

A Fence and a Ladder: Subversive Acts of Everyday Urbanism at Home

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This paper documents and examines the power of an informal, spontaneous, low-tech spatial gesture: a ladder built to straddle a fence between two properties. The ladder was built in order to give the children in the neighboring backyards a way to traverse the boundary easily, without the need for permission and without the risk of climbing and falling or cutting themselves. The ladder is not elegant. It was made using spare 2x4s. It's clumsy looking. It leans. But the power of the ladder is not in how it's designed or its materiality. The ladder extends the agency of the property owners on both sides of the fence, but especially the children, expanding their territory and opportunities for play. It connects two families and encourages sharing caregiving responsibilities. It is an example of what Margaret Crawford would call "everyday urbanism"¹ or what Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett would call the "urban vernacular."²

The vernacular is what ordinary people do in their everyday lives. It consists of local practices that take shape outside planning, design, zoning, regulation, and covenants, if not in spite of them. The relationship between the built environment and the social practices that occur within it reveal both intentional and unintentional effects of great importance. The vernacular can help us discover what cannot – indeed, what should not – be planned. It can suggest what should be protected from design and should be left to its own devices, free to find its own spatial form.³

The fence divides. The ladder connects. But the spatial situation is complex because these two devices that do opposite things sit together; while the fence is useful and needed to provide an enclosure for the two small dogs belonging to the one family, the ladder sits as an invitation for the parties on both sides to cross-over casually at all times. It is a particularly subversive example of "everyday urbanism" because it turns the fence into its opposite—a bridge. In "Fences and Between Fences: Cultural, Historical, and Smithsonian Perspectives"⁴ the authors unpack Robert Frost's declaration, that "good fences make good neighbors." This particular case brings new meaning to the idea of a "good fence." Is a "good fence" one

that actually complicates property boundaries and increases social interaction and interdependence? Can deliberate modifications to fences strengthen localized communities?

INTRODUCTION

This paper documents and examines the power of an informal, spontaneous, low-tech spatial gesture: a ladder built to straddle a fence between two properties. The ladder was built in order to give the children in the adjoining backyards a way to traverse the boundary easily, without the need for permission and without the risk of climbing and falling or cutting themselves. The ladder is not elegant. It was made using spare 2x4s. It's clumsy looking. It leans. But the power of the ladder is not in how it's designed or its materiality. The ladder extends the agency of the property owners on both sides of the fence, but especially the children, expanding their territory and opportunities for play. It connects two families and encourages sharing caregiving responsibilities.

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It's essential to mention that the installation of the ladder was spurred by the abrupt need for both families—and everyone, for that matter—to stay at home for prolonged lockdown periods during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The literal, physical limits of one's personal space became suddenly very palpable, even exaggerated as the lockdown periods were extended.

CONSTRAINED PERSONAL GEOGRAPHIES

Limitations on freedom of movement, this spatial constraint, and the associated social isolation, impacted children, I would argue, differently than it impacted adults. While children are accustomed to having limitations set on where they can and cannot go, the abrupt social isolation that the pandemic caused was not so familiar. The construction and installation of the



Figure 1. Photograph showing the ladder built to straddle an existing chain-link fence. Before the ladder was built, the children on both properties would climb the fence and snag their clothing or scratch themselves. Image credit: S. Davidson.

ladder to connect the two backyards was a highly intuitive gesture responding to the childrens' social and spatial patterns. In this sense it was a spatial act that provided agency to those who generally don't have much, even when it's not a pandemic.

Sarah James, in her paper "Is there a 'place' for children in geography?" states that:

"...there has been little research undertaken which critically examines the ways in which children's lives, experiences, attitudes and opportunities are socially and spatially structured. For far too long children have been hidden from geography, as well as from other disciplines. Little effort has been made to investigate the role children play in society other than in terms of their adjustments to an adult-dominated and adult-orientated world."⁷

In the constrained geography of two properties that share one boundary, the ladder can be seen as something akin to desire lines or desire paths that inevitably occur in parks and across



Figure 2. Photograph showing the neighbor children using the ladder to move back-and-forth from one backyard to another. Image credit: S. Davidson.

campuses. It's a concretization of spatial and social pattern that kids established by themselves, for themselves. Indeed, when I asked my son what it looked like when adults climb the ladder he just exclaimed "What? I don't know. I didn't see you climb it."

Sarah James also writes about children and environmental cognition, stating that "Even when children and adults operate in the same environments, their interpretations of these places are unlikely to be the same."⁸ In a video clip prepared for the conference presentation, one of the children verbalized his experience of the ladder. Climbing over the top of the ladder, the boy explained: "The funnest part is, like, vines are growing on it, so it feels like I'm kindof exploring a place I've never seen before, like I feel like Indiana Jones."

A CONTRADICTIONARY SPATIAL CONDITION

The fence divides. The ladder connects. But the spatial situation is complex because these two opposing forces sit together; while the fence is needed to provide an enclosure for the two small

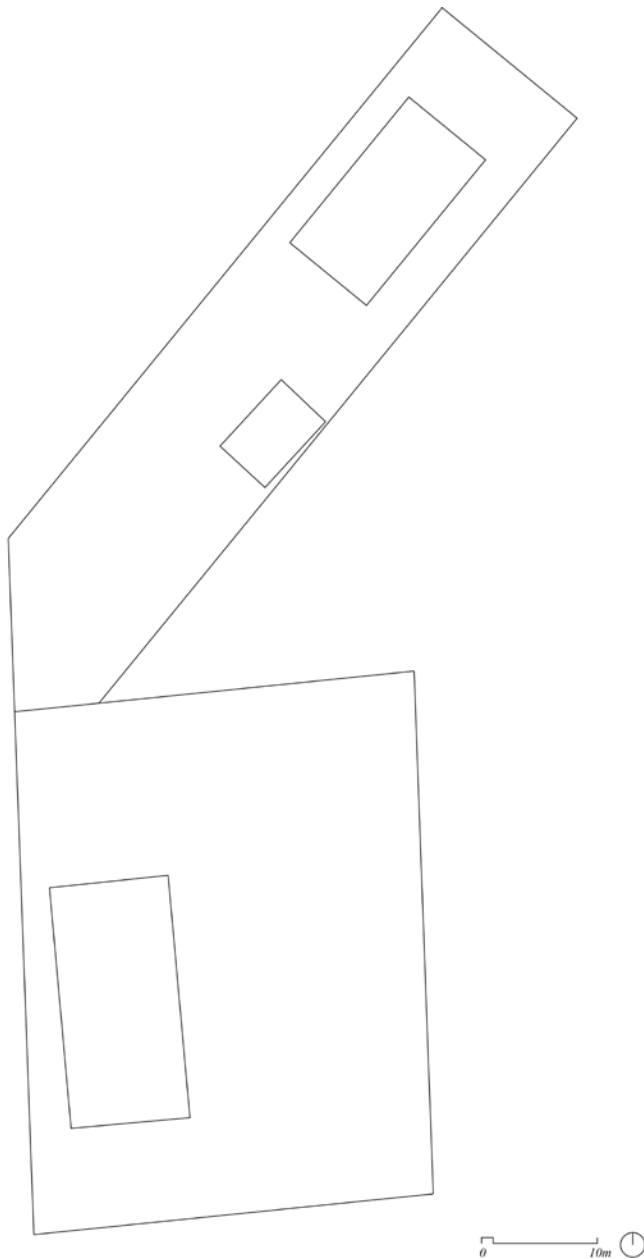


Figure 3. Drawing showing the property boundaries of the two properties linked by the ladder. The properties back onto one another and the ladder, parked at the rear lot line for the properties, expands the backyard for each property. Image credit: S. Davidson.

dogs belonging to the one family, the ladder sits as an invitation for the parties on both sides to cross-over casually at all times. In sociologist Georg Simmel's seminal 1909 text, "Bridge and Door," he states that "Only man, as opposed to nature, has the faculty of binding and unbinding, and in this specific manner: that one is always the presupposition of the other. By disengaging two things from the undisturbed state of nature, in order to designate them "separate," we have already related them to each other in our awareness...we experience as connected only



Figure 4. The fence serves its own purpose: to keep two small dogs safely enclosed in one of the yards. Image credit: S. Davidson.

The ladder is a teasingly ironic example of "everyday urbanism" because it turns the fence into its opposite—a bridge. In "Fences and Between Fences: Cultural, Historical, and Smithsonian Perspectives"³, the authors unpack Robert Frost's declaration, that "good fences make good neighbors." This particular case brings new meaning to the idea of a "good fence." Is a "good fence" one that actually complicates property boundaries and increases social interaction and interdependence? Can deliberate modifications to fences strengthen localized communities?

The fence wouldn't be there without the kids. In this sense, we can see the fence as a marker of the spatial potentials—the fruitful subversions and disruptions of adult-world-order—that we can glean if we look at, and take seriously, childrens' geographies—the more fluid and spontaneous ways in which children can bind space and social acts. While kids clearly see the fence, it may register as just a barrier that needs to be climbed in order to play with a friend.

Kids don't commission property surveys or know where the stakes are planted. They don't police boundaries in the ways that property owners—adults do. The built boundary seems to, rather, register as a frontier for these children who relate crossing it with permission, adventure, freedom.

A PROMPT FOR SHARING AND EXCHANGE

For the adults on both sides of the fence the ladder has become the defacto meeting point, the nexus of all social exchange from spontaneous small talk to scheduled meet-ups to talk through any conflict that has arisen between the kids. It's a shared stoop, a porch too small to sit on, an access to a treehouse that isn't there. It's typologically indistinct yet familiar and has easily and immediately melded into our lives in essential ways.

Gifts as informal as the ladder itself show up there: extra zucchini and tomato plants that the one family has no more room for,



Figure 5. The platform at the top of the ladder, a small space straddling the shared property boundary, has been used by the adults on both sides of the fence. Food, laundered clothing, shoes, plants, among other things, are deposited there. Image credit: S. Davidson.

zucchini pesto made with the extra zucchini plants, grape and strawberry jam, preserved beets,

Toys and clothes returned to their owner after being laundered, of course. Gestures of intimate, shared household labor are made across the ladder. Without prearranged agreement or verbal discussion the micro community of two families share food, caregiving, and watch over one another due to this spatial link that showed-up one day.

When the one family tested positive for COVID-19 and the other family didn't, the ladder was the lookout and the spot where take-out pizza was deposited for the ill family, isolating in their house.

The ladder straddling the fence is a modest, DIY intervention with a big spatial and social impact for the two-family community that it connects. It is a contradictory spatial condition that sits outside of convention and complicates our understanding of property ownership and community-making.

NOT PRETTY

The ladder isn't "designed" in the conventional way that we understand the act of design as architects. At the same time, its physical character is significant.

The ad hoc physical character of the ladder is one aspect that allows it to be interpreted in many ways and used so freely. It is both familiar and unfamiliar, with an undeniable "laderness" despite its thin rungs and awkward proportions. It sits wide at the base and tapers toward the top yet it lacks all of the slick engineering and material optimization of the better-known aluminum step ladder. It is site-specific, custom-made, pragmatic. It is the direct, physical, frugal response to a problem.

The ladder could be seen as belonging to the rich and vast category of "anonymous architecture," which "Architecture without Architects" author Bernard Rudowsky laments is "so little known that we don't even have a name for it."⁶ Rudowsky goes on to complain that "[u]nfortunately, our view of the total picture of anonymous architecture is distorted by a shortage of

documents, visual and otherwise.”⁹ In his own documentation of “architecture without architects,” Rodowsky states that “the philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders presents the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration for industrial man. The wisdom to be derived goes beyond economic and esthetic considerations, for it touches the far tougher and increasingly troublesome problem of how to live and let live, how to keep peace with one’s neighbors, both in the parochial and universal sense.”¹⁰

The ladder’s physical humility—how it’s sunken into the low-lying muddy part of the yard, weathered and in need of no maintenance—contributes to its role as a socio-spatial bond between two families and the kids in particular. Its wobbliness and integration into the unmanicured, overgrown rear yards—surely also adds richness to the childrens’ environmental cognition as they map out their constrained personal geographies and blend their reading of their surroundings with the imagined scenarios that seem to be created so naturally for kids.

A MODEST PLACE TO START NEW WORLD BUILDING

Low stakes, low budget, shielded from the public view, backyard interventions, installations or prompts like the ladder straddling the fence can plant seeds for new world building, visions for new spatial and social order and community connectedness. In Nadine Botha’s “A Safe Space to Redesign Reality,” she describes the work of Amal Alhaag, an independent curator, cultural programmer and radio host that work on deconstructing, unlearning and redesigning processes of social interaction.¹² In organizing social events with a “focus on learning from each other”¹³ Alhaag contends that “[s]mall things can make a huge difference.”¹⁴ In facilitating dialogue, Alhaag experiments with “using microphones, not using microphones, sitting on the floor, the format and the timing.”¹⁵ Alhaag’s work uses dialogue, social interaction, as an instrument toward “reconsidering and redefining how we engage with each other.”¹⁶ The idea is to break-down power structures and power imbalances that are reified through the ways in which we conventionally “speak and interact with each other.”¹⁷ Returning to the theme of childrens’ agency and childrens’ personal geographies, we can see the ladder straddling the fence as a way of opening-up opportunities for a “child-led” space, a space where, as Alhaag encourages, we (adults and children) learn from each other, rather than a space where a predefined rule set is imposed on the children, perpetuating the social and cultural order form where that rule set springs. In their article, “Child-Led Tours to Uncover Children’s Perceptions and Use of Neighborhood Environments”¹⁸ authors Loebach and Gilliland describe how significant home and neighborhood environments are in childrens’ social development and in their evolving sense-of-self, yet their role in shaping these environments is small: “The challenge then lies in employing methodologies that can tap into the child’s experience of the world and position them as empowered agents, and that are better tailored to their strengths and interests than traditional tools. The use of techniques such as drawings, maps, diaries, story-telling, and auto-photography

in several key environment-behavior studies in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated that such expressive tools may be more in keeping with how children naturally conceptualize and interact with their environments and better able to extract a slice of their lived experience.”¹⁹ Loebach and Gilliland emphasize the deep and lasting impact that experiences of a neighborhood environment play in the life of a child. Their article describes model, from a planning perspective, for integrating childrens’ voices in the format of “child guides” of neighborhoods “carving out of meaningful places for activity and interaction”²⁰ in their home environments. The ladder straddling the fence can be seen as a grassroots, individual action that shares the same objective of Loebach and Gilliland, and indeed of Amal Alhaag as well, in disrupting spatial and social convention, in setting-up a space in which we can learn from each other, and in which small things make a huge difference. Of course the children did not construct the ladder, but the ladder is a concretization of the childrens’ actions, made based on the observation of the kids climbing the fence. It could be seen as an extension, on a tiny scale and on privately owned property, of the methodology that Loebach and Gilliland describe in their article, in which children are “empowered agents”²¹ and as such, can perhaps help effect change during this time of layered crises.

CONCLUSION

The autoethnographic research methodology may seem, in this case, like little more than babysitting or parenting, a documentation of a long stretch of working-at-home with kids in virtual school during a pandemic. And certainly it was that, too. But it is also a lived case-study in ad-hoc, temporal, almost humorous spatial gestures that end up becoming vital social channels. The fence as a built construct is an extremely formal, often legal thing governed most often by municipal by-law. And in this case study it should be mentioned that running perpendicular to the fence with the ladder is a newly constructed 7 ft high privacy fence which comes with a more banal, unfortunate and predictable narrative about conflict and spite.

But what the fence and the ladder draws attention to is what Margaret Crawford, in “Everyday Urbanism” describes as “the transformational possibilities of the everyday”.¹ Similar to her aims for that book a case study like this can be seen as a “call to action” and an “entry point for an understanding of everyday space and... [an] incentive for rethinking the ways in which designers can operate there.”²² Cheap, low stakes, improvisatory, the ladder is an unlikely design precedent in facilitating a micro-utopia during an otherwise devastating time.

ENDNOTES

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