

Architecture of the Limit: The Fence (Köln, 29–30 Sep 25)

Universität zu Köln, Sep 29–30, 2025

Deadline: Jan 31, 2025

Gabriella Cianciolo Cosentino

In his 1851 work ‘Die vier Elemente der Baukunst’, Gottfried Semper identifies four essential components as the foundation of architecture throughout history: the hearth, the roof, the enclosure, and the earthwork. Among these elements, the enclosure stands out as a universal and archetypal element that represents the essence of building itself – namely the act of delineating space. Evidence of fences can be traced back to primitive times, thereby marking the enclosure as a foundational principle in human settlement and interaction with the environment.

The fence serves several functions: It provides protection, demarcates property, and either prevents or regulates access to specific areas. It can be a mobile, temporary boundary and can take an astonishing variety of forms. Made of different materials, it encompasses multiple dimensions ranging from conceptual and philosophical to historical and social as well as from architectural and constructive to juridical and geopolitical. In ancient times, the temenos was a sacred boundary that demarcated holy space and asserted the physical presence of this space in the landscape. However, a fence can sometimes also be a thin, intangible boundary, as seen in the Jewish ritual enclosure, the ‘eruv’, or in the countless invisible borders that shape our daily lives.

The architectural enclosure of the fence holds both micro- and macroscopic significance: It may surround a small garden or divide entire nations. We live in a world shaped by fences of various scales and consequences – including architectural, urban, and territorial – that guide, regulate, or prevent the transit of people and things. Often, the fence functions as a tool of separation and confinement by materializing power structures and mechanisms of exclusion, as in the case of Foucauldian heterotopias. Indeed, so pervasive are fences that we often overlook their potential for violence and coercion.

In recent years, the Humanities have increasingly focused on movement, specifically on travel, migration, and the circulation of objects and people. Fences are central to this movement, especially through their establishment of borders and territories. Given the current global landscape, it is now more critical than ever to reflect on this fundamental mechanism of control as well as on the inherent duality of its function as both a tool of protection and a means of confinement.

The present conference seeks to examine the fence as an architectural theme from a diachronic perspective by considering its historical manifestations alongside contemporary developments. Since the discourse on borders is inherently interdisciplinary, we encourage proposals from a variety of research fields and methodological approaches. Artistic projects to be realized in the con-

text of the conference are also welcome.

We welcome proposals for papers on topics related to the following themes:

- Enclosure as a spatial principle and the demarcation of space: Borders and thresholds.
- Political, geographical, and territorial fences: Divided cities, national borders, and the sociopolitical implications of both.
- Fences in architectural theory and practice: Typological, morphological, constructive, and compositional aspects.
- Materiality of the fence: From transparent to porous to solid.
- Urban décor: Ornamental fences and the aesthetics of ironwork in the urban landscape.
- Fences as enclosures: The role of fences in heterotopic spaces, such as convents and prisons.
- Fences and art: Creative interpretations, iconographic and photographic motifs, and the experience of fences in museum spaces.
- The sacred enclosure: Symbolic and ritualistic boundaries in religious contexts.
- Environment and the vernacular: Fences in landscapes and gardens, and the intersection of architecture with nature.
- Virtual fences: Geofencing and technological perimeters.

Organized by the Kunsthistorisches Institut of the Universität zu Köln (Department of Architectural History), the conference will be held in Cologne from 29–30 September 2025. Proposals should be submitted as a single PDF and must include a title and an abstract (the latter with a maximum of 1,500 characters) as well as a brief CV. Travel costs up to a certain amount and accommodation for speakers will be covered by the organization.

Please submit your proposal by January 31th, 2025 to: gabriella.cianciolo@uni-koeln.de

Reference:

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