

## WALLS

Enclosure and Ethics in the Modern Landscape

By Thomas Oles

232 pp. University of Chicago Press. 2015.

The verse "[g]ood fences make good neighbors" (Robert Frost, "[Mending Wall](#)," 1914) inspired landscape architect Thomas Oles to write *Walls: Enclosure and Ethics in the Modern Landscape*. It is a thoughtful, nuanced survey of boundaries, borders, and hedges across time and place, from the biblical walls of Jericho, which functioned as a granary, to yarda (front lawn) fences in East Los Angeles hawking discount diapers. The author bristles at walls that other, shun, exile, displace, abandon, or as historian-activist Rebecca Solnit writes, "suggest difference when there is none" (12). He describes walls that protect livestock, provide shelter, bloom an ecology, site ritual and public opposition, and foster economic and cultural exchange. Oles shows how walls can be used ironically, such as the parvenu who impedes her view with high walls and a tall gate, and walls built to connect, as in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's [Running Fence](#) (1976), 24.5 miles of white nylon fabric hung across public and private lands in Sonoma and Marin counties. The art installation entailed four years of vital "[procedural duress](#)," according to art critic Anthony Haden-Guest. Therein lies the possibility of ethical salvation and takes us back to Frost: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense." Walls are meaningful not because they exist or because of what they assert, but because through the slow, deliberate process of their creation, we can ask why. —Lisa Thaler, 22 February 2021