

UniGR-CBS Working Paper Vol. 19

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A border-theoretical conceptualisation

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UniGR-CBS 2024

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10230105

San Diego, California: Borderland Dynamics Between North Park and Mid-City. A border-theoretical conceptualization

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ABSTRACT San Diego's central neighborhoods are in the midst of a municipally and privately led redevelopment phase, which is gradually progressing from one neighborhood to the other and slowly transforming lower-income communities into 'trendy' places for affluent populations. This is particularly the case in the neighborhood of North Park, which has been redeveloped in the last decades and has recently begun to expand eastward across two inner-city highways into the large Hispanic and Asian American community of Mid-City. Particularly along the large commercial streets that link the two communities, previously produced and habituated differences are currently re-negotiated – socially and functionally but also economically, symbolically, and architecturally –, which provokes the emergence of a (temporal) hybrid in-between zone that is simultaneously part of the one and the other neighborhood. These changes are tied to municipal and private redevelopment efforts and are of significant everyday relevance for the residents of North Park and Mid-City alike. However, these processes have not yet undergone in-depth analysis. Our paper addresses this gap by developing a theoretical framework of multi-dimensional b/ordering processes, which takes account of the multi-faceted complexity of this transitional and temporal borderland. On the basis of this framework, empirical results from a mixed-method research study (qualitative interviews and participatory observations among others), conducted between 2019 and 2022, will be used to trace how San Diego's progressing redevelopment trend furthers the multi-dimensional shift, perforation, and re-negotiation of boundaries and thus the emergence of a *hybrid urban borderland* between North Park and Mid-City.

San Diego (California), urban border studies, hybrid urban borderlands, urban bordering processes, urban redevelopment

Introduction: Redevelopment and Bordering Processes

The international cross-border metropolis of San Diego-Tijuana stretches over 16,000 square kilometers from the military base Camp Pendleton and the City of Oceanside in the northwest, the popular mountain town Julian in the northeast over the central and southern jurisdictions of San Diego County to the three Northern Mexican municipalities of Tijuana and Playas de Rosarito in the southwest and Tecate in the southeast (Herzog and Sohn, 2017). The international region is home to more than five million inhabitants and is strongly entangled through everyday life ties across the U.S.-Mexico border, which create a complex borderland (cf. see general Anzaldúa 2012, [1987]). These connections across the border are, on the one hand, 'bottom-up' networks – all the social connections and efforts to unite the physically bordered region – and, on the other hand, 'top-down' multi-level cross-border governance structures and guidelines that coordinate the shared markets, production and manufacturing, tourism but also the environmental strategies in this rapidly growing region (cf. Mendoza and Dupeyron, 2020; Peña, 2007; Roßmeier, 2020; on multilevel cross-border governance see generally Crossey and Weber, 2020; Hooghe and Marks, 2003).

In the following, the focus lies on the northern half of the cross-border metropolis and its urban structures that resemble the bordering processes known from the level of international borders. Since 2004, the City of San Diego is officially referred to as the "City of Villages" due to its diversity of distinct neighborhoods nestled in the unique Southern Californian geography of beaches, canyons, hills, and freeways. This new title has been created as a label for the radically different "smart growth strategy" adopted by the City and the County of San Diego. The new objective constitutes a planning turnaround from the decade-long outward thrust of the metropolis in the form of low-density residential settlements and employment centers. Five pilot projects have been chosen for this objective, which ought to be developed into walkable, mixed-use, transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly "urban villages." In this context, the neighborhood center of North Park (north-east of San Diego's downtown) as well as a location on the commercial corridor of El Cajon Boulevard in the adjacent Mid-City (see Figure 1) have been designated pilot projects for extensive redevelopment and densification in order to "correct" the development trajectories of these two previously disinvested communities.

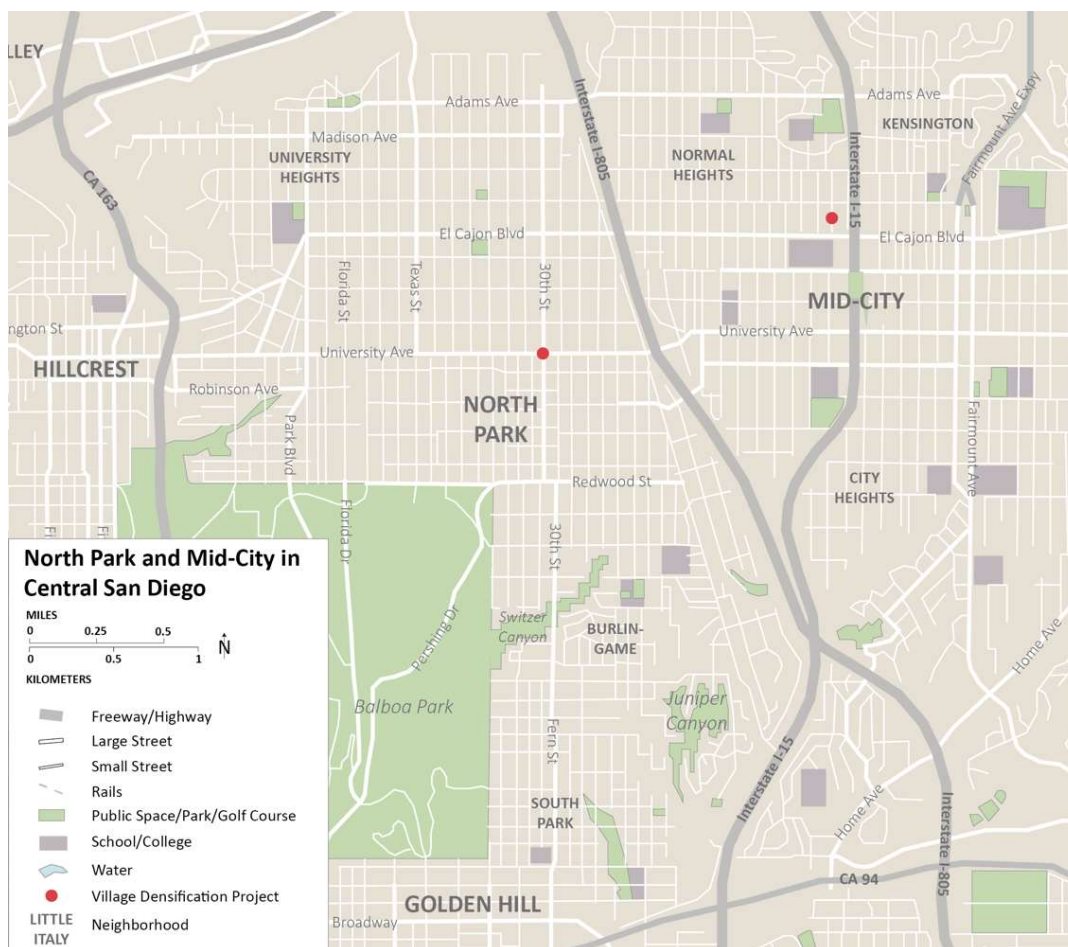


Figure 1. North Park and Mid-City in central San Diego.

Source: Cartography Albert Rossmeier 2023.

After their successful development in the early 20th century, the communities of the inner ring as well as the downtown area, have been declining due to the eminent success of suburban developments stretching along the coast and into the county's backcountry (Griffin and Weeks, 2014). Especially in the post-World War II era, the city's affluent White population had gradually left the once vibrant inner ring. Thus, by the end of the century, the central areas had developed into low-income communities with "failing business districts and deteriorating neighborhoods" (CofSD, 2016, p. 4). Neglected by affluent populations as well as by economic and planning forces, North Park and Mid-City exemplified the widespread demise of U.S.-American inner-ring suburbs of the late 20th and early 21st century (cf. Hanlon, 2008, 2010; Lee and Leigh, 2005; Vicino, 2008). However, in the late 1990s, the community of North Park had been reached by the redevelopment dynamics that ignited in the late 1970s and early '80s in the neighborhood of Hillcrest to its west (Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco, 2020, pp. 39-40). Eventually, the decade-long distress and municipal neglect in North Park has been followed by a phase of renewed economic, planning, and social interest (see generally Hanlon and Airgood-Obrycki, 2018; Sweeney and Hanlon, 2017). More recently, the redevelopment dynamics began sprawling even further east into the lower-income community of Mid-City and its neighborhoods of Normal Heights and City Heights. In the course of this "redevelopment wave," the "desirable" concept of the neighborhood in the west seems to push into, rebrand, and absorb parts of the community in the east.

The present study traces how the spatial progression of the redevelopment processes is manifesting in the neighborhoods adjacent to North Park and challenging socialized neighborhood boundaries. For this aim, a geography of multi-dimensional urban bordering processes is developed, which highlights the ambiguous and spatio-temporal in-betweenness that emerges between the new trendy neighborhoods on the one side and the ethnically-diverse low-income communities on the other side. By means of this new perspective, it becomes possible to illuminate the various dimensions of urban bordering and thus to look closer into the multi-faceted emergence of the *hybrid urban borderland* (Roßmeier and Weber, 2023 [2021]) between North Park and Mid-City. This endeavor allows to shed light on the imminent everyday consequences—the loss of place—of the low-income population in San Diego's inner-ring and will eventually not only further the theoretical understanding of everchanging urban borders and borderlands but will provide valuable insight for the fields of urban planning and urban/neighborhood studies.

Theoretical and Methodical Approach to the Redevelopment Between North Park and Mid-City

The Social Construction and Processuality of Neighborhoods

Within the aim of tracing neighborhood change processes, it is necessary to illuminate the notion of neighborhoods conceptually. Neighborhood studies are carried out in various human and social-scientific disciplines, such as geography, sociology, and ethnology, which approach this complex and "context dependent" (Sperling, 2012, p. 222) object of investigation in diverse ways, with their unique logics and concerns. The large volume of literature and research on neighborhoods testifies to the concept's multitude of connecting points. The result of this versatility, however, is a broad scope of neighborhood definitions (Galster, 2001; Nicotera, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the neighborhood concept is labeled one of "the most notoriously slippery [in] social science" (Taylor, 2012, p. 225; cf. Mooney-Melvin, 1985) and is characterized by a "definitional ambiguity" (Coulton, 2012, p. 232) rather than a universal singular meaning. Consequently, Lohmann and McMurran (2009, p. 67) pose the fundamental question: "What exactly comprises the neighborhood?"

As argued by Coulton et al. (2013, p. 140), neighborhood research in urban studies is frequently dealing with this conceptual inaccuracy through "simplifying assumptions about boundaries, often relying on census geography to operationalize the neighborhood units" in study (cf. Coulton et al., 2001; Sperling, 2012; on the difficulty to delineate suburban neighborhoods see Airgood-Obrycki et al., 2020). Equivalently, guided by Euclidian logics of space and scale, also urban planners and policy-makers typically draw on fixed spatial units (Davoudi, 2012). However, the positivist nature of these approaches neglects the possible "lack of congruence among local actors' perceptions of boundaries" (Galster, 2001, p. 2112; cf. Rumford, 2012, p. 899), which are—in turn—significant aspects of the organization of social everyday life in cities. This is becoming particularly obvious in the context of urban redevelopment, in which neighborhood boundaries are not "static but often dynamic and contested" (Coulton, 2012, p. 232), as it will be elaborated below.

The social constructivist perspective offers a different approach to neighborhoods; it highlights individuality and processuality instead of fixed territoriality and assumed uniformity. From this perspective, neighborhoods are understood as individual and social place perceptions which are processually, contingently, and temporary charged with meaning and identity as a result of social and symbolic b/ordering and othering processes (Lee et al., 1994, p. 252; cf. Suttles, 1972). In this sense, neighborhoods, their boundaries, and thus also their identities come into being through social and individual everyday life routines, experiences, and emotions. Even though the location and demarcation of neighborhoods are to a certain extent the result of physical conditions and political-administrative categorization, these aspects play a role in the present social constructivist approach only if they obtain relevance in social everyday life. As it will be shown below, this is the case, e.g., when private and municipally driven development and marketing efforts are playing into the change of place perceptions and images. The following border-theoretical remarks will illuminate the complexity and hybridity of neighborhood bordering processes in more detail.

Developing a Geography of Urban Bordering Processes

The field of border studies has evolved into a multi-disciplinary endeavor with various themes and focus points in the course of the paradigmatic shifts and major geopolitical events of the 20th century. Early on, borders had been conceptualized as fixed lines and static “empirical entities which divide the global space into bounded units that change mainly as a consequence of conflicts” (Paasi, 1998, p. 69). However, following the onset of postmodern thinking, the border studies field underwent a “processual shift” (Brambilla et al., 2015, p. 1) and has come to understand borders as socially constructed and changeable phenomena. As a consequence, the object of investigation transformed from a territorial border line and its functions to diverse social, spatial and institutional practices of *bordering* (Brambilla, 2010, p. 82). Rather than “fixed point[s] in space or time” (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002, p. 126), today borders represent complex “social practice[s] of spatial differentiation” (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002, p. 126), which are always created anew. In this sense, Simmel (1997 [1903], p. 142) has already argued that “the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially.” In line with this understanding, it becomes possible to focus on the “*construction, organization and reproduction* of social life, territoriality and power” (Paasi, 1998, p. 69 [original emphasis]) and to analyze demarcations as (everyday) processes of social distinction, its reproduction and dissolution. Ultimately, in contrast to previously held assumptions of a globalized, borderless world, today border studies are focusing on multi-layered borders and hybrid borderlands (see Figure 2), which differ in terms of visibility, permeability and materiality (Johnson and Jones, 2016 [2014]; Rumford, 2012, p. 894).

Especially since the 2010s, the theoretical key concepts of the border studies field have been transposed from the national level to the micro level of urban neighborhoods. The field of urban border studies has successfully integrated the processual view on bordering (Lazzarini, 2015), the idea of debordering and rebordering (Liao et al., 2018), the concept of ordering and othering from the cultural studies (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002; cf. Paasi, 2011, p. 27), as well as the borderland notion (Iossifova, 2013, 2015). The conceptual expansion is drawing on the growing understanding of urban space as a social environment that is characterized by the “interplay of closure, demarcation, and exclusion on the one hand and openness, connection, and participation on the other” (Roßmeier and Weber, 2023 [2021], p. 6; cf. Brambilla, 2009; Roßmeier, 2020; van Houtum, 2010). Generally, bordering is understood as the “practice of creating, confirming and re-creating socio-spatial distinctions at the formal (e.g. political) as well as everyday level” (Scott and Sohn, 2018, p. 5). Thus, *urban bordering* processes are conceptualized as everyday practices of coexistence, contestation, and identity building of the self in the world—or the neighborhood—of the other (Iossifova, 2020). By integrating post-structuralist thinking into this perspective, it becomes possible to conceptualize urban bordering practices as ongoing and open power processes over spatial and social relations, networks, and flows, which constantly solidify (reborder) and dissolve (deborder) demarcations (cf. Paasi, 2011, p. 28). However, it is important to conceive urban bordering not only in a “traditional” way as physical-architectural or political bounding, such as in the example of gated and walled communities or mapping, but rather in a multi-dimensional way that takes processes of individual/social and symbolic-aesthetical differentiation into account. Accordingly, the present study will trace bordering processes in San Diego in the physical-architectural, political, social or individual, and symbolic dimensions (see Figure 2), which allows for a more detailed look into the spatio-temporal entanglement of the ever-changing ‘*hybrid*’ *urban borderland* between North Park and Mid-City.

Below these four processes will be outlined using the example of neighborhood redevelopment, which is understood at the same time as the onset and the reaction to shifting, adapting and newly drawn or redrawn boundaries:

- The physical dimensions, for instance, contains the strongest visual elements of bordering, such as new walls or fences, but also prohibition signs, which signal a spatial distinction between *here* and *there*. Debordering in the physical dimension is taking place whenever differentiation lines are dissolving, for instance when the urban fabric of smaller, older housing structure on the one side and larger, modern building on the other side begins to assimilate.
- Urban de- and re-bordering in the political dimension can take place in the form of redistributed planning responsibilities through a shift of official district boundaries, the incorporation of a city or simply the construction of an official neighborhood sign and other branding efforts that redefine (not only) the political boundaries of a city.
- Further, debordering in the social dimension of bordering describes developments that enhance the accessibility and increase appropriation or participation of a formerly excluded group. Rebordering in the social dimension is the strengthening of aspects, such as exclusiveness, segregation and otherness.
- Lastly, symbolic de- and rebordering is taking place in the form of changes in the reputation, atmosphere, aesthetics or the common use of space. These changes are intensifying an either inviting and appealing image of a place or leading to aversion and withdrawal (cf. Berglund, 2019; Berglund and Gregory, 2019; Gregory, 2019). Symbolic bordering processes are commonly less visible than physical ones, however they might still develop into boundaries that “can be as sealed as the strongest of interstate borders separating two belligerent countries from each other” (Newman, 2006a, p. 177).

Summing up, bordering processes are complex developments in different, yet interconnected dimensions and are not necessarily materialized in order to gain effect, as the following analysis will demonstrate.

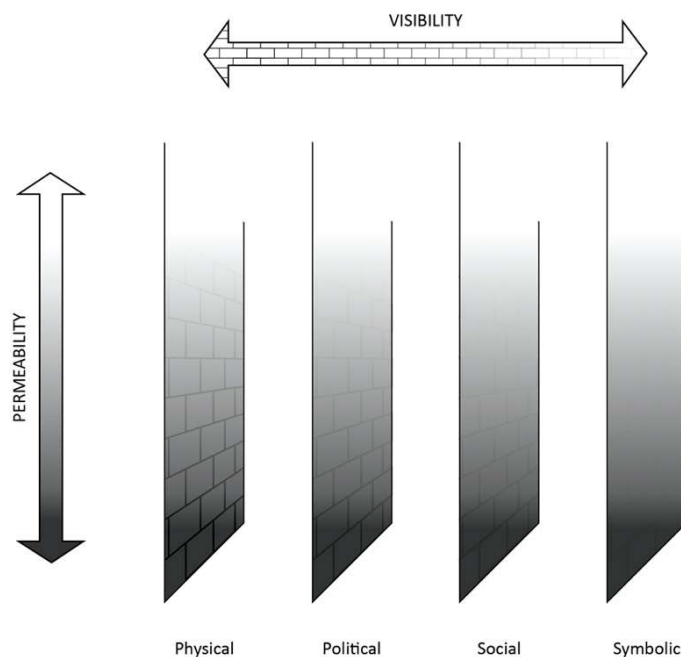


Figure 2. The four processual dimensions of urban bordering.
Source: Own illustration.

Methodological Considerations and Multi-Methodical Approach

Methodologically, social constructivist urban border and neighborhood research favor “resident-informed methods” (Coulton, 2012, p. 231) which enables one to collect a variety of interpretations and to discover multiple, potentially contradictory visible as well as non-visible boundaries. This is due to the assumption that “there is no single border situation” (Newman, 2011, p. 33), neither on the national level, nor on the level of neighborhoods. Accordingly, the aim of the present study is not the reproduction of official maps, but to capture “multiple perspectives of the city simultaneously” (Graham and Healey, 1999, p. 629 [original emphasis]) to do justice to the diversity and dynamic of place perceptions and experiences. This principle

becomes particularly important in the context of urban phenomena, such as redevelopment, which are perceived and experienced in diverse ways by individuals and different groups. In line with the argumentation of Balibar (2004) and the notion of *borders everywhere*, Rumford (2012, p. 893) claims that “contemporary transformations cannot be properly understood from a single privileged vantage point” for the simple reason that borders “mean different things to different people, and work differently on different groups” (Rumford, 2012, p. 894). Taking these considerations into account, the present paper traces individual interpretations and experiences of neighborhood change in and around North Park with a focus on the social adaption of neighborhood identities and boundaries.

Following this understanding, the present study constitutes a mixed-methods approach including qualitative interviews, participatory neighborhood walks, cartographic visualization and photographic documentation supplemented with quantitative insights into the socio-spatial development of the city using recent Census Data. Between May 2019 to April 2020, 39 interviewees grouped into three defined “perspective categories” have been recruited: “residents” (R-01 to R-14), “development & planning” (EP-01 to EP-13) and “academia & research” (AR-01 to AR-12). By means of this classification, it became possible to cover different modes of interpretation, which are ranging from resident-specific everyday-life perceptions to special knowledge-based interpretations given by planners, developers, or academics. The codes are used to anonymize the interviewees and are representing the perspective group they have been assigned to. In addition to the interviews, the present methodical approach includes explorative participatory observations, which are termed *neighborhood walks*. In the summer of 2019, during a research visit in the cross-border metropolis of San Diego-Tijuana, the author has executed six participatory neighborhood walks. The walks were performed as attentive strolling through San Diego’s inner ring within the aim of studying the social meanings of boundaries and the ways in which boundaries are individually constructed in everyday life. Photographic documentation was used to support the notes and underline the findings of the neighborhood walks. These insights have been supplemented with a comparison of Census Data to take a closer look at the quantitative development of the neighborhoods in question. Subsequently, the findings of the various methods were evaluated cartographically into an array of maps and illustrations (see Figure 4).

Redevelopment Dynamics Sprawling Eastward: The Hybrid Urban Borderland Between North Park and Mid-City

The structure of the empirical outlines below follows the four dimensions of urban bordering processes (Figure 2). This breakdown of the analysis carves out the great potential of border-theoretical thinking for urban studies by highlighting the processuality, temporality, and hybridity of neighborhoods and their demarcations.

The Physical-Architectural Dimension of Urban Bordering: Redevelopment and Urban Structural Changes

Bordering in, between, and of the communities of North Park in the west and Mid-City in the east is particularly taking place through physical ordering and othering processes. This means that visible differentiations between “here” and “there” emerge, are perceived, and (re-)created on the basis of physical and architectural elements. In the present case context of the “redevelopment wave” from west to east, from the neighborhood of Hillcrest over North Park into the Mid-City area, physical changes become increasingly visible, especially in relation to the urban structure.

On the one hand, several interviewees have pointed out a trend of newer, affluent residents renovating older homes and re-converting formerly subdivided single-family houses into private residences. Interviewee R-12, who grew up in North Park in the 1970s and ‘80s describes the overall neighborhood change in terms of “beautification.” According to the interviewee, the area has changed drastically since their childhood days: The homes in the formerly neglected inner ring are becoming “more and more beautiful” (R-12) and the infrastructure is improving (accordingly described by the interviewees AR-07 and EP-11). These changes are especially visible in the (south-)western areas of the neighborhood that are closer to positively attributed places such as the urban recreation area Balboa Park and the trendy LGBTQ+ neighborhood of Hillcrest. The eastern section of the neighborhood next to the physical border of Interstate 805 is in an earlier stage of transformation—it is lacking behind, as interviewee R-12 states. Ultimately, this is emphasizing the direction of the redevelopment dynamics from west to east in San Diego’s inner ring.

On the other hand, the urban structure in North Park is also changing due to the demolition of older homes, which are making way for new constructions of mixed-use buildings along the community's commercial corridors. A developer from Barrio Logan states: "The houses just get absorbed there [North Park]" (EP-04). Equivalently, interviewee EP-12, an environmental planner from Hillcrest shares: "I remember, like, North Park is very different now. The neighborhood is changing, I think, more housing gets put in there and I think it has gentrified." However, the neighborhoods of Normal Heights and City Heights are experiencing more development as well:

San Diego's real estate market got so overpriced. So, people [...] started looking at these inner neighborhoods differently and are more willing to accept them which, of course, realtors start to play a role in presenting the neighborhoods differently. And a lot of those apartment complexes that were seen as really sub-standard housing suddenly became candidates for condo conversion (AR-11).

In addition to these insights, personal impressions from the neighborhood walks underpin the narrative of the eastward progressing redevelopment dynamics: new, large apartment buildings with ground level commercial space are implemented gradually along the historic commercial corridors of El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue, which connect Hillcrest, North Park, and Mid-City in East-West direction (see Figure 1 and 4). This constitutes a commencing physical-architectural expansion of the walkable "urban village" concept of North Park over the physical borders of Interstate 805 and 15 into the lower income neighborhoods of Normal Heights and City Heights. The former linear contrast of newer or renovated historic buildings in the west and dilapidated overcrowded homes in the east, which aligned with Interstate 805 is thus gradually penetrated and blurred. As a result, a physical-architectural hybridity of structures that represent different development stages emerges (see Figure 4). As indicated by interviewee AR-11, this is also connected to planning and economic interests, as discussed in detail in the following.

The Political Dimension of Urban Bordering: Planning and Economic Objectives to Re-develop and Rebrand San Diego's Inner Ring

From a political-administrative perspective, neighborhood boundaries are unambiguous delineations of various areas in the city. The circumstance that resident perceptions might not overlap with official boundary lines has already been addressed above. In the present case context, the positioning of two village pilot project areas in the border area between North Park and Mid-City can be seen as a strategy to change social neighborhood (boundary) perceptions and to make use of the trendy "Hillcrest" concept in the areas to its east. In addition to the official planning interventions, various private stakeholders and local business improvement associations are concerned with expanding the current prosperity of North Park into the Mid-City area. According to interviewee AR-11 "North Park has just exploded with value and new, kind of, trendy residents." In terms of the Mid-City community, several interviewees discuss perceived economic efforts of "projecting the value of North Park and its attractiveness into the less invested areas to the East" (EP-11), especially in terms of real estate. Interviewee EP-11 describes further:

"Our generation wants to be in more livable, walkable, kind of, urban type areas with activity and resources and so that's, even for the last 10 or 15 years, it has been affecting the surrounding areas as well. So, I remember looking for homes or places to rent, and the North Park area, even like 10 years ago, seeing places that were advertised as being in North Park, but when you looked at the map, they were east of the 805 [freeway] in City Heights."

Commenting on the illustrated development efforts in Normal Heights and City Heights, Interviewee AR-11 phrases emotionally: "Being a City Heights resident and loving City Heights, I'm very irritated at the incursion of North Park on our western border." Summing up, several interviewees have described the penetration of the neighborhood concept of North Park into the less invested western areas of Mid-City, which is strongly tied to economically-driven marketing strategies and neighborhood branding efforts. In this process, socialized neighborhood boundaries become increasingly loose and areas of overlapping, hybrid identities emerge (see Figure 4). Additionally, these bordering processes bear drastic social consequences, which will be discussed in the following.

The Social Dimension of Urban Bordering: Re-orientation, Displacement, and Functional-Infrastructural Changes

As it has been demonstrated above, various interviewees perceive the neighborhood of North Park as radically changed in terms of its appearance and atmosphere: In the 1980s, the nowadays vibrant "commercial

corridor of North Park was a lot less invested, you know, more kind of low-cost shopping” (EP-11). In the same vein, Interviewee R-10, a resident of Hillcrest, shares that even “10 years ago the neighborhood [of North Park] was just less, you know, there was a lot of vacancy, and it wasn’t really popular.” However, today, the neighborhood embraces the “brewery culture” (R-10) and has a hip reputation. Trendy cafés, restaurants, and new residents—“young hipsters” (R-10)—have moved in.

This development is also affecting the western Mid-City community. On the one hand, interviewee R-03, a resident from City Heights, points out that “once you pass the 805 [freeway], everything is less developed, and you can totally see the difference.” For example, “on University [Avenue in Mid-City], there is still lots of shops, but they have gotten a little more rundown” (AR-07). On the other hand, however, this functional-infrastructure border between the new and hip North Park with cafés and breweries on the west and the relatively disinvested community of Mid-City with businesses catering to low-income residents (such as pawn shops or liquor and dollar stores) in the east is increasingly perforating. One by one, new, trendy businesses are being established along the commercial corridors of University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard in Mid-City, which cater to newly arriving, affluent residents rather than to the local lower income community (AR-10) and create a hybrid yet contrasting mix. Interviewee EP-04 states: “It is definitely spilling over the freeway [...] and I see a lot of people buying places in the next ring, in City Heights and National City.”

The re-orientation of home buyers is also connected to the strong increase of housing prices in North Park. Several interviewees state that North Park became “very expensive” (R-10) and that “the people who used to be able to afford the inner ring have to move more outward” (EP-04). A long-term resident from Hillcrest deplores: “North Park and South Park are being gentrified as well, people have been moving from Hillcrest to North Park and from there further east.” Accordingly, interviewee R-12 emphasizes that back in the 1970s, “North Park was still predominantly Black and Latino.” Today, however, the tracts of North Park record high shares of White residents, which have increased even more over the last two decades—especially in the refurbished suburban-style residential area around Balboa Park (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

With renewed interest in the inner ring and the influx of former residents from Hillcrest and North Park, AR-07 states that “even City Heights is getting more expensive.” According to interviewee R-11, the Normal Heights and City Heights area consists of a large number of “immigrants” (AR-11) and “refugees” (AR-08), who have settled in the Mid-City area over the years but are now forced to move out due to increasing housing prices. In the same vein, a young barista who lives in City Heights and works in a trendy café in North Park (R-03) explains that “the area [Mid-City] is pretty urban and also lower income, but within the last 10 years people with higher incomes have moved in, because it’s still pretty central.”

In conclusion, the physical border between North Park and Mid-City is slowly starting to lose its everyday relevance as a social and functional boundary between an area of White higher-income households and young urban professionals in the west and an ethnically diverse low-income community in east. In the course of the ongoing redevelopment processes and the influx of new businesses and residents into the Mid-City area, the described socio-economic boundary is perforating while also moving eastward—the emergence of the spatio-temporal hybrid urban borderland between North Park and Mid-City becomes increasingly obvious (see Figure 4).

The Symbolic Dimension of Urban Bordering: Freshly Painted Facades, Murals, and Neighborhood Signs

Neighborhood branding and placemaking efforts are making use of symbolic-aesthetic aspects by integrating signs, symbols, or specific designs that draw on current trends. A strong and specific form of symbolic bordering is the use of neighborhood logos and especially the installation of physical neighborhood signs (see Figure 3).

This seems to be the milestone. When one of these neighborhoods has successfully arrived and re-birthed itself, they get a sign. Like, Kensington has one, Hillcrest has one, North Park has one. It becomes a landmark. And it’s, kind of, a way the neighborhood puts a stamp on their accomplishment of re-birthing themselves (R-13).

In addition to the neighborhood sign, the redevelopment of North Park is also characterized by a multitude of smaller and more subtle symbolic adaptations. The physical-architectural updates of renovations, conversions, and new constructions in the neighborhood bear an aesthetic component that evokes new place perceptions and interpretations. As observed during the neighborhood walks, freshly painted facades, colorful murals, ornaments, and advertisement for new consumer goods, such as specialty coffee and tea, Neapolitan-style pizza, or vegan tacos (cf. Joassart-Marcelli, 2021; Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco, 2020), are now prominent at North Park’s commercial neighborhood center. However, according to interviewee R-12, the symbolics in the neighborhood have not always been as inviting as today. In the 1980s, the streetscape

was characterized by aggressive, gang-related graffiti, pollution, and empty storefronts but has now almost entirely shifted to “Instagram-style aesthetics” (AR-07), new landscaping, motivational quotes, as well as rainbow flags in the new storefronts and windows of private homes. This symbolic shift is strongly tied to the eastward progression of redevelopment processes from Hillcrest to North Park.



Figure 3. Symbolic Efforts of Branding, Identity Creation, and Bordering: The Re-Erected North Park Neighborhood Sign at the Prominent Intersection of University Avenue and 30th Street.

Source: Photography Albert Rossmeier.

However, interviewee AR-08 states that they are “also seeing City Heights going through a similar process of beautification” today. Accordingly, even though the communities of North Park and City Heights appear in parts very different from each other (in terms of the condition of the housing stock, the public infrastructure, as well as the gastronomic offers), the symbolics and aesthetics of trendy businesses, new mixed-use buildings, and renovated historic homes are now also increasingly found east of Interstate 805. These changes become particularly visible along the commercial corridors that run in west-east direction and constitute gateways over the physical borders of Interstate 805 and 15. In conclusion, the differentiation line previously created through symbolic-aesthetic urban bordering processes between the redeveloped west and the formerly “neglected” (AR-11) community in the east is slowly perforating and eroding in favor a hybrid urban borderland due to the increasing assimilation of aesthetics, designs, and symbols (see Figure 4).

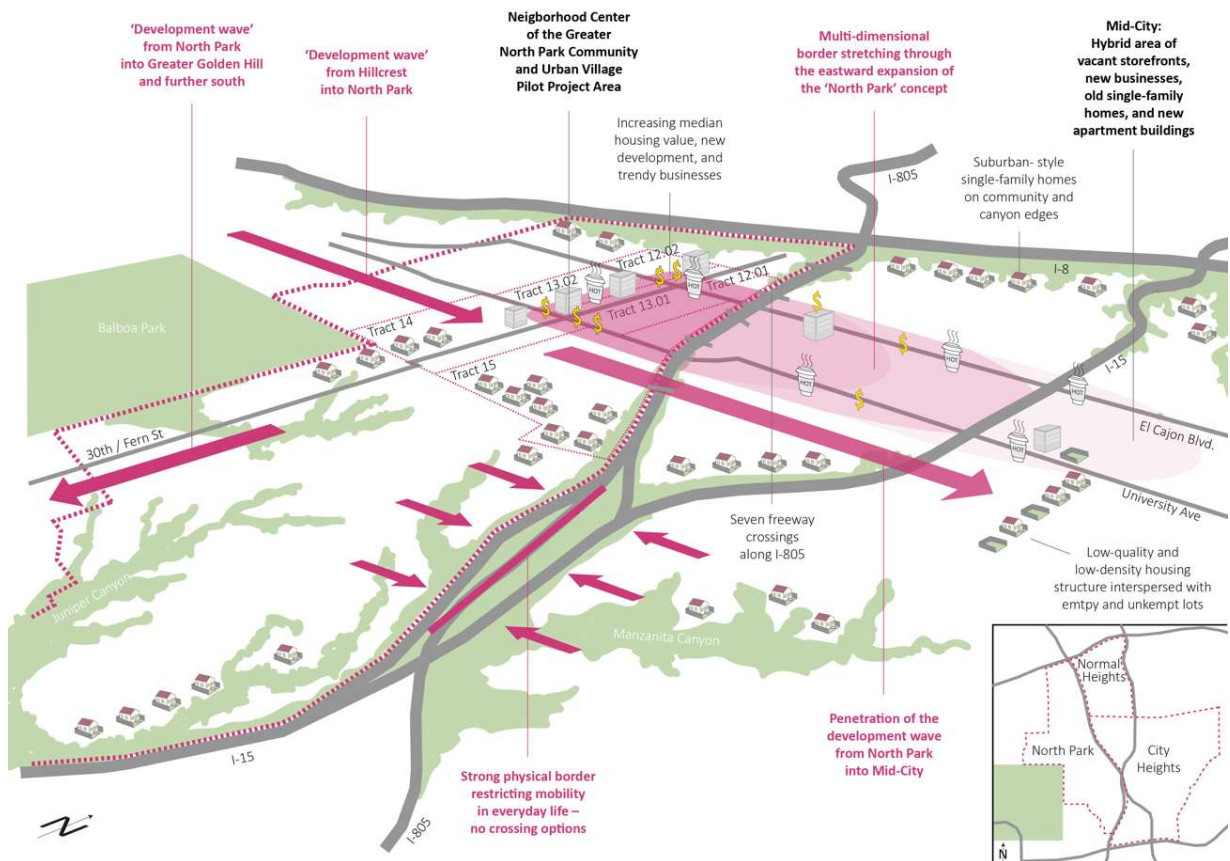


Figure 4. The spatio-temporal in-betweenness of the hybrid urban borderland between North Park and Mid-City.
Source: Illustration Albert Rossmeier 2023.

Conclusion

The present paper has traced how redevelopment dynamics spread from one urban community to the next one by illuminating the various bordering processes that create the distinct communities of North Park and Mid-City in San Diego's everyday life. This became possible by means of a geography of multi-dimensional urban bordering processes as well as a multi-methodical research approach that allows to look at the various ways in which b/ordering and othering takes place on the level of neighborhoods. Within the present social constructivist perspective, neighborhoods and their boundaries are not understood as rigid structures but as social and individual everyday life processes, which may change and adapt at all times. For this reason, bordering processes are temporal and never final. The goal of the present paper was to work out how the redevelopment processes have been perceived and experienced individually and how they have led to adaptations of the interpretations, identities, and boundaries of the 'fluid' neighborhoods of North Park, Normal Heights, and City Heights.

Within a detailed discussion of bordering processes in the four elaborated dimensions (physical-architectural, political, social/individual, and symbolic-aesthetic), it has been shown how the previously established boundaries between the neighborhoods in study are perforating, blurring, and shifting further east in favor of a spatio-temporal in-betweenness (graphically illustrated in Figure 4). In the physical dimension of bordering, the distinction between the newer, larger apartment buildings and the renovated single-family homes in the west and the dilapidated housing structure in the east is gradually diminishing in the sense of a debordering. In the political dimension, a debordering is taking place through the designation of two village pilot projects in the border area of North Park and Mid-City. The two projects are part of the larger redevelopment efforts in the San Diego area and are aiming for an image change in the inner-ring neighborhoods, including the Mid-City area, which is increasingly perceived as a developing community. In the previous years, the multi-layered border between North Park and Mid-City is also facing a debordering in the social dimension – not only through changing perceptions but also demographically and functionally. Lastly, in the symbolic dimension of bordering the communities of North Park and Mid-City are experiencing an assimilation in terms of atmosphere and the symbols and signs that are visible in the streets and the local businesses.

In summary, against the simplifying assumption that neighborhood boundaries are universal and static lines, the present study has uncovered the complex processuality, changeability, and temporality of boundaries. The formerly rather clear boundary that ran along Interstate 805 is currently stretching into a *hybrid urban borderland* that evades unambiguous interpretations; it is unclear whether the area around the physical border is part of the one or the other neighborhood as their spatial identities are increasingly contested. It has become clear that this is not only due to demographic changes and symbolic-aesthetic reinterpretations but physical-architectural updates and planning or governance-related efforts that are currently directed at this very border area. Ultimately, these insights are not only valuable for the understanding of urban change processes in San Diego but are an insightful contribution to the broad fields of (urban) border and borderland studies.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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