htm#Membership>.
2. Ibid.
3. Martin S. Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (California: University of California Press, 1991), 1.
4. Frederic Thrasher, a University of Chicago sociologist, was a major figure in the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. His reputation rests on his 1927 book *The Gang: A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927). http://www.gangresearch.net/GangResearch/Seminars/definitions/thrasher.html
5. Kevin McDonald, "Marginal Youth, Personal Identity, and the Contemporary Gang: Reconstructing the Social World?" in Louis Kontos, et al., eds., *Gangs and Society: Alternative Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 66.
6. Gang graffiti introduces yet another claim to neighborhood territorial borders. Unlike graffiti writers

who use tagging as a transient art to capture as much as audience as possible (i.e. subway cars, railroad carts, or billboards), gang graffiti is for one purpose only – to mark territory

7. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 75.
8. N. J. Habraken, *The Structure of the Ordinary: Form and Control in the Built Environment*, Jonathan Teicher, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 126.
9. Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 35.
10. Rebecca Cathcart, "Lighting up Tough Parks' Darkness," *New York Times*, 12 July 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/us/12park.html .Viewed online 13 Aug 2009.