

# ORION

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## The Nature of Walls

*Why we build them, how they fail us.*

BY JOHN PIASECKI

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Photo: Jonathan Olley

BUILDING a dry-laid stone wall is an exercise in patience. The first step is to figure out where the wall goes on the land. To do this well you need to decide what the wall has to do. Does it retain earth behind it? Is it free-standing? Does it mark a boundary? Then you have to choose the stone.

After varying amounts of effort and the expenditure of a significant amount of money, you face a rather daunting and even poetic situation: you must make order from a chaotic pile of perhaps a hundred tons of stones of various shapes and sizes. They sit heavy on the ground. When you build a wall you have to arrange and stack them. Usually they are placed on a foundation of compacted gravel dumped in a trench, and as a general rule I lay the biggest stones low in the wall. Then the stacking and bonding starts. It took me a few years to learn how to find the “face” of the stone. It is easier now.

The most important trait needed to turn an enormous pile of stones into a wall is not strength, though it helps. It is persistence. The wall in progress is a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle that on completion can last for hundreds if not thousands of years, and it all gets built a little bit at a time.

When you examine a wall, the skill of the mason becomes obvious straightaway. Are the joints bridged? Are there bonding stones that go deep into the wall? Do the stones fit well? I have studied walls for the past decade or so. They have a beautiful logic of stacking and solidity. They are fixed, but when laid righteously they are flexible. They can move in a fluid way along mountains, as do the agricultural terraces in South America, or they can anchor a people to history, as does the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Though the requirements, materials, techniques, and design of walls are as varied as the people who build them, all walls have one thing in common.

They all fail.

The barbarians eventually get through. The city gets sacked.

Water undermines the foundation and the terrace crumbles. The excluded arrive. The contained escape. Time and nature always win. Now we dig below ground to find the traces of the proud stones that once lifted the ambitions of their builders into the sky and held the threat—be it famine, flood, or invasion—at bay for a short while.

When I stack a wall, I imagine the specific threats to its stability. Is the ground around the wall shaped to shed water?

Is there a way out for the water that builds up behind a wall?

Are there tree roots or foundation faults that will endanger sections of the wall?

The process of imagining failure leads to a better wall every time. In addition, it becomes a creative driver of the specific form of the wall. These problems require solutions, and to make a good wall is to adjust to these specifics. Of course, there are terminal failures awaiting my walls that I cannot imagine, and some of the threats I dream up will never come to pass. These efforts are not a waste. They help me to animate my little projects, and they have led to some larger-scale thinking.

When you build walls, you have plenty of time to think. The focus of my thought has been on walls of the mythic past, like the Servian Wall in Rome. In the West, ancient walls like that are early examples of a practice that continues to be important to this day: walls are the way that people mark their place on the land. Those walls mark a critical point of intersection between ancient culture and nature. Ancient walls made a magic circle inside of which the accepted rites of “the people” were performed. They marked an exact line where culture met the raw matrix of what we consider the natural and the ancients saw as a supernatural world. Where citizen rubbed up against enemy. Where the city both touched and turned away from the wild. The prime inheritance of this beginning is that culture is “us” and nature is “other.”

Defensive walls, however, have an overlooked consequence. A wall designed to keep something out has to restrict whomever it is protecting within its confines. While it seems a success that nothing can breach the walls and give threat, in the end the walls will fall—and in the meantime their standing creates a deadly problem: people held within the walls are trapped with whatever internal threats the walls contain.

If nature’s story were to have a brief synopsis it would be this: life, cataclysm, survival, adaptation, and regeneration. The natural world and evolution have a robust and proven track record of several billion years.

Humanity, in contrast, is new and frail, and our many cultures are just a tiny part of this brief human history. The modern defensive walls we have set against nature—be they engineered, medical, military, or religious—seem designed more to maintain the illusion that we are in control and in a privileged position than to resolve the underlying tension of our own insignificance and our inevitable failure to overcome death.

The “other” is surely a threat. Life is fatal. But I am worried that the walls we have built to keep us safe preclude our participation in the world that surrounds us. To hold to our internal “us” identity, we reject the external signs of our similarity to the foreign “other.” Trapped behind the security line between nature and culture, humanity stagnates in a swamp of self-reference, where the signs from without are discounted and the signs from within overblown.

What possibilities await if we consider that we are the “other” as we are “us”? We are trained to take comfort within the walls of culture, but I am afraid those walls, like all others, are failing. Insomuch as these walls reinforce our detachment from nature, we are less for our desperate efforts to shore them up.

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