

# A View in the Edge

FRANK F. VENNING  
Southern Polytechnic State University

Hello, I come from a city without a name, a locality really, known as the Cumberland Mall-Galleria node outside of Atlanta. It is developed around one of the largest interchanges in the United States. It is, as Joel Garreau discusses in his recent book, a quintessential “edge” city. What is an interchange? It could be defined as a place that is between change, it is dedicated to movement, to freedom. All this sounds fine, useful for you and me, until we try to go there.

Because the sole function of this place is to serve the automobile, not us. It is more like the fuel injector of a great engine that handles 300,000 cars a day each exerting hundreds of horse power each, so that tens of millions of horse power a day are exerted over a span of eight miles of road, spread over 660 acres. A city is a community of people. But what is at the heart of edge city? Nothing, but an engineered landscape impossible for us to experience directly. In essence, the interchange is a machine, one of the largest and most powerful that mankind has created. It is at the center of our new city, so that we really are a part and parcel of this machine. We animate it, yet we don’t experience it, we are in it, but not of it. Not only is it the geographical center of our city, it is also a central part of our daily routine. In order to go anywhere we must pass through it like particles in an accelerator. Thus, in a sense we are very familiar with it. It is our backyard, we go there every day. But only as moving parts of the machine, in our cars, in the cocoon of sheet metal that frames our perspective. If we are without our veil of sheet metal, the interchange is potentially lethal to you and me. It is cordoned off from the rest of the world so that essentially it is impenetrable for practically all living creatures.

I found all this out one day when my perspective was dramatically changed. Normally, we see this world from behind the steering wheel. It began with a small thing: the desire to get air, to breathe outside air. A simple commodity that we have made complicated. You see, the motor that controls my car window burned out, died. I could not put the window in my car down. It was urgent that I have my window fixed even though my car is air conditioned. The very first week I came to Atlanta, I had been taught to put the windows

down and run the air conditioning at the same time. And now it was habit, culture. This way one can intensify the sense of both the outside heat and the inside air conditioning. Like sitting in a hot tub on the slopes of Aspen.

Mercifully, the sky was cloudy, it was a cool day, when the call came: the car was ready. How do I get to the car? After exhausting a number of transportation alternatives, I felt hopeless: I was stranded. I could walk, it really did not seem that far, at least if I took a straight path to the garage. I know the area so well, I drive through it every day and it is kind of nice, even pastoral—it would be like a stroll through my back yard, no problem.

“You won’t be protected by that thin layer of sheet metal,” the voice said.

“Where you are going is not meant for human beings,” it continued. It couldn’t be that bad. After all, I can see the Galleria towers where the garage is from the entrance to my apartment complex.

“It is possible that you will not survive this trip.” Now I was concerned. I’ll be walking through a maelstrom. But I won’t be going far, and I’ll leave a note on my refrigerator where I’m going. In case I’m never heard from again someone will know where to look for me. Anyway, I was trained for this sort of thing in the boy scouts. I put on my boots, took my compass and my pocket knife, and set out.

2:43 PM. I headed West Southwest at 220 degrees toward the curious pediment atop the Galleria 200 building. I stepped across the threshold of my apartment complex, a line that I crossed every day in my car, yet I had never set foot on it before. Even at this first step I knew my perspective, my experience right then was new. I really didn’t know this place after all.

I took a compass reading on my heading using a tree on a hill across the four lanes directly in front of me as a reference—and I headed straight for it. Immediately as I embarked upon the street shoulder I felt uneasy, almost incapacitated. I felt completely out of place, naked without my sheet metal. I saw some telephone workmen nearby who were at ease about their business, they seemed to belong here. I needed to become one of them: a journeyman of the

infrastructure. I took my camera pack and slung it around my waist so that perhaps it could be construed as some kind of surveying device or one of those phones that they wire up to the poles. Carrying my notepad, I now felt confident enough to plunge ahead across four lanes of traffic, and over the other sodded shoulder which abruptly ended with a retaining wall. This unnatural barrier forced me north to a P.U.D. entrance boulevard. I turned in and sighed with relief because it was peaceful, even quiet there and I relaxed into a comfortable stride into the west.

When the sun came out I realized it was a beacon right on my heading, now it would be easy for me to keep my bearings, even on this curving street. Maybe this suburban plan wasn't so bad after all, I felt relieved to be here, I had hated all this before. I had been traumatized by the infrastructure I just traversed. I know the monotonous calm of this place is not enough. In time the soul demands more, more than a quiet street! Maybe that's why we always move, we can't live in these places for too long. Then I heard it, this moment of tranquility was over, replaced by the far off wail of 285, the Perimeter, the ultimate rupture like an unending tearing in the trees.

3:05 P.M. I continued down the combination street and parking lot within the apartment component of the PUD. No one was around save one man changing a flat on his car. I felt a kinship with him. We were both of us without our cars; both vulnerable. The end of the asphalt was crowned by two identical white gabled garages sparkling against the deep woods beyond. They were almost alright. The culvert that bisected them aligned with my bearing perfectly. I followed the axial culvert to the fence and climbed over it into what can only be described as a total wild buffer.

This had to be the original landscape, however it was marred by the culvert which I followed down the steep incline. I emerged on a two lane road, at first not knowing where I was. I took a bearing to check on my direction and headed north toward a bridge on my right. Suddenly I recognized where I was. This bridge seemed farther away from where I thought I was. By car, it seemed far from home yet I got here so quickly this way, as if I had folded space by walking. Down here on Rottenwood Creek everything looked so natural, even with the passing trucks hurtling through the trees above, reflected in the water below. This area has a number of creeks and rivers running through it. Of note is the Chattahoochee River that is surrounded by a preserve that borders this edge city. I took a compass reading in the deep cover of this ravine and headed up a steep grade. The wail of the perimeter was all around me now, along with the sun—an ever present beacon from then on.

3:13 P.M. I could hardly get any footing on the slope, I was able to pull myself up the grade using the trees. It was awfully steep. I found a rock ribbed gully and climbed toward the light tunneling down it. Finally, the gully turned into a concrete culvert, too steep to crawl on, so I rappelled along it until I emerged onto a great open plateau. I could see the entire edge city from this vantage point, the Galleria

towers were unobstructed, in full view. Now I knew why that hill was so unnaturally steep, it was the result of cutting off the top of a knoll and pushing its remains to the side, in order to make a huge parking lot for the Interstate North office complex.

Parking lots in edge cities come with security guards and once again the uneasy feeling returned that I didn't belong here. Like a fugitive out in the open, I hurriedly walked across the sea of cars toward my destination. I had not noticed the diaphanous blur before. It was ten feet tall, with a head of barbed wire shaped in a "V." An invincible, mean chain linked fence loomed ahead, it hugged the hillside as far as I could see in both directions as if to protect the menacing lanes of Interstate 75 below. The only way to get through was to go under it, maybe back at Rottenwood creek. No, this barrier had to be vulnerable somewhere, so I decided to head north along the fence.

After searching low for several hundred yards, I came to a point not far from where the fence turned into concrete forming a wall dropping 30 feet to the pavement below, a grim sight. It looked like a battle had raged here. All the sapplings on the other side of the fence had been shorn off a foot above the barren soil in stark contrast to the lush office park where I stood. The taut, impervious fence looked plastic and weary, as if it had fought with a powerful foe, like a mower. At the base of the undulating chainlink I saw the best breach I could have asked for. 3:30 P.M. I went under and entered the war zone.

Directly ahead was one of the slashing arteries of the 285/75 interchange: four lanes of hurdling metal, a jersey barrier, then four more lanes - totally impassable. I would have to go either over or under that. I descended southward on the shoulder toward a bifurcated collective distributor (a road that is neither highway nor ramp). It was only four lanes wide, about forty feet across with traffic careening around two separate blind curves into a merge just to my left. The cars pulsed around the curve. In two seconds they were in front of me. I would have to sprint this just right to get across. For ten minutes, I waited. Looking for a predictable pattern that I could weave through, a suicidal notion. Just as I was turning to find another alternative, I saw a lull in the flow. Quickly, I took my mark at the white line at the edge of the lanes and prepared to sprint. Get set... Go! I made the forty foot dash across intact and climbed to the top of a grassy knoll on the other side.

3:47 P.M. I found myself secluded in the peaceful eye of the storm all around, within a ventricle of the pounding interchange that was cut off from everything, forgotten. The lonely eeriness of the place was accentuated by sections of unused jersey barriers scattered about like tombs of some primeval graveyard. Were these castaways deposited in an eddy of edge city? Or were these foundations for the future? Atop the acropolis of barriers, I studied the forbidding terrain in order to plan a way over 75. I could use the north 75 off ramp that climbs to the Cobb Parkway collective distributor, then head west and cross the great artery. With my course

set, I descended out of the secret, tranquil place I had found. A wall of sound reverberated everything like an invisible tissue encircling the domain of the interchange's heart. My uneasiness returned.

My chest vibrated from the rush of 75 below, feeding Atlanta. Highways, ramps, and collective distributors permeated all three dimensions around me as I found my way under the perimeter along the bend of a ramp. The sharp sweep of the ramp forced me to its apogee against the cusplike gore that had been shattered with great force. It seemed as if nothing could survive here, not even the protective gore, its metal face twisted and cast aside amongst shards of wood supports as far as fifty feet away. The place was an apocalyptic shore littered with the flotsam of society washed up on it. Machinery, pieces of cars, money, clothes, magazines, furnishings, and especially plastic had all been transformed by ceaseless movement into driftwood along the road. It was a place of total transience, a monument to our society's rush for speed. Even the artifacts were about motion—perhaps our ultimate, impermanent home is here. 3: 57 P.M. I ran to the end of the guardrail and dove into the woods.

A feeling of refuge overwhelmed me as I made my way southwest down a ravine covered by a blanket of young pines. Dead ahead I saw the Galleria towers. But they soon disappeared again from sight. The forest was in its first stage of maturity—dense, with older and smaller fallen pines crossing the ground at every step. Not long ago this terrain had been created by the engineers to make way for the interchange. Drainage was carried by concrete, not by stones of a gully. Once again, I followed the concrete culvert and descended down into its hollow. It felt good to lose the wail of the traffic the further down I went. I came to an intersection of culverts, a low spot. I was deep down, far away from everything, in the bowels of the interchange. Even the pines were dark, their bark black as night from a recent rain. It was an ominous peace I felt in this landscape that nobly sought to conceal its infrastructural birth - there was no grace here. Just then, I heard a car alarm above and to the left. I turned toward the tone and climbed the other culvert through dense summer foliage toward the beam of sound. There was a break in the trees where the culvert broke apart into a rubble lined gully of red effluent. Through the hole of light above I saw the linear parking decks of the Galleria, directly overhead. The red gully afforded passage under the mean fence that bounded the interchange, the edge that also represented the border between the frontier and the sought after realm "inside the perimeter."

4:05 P.M. Once inside, I could not move. An overgrowth of briars covered the steep rubble heap that formed the battlement to the Galleria. I snapped off a strange sappling and thrashed a path with it through the entangled thicket while trying to maintain my footing on the excessive slope. I stumbled out into the open, onto the immaculate sodded lawn of the Galleria still swinging my club ahead of me. I was stunned, it took me a while to realize I had made it. By now I should have been quicker at making these transitions. I looked out on the brick plaza with the lush plantings surrounding a multi-tiered fountain, the verdant lawns with glass towers reflecting the sky. I composed myself, threw my stick behind my back into the wilderness, and brushed myself off. By car this journey would have been quick and uneventful. On foot, the voyage had been jarring, fraught with contrast, with transition: from the private to the public; from being isolated, to being alone yet surrounded; from the pristine wild buffer to the savage infrastructure; from the unplanned leftover to the planned exclusive landscape... jostling each other. Taking a straight path using the compass, I had essentially experienced a section through edge city. This needs to happen alot more.

It was clear to me that the landscape of edge city is composed of segregated elements that have no relationship to each other. Each part maintains its distinct functional purity without transitions, like a knot of differing strands that is orderly and rational when viewed from space; however, in section the strands are experienced as jumbled, detached zones in complete disharmony. Ironically, the whole thing was rationally designed for greater freedom. Yet when experienced face to face, individually, this engineered landscape is a great barrier to freedom. Without the right equipment, we are trapped within our provincial pocket, curbed within the infrastructural framework. We need to break the rules the engineers have imposed on us and explore the network anew as human beings, without sheet metal, without cars. Then new kinds of paths could be made within edge city that would break down its barriers and facilitate the development of a hybrid urban fabric, perhaps with pockets yet to be invented, until such a rich fabric creates total integration, a real community.

A bolt of lightning jarred me back to reality. I ran toward the garage as heavy drops of rain pelted me. A complex pattern of holly bushes were a formidable barrier that required a painfully extended zigzag course. I arrived at the garage breathless, torn, and wet. The attendant looked me over and said there would be no charge for the work. It was 4:23 P.M.