Observing current debates on climate change and socio-political tensions by which citizens have become more and more separated from each other as well as the very ground they stand on, the objective of this paper is to distill how the politics of socio-economic practices have affected (and led to) the configuration of the urban construct and our engagement with it as well as our interaction with each other.

As current modes of urbanization divide, expand, and accommodate shortcuts of various socio-political as well as scalar implications towards the built environment, the urban grid — one could argue — is perhaps the most resilient functional figure forming ground that has enabled humans to define and abstract their relationship to one another as well as to distinguish themselves from the land that surrounds them. The result of this interplay has ultimately naturalized the possession of land to the point that we more or less accept these endless lines that parcel the earth surface into a myriad of distinct (inside and outside) conditions. The consequences of these processes of separation have led to disrepair of the environment urban citizens inhabit as well as social divisions among them.

As these rectilinear lines then abstract the urban construct into a composition of subdivisions, the grid’s political implication in constructing the urban realm however continues to be ambiguous. To disclose the political significance of the urban grid, is to question our engagement with it: not through the figure-ground as an abstract
configuration, but through its spatial implication. The notion of the grid from that point of view plays an ambivalent role then, as its geometry does not just relate to form, it reveals the presence of a spatial configuration closely tied to socio-political relationships—relationships that form an association towards ownership.

Given my interest in the notion of place, and how urban citizens confront current forms of urbanization by re-shaping their local environment through their actions, this proposal examines the socio-economic tensions among urban citizens and their struggle to find a common ground—a sense of the collective—within this extensive desire for individualization, while the urban grid continues to grow unabated.

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Petra Kempf PhD. is an architect, urban designer and educator. Her background includes working with the public and private sector, such as the Department of City Planning in New York City, The Project for Public Space and Richard Meier and Partner. In addition to her current teaching appointment at Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in Saint Louis, she has taught at Columbia and Cornell University, Rhode Island School of Design as well as various other universities in the United States and Germany. In addition, she serves on the board of the Divided City Initiative, a partnership between the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Center of the Humanities, and the Sam School of Design at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. She serves as a member on the editorial board for the “Journal of New Frontiers in Spatial Concepts,” and is the founder of urbantransits, a research initiative with focus on the transient nature of cities and the impact of this dynamic condition has on its architecture and culture. She has lectured in the United States, Latin America, Middle East, Asia, and Europe and her work has been exhibited in various galleries, institutions, and museums, both in the United States and Europe. She is the author of “You are the City - Observation, Organization and Transformation of Urban Settings” and “(K)ein Ort Nirgends, Der Transitraum im urbanen Netzwerk.”