**On the Fence**

**HOUSTON’S URBAN FABRIC** is frequently characterized by the prevalence of hierarchical road systems—expressways that lead to feeder roads that lead to boulevards that eventually terminate in cul-de-sac destinations. This street infrastructure implies a pattern of territorial isolation where properties accessed by cul-de-sacs are insular, introverted, and closed off from serendipitous connections with the city. Albert Pope argues that such infrastructural form produces “individuated subjects at the expense of any massification or incorporation.” However, roadway organization is not the only infrastructural form that regulates how subjects are produced and how people interact in a city. Perhaps the fence is an even more potent instrument of organizational power and an even more visible manifestation of the “cul-de-sac city.” In Houston, high fences, gated housing complexes, and limited access properties abound.

In his 1996 book *Between Fences*, Gregory K. Dreicer, writes, “We live between fences. They bound our properties and stand at the center of the American landscape. Fences define, protect, confine, and liberate. They tell us where we belong and who we are in relation to others. Fences join the public and private. Remove a fence; invite chaos. Erect a fence; you are home.”

The old adage says, “good fences make good neighbors.” Robert Frost mused on this proverb in his 1914 poem, “Mending Wall,” in which he describes two neighbors on either side of a fence, mending the fallen stones during an annual springtime routine. The narrator of the poem is skeptical of this act of border reinforcement, and he questions his neighbor accusingly, “Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.” Their fence
merely separates apple trees from pine trees. What would happen if a fallen apple were intentionally exchanged for a pinecone?

The fundamental act of architecture is to delineate borders—to mark territory by locating thresholds. “On The Fence” is a proposal for strategic property line interventions between prototypical backyard borders. The project inserts public apertures into the demarcations of private property. Literally implanting playful opportunities into the surface of the fence itself creates radical adjacencies and social opportunities. The border is re-delineated.

A lexicon of backyard leisure activities programs this new middle ground. By leveraging the familiar vocabulary of backyard recreation, new participants are invited to join in existing activities.

The architecture of “On The Fence” exploits the latent potential of two-sided adjacency to create and combine new collectives of neighbors and citizens. The project respects the discrete domestic differences that fences protect, but it challenges people on either side to interact in new ways. It posits that even in the private haven of a fenced-in yard, there can be a place for encountering the Other—people different from ourselves. Moreover, by privileging humorous possibilities, the project looks to ease the inherent tension and awkwardness that comes along with interacting with new people.

Great fences make great neighbors.

NOTES
unexpected

urban life