

# Trans-Border Flows: Urbanisms Beyond the Poverty Line

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The international border between the US and Mexico at the San Diego–Tijuana checkpoint is the most trafficked in the world. Approximately sixty million people cross annually, moving untold amounts of goods and services back and forth. Currently, the intensity of this socio-cultural and economic funnel is once more being suppressed as the US government through the Department of Homeland Security is pouring billions of dollars into this border region to reinforce its infrastructure of surveillance. These new protectionists strategies fueled by a collective obsession with safety and security, paranoia and greed are defining a radically conservative cultural agenda that is incrementally reinforcing a rigid grid of containment instead of a fluid bed of opportunity. In other words, the hardening of the wall has occurred in tandem with the hardening of a social legislature toward the public, exacerbating a discriminating urban policy of exclusion and division. At no other urban juncture in the world can we find some of the wealthiest real state, as the one found in San Diego's Northern edges, barely twenty minutes away from some of the poorest settlements in Latin America as the ones found in Tijuana's southern fringes. It is in geographies of conflict such as this one where the tensions between urbanisms of the formal and the informal, division and mixture, wealth and the poverty, are radicalized at local and global levels.

A series of 'off the radar' two-way border crossings —North-South and South-North across the border wall and within these border cities— suggest that no matter how high and long the post-9/11 border wall becomes, it will always be transcended by migrating populations and the relentless flows of goods and services back and forth across the formidable barrier that seek to preclude them. These illegal flows are physically manifested, in one direction, by the informal land use patterns and economies produced by migrant workers in San Diego, flowing from Tijuana and Latin America, searching for the strong economy of Southern California. But, while 'human flow' mobilizes Northbound in search for Dollars, 'infrastructural waste' moves in the opposite direction to construct an insurgent, cross-border urbanism of emergency.

## Five Border Tours

### Tour 1

#### **South Beneath North: Counter Tactics of Encroachment / The Fictional Cartographies of an Urbanism 70-feet Deep**

An archaeological section map of the border territory today would reveal an underground urbanism made of at least 30 tunnels, a vast "ant farm"-like maze of subterranean routes criss-crossing the border from California to Arizona – all dug within the last eight years- worming it's way into houses, churches, parking lots, warehouses, and streets on both sides of the border. The most outlandish and sophisticated of these tunnels, discovered by US border officials in January of this year, is clearly the work of professionals: up to 70 feet below ground and 2,400 feet in length, its passageways are five to six feet high and four feet wide to permit two-way circulation. Striking not only for its scale, but also for its "amenities," the tunnel is equipped with ventilation and drainage systems, water pumps, electricity, retaining reinforcements, and stairs connecting various levels. Beyond its use by drug

traffickers, it was also "leased out" during "off" hours to coyotes transporting illegal aliens into the US, making it perhaps the first mixed-use smuggling tunnel at the border. Some might see this as a marvel of informal trans-national infrastructure, but most locals understand it as just another example of the vigorous Mexican-American economy at work. Beyond the sensationalism that might accompany these images, it is the undeniable presence of an informal economy as well as the political informalities of density that surround the border what is producing a unique urbanism of mobility and contingency.

## **Tour 2**

### **North to South: Migrating Houses**

#### **How San Diego's Waste Builds Tijuana**

In many ways, Tijuana builds itself with the waste of San Diego. One city recycles the 'left over' of the other into a sort of 'second hand' urbanism. San Diego's obsolete housing is imported into Tijuana. Entire pieces of one city travel southward as residential ready-mades are directly plugged into the other's fabric. This process begins when a Tijuana speculator travels to San Diego to buy up little post-war bungalows that have been slated for demolition to make space for new luxury condominium projects. The little houses are loaded onto trailers and prepared to travel to Tijuana, where they will have to clear customs before making their journey south. For days, one can see houses, just like cars and pedestrians, waiting in line to cross the border. Finally the houses enter into Tijuana and are mounted on top of one-story metal frames, leaving an empty space at the street level to accommodate future uses. These floating houses define a space of opportunity beneath them, that will be filled, through time, with more house, a taco stand, a car repair shop, a garden. One city profits from the dwellings that the other one discards, recombining them into fresh scenarios, creating countless new possibilities. This is how the border cities enact a strange mirroring effect. While the seemingly permanent housing stock in San Diego is turned disposable from one day to another, the ephemeral dwellings in Tijuana want to become permanent. Ultimately, this intensive recycling urbanism of juxtaposition is emblematic of how Tijuana's informal communities are growing faster than the urban cores they surround, creating a different set of rules for development, and blurring the distinctions between the urban, suburban and the rural.

## **Tour 3**

### **South to North: Illegal Zoning**

#### **The Search for Infrastructures of Ambiguity**

As our institutions of development and governance return en masse to the city, manifested by the massive re-development processes currently on going in many American cities, and focused in Downtown and the periphery, the territory that continues to be ignored is the older neighbourhoods of the Inner-City (Mid-City). This is the area where most of the immigrants coming from Latin America, Asia, and Africa have settled in the last decades, making these neighbourhoods the service communities for the newly gentrified center and the expensive periphery. Not able to afford the high-priced real estate of downtown's luxury condos or the Mac Mansion of the new sprawl, waves of immigrant communities have concentrated themselves in the mid-city neighbourhoods of many American Cities in recent years. The temporal, informal economies and patterns of density promoted by immigrants and their socio-cultural and economic dynamics have fundamentally altered what was the first ring of Levittown-type suburbanization of the 1950s, transforming its homogeneity into a more complex network of illegal socio-economic relationships. By critically observing how these temporal and contingent urbanisms have contaminated the rigidity of zoning within these older fabrics, can we anticipate how the one-dimensionality of the Mac Mansions now sprawling in the third, fourth, and fifth rings of suburbanization will be retrofitted to accommodate difference in the next five decades?

This points at the emergence of a temporal public domain encroaching into private property: Social spaces begin to spring up in large parking lots, informal economies such as flea markets and street vendors appear in vacant properties, and housing additions in the shape of illegal companion units are plugged-into existing dwellings to provide affordable living. Together, these 'plug-in' programs and architectures pixilate with a finer socio-economic grain, the discriminating land use that has maintained the social and the formal at a distance.

## **Tour 4**

### **North into south: The Counter Invasion (Tijuana's Mini Gated Communities)**

#### **Little San Diego in Tijuana**

As millions of Latin American immigrants flow North to work illegally for 'unwanted' jobs, thousands of mini tract homes and gated subdivisions move Southward, as San Diego's sub-urban recipes of development are defining Tijuana's periphery. The most dramatic physical manifestation of the importation into Tijuana of American – style neo-liberalist economic policies of privatization and the urban planning values of security and sameness that accompany them, can be found in the newly built mini master planned gated communities sprawling to the South East of the city. As Tijuana grows eastward and is seduced by the style and glamour of the master-planned, gated communities of the US, Tijuana is building its own version - miniaturized replicas typical suburban Southern California tract homes, paradoxically imported into Tijuana to provide "social housing." Thousands of tiny, tract homes are now scattered around the periphery of Tijuana, creating a vast landscape of homogeneity and division that is at odds with this city's prevailing heterogeneous and organic metropolitan condition. These diminutive 250 Sq Ft dwellings come equipped with all the clichés and conventions: manicured landscaping, gate houses, model units, banners and flags, mini-set backs, front and back yards. Even if designed with a fixed stylistic recipe by developers – beige units irresponsibly thrown in the landscape, lacking an infrastructure of public space and transportation- these tracts are transformed through time by their occupants into open systems, allowing them the freedom to activate higher-density, mixed uses and the negotiation of a new public realm. A small business fills in the front yard; an overhang appears, extending beyond the right of way, creating a public shade by a main sidewalk; two, three, four stories unfold through time, morphing the tiny prototype original model from an autonomous object into a series of interlinked spaces and patterns. Sometimes beneath the many layers, one can view the original house, hidden away as a silent witness of its own transformation.

## **Tour 5**

### **From the Global Border to the Border Neighbourhood**

What are the implications of these forces of control on one hand and of non-conformity on the other in the reshaping of the American City? My architecture practice and research reflects on the trans-border urban dynamics between San Diego-Tijuana, using this territory of conflict as backdrop to critically observe the clash between current top down discriminating forms of urban economic re-development and planning legislature (as expressed through dramatic forms of unchecked eminent domain policies supporting privatization and NYMBYism), on one hand, and the emerging American neighbourhoods nationwide made of immigrants, on the other, whose bottom up spatial tactics of encroachment thrive on informality and alternative social organizational practices.

My work primarily engages the micro scale of the neighbourhood, transforming it into an urban laboratory. The micro heterotopias that are emerging within small communities in the U.S., in the form of non-conforming spatial and entrepreneurial practices, are defining a different idea of density and land use, setting forth a counter form of urban and economic development that thrives on social encounter, collaboration and exchange. The trans-border urban dynamics at play across the most trafficked checkpoint in the world has provoked the small border neighbourhoods that surround it to construct alternative urbanisms of transgression that infiltrate themselves beyond the property line; a migrant, small scale activism that alters the rigidity of discriminatory urban planning of the American metropolis, and search for new modes of social sustainability and affordability. The political and economic processes behind this social activism bring new meaning to the role of the informal in the contemporary city, outside the conventional 'favela-like' slum research and the obvious formal analysis of traditional 'architecture without architects' rhetoric.

What it's interesting here is not the 'image' of the informal but the instrumentality of its operational socio-economic and political procedures. The counter economic and social organizational practices produced by non-profit social service organizations (turned micro-developers of alternative housing prototypes and public infrastructure at the scale of the parcel) within these neighbourhoods are creating alternative sites of negotiation, effectively searching to transform top down legislature and lending structures in order to yield a new brand of social and economic equity.

## **Regulating the Informal at the Border?**

### **CASA FAMILIAR (Case Study)**

#### **Designing a Micro-Policy**

The most experimental work in housing in the U.S. is in the hands of progressive, community-based non-profit organizations such as CASA FAMILIAR in the border community of San Ysidro, California. These agencies have been the primary social service organizations engaging and managing the shifting cultural demographics caused by immigration within many mid-city neighbourhoods in the U.S. These NGO's are also becoming the developers of affordable housing within these environments, translating their socio-cultural agendas into unique organizational strategies and spatial tactics.

Working with the premise that no advances in housing design in the U.S. can occur without advances in its housing policy and subsidy structures, my collaboration with Casa Familiar has been grounded on the shaping of alternative political and economic frameworks that can, in turn, yield tactical housing projects inclusive of these neighbourhoods' informal patterns of mixed-use and density.

#### ***Designing the Conditions: AHOZ Micro-Policy / 10 points:***

Premise: In San Ysidro housing will not be just 'units' spread indifferently across the territory. Here, housing is dwelling in relationship to social and cultural program managed by Casa Familiar, the neighbourhood's Non-Profit Organization. In this context, density is not just an amount of 'units per acre,' it is an amount of 'social exchanges per acre.'

1. The Non-Profit Organization becomes an urban Think Tank. It would manage an initial research project to identify and document properties on which illegal construction has taken place in the last decades, as small extended families share resources in building non-conforming additions. These stealth companion units usually are located in the back of a parcel flanking an alley.
2. The municipality would allow a small overlay zone, within which these illegal and fragile units could be legalized, allowing their replacement by new ones without penalizing the property owners (the municipality makes visible the invisible, inserting these illegal units into a new category of zoning)
3. The Non-Profit with the support of alternative funding would generate the design of a series of small, ready-made housing additions that can be combined in a variety of scenarios and assembled by human resourcefulness within the community (it is in these neighbourhoods where the service construction sector lives).
4. The Non-Profit would act as mediator between city and financial agencies (banking), managing and facilitating construction permitting and loan processes.
5. A property owner would select a particular combination of dwelling and the non-profit would assist in expediting its permitting process (the Non-Profit becomes a micro City Hall). The municipality would pre-authorize the construction documents for these new dwellings, allowing the Non-Profit to facilitate the end of the process and managing the actual construction permit.
6. The property owner promises to participate in the construction of the unit, therefore allowing sweat equity –hours of labor- to become equity in the development pro-forma. (The property owner becomes a micro-developer, participating in the process). This introduces the notion of 'Barter-Housing and Services.' Property owners join forces to produce alternative services and programming. Two households get together to produce a micro-nursery or a free-rent studio is given to a gardener as exchange to maintain the premises, a dweller participates in a pedagogical project organized by Casa Familiar for the neighbourhood's children, generating a 'Time Bank' for the dweller who in turn can invest it or exchange it for other services, etc.
7. How to make these units affordable? The Non-Profit would manage a series of micro-credits. This is not only achieved by inserting the notions of 'bartering housing,' 'time banking,' sweat equity, neighbourhood collaboration and exchange, but in a more 'official' economic process, it is achieved by breaking the loan structure allocated to large affordable housing projects -out of tax credits and other

subsidies- into small pieces that can be distributed throughout the community. Let's imagine shattering the large loan for a conventional condominium project over parking into smaller pieces, and then distributing these micro credits across the neighbourhood.

*Note:* The reason private developers have not built affordable housing projects in neighbourhoods such as these ones –even during a period of unprecedented construction boom in California- is because a discrepancy between zoning policy and economic development. In other words, for a developer to make an affordable housing project profitable, he or she would have to be competitive in terms of tax credits and subsidies. In order to make it feasible, this project would have to have an average of 50 units. 50 units are not allowed by code in many of these communities, and mixed used is prohibited by zoning. Housing affordability in many US cities is trapped within this contradiction.

8. The construction of housing units at the back of parcels would support the activation of a network of alleys into a circuit of pedestrian and landscape corridors.

9. Some of the amenities included in these community housing projects would include small, social service infrastructures as support systems for non-conforming community uses, such as informal public markets and gardens.

10. The guidelines proposed by the AHOZ could be distilled into a series of new relationships, so that private developers who want to benefit from the higher densities proposed by this overlay zone would have to comply with the social and public programs that accompany these developments.

In a special resolution, in January of 2005, Casa Familiar's micro-policy was authorized by the City of San Diego's Mayor and City Council, paving the way for the design of a pilot housing project that could anticipate new densities and mixed uses in the mid-city.