# BOUNDARY WALL IN PUBLIC LIBRARY
## A PROTECTION FOR A SITE OR A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR AN URBAN SPACE
### *Case study of Divisional Government public library, Rajshahi*

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**Abstract:** Boundary walls, often used for protection of a site are more of visual hindrance than protection itself, especially around public spaces. The solid boundary wall around the government public library of Rajshahi hides the potential the site contains to be utilized by the users. Moreover, the boundary wall adds to the public nuisance in the pedestrian around. This paper discusses the issues of the walls and how it can be reimagined to accommodate public usage into consideration. Literature review provides sufficient reasons and evident to make the wall permeable to public. A questionnaire survey done with the local people provides insight of their perspective towards the library and the outcomes of the survey provides suggestions for improvement.

**Keywords:** *Boundary wall, library*

## 1. Introduction

Boundary walls play a significant role in shaping the organization of human activities within urban environments. These vertical spatial markers serve multiple purposes, including defining property boundaries, ensuring privacy and security, and demarcating social and cultural divisions. (Montgomery, 1998). These boundary walls, despite their functional role in social life, often carry negative connotations. While boundary walls do serve certain practical purposes, such as security and privacy, it is important to be mindful of their potential negative effects on social dynamics, community integration, and the overall urban experience. (Flusty, 1997; Low, 1997). However, their ability to link or isolate two separate locations highlights the relevance of their material and physical circumstances, which serve to communicate while also defining the spaces. (Brighenti, 2009; Madanipour, 2003).

Boundary walls can be seen as implicit in the growing polarization of urban space and contribute to narratives of the loss of publicness. (Flusty, 1997; Flusty, 2001; Franzen, 2001, p. 202; Low, 1997; Low, 2001). These elements not only serve as hard controls that explicitly communicate the desired levels of control while implicitly associating with the adjoining space conditions but also convey messages of ownership, exclusivity, and authority, and their design can align with the nature of the enclosed space. (Brighenti, 2009; Huang, 2012; Marcuse, 1997)

## 2. Literature Review

Boundary walls serve as a physical representation of both social and property ownership. (Marcuse, 1997; Rashid, 1998). Boundary walls encompass more than just property ownership; they also reflect social conditions. They are not static and isolated structures; instead, they exist within the realm of architecture and serve functions that go beyond geographical, legal, social, and cultural dimensions of a settlement. The concepts of hard and soft controls, fearscapes, and the loss of publicness are key aspects that highlight the role of boundary walls. (Carmona, 2010; Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011; Tulumello, 2015; Varna, 2014). The existence of boundary walls is often viewed unfavorably as they are believed to deter and discourage people from engaging with public spaces. These walls create a physical barrier that limits accessibility and can give the impression of exclusivity or private ownership. Instead of promoting a sense of openness and community, boundary walls contribute to a perception that the enclosed space is off-limits or reserved for a select group of individuals. (Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011; Varna, 2014).

As per Madanipour (2003), boundary walls have an ambiguous role as they serve as both the perimeter articulation of an enclosed space and the edge conditions of the continuous space, such as a sidewalk. They have the

potential to either insulate or connect, and both properties encompass enabling and non-enabling conditions. The side of the boundary wall facing the public space, within the context of ownership, is not just a physical representation of enclosure and separation, but it can also be a space that has the potential to facilitate social interactions and bring life to the streets (Alexander et al., 1977; Dovey & Wood, 2015).

### 2.1. BOUNDARY WALLS IN PUBLIC SPACE

The existence of vibrant public life is contingent upon the presence of successful public spaces, as emphasized by Montgomery (1998) and Pugalis (2009). While discussions surrounding the publicness of public spaces often focus on Western contexts, boundary walls are pervasive and their physical attributes are influenced by the actions of individuals, governments, and private corporations (Almatarneh & Mansour, 2013; Brighenti, 2009; Brighenti, 2010; Marcuse, 1997). As cities worldwide undergo similar global urban processes involving the privatization of urban space, studies conducted in Eastern contexts contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the material and spatial conditions of public spaces. Such insights are not only valuable to academic scholars but also to officials and professionals involved in urban planning and design (Kim, 2012; Madanipour, 2010, p. 14).

Symbol of segregation: Boundary walls can serve as physical manifestations of social and economic divisions within communities. They can reinforce the separation between different social groups, perpetuating inequality and exclusion. The visible presence of walls can symbolize the barriers that exist between people and contribute to a sense of division and isolation.

Loss of public space: When boundary walls proliferate, they can fragment the urban landscape and restrict access to public spaces. Continuous walls along streets and neighborhoods can create a sense of enclosure, limiting visibility and creating physical barriers that impede social interaction and community cohesion. This loss of open, shared spaces can be detrimental to the vibrancy and livability of urban areas.

Aesthetically unappealing: In many cases, boundary walls are constructed without much consideration for design aesthetics. They can be monotonous, imposing, and visually unattractive, contributing to a sense of monotony and uniformity in the urban environment. This can negatively impact the overall visual appeal and character of a neighborhood or city.

Perceptions of fear and exclusion: The presence of boundary walls can create a perception of fear and exclusion. They can convey a message of distrust and defensiveness, making residents and visitors feel unwelcome or unsafe. This can have a psychological impact, affecting the sense of community and social cohesion within an area.

Impact on social dynamics: The physical separation created by boundary walls can hinder social interactions and impede the formation of inclusive communities. They can limit opportunities for spontaneous encounters, neighborly interactions, and collective activities. In turn, this can weaken social bonds and hinder the development of a sense of belonging and shared identity among residents.

## 3. Site context

Rajshahi is one of the eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh with an area of 18,174.4 square kilometres. Having a population of approximately 20,353,119 (according to the 2022 Census), currently the city has only one public library to serve its residents.

### 3.1. DIVISIONAL GOVERNMENT PUBLIC LIBRARY, RAJSHAHI



1. Divisional Govt. Public Library
2. Rajshahi Medical College Hospital
3. Teachers' Training College
4. New Govt. Degree College
5. Laxmipur Girls High School
6. Govt. Laboratory High School

Figure 1: photo showing surrounding buildings (Source: Author)

Rajshahi has been known as the "City of Education" for decades due to the high literacy rate among its population and high standards of its educational institutions. The Divisional Govt. Public Library of Rajshahi, established in 1982, is situated in the most prominent educational zone of the city. The library site is surrounded by multiple educational institutes on north, east and south sides. On the north of the library, there is Rajshahi Medical College. On the south and east, the library shares its boundary respectively with New Govt. Degree College and Teachers Training College. The west side of the site is occupied by student dormitory. Moreover, the is also a waterbody on the eastern side of the library which belongs to the Teachers Training College. Despite being surrounded by these remarkable educational institutes, the library compound is segregated from all of them by a solid boundary wall on every side, making the library accessible only through its main entrance.

3.2. BOUNDARY WALL AROUND THE LIBRARY

The boundary wall around the site of the library is a matter of great concern in terms of making the library accessible for more people. The boundary wall on the north side prevents people from noticing the existence of the library itself. Temporary street shops take the advantage of the boundary wall and occupy the pedestrian walkway in front of the library boundary. Therefore, it creates an unwelcoming entrance for the users of the library.

The boundary wall on the northern east side isolates the library from the Teachers Training College, which interrupts the teachers and students from gaining a direct access to the library. The boundary wall on the south side also discourages the students of New Govt. Degree College from having an easy access to the library. Even on the eastern side, the solid boundary wall is unnecessary as the student dormitory poses no threat to the security of the library compound. However, a visual connection through a perforated segregation between the library site and the dormitory would be more pleasing.
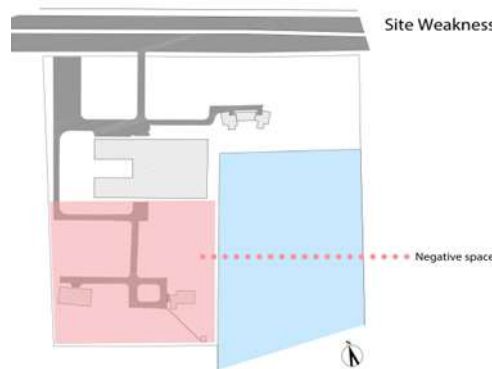


Figure 2: photo showing the backyard which is now a negative space (Source: Author)

Moreover, the boundary walls have created some unused and negative spaces around the library building due to having no human interactions and circulations in those places. These negative spaces do not have any functions and they are not maintained at all. They are unsafe after it gets dark and becomes a safe ground for drug addicts. Other antisocial activities and crimes also take place inside the library site behind these boundaries after the working hours of the library in absence of necessary surveillance and maintenance.

## 4. Methodology

The library building is located around some major educational institutions of the locality. People from the neighbourhood were asked to participate in an anonymous questionnaire survey to observe the perception of the existing building and the boundary wall. 35 responses were recorded through online survey and majority of the respondents were between 26 to 30 years.
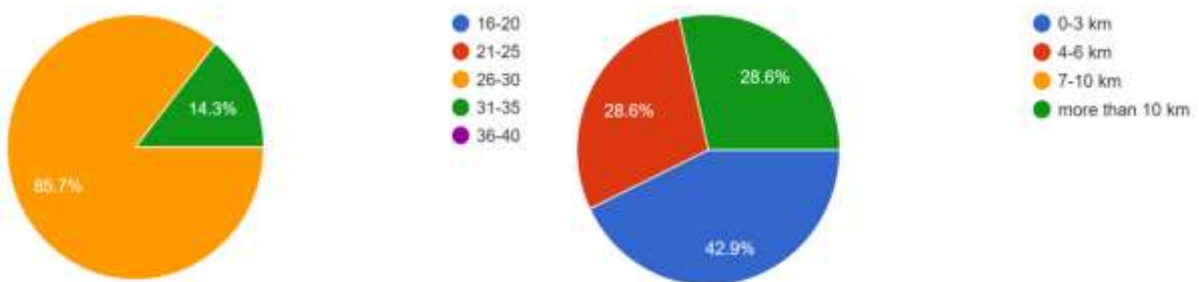


Figure 3: pie chart showing the responses from questionnaire; more than 80% of the respondents were between 26-30 years (left) and they were from a varied distance from the central library (right)

The existence of a waterbody just beside the library wall is not known to everyone; when asked about it, around half of the respondents were not familiar with the presence of such a natural waterbody. The existing entry to the library complex is rather hidden and not visible from a distance. About 70% people think that the entrance is not clearly distinguishable, and even more people claims the entry to be uninviting.
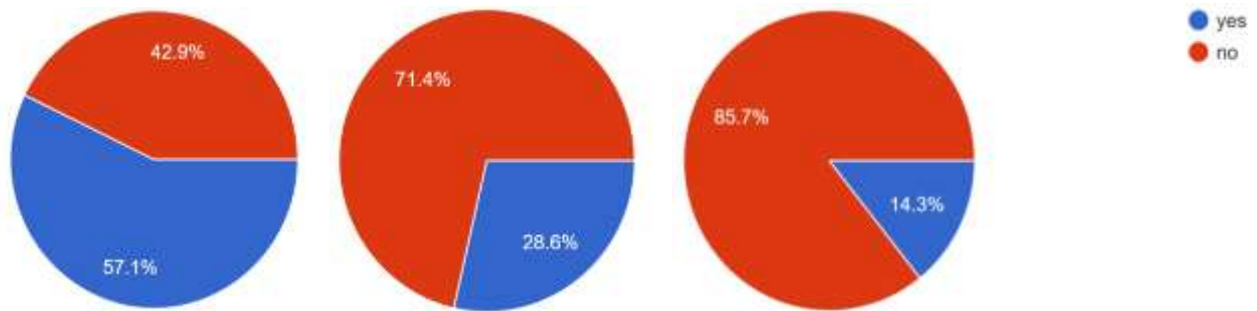


Figure 4: pie chart showing the responses from questionnaire; 42% of the respondents were not aware of the existence of a natural waterbody along the boundary wall of the library complex (left), more than 70% of the people think the entrance is not easily visible and a larger percentage, about 86% people think it is not inviting (right)

## 5. Discussion

The entrance to the public library compound is through the northern side, which comprises of a small entry through the walled area. The boundary wall does not only keep the public library hidden from plain sight but also hinders the opportunity to use the front space for public gatherings during events like book fairs, festivals or national programs. Being the only public library in the neighbourhood, the place has the potential to attract more people. Currently the library is not utilized to the fullest, only being used by elder citizens mostly for reading newspapers and magazines and some events once in a while by nearby educational institutions.



Figure 5: photos showing the negligence towards the use of library (*Source: Author*)

On the south eastern side, there is a waterbody which act as a physical barrier itself between the library and the teachers training college. Though the ownership of the waterbody lies with the teachers' training college, the view towards it can be an attraction for the library users. The solid wall along the edge of the waterbody leaves only room for imagination to predict it's existence. This view towards a well-maintained pond can be a relief for the people reading for a longer period of time as well as for the public visiting the library compound only for recreation.

The library is situated at the heart of the city where there are prominent educational institutions, however, the library is rarely used by these institutions. As per the idiom phrase goes "out of sight, out of mind", the library being fortified with a solid wall remains neglected. If the wall is permeable at places, with access for people to move through the compound will ensure more usage of the place.

Due to lack of usage of the landscape around the building, the place has turned into a backyard and a dead pocket space. Increased mobility through the site will increase maintenance of the place and can be a public attraction in the neighbourhood. The green spaces around the building, specially in the back of the building can be used for outdoor activities of the library itself- can be the plot for book fairs, pop up book stalls or festival gatherings.

## 6. Conclusion

When intended to safeguard a site, boundary walls are more of an eyesore than a real barrier, especially when placed around public areas. The government public library in Rajshahi has a thick boundary wall surrounding it that conceals the possibilities for user interaction. Additionally, the border wall increases the overall public annoyance for nearby pedestrians. These walls can be made permeable, opened up at places even removed to attract more people. If removal of a wall invites more people, then it should be done to take the opportunity to bring vibrance to the place. The neglected backyard can be a place for urban park not only for the users of the library but also the people in the neighbourhood.

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