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*Publication date:*  
2023

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*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Holm, L. (2023). My neighbour, the subject of civilisation. *Lo Squaderno*, 65, 9-13.

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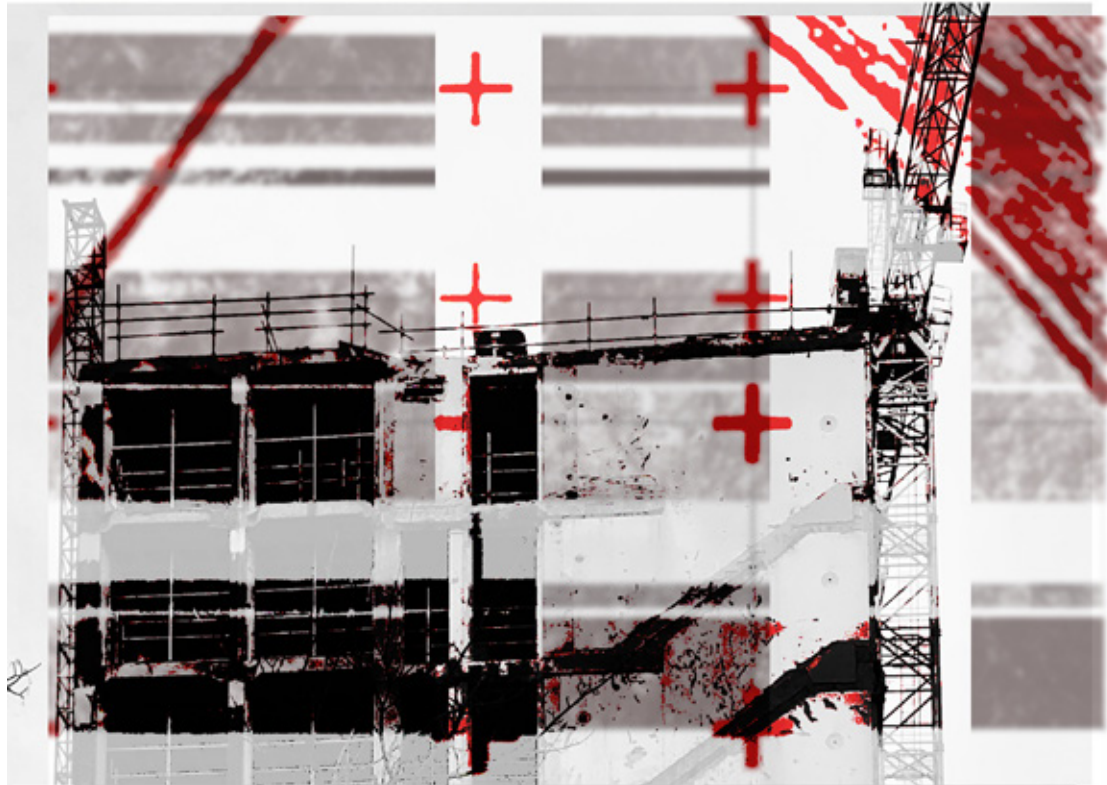
Explorations in Space and Society  
No. 65 | July 2023  
ISSN 1973-9141  
[www.losquaderno.net](http://www.losquaderno.net)

Care and Critical Action

65 Lo sQuaderno

# My neighbour the subject of civilisation

Lorens Holm



*Good fences make good neighbours.*  
*Robert Frost, Mending wall*

In Frost's poem, two neighbours pace their wall, replacing the stones that have toppled. Each to their own side. They do it every Spring. Like a ritual. Frost is critical of the wall, in a neighbourly way, because his neighbour wants the wall and he doesn't see the point. The poem recalls the spectre of the American range wars of the 1890s, between cattlemen and farmers. They were excessively violent, largely because of the unregulated nature of the terrain in which their conflicts of interest were staged.

## **An introduction to the neighbour**

Ethics is about how we live well together. The three major religions of Islam Judaism and Christianity have chosen the neighbour as the principal site for our ethical duty to others. They have further chosen the words *love thy neighbour as thyself* as the principal form in which to express it. Even most atheists have adopted this form without critique. Ethics goes back to Leviticus where it has always been territorial and contractual. In Leviticus, it is love thy neighbour as thyself and leave the edges of your fields unharvested for gleaning by the road-wearied indigent or love thy neighbour as thyself and pay your employees on time. The neighbour reappears in *The Gospel According to St. Luke*. A priest and a Levite pass a victim of highway robbery without helping. The Samaritan was the next person on the highway, and he stops to help. In Paul Ricœur's treatment of *Luke*, he describes ethics as an eruption of the charity of the individual through the stolid surface of the socius. (2) The recurring scenario of the road in *Leviticus* and *Luke* points to the transient, nomadic, and serial nature of the neighbour. (3)

The neighbour is a problematic figure. My neighbour has no affinity to me, and there is no reason they should share my tastes, lifestyles, or histories, which is not a problem except that they live next door. Most of us don't mind weird, until it is on our doorstep. The neighbour is an accidental and contingent category of other based solely on spatial or temporal propinquity. My neighbour may be of any race, gender, political affiliation, social circle, advocacy group,... and is my neighbour simply because they are near me. It is, in other words, a bond that is not articulated in the symbolic order of society, but in the reality of the spatial and temporal orders, which may explain the peculiarities of party wall legislation.

For a short piece which ticks cosy truths about the neighbour and community, you could do worse than a *Guardian* sketch about the helpful neighbour. (4) It masks the fact that the neighbour is also the site where disagreements become personal and invasive. It also masks the coercive nature of

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communities. Both of which are the starting point for Mark Cousins' public lectures on the Neighbour which critique the neighbour from a psychoanalytic position. (5) Cousins distinguishes two connotations for the neighbour based on its etymological affinities: the near-man (Old English, German) and the next-man (Romance Languages). To sketch this field of connotations is one of the accomplishments of these lectures. His interest is to shift the neighbour from a spatial category to a temporal one, from near to next.

The near-man takes the form of a neighbourhood and forms the basis of the community with its implications of exclusion and hierarchy (someone always speaks for the community).

The next-man is the constituent of an open series explored by counting, whose form is not the neighbourhood but that 20th C British social formation, the queue. It relates to the serial nature of domestic life, the queuing for goods, services, passports, . . . . Mark Cousins taps into Aristotle's distinction between politics and economics, or state and household, which distinction is one of the bases for Arendt's discussion of the polis in *The Human Condition*. This distinction was put into architectural circulation by Pier Vittorio Aureli, who argues that it can be used to understand the different approaches to human settlement: if politics relates to public life and city form; economics relates to the household and the management of the ongoing process of urbanisation. My relations with my neighbour do not go through the forms of politics but through the economic management of the home, a domestic other. (6)

We can relate Cousins' distinction to our Biblical sources. The near-man shares the territorial ambitions of *Leviticus'* neighbour. It is a spatial category, grounded in the parcelisation and ownership of land. Land is either acquired by purchase or conquest. The next-man is a temporal category related to *Luke*. You go through the queue until someone offers you charity. It is not about land rights as expressed in either common law or planning statute, but about managing the procedures of daily life.

### Party walls

'The [Party Wall Act 1996] contains a special statutory code governing party structures and the rights of adjoining owners. . . . A special procedure has to be followed if the building owner wishes to invoke his rights under the Act.' (7)

The problematic nature of the neighbour is recognised by architecture in the form of party wall legislation. Most cities have procedures that recognise the co-dependency of neighbours who reside on either side of a parting or dividing wall. In the UK, these are inscribed in statutory party wall procedures, which are intended to keep the potentially incendiary relations between neighbours sweet. The party wall is the wall that separates your house from your neighbour's. Similarly, party fences. In a London terrace, the property line typically goes down the middle of the wall. They form a pattern of parallel lines perpendicular to the street façade. You and your neighbour enjoy certain rights and responsibilities with respect to each other. When you build up against your neighbour's property, the negotiation with your neighbour is taken out of your hands and the hands of your architect and given over to a specially appointed party wall surveyor. The neighbour does the same. These proxies reach an agreement about rights and liabilities on your behalf, and if they cannot, it goes to arbitration with a third party, appointed by the Institute of Party Wall Surveyors. Even if the wall is solely on your side of the property line, your neighbour still has usufruct over your wall (they can bear on it) simply by virtue of the fact that their house touches it. You cannot refuse them, but they have to go through a notification procedure. Architecture recognises that dealing with your neighbour is fraught business; it is always personal, and so it needs to go to someone who has no interest in the agreement. The love that Romeo and Juliet shared was doomed because the opening they made in the wall that parted them, violated this architectural law of the neighbour, we might call it the taboo of the party wall.

### Psychoanalysis

'But if for us, God is dead, it is because he has always been dead, and that's what Freud says. He has never been the father except in the mythology of the son. . . .' Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1986/92). (8)

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues that the commandment *love thy neighbour as thyself* occupies the place of absence represented by the death of a God who has always already been dead. It is compensation for something that never obtained. In psychoanalytic discourse, the neighbour is a contested term, and the commandment is problematic, not least because it is intuitively correct and wrong at the same time. We want the neighbour near to us – in togetherness is strength – but they are always too close or too loud. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud is aghast at having to love his neighbour, who would sooner kill him than love him, if they were not constrained by civilisation. Kenneth Reinhard argues that the neighbour raises the terrifying spectre of being subjected to someone else's fundamentally alien pleasure, combining as it does, the extremes of being close and foreign. (10) Lacan links the neighbour to pleasure and enjoyment (*jouissance*), and in particular to the salient feature of pleasure in Freud's thought – that it is shadowed by an enjoyment *beyond* pleasure, beyond the realm where pleasure is articulated in thought and action. It is unnameable but intractable, useless but unexpendable. Lacan argues that *love thy neighbour as thyself* conflates imaginary and symbolic categories. *Love thyself* goes through the spectral magic of the mirror, whereas attachment to others goes through language and symbolic systems held in common by all. We have all seen how self-love can kill a conversation – it makes a bore of the best of us. It hollows out the self because it leads to a denial of the unconscious. Finally, the command to love makes love legally binding. It joins love to the law, enforced love, which is a formula for the cruelty and self-aggression of the super-ego. (11)

### Infrastructure of civilisation

Imagine if Nollí drew a section of Rome to accompany his plan, that highlighted the party walls and the co-dependence of properties. It would delineate properties not spaces. It would constitute a ground whose figure is not the urban object, but areas without ownership, which may or may not be public spaces. This party fabric relates to a fundamental condition of our relationship to the land – that we parcelise it for ownership. Commodification is often inscribed in the originary planning of the city (in the 1811 Commissioners Plan, Manhattan was laid out in blocks and subdivided into plots).

The party wall is a form of urban infrastructure. It extends the public infrastructure of the city into the domestic realm where everything is personal. It forms a network whose main feature is that it is hidden. Imagine a ground plan of the city in which the street façades that envelope the urban blocks have been removed so that only the parting walls remain. The blocks would now be distinguished by the texture, density, and complexity of their ownership, rather than their shape. We could call this plan, a property or neighbour plan of the city. Relations of private to private would become important, and relationships that we usually regard as important, like the relation of private block to public street, would be less important. (12)

Unlike the façade, the party wall forms no part of Lorenzetti's picture of the city of good government, although it is probably more important for keeping the peace than good government. Party walls constitute the hidden texture of civilisation, in contrast to the city walls that keep us safe from barbarians and the façades that articulate its public and private realms. The threat that the party wall addresses is the internal threat to civilisation which Freud identified, the threat posed by the violence inherent to individuals. Domestic wall and public space are in a dialogic relationship: often, conflict in one is resolved only to shift to conflict in the other. (13) The party wall is the domestic counterpart to Arendt's space of appearance, the agonistic space of boulevard piazza and media, where conflicts

of interest are staged publicly in productive ways. These conflicts drive civilisation forward. The party wall is where domestic conflicts are internalised in order that civility can be maintained, the depository for the simmering resentments that would otherwise tear civilisation apart.

This texture of civilisation constitutes a domestic network of care. It is unlike other networks of care, which go through public programs, like child benefits or pensions, which are supported by the public purse; or go through institutions like charities, hospitals, spas, all of which, whether publicly or privately owned, have a public face that announces them in the public realm of the city. The care we owe to our neighbours is problematic precisely because it goes in the direction of a domestic duty. The party wall is the material model of the social bond that goes from individual to individual; it is incremental, cumulative, compensatory; it is on the side of metabolism – the metabolism of civilisation – and the multitude. The party wall permeates the city like a common grammar that articulates our care of the other. It works by relay, like the game of Chinese whispers. A takes care of B, B takes care of C. . . . To the extent that A takes care of C, it is indirect, diffused, going through others in the queue. You can imagine it rippling through civilisation, like unconscious life.

## Conclusion

The neighbour is the central figure in western ethical thought. This paper focuses on the neighbour because we want to cross the ethical discourse of care with the spatial territorial contractual discourse of architecture. This paper is, in effect, a prolegomena to any future discourse that may come forth as an ethics of the environment. Frost's neighbour wants stone walls; Frost defers to keep the peace. The ethics is in the act of deference. The wall is but a sublimation. Ethics is about living well together. Living well appears not to be something that resides in the individual, but between them. The lesson of our detour into psychoanalytics is that the neighbour – and that surface with the forbidden potential for a framed opening – is a formation of the super-ego in confrontation with the irreducible alterity of the other. *The love thyself* that resides in the subject of civilisation, and is externalised in the neighbour, and materialised in the party wall, is a relationship laced with anxiety, aggression, and cruelty. It is both summoned and regulated by civilisation. Freud and Ricoeur argue, to different ends, that we need the laws and institutions of civilisation to love, but they put that love in different relations to civilisation. For Freud, the command to love is a constraint imposed by civilisation (that's what civilisation does, it constrains us), and as a constraint, it is a source of unhappiness. Ricoeur's love is an exception that is made possible by, and erupts through, these constraints. The neighbour conflates the subjective categories of self and other, the territorial categories of near and far, the social categories of private and public and the political categories of household and state. It is clear why ethics should choose the figure of the neighbour – the neighbour is such a liminal figure, its liminality the flashpoint for care and for the aggression that prevents care.

## Endnote

1. Robert Frost (1916) 'Mending wall' in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, pp.33-34.
2. Paul Ricoeur (1955) 'The Socius and the Neighbour' in *History and Truth*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, pp. 98-109.
3. The Book of Leviticus, 19: 9-18, Old Testament. The Gospel According to St. Luke, 10: 30-37, New Testament.
4. Hafeezah Soni, '... a good neighbour' in Moya Samer, compiler, 'How To Be Good' in Saturday Guardian issue 66, 31.12.22, p. 16.
5. Mark Cousins gave a public lecture at the Architectural Association, London, every Friday evening during the academic term, each year addressing a different topic. See the Mark Cousins Lecture Archive at <https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/markcousins>. For the lecture series 'The Neighbour' (academic year 2009-10) see <https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/markcousins/34>. The Mark Cousins Lecture Archive is one of the great contributions to the oral tradition of public life.
6. Pier Vittorio Aureli (2011) *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press. Hannah Arendt (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
7. Anthony Speaight and Gregory Stone (1996) *Architect's Legal Handbook: the law for architects*, sixth edition. Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, p.163.
8. Jacques Lacan (1986) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. Trans. by Dennis Porter. Ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (NYC: Norton, 1992) p.177. Chapter XIII, The death of God, joins up the originary murder of Moses, the murder of the primordial father; the foundation of morals, the foundation of the law; the destruction of the temple, the sublimation of architecture, the death of God, the command to love God, and the command to love the neighbour.
9. Sigmund Freud (1930) *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. by Joan Riviere and James Strachey. Ed. by M. Masud R. Khan, International Psycho-Analytical Library. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1975, pp.48-9.
10. Reinhard, Kenneth, Eric L. Santner, and Slavoj Žižek (2005) *The Neighbour: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 11-75.
11. Lacan (1986) *The Ethics*, op. cit., principally in chapter XIV 'Love of one's neighbour' pp.179-190, in particular p.186, although the discussion is returned to in a number of places throughout the text.
12. The relation to the street is not quite irrelevant. In British planning law, for a structure to count as a party structure, the two interiors must have separate entrances from the street. Many TV comedies, including *Neighbours*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends*, tarry with the ambiguous disconnect between street façade and interior. The party wall seems to fall in the register of comedy; it puts individual in relation to individual. The façade, which puts the individual in relation to public life, falls in the register of tragedy.
13. These shifts often happen in the periphery. For instance, the planning debates around on- versus off-street (public versus private) parking.