

The Fiction of the Equal: Boundary Disappearance and Border Neutralization in the American City

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Introduction

This paper takes the concept of “Open City” by Richard Sennett¹ as an investigative lens to theorize the current state of affairs in American urbanism. A lack of critical thinking, social isolation and rising mental health issues are becoming characteristic of cities in the United States. By performing a historiographical analysis of the broad trends of city development in the United States, from the earlier settlements to the conquering of the frontier, the idea of closed and open systems employed by Sennett becomes an essential tool to analyze American Urbanism; Chicago has been taken as an example, since different thoughts on urbanism were played out. In the paper we delve deeper into how the status quo, i.e. the dominating sources of power, allowed certain architectural typologies, such as the church and the mall, to replace the essential friction inherent in cities. In such places of religious and capitalistic doctrination, the critical sense to be exercised by the general populace became diminished, resulting in the current problematic landscape of American Urbanism.

In his paper titled “The Open City”, Sennett explained the fundamental difference between boundaries and borders and its transcendence for the purpose of defining closed and open systems. He said that we tend to think and design cities as closed systems, implying with this acts of over-determination of the city’s visual form and its social functions. This way of thinking resulted in a clear rejection of any event or shape that are “contestatory or disorienting”, that “don’t fit” into the *System*, understood here as the regime of power always willing to “order and control”. The search for homogeneity has been a traditional self-defense mechanism that Systems use, independent of their ideology, taking exclusion and segregation as fundamental *modi operandi* that require sharp definitions of the limits for determining what is in and what is out. The determination of an ambiguous edge is the first recommendation that Sennett provides us with for pursuing the design of a city as an open system, an *Open City*. The other two recommendations (the “incomplete form” and the “unsolved narratives”) could also be understood as other kinds of ambiguous edges, from the formal and the conceptual points of view, respectively.

Sennett explained then the essential difference between “boundaries” and “borders in the search for the desirable design of the *Open City*. The boundaries are edges that very clearly establish the end of some condition or a change of status. For instance, a political boundary turns any of us into a subject of instantaneous change of status from citizen to alien with just the act of crossing it. On the other hand, the border, as Sennett pointed, is an edge understood as a meeting line where different groups interact, a space of fruitful exchange. Ecological Frontiers are rich borders where the different organisms take advantage of the changing condition and are usually very rich ecosystems such as, for instance, a river shore.

Cities are entities closely related to these two concepts from the very beginning of their existence. Some cities were created embracing a road, taking advantage of its border condition as a place of the constant flux of people and goods. The “street villa” is one of the most common urban

1 Richard Sennett, “The Open City”, *LSE Cities* (2006), <https://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/the-open-city/en-gb/>, accessed March 21, 2017.

typologies related to cities with a strong commercial past, due to their relationship with ancient goods routes. As Mumford explained, this trade condition was reinforced in some street-cities widening the center for formally placing a market in it.² In an opposite way, other urban agglomerations originated as walled cities, with a strong determination of a protective boundary, sometimes crucial for the survival of the city. This boundary was established as a protective device and its determination was a sacred fact in some occasions, with extreme cases where it was sealed with human sacrifices.³

Cities based on boundaries or borders are very different to each other, with their close or open configuration respectively, and the difference is not only established by a physical condition but also by a cultural one. When the city is born as a place to freely go through, it maintains a historical consciousness about the importance of the human flow for its own cultural and economic enrichment. The street-villas were socially organized in a horizontal way not only for expressing the equality between its own citizens, but also for blurring the distinction between inhabitants and visitors. Culturally more open and economically more active, the cities grown around the border are more unobstructed to informality and they have been ideologically much more progressive. By contrast, in cities enclosed in boundaries the inhabitants develop a deep sense of belonging, hence they are more suspicious of the alien. This fact obstructs the cultural and economic exchange, limiting the city's possibilities of progress. The necessity of formal planning for the walls and its entries make these cities more traditionally linked to a change that has to be formally planned, which usually means a slower and more top-down dynamic of transformation.

In the urbanistically younger American context, we could find equivalent strategies of city making. The Main Street is the basis of most of the settler's cities created in the new continent, an urban strategy dictated by the casual conglomeration around a border — a line of transit usually linked to horseback riding routes across the territory or newly created railroads. The seed of the walled city in the American context can be found in the architecture of the “fort”, a construction that settlers used as a territorializing apparatus for penetrating the first nations' territories. Usually shown as a defensive construction through the American self-narrative, the fort was a colonization device, closer in kind to the Roman camps in alien territories than to the European medieval walled city threatened by barbarian hordes.

Although we can find some similar origins between the American and the European city (construction around the border or boxed by the boundary), the urban evolution in both contexts were radically different. The reason for this difference is deeply embedded in an American idiosyncrasy. There is a particularity in American mentality that Steven Conn defines as such: “for Americans, utopia has always been a few acres in the country”.⁴ Thomas Jefferson had a very strong anti-urban vision of the nation, perhaps taking a cue from the fact that when he moved to the White House in 1800, only around six percent of the American population was urban.⁵ This anti-urban impulse was fueled by the claim of living close to nature autonomously, which was fundamental in settlers who had fled from crowded European cities, but also — as Conn pointed — it represented an anti-institutional mood, a resistance to being governed.⁶ Because of this opposition, the American capital was established far away from the major urban centers at that moment (New York and Philadelphia), making a very clear difference compared to the European context, where political, cultural, and economic power converged usually in the great pre-existing cities. This disparity between the political and the socio-economic was perpetuated by the way in which the American system established the election of their representatives. As Conn explains, the idea of getting equal political representation from the different States, in spite of their population,

2 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989), Graphic Section III, plate 33.

3 Colin Ellard, *Places of the Heart* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2015), 54.

4 Steven Conn, *Americans Against the City. Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

5 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 13.

6 *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 17.

was ingrained with the intention of undermining the political interest of the metropolitan population over that of the rural minority. The unexpected outcome of the 2016 American presidential elections was a consequence of the ‘metropolitan dismissal’ that has its origin in the same foundations of the political system of the United States. The electoral college system was put in place in order to achieve equality for the voice of non-urban populace.

Despite this denial of the urban phenomenon and its political framing, the American cities started to grow spectacularly during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Chicago doubled its size in ten years (between 1880 and 1890), reaching at the beginning of the 20th century more than 1.5 million people, a moment in what New York reached the 3.5 million people, adding another 1.3 million by 1910. Nevertheless, this growth did not stimulate a popularization of the urban but quite the opposite. As Conn explains, the overcrowded city quickly became a place of crime and corruption, distilling a bad reputation for the urban and promoting debates about the way to preserve the nation’s virtue seeking solutions with moral and religious content. Even nowadays about 20 percent of American express a desire to not live in a city.⁷

This dismissal of the urban was reflected in two very specific ways in the American city: through the disappearance of boundaries and the neutralization of borders, dissolving in this way, as we have explained, two universal city-making factors.

The disappearance of boundaries is a denial of the basic essence of the urban fact, of its intentional difference with the rural. The artificiality of the city has to be distinctly separate from the wilderness of Nature, which is translated in the acknowledgment of the paradigmatic shifts that identify both worlds: the geometry of the urban and the organic of the rural, the planned built environment and the casual landscape, the artificial and the natural... With the establishment of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) in 1785, commonly known as the Jeffersonian Grid, the American boundaries were dissolved. The geometry of the grid extended all over the territory declaring, at the same time, all Nature as potential city and all the urban as an accident into the vastness of the extensive grid. The grid, even just drawn on a map, symbolized for the settlers a feeling of the endless disposition of the land that was so appealing. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, where he recognized that the degree of dispersion created in the settlers sprawl moving towards the West Coast was such that “can hardly be said to be a frontier line”.⁸ This boundary disappearance generated a dispersed society in the middle of the wilderness that took refuge in the most primitive human organization, the family — a tendency that Turner admitted as “anti-social”.⁹ The grid was the only symbolic evidence for the dispersed settlers that there was someone else out there. As Turner pointed, this feeling of isolation created antipathy to control and governance, “pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds”, and finally resulting in “the lack of a highly developed civic spirit”.¹⁰

This anti-social American tendency derived from settlers’ dispersion was responsible for the neutralization of borders as well, entailing the deactivation of social frictions as one of the more powerful characteristics of urbanity and also, paradoxically, its more common source of conflicts. In the consolidation of this tendency, planners were not neutral at all. With respect to it, it was extremely significant the pulse that Steven Conn describes between the City Beautiful movement and the Progressive City one, which happened at the beginning of the 20th century. Both concerned with how to deal with the urban congestion, they represented two very different social approaches. The City Beautiful by Architect Daniel Burnham was an elitist trend based on a disciplinary planning focused exclusively on “architectural rationality and aesthetic uniformity”,¹¹ which absolutely dismissed the social complexity of the original

7 Ibid., 12, 14.

8 Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), 1; available at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf>, accessed May 24, 2017.

9 Ibid., 6.

10 Ibid.

11 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 32.

fabric of American's cities. On the other hand, the Progressive City was a movement led by sociologists willing to use city planning as a tool for getting — as Benjamin Marsh, other of its representatives, said — “social justice, not prettier buildings”.¹² Chair of the Commission on the Congestion of Population Committee, Marsh expressed a very clear will to reform the city scrutinizing any improvement “with a view to the benefits they will confer upon those most needing such benefits”,¹³ making a call for the necessity of the government intervention in the planning of the city as a way of getting the fairest output possible. The public nature of the urban problems meant for Marsh a public nature of the urban solutions.

Aligned with this more social way of thinking about the urban problems, in 1895, the residents of the Hull-House neighborhood headed by social reformer Jane Addams, published a collection of essays and maps about the social life in this small area, one of the most crowded and problematic sections of Chicago, located on its west side. Under the name *Hull-House Maps and Papers*¹⁴ and with the subtitle as *A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in Congested District of Chicago*, the publication included a set of essays analyzing deeply the social characteristics and the living and work conditions of the Hull-House's inhabitants. The maps that accompanied the publication registered the wages and national origins of the Hull-House dwellers showing a colorful mix, where families of eighteen different national origins and with different wages were living attached to each other in just a third of a square mile.¹⁵ (Fig. 01a/b)

With no identifiable pattern, the diverse combination of nationalities displayed in the maps of Hull-House gives an idea of the intense cultural interaction that this neighborhood represented. Although the working and living conditions described in the Hull-House study were not desirable at all, the big difference between the City Beautiful and the Progressive City approaches was precisely that the latter was studying deeply these conditions for fixing the problems while keeping the undeniable social and cultural value of the current state. The perception of the City Beautiful aesthetics about the value of the Hull-House existing conditions was radically different. When Burnham presented his grand vision for the new Chicago in 1908, the center of his plan was a monumental void with a neoclassic layout for the government buildings, which exactly coincided with the Hull-House neighborhood, erasing it definitively (Fig. 02). As Conn pointed, Hull-House “represented everything that Burnham wanted to eliminate from the city”, not only the “crowded and ugly”, but also, what probably was worse for Burnham, an architecture “as messy and heterogeneous as the people”.¹⁶

The coexistence between city and neighborhood supporters and detractors continued along the first decades of the 20th century. Some arguments declared the industrial city as a hostile environment (Robert Woods), with opinions that even considered immigrants responsible for the corruption of the American city (argued by Josiah Strong and curiously reverberating in President Trump's messages nowadays). These urges coexisted with some other points of view from people like Walter Laidlaw, Robert Parks or Ernest Burgess, advocating for the importance of the life in a community based on the neighborhood as “the natural habitat of civilized man”.¹⁷ In addition, it was thought that the citizenship was the only condition able to prepare people for democracy through the recognition of their responsibilities and obligations in relation to the community.¹⁸ As Conn explained, this urban moment of the American society, that shined in the early years of the 20th century, did not last long, and from the 1920s there were numerous people who thought the only way for restoring the lost American authentic values was to abandon the city.¹⁹

12 Ibid., 31.

13 Ibid., 29.

14 Jane Addams et al., *Hull-House Maps and Papers. A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in Congested District of Chicago* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1895), available at <http://hist346gildedage.homestead.com/files/etexts/hullhousemapspapers.pdf>, accessed May 24, 2017.

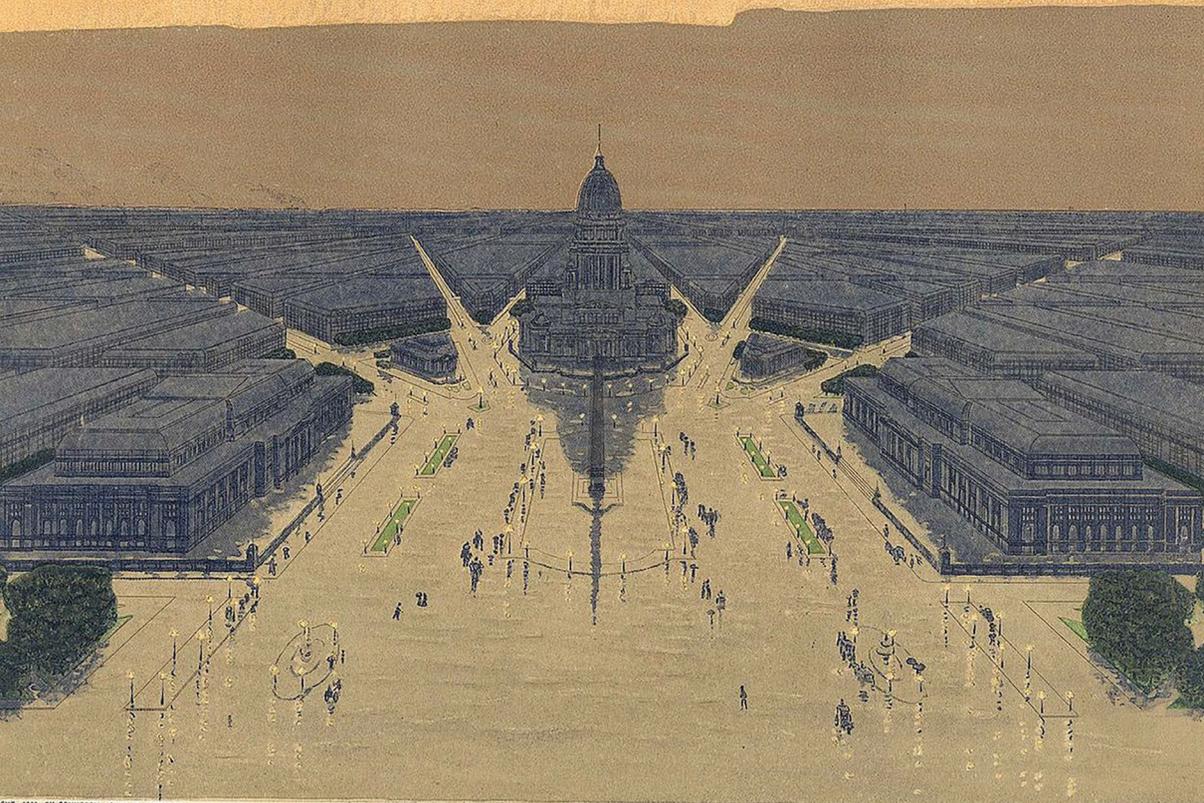
15 Ibid., 17.

16 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 39.

17 Robert Park, “City as Social Laboratory” (1929), 1, as cited at Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 46.

18 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 49.

19 Ibid., 56.



ENT, 1909, BY COMMERCIAL CLUB OF CHICAGO

CXXXII. CHICAGO. VIEW, LOOKING WEST, OF THE PROPOSED CIVIC CENTER PLAZA AND BUILDINGS, SHOWING IT AS THE CENTER OF THE SYSTEM OF ARTERIES OF CIRCULATION AND OF THE SURROUNDING COUNTRY.
Painted for the Commercial Club by Jules Guerin.

Fig. 02: Burnham Plan of Chicago. Civic Center and Plaza (Drawing by Jules Gerin).

The fact is that after World War I, and despite the step-up of the investment, most of the cities did not improve their conditions. American cities started their decline, which can be seen today in empty downtowns and abandoned urban fabrics in what one day were grand cities such as Detroit. This abandonment was a consequence of the extreme refusal of most Americans to live in a community, which was perceived as the constant presence of the increasing conflictive effect of the frictions at the social border. As Conn explained this anti-urban spirit, intensified after the 1920s, was also driven by racism because it was amplified by the growing African American population moving to the city.²⁰ The White Flight is, very sadly, a long-lasting phenomenon in America population (the undeniable echo of President Trump's racist messages is also a demonstration of racism validated to some extent in American society). As a result, the racial map of the American cities nowadays has nothing to do with the Hull-House vivid mix. The different races are totally isolated in neighborhoods with invisible, but very sharp boundaries arising under the delusive democratic homogeneity of the Jeffersonian grid. This racial segregation is also economic — when comparing the similarities between race and wages maps of American cities we realize the obvious economic supremacy of the white America (Chicago race and wage maps in Fig. 03a/b).

Whether racially isolated in the cities or secluded in family groups in the sprawl fabrics all over the nation, Americans live deeply alone, which also means being politically powerless and mentally fragile. Against this loneliness, two 'social refuges' seem to be acting as antidotes:

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

The Church and the Mall. Both have in common the construction of a community politically neutralized, one through the spiritual, the other through the material.

In a racially, economically, and physically segregated place, the Church represents for Americans an experience where they can feel being part of a bigger collective. With a built environment discouraging social contact and an embarrassing health and public education systems (too expensive for being called public in the context of the First World), Americans feel abandoned to their own fate, in what is one of the most significant sources of stress and unhappiness. Research now suggests that the number one factor in determining a person's happiness is the state of his/her social relationships. This necessity of social interaction could be one of the explanations behind the fact that even when in most of the advanced industrial societies the church attendance is constantly declining, in America it has remained stable since the 1990s.²¹ In the States, 55% of the population recognize themselves to be a member of a Church or a Synagogue, and 36% of the population report religious services attendance weekly or almost weekly,²² a proportion that almost doubles (60%), when it refers to attendance frequencies of every two weeks or once a month.²³ These figures are unusual for an advanced industrial society, and this can only be explained by referring to the social and built environment differences. Church attendance has been also reported having health benefits, as decreasing blood pressure and boosting the immune system (adding at least two or three years to your life);²⁴ all these "miracles" might be based on the benefits of the social interaction that Americans need to find, away from their daily life environment.

In the Catholic denomination, the church is a deeply apolitical place and is not used to host exchanges of opinions or critical political discussions. From the very beginning, Christian theologians made an effort to depoliticize Jesus' rebellious statements through imposing an exclusively spiritual reading and, thus, diverting a message that was profoundly socio-political. The importance of the community as people's support, the criticism to the property system and the political decentralization, were common statements in Jesus's doctrine that were intentionally left out by the officiality of Christianity. Such clear connections between Jesus' statements and the communist ideology have been very controversial, usually skipped in Christianity's teachings and only occasionally shown — as it was the case of the Latin American movement of the Liberation Theology. Some Popes, as Benedict XVI, made an extraordinary effort to react against the political aspect of this ideology, prohibiting some priests from teaching such doctrines in the Catholic Church's name and forbidding some theological schools. Even nowadays, the relationships between the official Church and the liberationists are, at least, tense. In the North American context where the lack of social friction has generated a society deeply depoliticized, the neutralization of Jesus' message was much easier. The System does not feel threatened by the people going to Church and this explains the exaggerated support that American Government has traditionally offered to the Christian Church.

The Mall is the other refuge for social interaction in the American society. If the church was a spiritual depoliticizing experience, the mall is a material one; yet what both have in common is the opportunity to provide people with a momentary community experience. Conceived as an architectural ruse — as Colin Ellard explained, malls are disorienting spaces similar to the slaughterhouses and the casinos — the mall is a space with no references, where all design efforts are "devoted to encouraging us to stay longer and spend more".²⁵ If the city markets have been traditional places for social engagement and interaction, their subverted version as malls is

21 Hunter Baker, "Is Church Attendance Declining?", *Christianity Today Magazine* (August 11, 2007); available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/novemberweb-only/145-42.0.html>.

22 "Religion: Historical Trends", available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>, accessed on May 24, 2017.

23 "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious", *Pew Research Center* (November 3, 2015), 6; available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>, accessed on May 24, 2017.

24 T.M. Luhrmann, "The Benefits of the Church", *Sunday Review* (April 20, 2013); available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/luhrmann-why-going-to-church-is-good-for-you.html>, accessed on May 24, 2017.

25 Ellard, *Places of the Heart*, 96-100.

A TAXONOMY OF TRANSITIONS

racial / ethnic
self-identification
in chicago
in the year 2000

white ■
black ■
asian ■
hispanic ■
other ■

the black lines show
chicago's official
community areas.

each dot represents
twenty-five people.
here, hispanic is
exclusive of other
categories.

block-level data
from the U.S. census.

scale 1:200,000

The same data, aggregated by community
area and shown with solid colors.

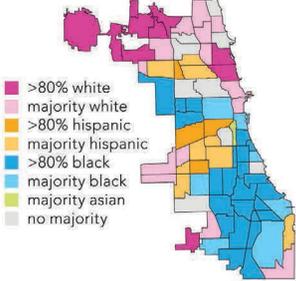


Fig. 03a: Chicago Ethnicity, 2009, by Bill Rankin.

FLAVORS OF BLUR

annual household income in chicago

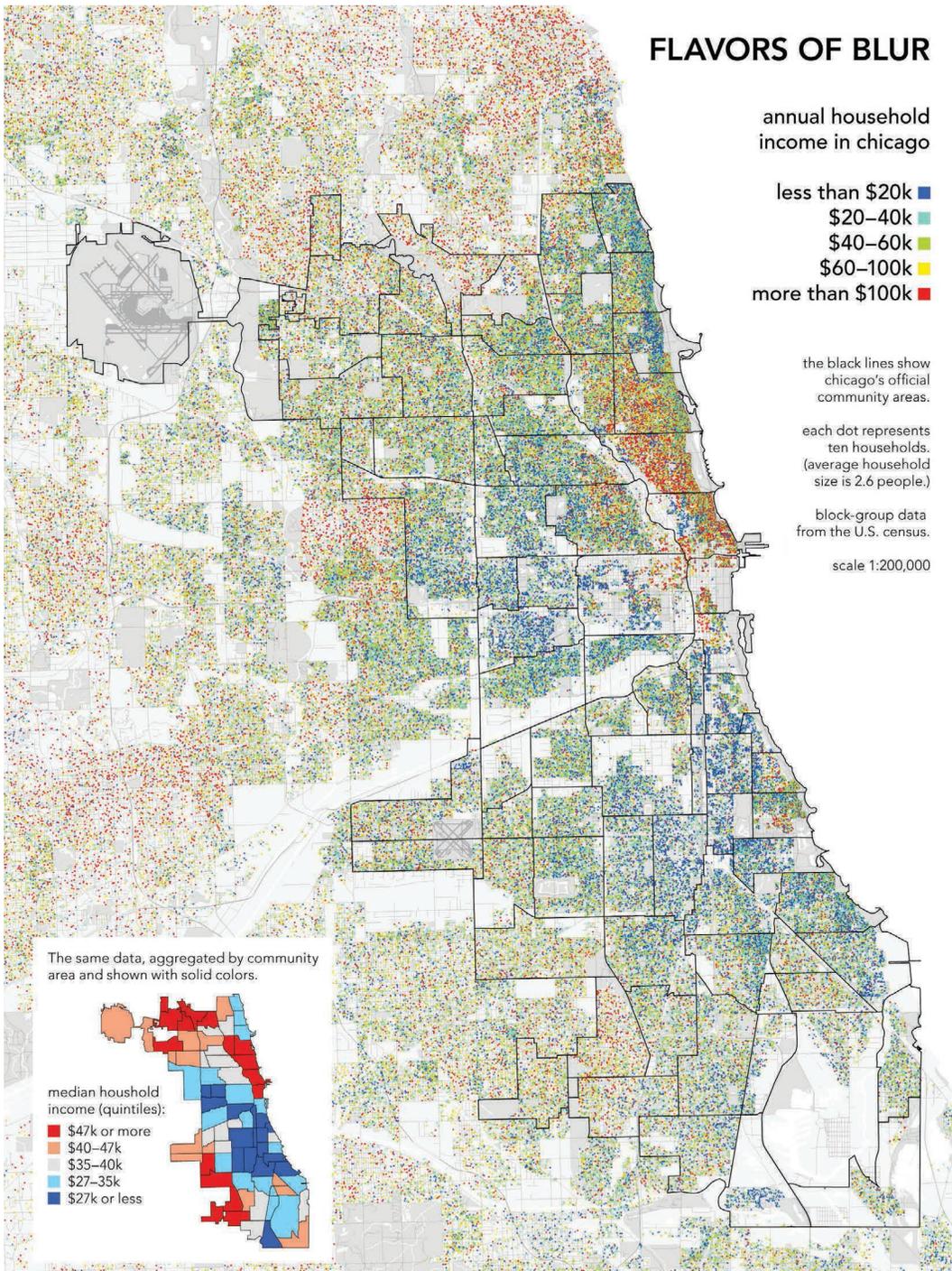
- less than \$20k ■
- \$20–40k ■
- \$40–60k ■
- \$60–100k ■
- more than \$100k ■

the black lines show
chicago's official
community areas.

each dot represents
ten households.
(average household
size is 2.6 people.)

block-group data
from the U.S. census.

scale 1:200,000



The same data, aggregated by community area and shown with solid colors.

median household income (quintiles):

- \$47k or more
- \$40–47k
- \$35–40k
- \$27–35k
- \$27k or less

Fig. 03b: Chicago Income, 2009y Bill Rankin.

performing a very different task. The vastness of the Mall space and its intentional opaqueness from the exterior transmit a feeling of an endless box of wonders — in a similar way that the Jeffersonian grid referred to a limitless disposal of land. The absence of references contributes to the idea of endless availability, forcing us to inadvertently go in front of the same products more than once, with the same disturbing insistence characteristic of television advertisements. The continued reference to a false consumer uniqueness is pointing to the opposite of the consumer's reality which is their absolute anonymity — just being another consumer — lost in the shared loneliness of the suburbs. The presence of other consumers is unnervingly reassuring, each one devoted to a constant voyeurism of people and their acquisitions as the only way of social interaction. The system is so efficient that between forty to seventy percent of mall purchases are items “that the shopper had no intention of purchasing when entering the building”.²⁶

The Church, for its political neutralization, is seen by the *System* as a reassuring version of the city boundaries, while the Mall acts as a caricature of the social border interaction, limited to the friction of the trolley through the mall corridors; each portrays an image of an urbanism that is supposedly the ‘American Dream’, all the while concealing the pangs of a deeply fragile social condition. The built environment is not a passive actor in this drama, it is not the background on which such fictions are projected. Architecture and its allied disciplines have been instrumental in creating naively a built environment that has been a perpetrator in producing such a fictitious image of equality. Only by a sincere recognition can there be a new beginning in reclaiming the social relevance of our discipline.

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