MAPPING THE URBAN FRONTIER

BY ERIC TEBBY

Introduction

Michel De Certeau discusses how the neighbourhood is the ultimate intermediary between public and private spaces. Once one leaves the threshold of property, they are thrown into a world embedded in social norms and constructs. When this transformation occurs the subject becomes constrained by vulnerability. De Certeau describes the neighbourhood as the "progressive privatization of public space" and functions to connect the intimate and the unknown. The urban space becomes a frontier of sorts where familiarity, safety, and a sense of "home" are removed. This space commands a necessity of movement within it. Frontiers can be described as nomadic boundaries where one is not settled but in a state of flux. To parallel this notion of movement along a frontier, de Certeau notes that "the relationship that links home to the workplace is, most generally in the urban space, marked by the necessity of a spatiotemporal coercion that requires traveling a maximum of distance in a minimum of time".

De Certau's Neighbourhood

De Certau's neighbourhood

This project attempts to examine the space between the private and public spheres within the neighbourhood. The "urban frontier" can be thought of as a line between where one exerts sovereignty over their private space and between the public spheres. Once this threshold is crossed, one is no longer in control but is controlled by social forces. While this notion of frontier may be less defined in the minds of some, for others, a defining structure is necessary to delineate this space.

Boundaries or borders could be argued as a fundamental aspect in many cultures. At least from a Euro-Canadian perspective, they are a prevalent norm. For other cultures, they can be seen as more fluid or overlapping. The same can be said about the individual. Some desire a more strict delineation with border controls where others persist on remaining open. Island nations have no need for borders as they possess natural ones where others desire to become islands.

Georges Perec encourages the inexhaustible examination of the habitual. Once we focus his lens upon this local threshold, the infraordinary can be highlighted. In the neighbourhood, fences become a feature to be examined as a defining structure protecting, but at the same time, formalizing these two spheres of space. To habitually cross the Rubicon, one ventures deep into the vestiges of the frontier where safety is not guaranteed.

Old Strathcona

In Edmonton, back yard fences are a commonality and could garner skeptical gazes were one to lack such a defining display of separation. What is often overlooked on the urban landscape is the infrequency of front yard fences. While some display a clear utility or flare of design this is not always the case. Some would argue that the main function is the delineation of the private and public. A built representation of home and frontier. In the lack of any clear functionality, could they be public displays of partition to these two spheres of neighbourhood space? What happens when we step back and look at the macro-sphere of information gathered?

This project is focused on analyzing the artificial boundaries imposed on private property. This comes in the form of front yard fences in the neighborhood. Old Strathcona was chosen as the research area from where I would collect my data. The focus is on houses so, when examining this area, a natural space of business and industry will be evident. The methods that I draw mainly come from Denis Wood in his book "Everything Sings: Maps for a narrative atlas". Wood's examination of the neighborhood of Boylan Heights in Releigh, North Carolina includes a milieu of information about the built environment that is often lost to those who reside there. He argues that traditional maps make overt efforts in trying to "correctly" represent the world in a factual sense but often result in misleading narratives. Wood, to the delight of Perec fans, brings out the hidden, habitual, and poetic world in which we live juxtaposed against the built neighborhood.

Total Front Yard Fences
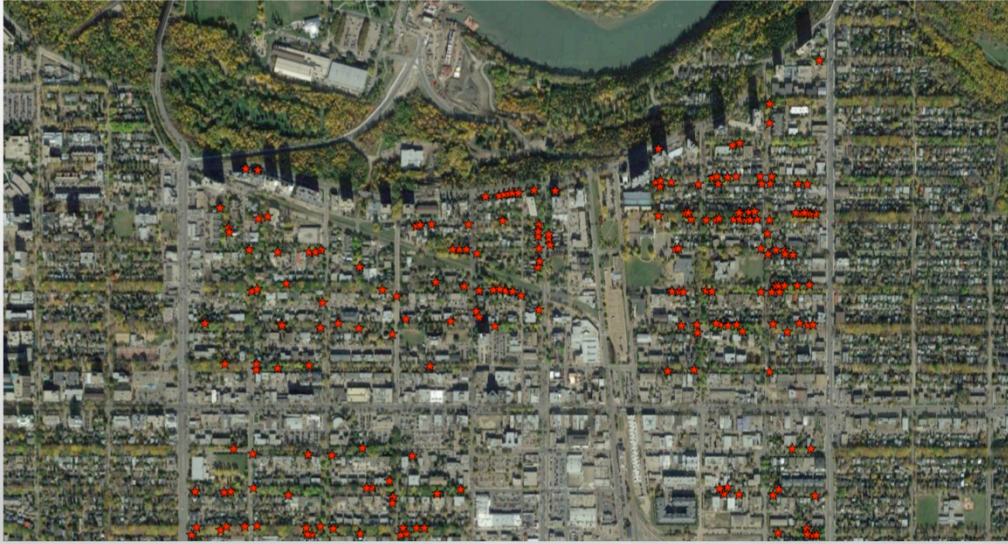
Plotting fences

It is under this guise that this project took its form. Using methods laid out by Wood and Perec we journey into the unseen world of two spaces defined by De Certeau. This project will narrate experiences and observations between the different attributes garnered during the course of my urban ethnography. These infraordinary boundaries of personal frontiers can be made extraordinary under inquisitive eyes and scrutinous lenses.
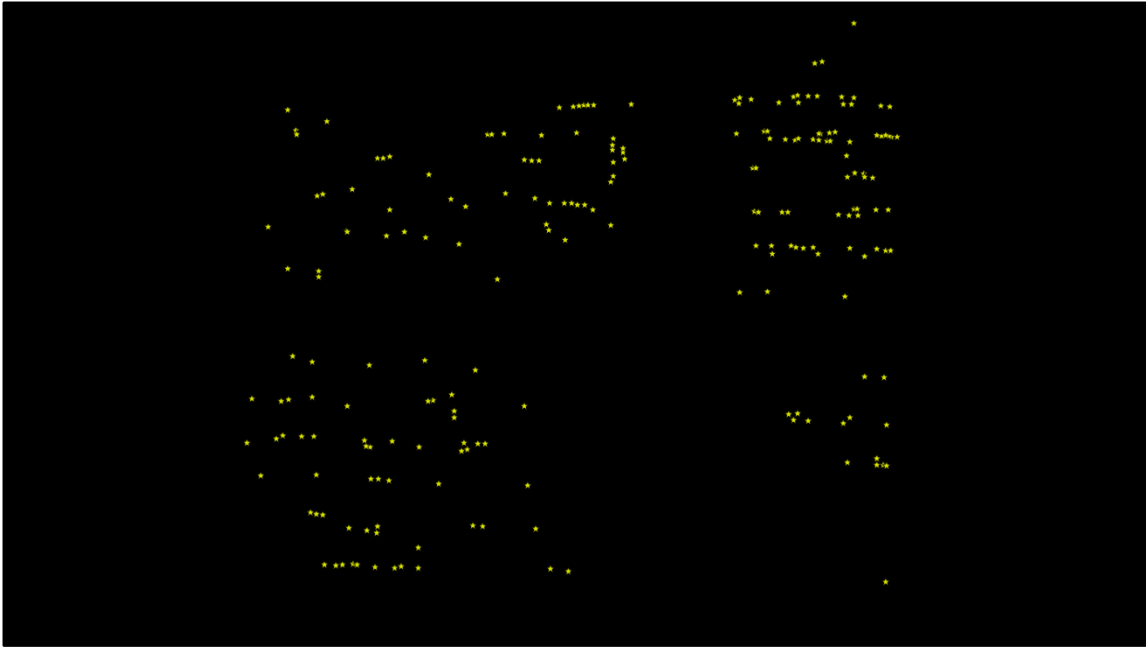
Constellation of isolation

Stars are not readily seen in detail amongst the built environment, often being choked out by the urban glow of light pollution. Under a different lens, we can see the constellation of boundaries and self-imposed isolation. Each twinkle a unique but lonely world separated from one another.
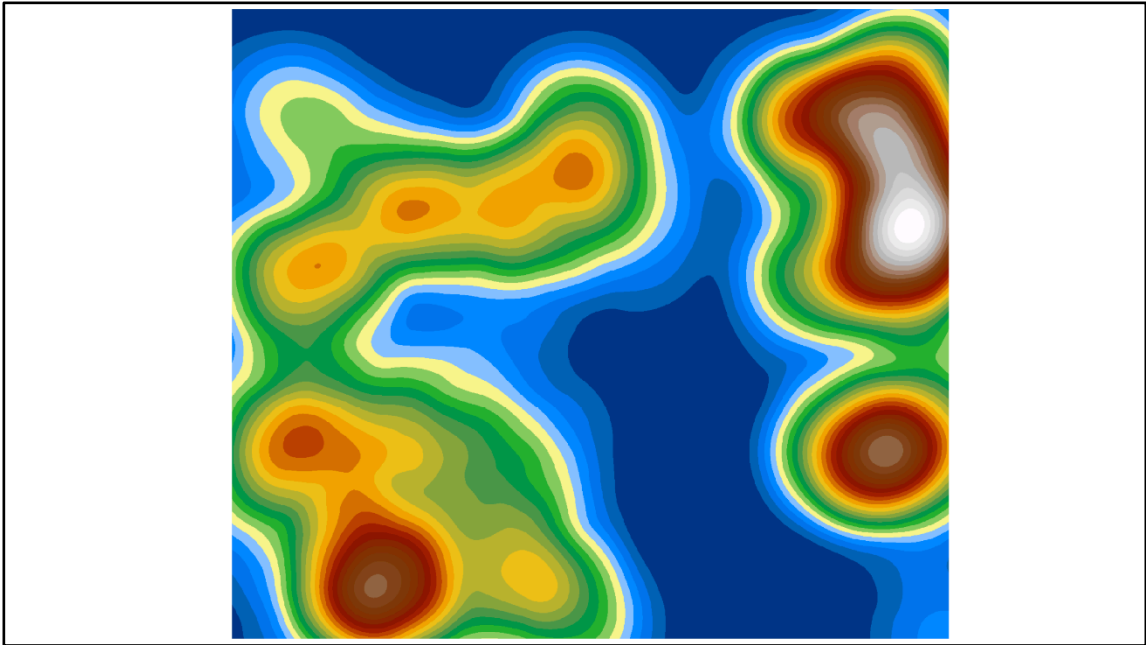
Fence Islands

Characteristics of island houses
On the ground one can't help but notice these islands. De Certeau's threshold is clearly defined but for some even that is not enough to protect against the public. These island houses typically fashion the latest in curtain technology. Many with multiple layers of bed sheets over the doors and windows with not a soul in sight.
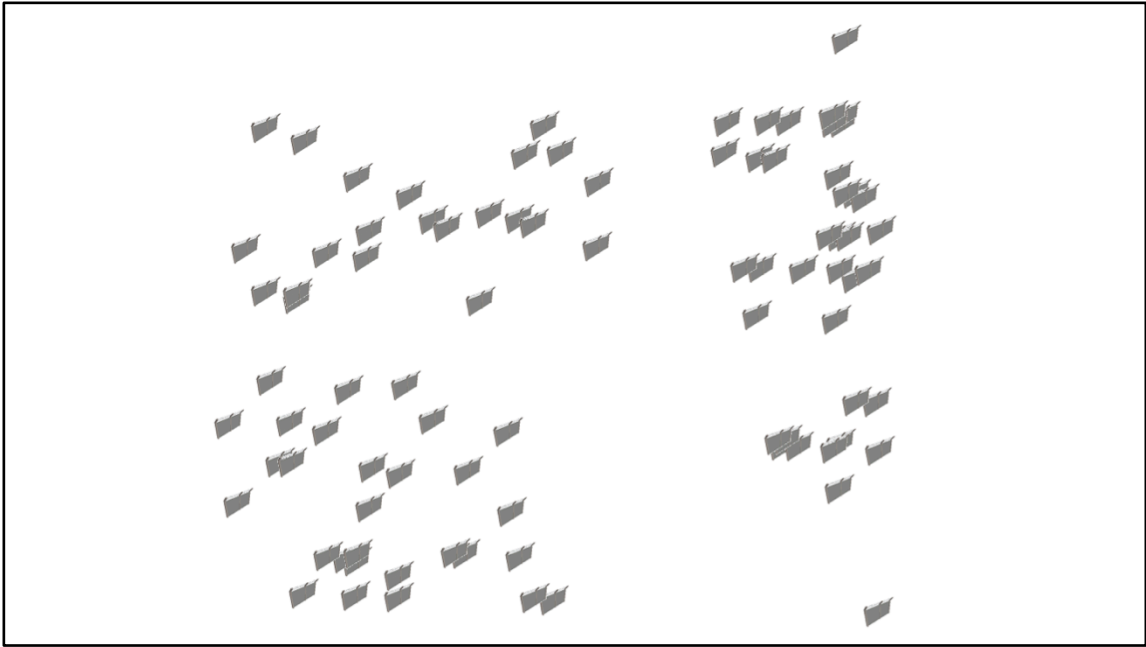
Plotting islands

But where are these islands? When I first began plotting my course and set sail on this project, I made the assumption that one would find more of them closer to the epi-centre to protect against intrusion. Edmonton Police Crime maps, which, by the way, are a crime in themselves to reproduce, often show most crimes located along the centre and then radiate outwards. This map make me question my original assumptions.

Density of islands: Landmasses
What can we see when looking at density of island houses? From this, it would suggest that they are less islands and more defined landmasses.
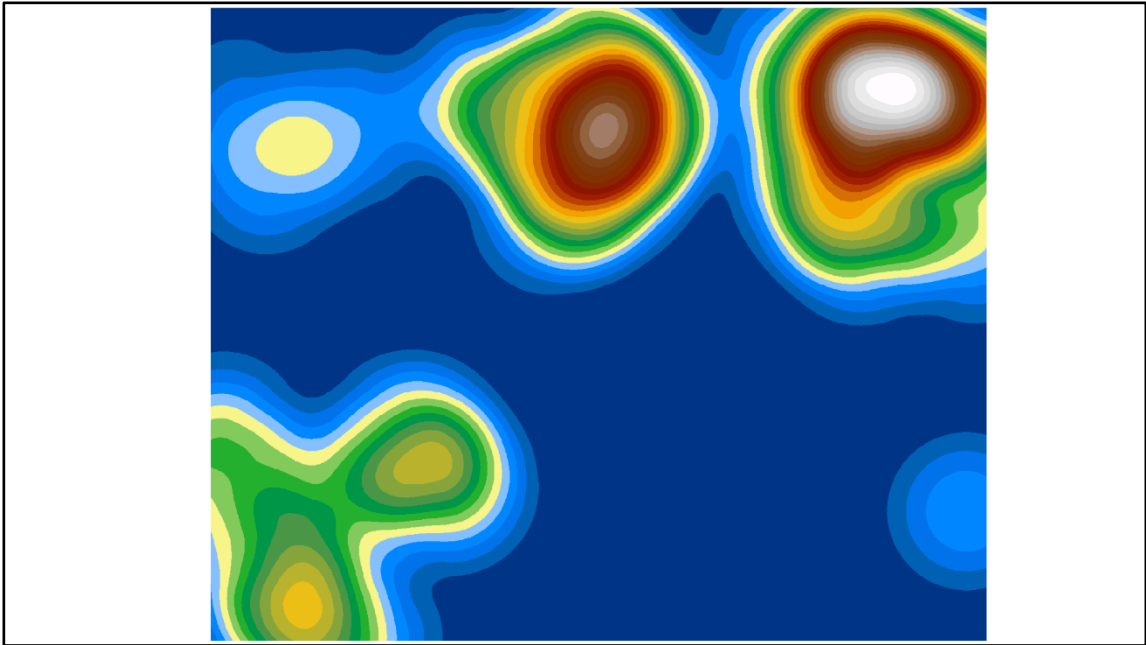
Density of shared fences: Islands
But what about non-island houses. Their density comes in the form of four distinct islands and one reef.
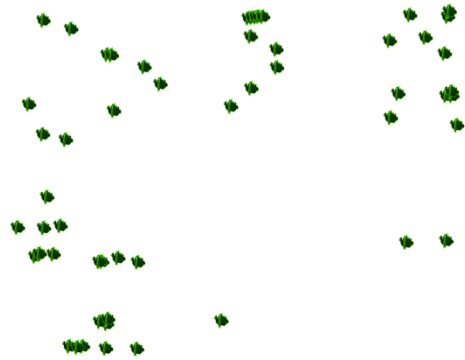
Shared Islands

Shared existence

Occasionally, I would come across houses that had a shared experience of space within the neighbourhood. Much more often though, one neighbour takes on the duty to separate the public and private spheres while the other builds on that initiative.
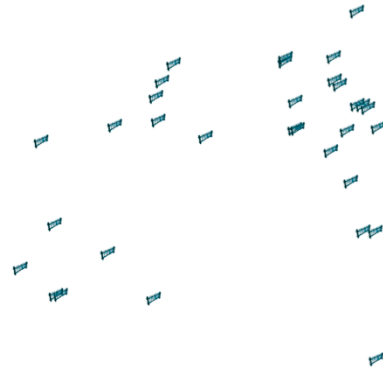
Hedge Fences

Hedge fences

With the exception of the odd outlier, all fences within Old Strathcona are designed with one of three materials. Hedges are utilized to give a natural feeling of separation. They can be found in most places around the neighbourhood and have wonderful summer foliage.

Metal Fences

Metal fences

The second of our eligible fence materials are metal fences. Strong, sturdy, and effective to provide a well-defined boundary that will last for years. Here style and flare are added in the form of vines which will bloom in the warmer months and can safely provide the feeling of a natural setting for when you sit on your chair in your very own private space.

Wood fences

The final category are wood fences. They give a natural feeling without the fuss of yearly trimmings. They cost less than metal and can be easily repaired. The density of wood provides a tough but malleable threshold.
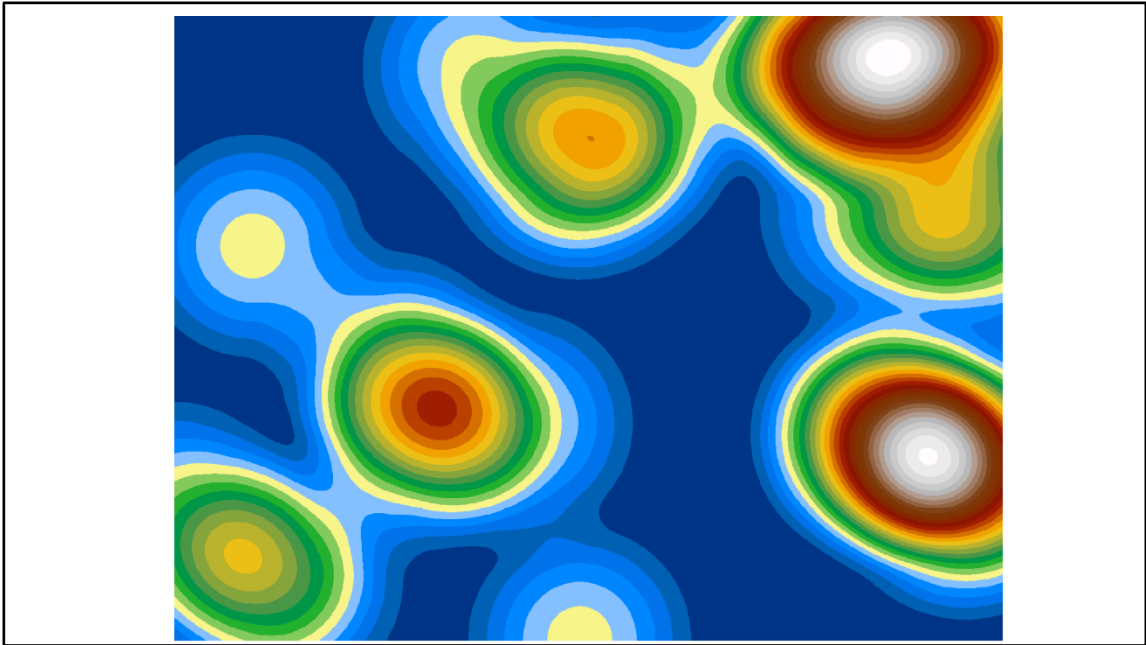
Density of wood

Speaking of the density of wood. The kernel density of the wood fences gives a familiar look to it. The growth rings are more round and defined than any of the density plots. Here you can see the growth of wooden fences in the neighbourhood.

Mixed Style Fences

Combined materials

For many, it seemed like it was more about an opportunity or a progression from one generation to another. Perhaps this white façade is a relic of the past when older houses were torn down to make room for apartments and condos frequently seen on this landscape. Combined fences or composite fences are mostly seen in the form of two of the three common materials. Rarely does one have all three.

Corner Fences
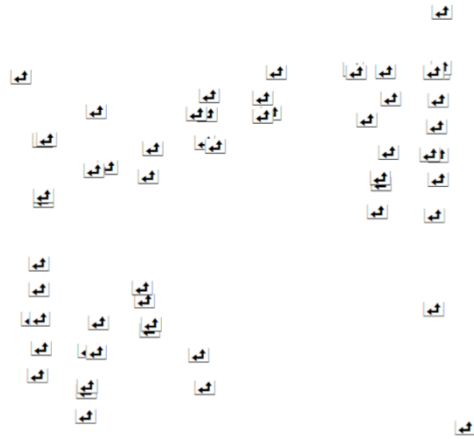
Corner fences

Another attribute that I took note of was if front yard fences were on corners or not. Just from my observations, it seemed like every corner at least had a fence on the side of building often an extension of a backyard. Many were fully protected from the urban frontier. Corner fences also seemed to contain more neighbourhood dogs than non-corner fences.

North Facing Hedges - Shady   South Facing Hedges - Sunny
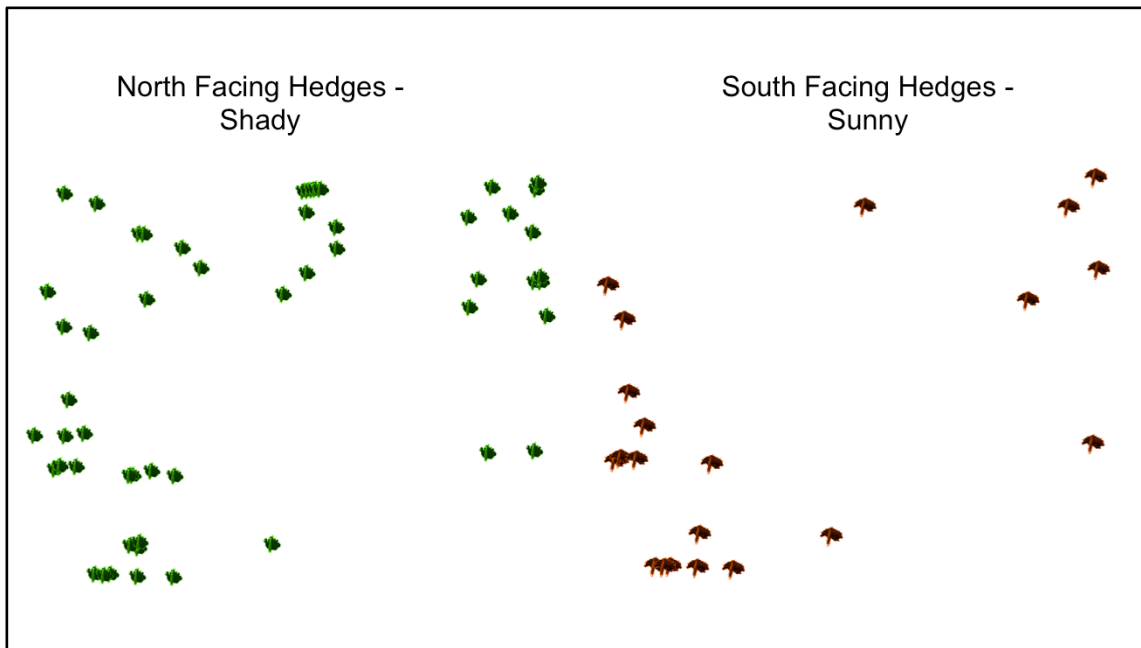
Hedge growth: North or South?

When plotting these fences. Hedge fences also seemed to be much more common in the front yards of shady, north facing houses.

DATA - REMARKABLY UNREMARKABLE

- FENCES WITH HEDGES: 103/212 – 49%
- HEDGE ONLY FENCES: 54/103 – 52%
- SOUTH GROWING: 62/103 – 60%
- NORTH GROWING: 41/103 – 40%
- ISLAND FENCES: 115/212 – 54%
- CONNECTED FENCES: 97/212 – 56%
- COMBINED MATERIAL FENCES: 71/212 – 33%

- CORNER FENCES: 58/212 – 27%
- CORNERS WITH ONE MATERIAL: 41/58 – 75%
- HEDGE ONLY CORNERS: 15/41 – 37%
- METAL ONLY CORNERS: 12/41 – 29%
- WOOD ONLY CORNERS: 14/41 – 34%

A sample of data

What can we glean from the attributes that I recorded? For the most part, these data don't suggest any well-defined trend. That in itself is remarkable. How remarkably unremarkable the distribution of design. Like a neighbourhood quota was established and every new resident followed suit.

Neighbourhood Change

Denis Wood and process

A major theme outlined by Wood is that the neighbourhood is a process. It is a process that transforms the common things around us into "the real stuff of our lives". They are also subject to the process of change. As some areas are encroached by development, others remain and stay strong, adamant on their resistance to this process. Here the separation of spaces becomes symbolic as well. It was here that one of my only social interactions of this project took place. After taking a photo of this house between two commercial buildings, I took a GPS waypoint and moved across the street and took another coordinate. A man yelled at me from in front of his house to ask me why I was taking down addresses. Our conversation briefly outlined his life story and how one by one, these houses are removed to make room for parking lots for the encroaching businesses. In one breath, he explained how he was tired and just wanted to move but how nobody could force him out of his house.

The White Picket Dream

White picket domesticity

The signs of process were evident throughout this entire project. White picket fences which where the ultimate sign of historic domesticity of past generations looked weathered and old. Children long moved away and settled in their own suburban spaces.

White picket survival

Some children remained however, and the white picket dream is still alive for many. Here among this row many children played unaware the of the socially imposed boundaries of the neighbourhood. Public and private are one and the same for them. A man sat on the front steps of one house and I approached the fence cautiously. The safety I felt from the sidewalk quickly eroded the closer I came to this defined boundary. I could feel it all over. As I reached the fence to take a waypoint on my GPS, the feeling was overwhelming and I shook inside. Instinctively, my head was turned down the entire time I was on this frontier. The man eating also felt this and grew uncomfortable at my presence, looking away trying not to make eye contact or looking down to furiously examine his meal.

Historic houses and poetry

It is in these experiences that we can reconfirm what De Certeau describes. A social threshold that one habitually passes. It is near this historic house that my great-grandfather used to live and departed from his own house everyday crossing this boundary into the urban frontier. It is also here that we can reflect upon the poetry of maps that Denis Wood describes, maps that describe the experience of place and, for Perec, to question the habitual.
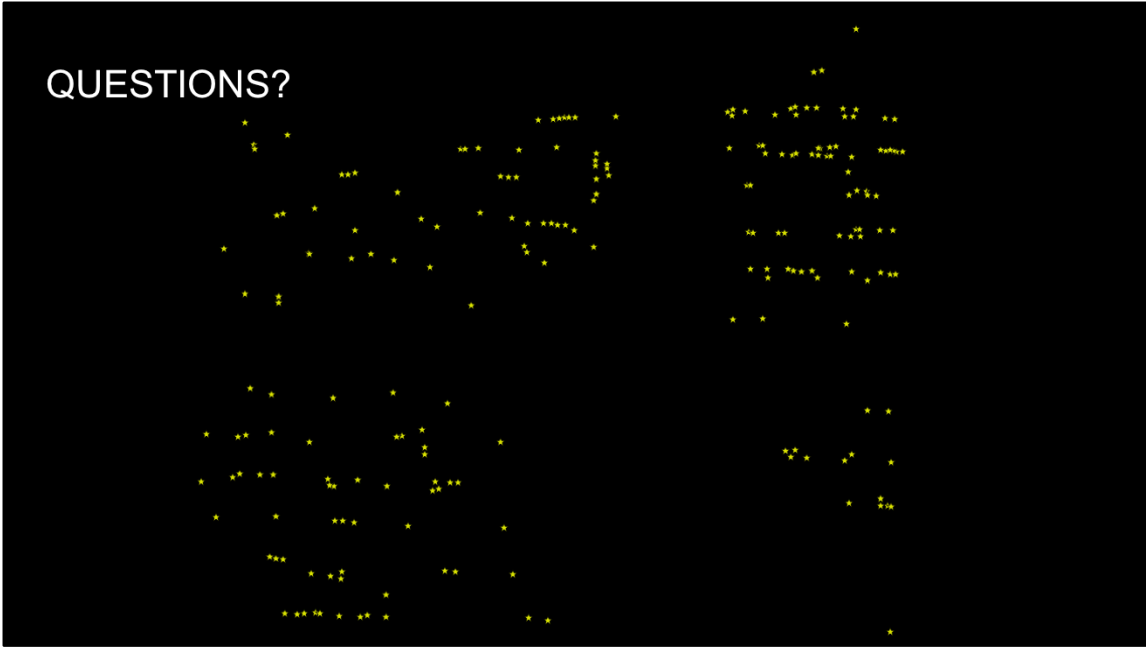
Conflicted end

INSPIRATIONS

CERTEAU, MICHEL DE, LUCE GIARD, AND PIERRE MAYOL. 1998. THE NEIGHBORHOOD & PROPRIETY. CHAPTERS 1 & 2 IN *THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE*, PP. 7-34. MINNEAPOLIS AND LONDON: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS.

PEREC, GEORGES. 1999. APPROACHES TO WHAT? IN *SPECIES OF SPACE AND OTHER PIECES.* LONDON AND NEW YORK: PENGUIN, PP. 209-211.

WOOD, DENIS. 2012. EVERYTHING SINGS: MAPS FOR A NARRATIVE ATLAS. LOS ANGLES: SIGLIO PRESS AND DENIS WOOD.

References

Questions