THE WALL
TEDDY CRUZ AND FONNA FORMAN ON THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER
THIS PAST SPRING, an anonymous group of architects, designers, and artists announced an international competition to design a new border wall between the United States and Mexico. But this was no Trump-inspired anti-immigration gambit; it was, rather, a supposedly objective response to the politician’s incendiary proposal for a cross-continental barricade, and the brainchild of the Third Mind Foundation, a consortium dedicated to experimental forms of interdisciplinary collaboration. The foundation began its challenge with this paradoxical statement: “Let us be clear: We take no position on this issue. We remain politically neutral.” It claimed, in fact, to be “moving beyond politics” by simply bringing the expertise of architecture and design to bear on current sociopolitical realities rather than making these fields into political agents.

The Third Mind’s approach presents a profoundly limited conception of the possibilities of architecture. To respond to Trump’s wall with a serious discussion of material choice, construction techniques, and maintenance costs, as the foundation has done, is to hide complicity under a pretense of neutrality, assuming that architects can do little more than give form to the dikta of others, conforming to a world fundamentally shaped by power and capital and increasingly defined by social and economic injustice. In fact, in our current heated political climate, it is more important than ever for architects to take a clear position: against inequality, against xenophobia, against border walls. And architects’ most political act in this context might be deciding where and when not to build. This does not mean there is no role for architects in the debate over Trump’s border wall, but that their role should be one of critique rather than acquiescence.

For too long, our creative fields have been smoothly aligned with the hegemonic power of neoliberalism, carrying out an apolitical project of beautification that suppresses difference and hides the conflicts that are at the basis of today’s urban inequality. The glaringly asymmetrical development that now characterizes cities across the globe is the ultimate physical manifestation of neoliberalism, dividing the contemporary metropolis into enclaves of megawealth and rings of poverty surrounding them. Yet we have
become paralyzed, silently witnessing rather than engaging the spread of urban informality, social and economic disparity, environmental degradation, crumbling housing stock and public infrastructure, and declining civic participation. Today, we must expose rather than mask the institutional mechanisms driving uneven urban development. Such a revelation requires a corresponding expansion of our understanding of the scope of architecture itself—can we design human rights, for example? Can social justice become an architectural protocol? In other words, the most important materials with which architects must learn to work are not steel and concrete but critical knowledge of the underlying conditions that produce today’s urban crises.

The San Diego–Tijuana border region is a zone of conflict that divides not just two cities but two countries and, in a sense, two worlds. It offers a dramatic microcosm of the conflicts and deprivations that globalization has inflicted on the world’s most vulnerable populations. The North American Free Trade Agreement enables multinational corporations to set up maquiladoras on the peripheries of Tijuana, where they generate massive profits freed from restrictions regarding labor practices, environmental protection, and urban zoning, while an aggressively militarized border—along which more than 650 miles of walls, fences, and physical barriers have already been constructed—radically disrupts the social, economic, and environmental ecologies that otherwise link people’s lives throughout the area. And so some of the poorest, most marginalized informal settlements in Latin America sit just minutes away from San Diego’s affluent suburban paradise. Yet these border cities are also inextricably connected, together constituting the largest binational metropolitan region in the world, with more than one hundred thousand border crossings a day.

Our collaborative practice, Estudio Teddy Cruz + Forman, is a partnership between an architect/urbanist and a social and political theorist established to carry out research projects focused on this region, linking universities, grassroots community organizations, and municipalities on both sides of the border to collaboratively tackle urban inequality by exploring everything from the bottom-up development of political beliefs and patterns of collective action to the ways in which informal modes of construction and urban design emerge from adaptation to resource scarcity. Instead of looking at the border region through the xenophobic lenses of Trump and Ted Cruz, who demonize border communities as sites of crime and decay that might infect American territory, we examine the border as an active site of exchange, from which we might be able to extrapolate new political principles and new strategies of dynamic coexistence. The wall, after all, attempts to impose a clear spatial division between neighboring communities, but it can do little to impede the shared practices, norms, ideas, interests, and aspirations that flow back and forth across the border.

We have been inspired by cases of equitable urbanization across Latin America, where inclusive civic processes have been used to stimulate a new civic consciousness. Some of the most dramatic examples have taken place in Bogotá, Colombia, where Antanas
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Mockus, a philosopher and former university rector, was elected mayor for two terms, first in the mid-1990s and again in the early 2000s. He came into office in a period of intense violence and has become legendary for the creativity of his interventions into the seemingly permanent state of crisis that had come to define the city. Mockus elevated the importance of public accountability and civic engagement, insisting that transforming social behavior within the city was even more important than—and in fact had to precede—the metropolis’s physical transformation. At the center of Mockus’s approach was the establishment of what he refers to as “citizenship culture,” a sense of mutual recognition and responsibility for collective well-being with the potential to reshape a city from the bottom up.

As mayor, Mockus emphatically declared the moral imperatives that should regulate social relations, among them that human life is sacred, that radical inequality is unjust, that adequate education and health are human rights, and that gender violence is intolerable. And he carried out a series of distinctive urban performances and interventions to demonstrate precisely what he meant, developing a kind of pedagogy of citizenship mobilized by art and culture. Most famously, he dissolved the corrupt traffic police force and hired a troupe of 420 mimes, who stood on street corners and shamed traffic violators by blowing whistles, pointing, and holding up disapproving signs. To many, it looked like a circus, and Mockus drew plenty of criticism, but the mimes were in fact helping to institute a new social norm of compliance. Their antics became a citywide sensation, and traffic fatalities declined by more than 50 percent during Mockus’s two terms.

Citizenship culture is a provocative idea in a border region like ours, where citizenship is typically understood as a means of enforcing division. Can we imagine it in a more complicated way that transcends the identitarian politics of the nation-state? Can the border region that divides two major cities in fact become a laboratory for cultivating a new citizenship culture, one grounded in a shared recognition that all human beings, regardless of race or legal nationality,
An aggressively militarized border radically disrupts the social, economic, and environmental ecologies that otherwise link people’s lives.

deserve equal respect and dignity? Thinking about citizenship as a cultural rather than a legal concept, one that unites rather than divides, demands that we untether identity from territory and conceive of ourselves as part of something larger and more inclusive than merely our local politics or even our nationality. If we imagine our border region through Mockus’s lens, the shared norms, values, practices, and aspirations of people across our region become the building blocks for a new kind of cross-border citizenship.

IN 2013, the mayor of San Diego asked us to develop a unit within his office that could work with the administration in Tijuana to cultivate municipal collaboration and carry out collective experiments in establishing new public spaces and fostering civic engagement in marginalized neighborhoods on both sides of the border. In response, we helped to establish the Civic Innovation Lab, an interdisciplinary think tank that we modeled in part after Mockus’s administration in Bogotá. The following year, we brought Mockus and Corpovisionarios, the consultancy he established after his second term as mayor, to the region to help us answer a provocative question: Is there a cross-border citizen? In collaboration with Mockus, we produced what we called the “Binational Citizenship Culture Survey.” Working with the municipalities of San Diego and Tijuana (the term binational was strategically selected in order to appeal to the mayors of both cities), as well as with Mexican and American stakeholders—government agencies, cultural institutions, foundations, universities, community-based organizations—we spent nearly a year designing a survey that would help us understand the needs and challenges, as well as the resources and aspirations, of this distinctive border zone.

We imagined the survey as a kind of “unwalling” protocol, a way of revealing the interpenetration and interdependence of these two cities. Indeed, the survey, completed in 2015, powerfully demonstrated that the region is defined by the informal flows that move back and forth across the border: economic, environmental, social, ethical. While we found, for example, a significant mutual lack of trust at multiple scales of government, we also discovered a desire to work together on a wide range of shared challenges—from public health to environmental conservation. Ironically, too, we saw that the most civically engaged communities on both sides of the border tended to be the least interested in cross-border collaboration. We see urgent opportunities for intervention at precisely this intersection between conflicting perceptions and agendas: As researchers and designers, we hope to disrupt the mythologies that have been perpetuated by xenophobic, often racially motivated, fears about the other and facilitate new conversations between institutions of power and diverse public audiences.

In 2011, inspired by Mockus’s idea that performance can be a tool for increasing public knowledge, we orchestrated a border-crossing intervention. The performance was carried out in collaboration with two NGOs, Casa Familiar and Alter Terra, which represent two communities divided by the border wall: San Ysidro, on the US side, which is the first immigrant neighborhood in the US, and Los Laureles Canyon in Mexico, an informal settlement of some eighty-five thousand people, which is the last slum in Latin America, literally crashing against the edge of the US. These marginalized neighborhoods bookend
a natural estuary on the US side of the border that is part of a binational watershed system. This sensitive environmental zone has been heavily impacted in recent years by the increased militarization of US Department of Homeland Security forces. Since 9/11, the US has been building a massive infrastructure of control and surveillance, adding triple fencing and creating a 150-foot-wide linear corridor that Homeland Security has claimed as its own jurisdiction, enabling the ongoing construction of floodlit US Border Patrol highways that run parallel to the border wall. This surveillance infrastructure includes a series of concrete dams and drains that truncate the many canyons that are part of the transborder watershed system, accelerating the flow of waste from the informal settlements on the Tijuana side, which are at a higher elevation on the south end of the wall.

We chose this site for our performance, intentionally encroaching on official institutional protocols and jurisdictions by proposing a public border crossing through a drain recently built by Homeland Security that is located at the exact intersection between the wall, the informal settlement of Los Laureles Canyon, and the estuary. Realizing the performance required us to work closely with local activists in a long process of negotiation with both Homeland Security and Mexican immigration; the two organizations ultimately granted our request to recede this specific drain beneath the border wall as a temporary but official port of entry for twenty-four hours.

Our strategy was to camouflage this happening as a symposium involving a wide, interdisciplinary audience including local, national, and international activists; scholars and researchers; artists, architects, and urbanists; and politicians and other community stakeholders. The central event of our “symposium” was a public walk that traversed the conflicting territories. As our audience moved south against the natural flow of contaminated wastewater pouring from the slum into the estuary, they eventually reached Mexican immigration officers, who had set an improvised tent on the south side of the drain inside Mexican territory. The strange juxtaposition of seeing pollution and the stamping of passports inside this liminal space amplified the contradictions between natural and national security while highlighting the artificial construction of citizenship. And the experience of these contradictions foregrounded another, deeper paradox: The construction of border walls for the sake of security is only exacerbating insecurity, as intractable logics of division threaten to produce future environmental and socioeconomic degradation. By enabling a physical passage across this odd section of the binational territory, our performance sought to expose the dramatic collision between informal urbanization, militarization, and environmental zones. Can we shift our gaze and resources from the border wall itself and into the slum? Border-Drain Crossing mobilized a cross-border public awareness around shared environmental interests. In this way, we hoped to physically manifest the idea of the border region as a laboratory for rethinking global citizenship. The problems of San Diego, after all, are also the problems of Tijuana; the problems of the US are also the problems of Mexico; and the problems of the world will not be solved in isolation and division.

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