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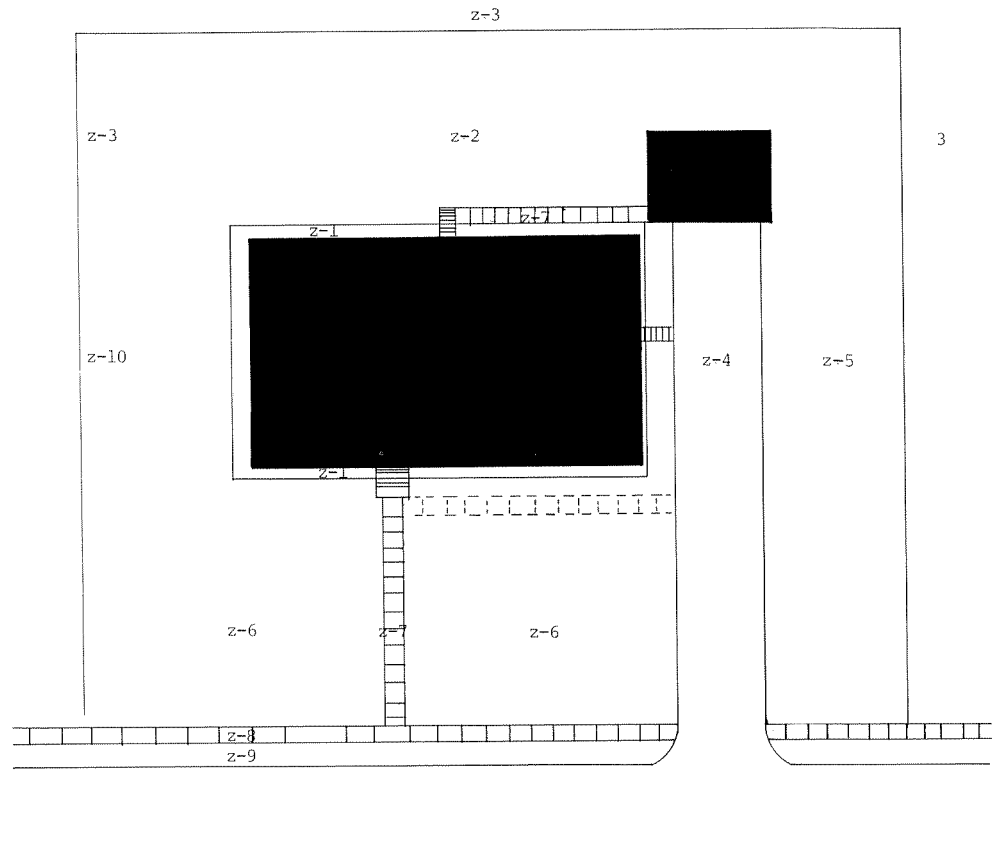
What about the yards around the houses in which we live? Do we understand these small, intimate places? To try, let us imagine several scenarios of movement in, for example, a midwestern household.

I. Movements

A. Getting up from the kitchen table, you open the *back* door, walk out of the house, and go down the back steps past the coiled garden hose and newly planted marigolds. You cross the back yard and continue to the back fence, which, on closer inspection, probably does not need repair after all. The neighbor's diseased elm tree, however, still looks as if it could fall.

B. Putting on your jacket, you check for your car keys as you open the *side* door. Once outside, you head toward the garage, but before you get into your car, you look to see whether your son has cut the strip of grass on the far side of the driveway. Naturally, he has not.

C. The newspaper should be here by now. From the living room you go out the *front* door, down the steps, and continue down the front walk to the sidewalk. Glad that the paper has not landed in the big evergreen again, you retrieve it from near the curb and wave to Ignaz across the street before you go back in.



I "Midwestern Yards: 10 Possible Zones

1. inner border: inmost and minimal yard
 2. back yard proper
 3. boundary
 4. drive
 5. side border
 6. front yard proper
 7. walks
 8. sidewalk
 9. front border
 10. side yard "
- (Drawing by Carol Silverman)

Nothing extraordinary happens here. But, these ordinary movements delineate the major areas of what we call yards—at least in the midwest.

II. Noting the Zones

In a more formal manner, we can distinguish ten major zones, that is, ten different sorts of space. Here “zones” means something like areas or parts—to be understood in a way parallel to discovering that we have arms, legs, and so on, as parts of our body. I do not claim that there always or only are ten zones. Rather, I believe that at least ten distinct zones typically present themselves in our daily lives and that describing these is a step toward a phenomenology of our home place.

A. If we consider the house as the center of our movement, the first scenario shows three zones.

1. The first zone is that which *borders* the house. This space is slight; in fact, it is almost unnoticed. It does appear as distinct, however, precisely because it is an insistent fringe. It is where we coil a hose and where the faucet leaks, where we plant flowers or bordering shrubs, where we lean a broom or snow shovel or leave muddy shoes.

2. The second zone is what we might call the *back yard* proper. We will need to

return to it in detail; clearly, though, it is what we generally mean when we say we are going into the back yard or when we tell the kids to play in the back yard—where we can keep an eye on them. This is a place of some (spatial and psychic) depth for family activity.

3. Beyond the back yard, say at the back fence, we find both the end of the yard and the *boundary* with the neighbor behind us. Like the inner fringe, this outer edge is easily overlooked, largely because we do little there, except when we use the boundary zone to talk to a neighbor or when we tend to it as a boundary.

B. The second scenario indicates two more zones.

4. The movement out the side door (which could be out a back door, for that matter) is to a garage and driveway. This entire zone may be paved or not. The fact that it is often paved simply asserts the unity of this distinct area: a strip, as it were, of *parking area and driveway*, running from house to street.

5. As was noted in checking whether the grass had been cut, there is a further strip beyond the driveway. The simple sense is that it is an *outer border* area with the neighbor. This zone—between driveway and boundary proper (e.g. the fence)—is easily overlooked and neglected.

C. The third scenario presents four more zones.

6. & 7. Most prominent is the *front yard*, the obvious public area which opens to community and communal activities. This zone contains a *walk* from the front door to the sidewalk. Whether a walk goes straight from house to street across the front yard or along the inner border zone to the driveway leaving the front yard “unbroken,” is not crucial. Clearly, the front yard is another major zone.

8. The *sidewalk* itself, though it may not be a yard in the most obvious sense, at least crosses the yard and marks, through or over it, the accepted area of public movement.

9. Beyond the sidewalk is another *marginal strip*, between sidewalk and street. Like the sidewalk, it clearly is not front yard proper. But, this zone is a reassertion or reemergence of the front yard, whose continuity is again signaled by the grass. Here we see that the sidewalk crosses the yard and is contained within it; the sidewalk does not end the yard as the street beyond does.

D. A fourth scenario might be helpful.

10. The additional scenario treats walking across the back yard or front yard, not to the drive and to the garage, but in the opposite

direction to. . . . We scarcely have a word for it. Can we say *side yard*? More likely, we would talk about going “around the side of the house.” Here, though, is another zone, perhaps most distinct as a problematic space, either almost forgotten or invisible (as a continuation of the front or back yard or as another side-border). More of this later.

If we put all these zones together, we have a typical midwestern yard. We should note, of course, that there are local and regional variations. For example, there are alternative walks (in the back); there are yards with no side walks, and so on. And, obviously, most homes would have either a side door or a back door and walk, not both.

III. What goes on here?

These ten zones may actually be distinct. This is most clearly seen from the ways they are “filled in” by things and by the activities which take place in each zone.

A. Two zones, the back yard and front yard proper, are open places which get filled in as we live and act outdoors. Note that they are open for activity partly because they are bounded; that is, clearly, they are defined or set off as “our place,” open for activity and thus are more like the house than like a boundary strip. They are outdoor domestic areas analogous to the



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interior space of the house. This “openness for what we want to do” appears in the autonomous or self-contained character of what we typically do here: the back and front yards are places for play, for gardening, for cooking outdoors, and for just sitting, walking, or “puttering around.” In addition, the front and back yards are prominent visual zones, to be looked into. Accordingly, they often get filled in by toys and sports equipment, by barbecue grills and lawn chairs, by vegetable gardens and flowerbeds, or by trees which nurture our aesthetic sense and contribute to a restful, natural atmosphere.

More domestic needs show up. Wash may be hung up to dry in the back yard since that yard is not so public, or perhaps around the side of the house. Washlines, like a volleyball net, a vegetable garden, a flowerbed, and large trees, create islands of sorts in the yard. The ambivalent sense of whether these islands are *distinct places set into the yard* (and

thus really apart from the yard) or merely *specialized highlights of the yard* is seen in children playing in the yard and running through the grass, flowerbeds, and drying clothes.

Other household requirements, such as space for garbage cans, compost piles, and air-conditioners, define certain spots as service areas. Not surprisingly, these tend to be kept out of the back and front yards and clustered instead in the transitional or ignored zone, such as the side border, especially around the garage and its immediate area.

Related yard uses involve storage, work projects, and pets. On the one hand, we need to store firewood, for example. It is interesting to notice how much wood is stored, whether out of sight behind a garage or more visibly along the side of the house, in the inner border zone. On the other hand, we need to store large items such as cars and boats. The temporary placement of an activity or object is one matter and leaving an old



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car or boat in one spot permanently is another. Connected to these storage uses is the yard’s function as the scene for work or a project such as home improvement or building a boat. It matters “how long” the activity goes on and the objects remain. Longer lasting uses seem to change the zones; shorter uses do not. Thus, having a permanently standing project changes a back or front yard into something else—into something like yard as lumberyard, that is, closer to nondomestic yards. (Gardening seems to be an exception to this; it even may be expected to be always underway).

Social or community acceptance of storage and work-project duration and placement naturally counts a good deal here. Communal practices and customs, displayed in the yards and by what is or is not in them, largely specify the tone or atmosphere of houses and yards in the community. Similar differences occur in the number and placement of pets. The doghouse may

2 “Front Yard as visual zone

Neenah, WI”
(Photograph by Robert Mugerauer)

3 “Family activity in the back yard

Neenah, WI”
(Photograph by Robert Mugerauer)

become an interesting island in the back yard, like the garden, or may be set aside as marginal, like a service area.

Of course, all these details largely omit the differences between the back yard and the front yard. While the front yard often is the more public and the back more private, it is not as simple as that. For example, several households may treat back yards as common and thus achieve an intimate but communal space. Then, too, what is deemed proper public and private activity varies and changes. Where does volleyball go? The barbecue grill? Sitting in one's undershirt with a cigar? In which direction should a porch face?

In any case, the major zones, *back yard and front yard* proper, are essentially *autonomous, centripetal spaces*, set off from boundary and marginal spaces and free or open for the uses which take place within them, and which fill them in.

B. To shift the focus: Recall the other, less dominant zones. These seem to be a motley collection of strips and edges. But that does not mean they are merely leftover areas. In fact, they are just the opposite; they are very specific sorts of space.

1. The inner border zone around the house, which may be used as the space for

utility access or filled with shrubs, also is the *inmost yard*. It frames the house: It not only sets limits to the house within it, but also—setting the house aside into its own area—opens the house up, connecting it to the outside. Because the border zone defines the house inside and the realm outside and mediates or bridges these two places, the zone itself is a kind of threshold. Hence, steps usually span and delimit the border: The steps and inner border extend approximately the same distance out from the house. As a border which simultaneously encloses and opens the house, the border zone is the minimal yard. This is seen in urban settings where the yard has shrunk almost beyond recognition, becoming vestigial space. It remains the least yard a house can have.

The importance and distinction of the inner border zone is seen in the focus we give to it. For example, we fill it with color (typically, with flowers) and often stress its upward extension (with shrubs and climbing vines). At the same time, the border zone tends to disappear insofar as it successfully frames the house and also bridges the house and the outside. The same is true for any good frame. Furthermore, the border zone helps define the back and front yards; it is part of the boundary which in delineating back and front yard, allows back and front yard to assume their

centripetal character. As complements to the inner border, these outer borders complete the definition of the back and front yards proper, which are set within its enclosure.

2. There are also the strips of yard at the *outer borders*. More obviously, these outer border zones emphasize the unity of the yard despite their apparent disconnection. Their presence indicates that the multiplicity—of drive, walk, and sidewalk, of movement and connection to community—is part of and contained within the yard. The continuity is affirmed insofar as the drive, walk, and sidewalk are shown to be laid over the yard (or to be parts of the yard itself?). As noted, the continuity of the grass in these border zones and in the front and back yard is a major means to this affirmation. Other unifying devices are trees or shrubs large enough to overhang and connect the spaces from above or of the same kind as those in the inner areas.

Of course, the unity of the yard presents important landscaping and design problems because it is difficult to accomplish and to maintain. If these many zones are not successfully gathered and held together as zones of one yard, they become disconnected and detached—as marginal and forgotten spaces; the yard itself fails; the dwelling which is needed in house and yard—that is to say our

home—is endangered. Where the border zones do succeed, however, the complexity in unity appears and may be experienced.

3. The walks may be seen as internal connecting zones, operating among other yard zones and allowing regular patterns of movement among those other zones. These walks get set with stone or are paved because they are paths of regular, even heavy, movement within a yard. Of course, they also are a first stage of movement out of house and yard; they connect house with the drive and sidewalk.

4. The drive and sidewalk, as noted, may be seen either as communal access to and across the yard or as the part of the yard which itself opens the household to community. In the latter case, whereas the back and front yards are bounded, centripetal spaces, the drive and sidewalk are centrifugal connections to the outside. The drive and sidewalk, then, open not for activity within them, but to activity beyond themselves. Further, the ambiguity of sidewalk and drive as a *part* of yard and also as *not a part*, is seen in their appropriateness for play, work, or sitting—as compared to back and front yards. They appear as yard when we cook, and set out chairs, and when children are allowed to play there. They may be dangerous, however, because they are spaces for cars and passers-by, that is, because they are

places for leaving, arriving, and passing through. Accordingly, we limit their use for movement. Walkways are a different, more internal zone than driveways and sidewalks; they are less ambiguous in "direction." Children may play on walks to a much greater extent than in drives or on sidewalks. Drives and sidewalks are intermediate in this respect, compared with walk and street.

5. It is no accident that the area set off on one side barely has a name in English. We almost have to invent "side yard." In most ways this zone tends to merge with one of the other zones. For example, it may be a part of the basically private back yard. This occurs, for example, when play and lounging space extend around the corner of the house. Here, the activities may be deemed enclosed or almost invisible even though in view of the front sidewalk. This can be seen, for instance, when the side yard is used to hang wash or to snooze in a hammock. The zone may also be contiguous with the front yard because of the continuation of the landscaping and the area's restriction to more properly public activities. Of course, the side yard also can be another side border, paralleling the side border on the other side of the house. In all these cases, it is interesting to note how the side yard tends to disappear, that is, to be an indistinct zone. No doubt that is one

reason why, when trying to build homes and yards without adequate space, we feel more comfortable reducing or eliminating the side yard rather than the front or back yards. The issue may be reduced to how much side border is needed.

6. Finally, the crucial outer boundaries, zones so compressed as to coincide with the ground under a fence or even to an imaginary line, are the most precisely defined. As the space where legal and social relationships, responsibilities, and rights are set side by side, these zones are a separate dimension of the yard. Their unusually clear and visible demarcation, which is accomplished, for example, by means of fence, hedges, and tree rows, often shows this separation.

Again, in varying degrees, the boundary can be left open, as it often is when several back yards merge for common use. Still, even here, the boundaries are clearly known and then let go, as is seen by the more subtle boundary marks of cut grass. It is interesting to note the sense of boundary when neighbors water and cut lawns and rake leaves. The yard surface itself manifests boundary and control through maintenance.

Another version of the boundary occurs when the yard ends not at a property line but at a point which the homeowner decides. This occurs when the homeowner



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4 "Drive and sidewalk are ambivalent spaces

Oshkosh, WI"
(Photograph by Robert Mugerauer)



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5 “Fences and Maintenance as boundary

Wauwatosa, WI”

(Photograph by Milton Bates)

also owns the land beyond the yard which adjoins the yard. The setting off of yard is a matter of choice. The boundary zone still appears and the yard still gets defined by stoppage, for example, by stopping maintenance on grass or by fence and trees—as when trees indicate where the yard leaves off and the orchard begins. Hence, the yard’s limit is fixed, even if one freely chooses to set off just so much, in this or that way.

In sum, these zones which appear as strips and edges have at least two major characteristics in relation to the back and front yards. First, in their *centripetal* dimension, these zones belong together and to the house and also help define back and front yards. They open up a space among themselves; they enable a clearing to open for back yard and front yard and the front yard’s more autonomous centripetal features. Second, in their *extrinsic dimension*, these zones connect both house and yard to the outside, establishing and maintaining place in relation to neighbors. In the balance of both dimensions, these zones amount to dynamic space pulling against and bearing toward the unity of all the zones, that is, toward accomplishing the yard as a whole.

IV What does it mean?

Describing the distinct zones which constitute a yard

reveals that yards are a complex ensemble of different spaces. Insofar as there are ten (or seven or five) possible zones, we can better understand what yards are, how they are used, and their mediating character on house and community. Then, too, seeing the zones makes clearer the subtle range and styles, or possibilities, for dwelling.

Yards need to be thought of as belonging to a home and its activities. They allow an extension of the home’s activities: lounging and resting, working on a hobby, and socializing. In this extension the enlargement is purely, but crucially, spatial. This fact becomes vital because any house can be too small at times. Often we need to get some distance from one another, while still maintaining our relationships. The yard allows release without leaving home. For example, in the course of a fight, when matters are “too much” or when we need to make a symbolic gesture, we may storm out of the house and into the yard. Hence, the yard is, so to speak, stored for when it is needed.

In addition, as yard adjoins yard, it becomes the location of neighborliness: We welcome others to our place and share it with them. Finally, the yard enlarges our natural arena. The yard is the place where, through its ordinary open character, we are connected to nature. The



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**“Yards Contribute to
Neighborhood Character.”**

6 83rd St., Wauwatosa, WI
(Photograph by Milton Bates)

7 Kavanaugh St., Wauwatosa, WI
(Photograph by Milton Bates)

8 Honeycreek Parkway,
Wauwatosa, WI
(Photograph by Milton Bates)

9 Church St., Wauwatosa, WI
(Photograph by Milton Bates)

yard is a “natural area” (here setting aside the issue of the *extent* to which yards are part of the natural), because, in yards, we encounter plants and animals, sun and heat, rain and snow. In short, this communal and natural arena allows and encourages us to move beyond ourselves and fosters the opportunity to go about doing something practical or useful and to bring about something beautiful as we work in the garden and in the flowerbed and with neighbors. Insofar as yard extends dwelling in these ways and yet maintains and even enhances the house as the center, we properly think of person and place by way of the *progression: body, house, yard*.

As *mediator* between house and community, the yard is especially balanced between public and private. We might say it is “private, yet open.” Within the house we have space which is private, but not really open (open by invitation only); beyond our property are open spaces like parks and town squares, but these are not private. Yards are private, yet open, spaces for the social. Children move and play from yard to yard; neighbors, passersby, and mailcarriers come through. A yard is a place for easy, casual conversation. Of course, just as these private and public extensions of our place occur by way of yards, yards also *separate*. They give us distance from the purely public space of road and sidewalk and from

nearby neighbors. The importance of zones is clearly shown by their arrangement as territory which has codes of access. This arrangement is directly linked to degrees of intimacy and distance. While strangers are allowed the sidewalk, the privilege does not extend to the front yard within the walk, and dramatically, even less so to the zone which borders the house itself.

Often portions of yards not only are set off or distinguished from house and for outside work and play, but also are “separate” in the sense of “just being there.” For example, with minimal use or marking as “mine,” yard space may function in its emptiness as a buffer zone—as a “pure” visual, physical, psycho-social separator. This space, in a broad way, keeps our own used areas for ourselves, that is, as the context for our own distinctive lives. Of course, there are all sorts of interesting variations; but, to reiterate the basic point, *it is a fundamental characteristic of yards that they are places which connect and separate*.

This joining and separating needs to be thought of in several ways. 1. *Historically*, the yards mark and implement situations of and changes in ownership, relationships, and responsibilities. 2. *Behaviorally and psychologically*, yards allow and manifest human processes and the needs of living

together. 3. *Culturally*, the overall gestalt of yards is built into neighborhood as patterns of yard types and styles and thus becomes what we call atmosphere or character and, as a gestalt, moves toward defining the sense of local place.

4. *Ontologically*, yards allow our own being to come forth in both our private and public capacities. That is, yards are places in the deep sense that they are where self and other emerge and encounter one another. To be human involves being located, as embodied, in the intimate places known as house and yard.