Enabling Boundaries (Oldenburg, 5 Jun 26)

Oldenburg, Jun 05, 2026
Deadline: Mar 6, 2026

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Enabling Boundaries: Rethinking Spatial Categories, Epistemic Challenges, and Transformative Design Practices.

Urban planning and design face mounting challenges in the face of continuous transformation processes. Demographic shifts, the climate crisis, shrinking natural resources, a chronic shortage of affordable housing, and persistently high land consumption demand a critical reassessment of existing instruments and institutions. As we become aware of the constraints that have conditioned our existence all along, we must not simply react by further limiting our agency as planners and designers to still uncharted territories of freedom and autonomy. On the contrary, the recognition of ecological limitations should be perceived as enabling opportunities for planners and designers to finally partake in actively conditioning the conditions that condition us, to paraphrase John Durham Peters (2015).

For the design disciplines like architecture, urban design and landscape design, these fundamental transformations mostly entail changes in “what” is built and planned through ever more efficient formal solutions, genuinely ecological materials, or smarter technologies to stay within benchmarks of sustainability. Despite the agreed upon necessity for “ecologizing” all design and planning practices, their fundamental tenets remain the same: it is still the rational subject organizing and governing an increasingly complex object world through increasingly sophisticated tools of representation and control. Speaking of limits of growth, finitude of resources and the fragility of life-supporting “critical zones” might have become dominant in current discourse. Yet, notwithstanding the recognition of constraints, co-existences and shared agency, design and planning continue to entertain the liberal-modernist ideology of transcending those boundaries and salvaging still unclaimed rooms-for-play.

What we propose instead is a shift in the understanding of ecologization in design, from working with limited resources to conceiving limits and boundaries as the very resources of an always already bounded design practice (Bateson, 1972; Guattari, 1989/2014; Hörl, 2017). Our point of departure is to question the information-deficit, consensus-first, and linear-progress approaches that dominate mainstream planning and design discourse. These approaches assume that better facts, expert knowledge and education allow for consensus and, in turn, lead to right action (Ludwig et al., 2024). This reductionist recipe collapses once cognition and agency are viewed e.g. through 4E lenses-embodied, embedded, enactive, extended (Newen et al., 2018). Instead, we ask whether clinging to ideas such as rational choice, communicative reasoning, and representational transparency is actually conducive to truly "ecologizing" planning and design practices. We seek

operative epistemologies and design practices that choreograph sense–model–act loops across human–media–environment assemblages, treating constraints as enabling structures that focus relevance, rather than as mere limitations (Friston et al., 2024; Juarrero, 2023; Manning & Massumi, 2014).

The aim of this symposium is to focus on one of the central elements for rethinking planning and design under ecological conditions: boundaries. In conventional design and planning boundaries take the shape of concrete lines drawn on the ground, on cadastral plans, or in CAD models. They manifest as fences, walls, partitions, and infrastructures, as well as social and political distinctions, economic differences, and geographical demarcations. From the perspective of cultural techniques studies boundaries are material media that rely on practices and protocols conditioning the epistemic frames through which planning and design operate. Central concepts such as “space”, “territory”, or “landscape” do not precede the intervention of the planer or designer drawing lines (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). It is the practice of drawing lines that constitutes these concepts.

We wish to explore how boundaries, traditionally perceived as rigid divisions and limits, can be re-conceptualized as dynamic, productive elements in the field of urban design. We intend to move beyond concepts, forms, and representations to the level of tools and media, and to examine boundaries as media and boundary-drawing as an epistemic-operative practice through which perception, knowledge, imagination, and design action are conditioned (Cilliers, 2001; Sevaldson, 2022; Ulrich, 1996). Drawing on relational space theory, ecological thinking, active-inference research and systemic analysis, boundaries do not simply mark ends or signify differences, they also activate virtualities, potentials and contingency.

The symposium intends to probe the tensions between the demands of ecologizing planning/design and its existing practices and media. We welcome contributions by planners, designers, artists and scholars who actively explore new planning and design media (e.g. mapping, diagrammatic reasoning, interactive “graph-games,” scripted disruptions and participatory design labs etc.) allowing designers and planners to navigate systemic complexity, to prototype federated inference among stakeholders, and to rehearse adaptive interventions.

We hence look for contributions that a) open up new avenues of thinking on ecologizing planning and design and b) develop concrete case studies from an array of scales and contexts and scales testing new planning and design tools. Based on this, we aim, first, to develop a better understanding of boundaries as enabling epistemic and operative conditions in planning and design, and second, to introduce and critically discuss new boundary-drawing tools and media in design practice.
The event is organized along four thematic axes: 1) Re-imagining spatial categories and boundaries; 2) Epistemologies of situated agency; 3) Operationalizing complexity: epistemic design tool-kits; 4) From theory to practice: case Studies in urban planning and design practices.

Timeline
- Symposium date: June 6, 2026
- Deadline proposal (300 words + short CV): March 6, 2026

Practical Information
We invite contributions from practitioners, critics and researchers from the design disciplines

such as urban design and planning, architecture, landscape and environmental design, but also from scholars in philosophy, sociology, geography, media philosophy, political science, etc. To foster debate and exchange, we are planning a one-day on-site workshop on June 5, 2026 in Oldenburg (with Zoom option). Limited funding to cover travel expenses is available. The workshop is part of the “Rurban Design Lab” research project, which belongs to the “4N” research network.

Please send proposals to: rurbandesign@jade-hs.de

Reference:
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