

Image: Estudio Teddy Cruz

Mapping Non-Conformity: Post-Bubble Urban Strategies

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Resumen:

En este ensayo, el arquitecto Teddy Cruz analiza lo que él llama "umbrales críticos" en las Américas, que incluyen zonas de frontera y también los sectores de conflicto generados por políticas discriminatorias de desarrollo zonal y económico. Cruz responsabiliza a las instituciones de desarrollo y planeamiento urbano por su incapacidad de mediar entre las múltiples fuerzas que diseñan las políticas de territorio; también las culpa de no resolver las tensiones entre las estrategias urbanas de desarrollo oficial –que se imponen "de arriba hacia abajo"– y las tácticas de activismo comunitario –que se desarrollan "de abajo hacia arriba". Como respuesta, Cruz visualiza nuevos mapas críticos que intentan capturar el movimiento y la migración de personas y bienes a través de la frontera, junto con las "micro-heterotopías" y el "urbanismo escondido" que caracteriza la zona fronteriza contemporánea de San Diego/Tijuana.

Introduction:

A personal Reflection: Where is (architectural) Practice?

1. *The transformation of my practice in recent years, in terms of my own interests, motivations,*

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and procedures, has been inspired by a feeling of powerlessness, as our institutions of architecture, representation, and display have lost their socio-political relevance and their commitment to advocacy. I have been increasingly disappointed at the futility of our design fields, in the context of pressing socio-political realities worldwide and the conditions of conflict that are currently re-defining the territory of intervention. It has been unsettling to witness some of the most 'cutting edge' practices of architecture rush unconditionally to China and the Arab Emirates to build their dream castles, reducing themselves to mere caricatures of change and camouflaging gentrification with a massive hyper aesthetic and formalist project. I certainly hope that, in the context of this euphoria for the Dubai's of the world and the seemingly limitless horizon of possibilities inspired by a sense of dissatisfaction, a feeling of "pessimistic optimism" can provoke us, head on, to also address the sites of conflict that define and will continue to define the cities in the 21st Century.

2. While international urban development in major urban centers has defined the economic and political recipes decorated by architectural practice, new experimental practices of intervention in the collective territory of collaboration will emerge from zones of conflict and from the margins. It is in the periphery where conditions of social emergency are transforming our ways of thinking about urban matters and the matters of concern about the city. The radicalization of the local in order to generate new readings of the global will transform the neighborhood—not the city—into the urban laboratory of our time. In this context, the task of architectural practice should not only be to make visible the long-ignored socio-political and economic territorial histories of injustice within our ideologically polarized world but also to generate new forms of sociability and activism.

3. The future of architectural practice depends on the re-definition of the formal and the social, the economic and the political, understanding that environmental degradation is a direct result of social and political degradation. No advances in urban planning can be made without redefining what we mean by infrastructure, density, mixed use, and affordability. No advances in housing design, for example, can be made without advances in housing policy and economic subsidies. As architects, we can be responsible for imagining counter spatial procedures, political and economic structures that can produce new modes of sociability and encounter. Without altering the backward exclusionary policies constructing the territory, the socio-political ground—our profession—will continue to be subordinated to the visionless environments defined by the bottom-line urbanism of the developer's spreadsheet.

4. I am interested in a practice of intervention that engages the spatial, territorial and environmental conditions across critical thresholds, whether global border zones or local sectors of conflict generated by the discriminatory politics of zoning and economic development in the contemporary city. This suggests operational urban practices that encroach into the privatization of public domain and infrastructure, the rigidity of institutional thinking, and the current obsession with an ownership society. This also opens the idea that architects, besides being designers of form, can also be designers of political process, economic pro-forma, and

collaboration across institutions and jurisdictions.

5. Architectural practice needs to engage in the re-organization of systems of urban development, challenging political and economic frameworks that are only benefiting homogenous large-scale interventions managed by private mega-block development. I believe the future is small, and this implies the dismantling of the LARGE by pixilating it with the micro: an urbanism of retrofit. No intervention into public domain can begin without first exposing political jurisdiction and conditions of ownership. Clearly, this points out the pressing need for architectural practice to re-engage the invisible forces and vectors of power that shape the territory. This is the main topic of conversation and exchange that needs to take place across disciplines, but not from the isolation of the classroom or the design studio.



Practice Diagram

6. Moving from these broad conceptual meditations into the specificity of the San Diego-Tijuana border, one oscillates back and forth between two radically different ways of constructing the city. At no other international juncture in the world one can find some of the most expensive real state as that lying on the edges of San Diego's sprawl—barely twenty minutes away from some of the poorest settlements in Latin America, manifested by the many slums that dot the new periphery of Tijuana. These two different types of suburbia are emblematic of the incremental division of the contemporary city and the territory between enclaves of mega wealth and the rings of poverty that surround them. I am interested in processes of mediation that can produce critical interfaces between and across these opposites, exposing conflict as an operational devise to transform architectural practice. The critical observation of this locality transforms this border region into a laboratory from which to reflect on the current politics of migration, labour and surveillance, the tensions between sprawl and density, formal and informal urbanisms, and wealth and poverty—all of which have increasingly come to characterize the contemporary city all over the globe.

Radicalizing the Local: 60 Miles of Trans-border Urban Conflict

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A newly reconstituted global border between the first and third worlds is re-emerging as societies of overproduction and excess are barricading themselves in an unprecedented way against the sectors of scarcity produced by their own indifference. The border zones along this post 9-11 political equator are the sites where the forces of division and control produced by these global zones of conflict are physically inscribed, manifested, and amplified in the territory, producing, in turn, local zones of conflict.

The international border between the US and Mexico at the San Diego-Tijuana checkpoint is the most trafficked in the world. Approximately 60 million people cross annually, moving untold amounts of goods and services back and forth. A 60 linear-mile cross section between these two border cities, tangential to the border wall, compresses the most dramatic issues currently challenging our normative notions of architecture and urbanism. This trans border 'cut' begins 30 miles north of the border, in the periphery of San Diego, and ends 30 miles south. Along this section's trajectory, we find a series of collisions, critical junctures, or conflicts between natural and artificial ecologies, top-down development, and bottom-up organization.

+30 miles / San Diego

Ironically, the only interruptions along an otherwise continuous sprawl—30 miles inland from the border—occur as the military bases that dot San Diego's suburbanization overlap with environmentally protected lands. This produces a strange montage of housing subdivisions, natural ecology, and militarization. The *conflict between military bases and environmental zones* has been recently dramatized as Fallujah-like mock villages, equipped with hologram technologies to project Arab subjects. These are now being erected here as vernacular military training sites.

+25 miles

Large freeway and Mall infrastructure runs the length of Coastal San Diego, colliding with a natural network of canyons, rivers, and creeks that descend towards the Pacific Ocean. A necklace of territorial voids is produced out of the *conflict between large infrastructure and the watershed*. As the politics of water will define the future of this region, the recuperation of these truncated natural resources are essential to anticipate density.

+20 miles

Top-down private development has been installing a selfish and oil-hungry sprawl of detached Mac Mansions everywhere. The *conflict between master-planned gated communities and the natural topography* flattens the differential landscape of San Diego's edges and encroaches into the natural cycles of fire-prone areas. This archipelago of beige tract homes also exacerbates a land use based on exclusion, turning it into a kind of apartheid of everyday life.



Radicalizing the Local: 60 linear miles of transborder conflict, 2008

+15 miles

San Diego's downtown has reconfigured itself with exclusive tax-revenue, re-development powers, becoming an island of wealth delimited by specific zoning and budgetary borders. Luxury condos and hotels, stadiums and convention centers, surrounded by generic commercial franchises compose this stew of privatization from New York to San Diego. The proximity of wealth and poverty found at the border checkpoint is reproduced here in the *conflict between powerful downtowns and the neighborhoods of marginalization* that surround them. It is in these neighborhoods where cheap labor-immigration concentrates, conveniently becoming the service sector that supports downtown's massive gentrification project.

+10 miles

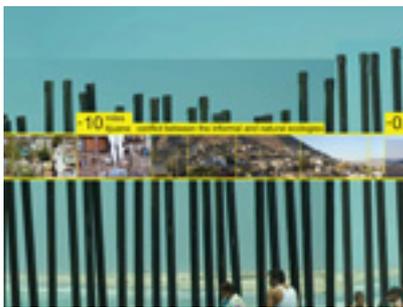
The *conflict between the formal and the informal* emerges as immigrants fill the first ring of suburbanization surrounding downtown, retrofitting an obsolete urbanism of older postwar bungalows. Informal densities and economies produce a sort of three-dimensional land use that collides with the one-dimensional zoning that has characterized these older neighborhoods.

0 miles

At the border itself, the metal fence becomes emblematic of the *conflict between these two border cities*, reenacting the perennial alliance between militarization and urbanization. This territorial conflict is currently dramatized by the hardening of the post 9-11 border wall that divides this region, incrementally transforming San Diego into the world's largest gated community. As we cross the border into Mexico, the first sight we witness is how the large infrastructure of the Tijuana River clashes with the border wall. This is the only place where an otherwise continuous metal fence is pierced and opened as the river

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enters into San Diego. A faint yellow line is inscribed on the dry river's concrete channel to indicate the trajectory of the border. But as the channel moves beyond the fence and into San Diego's territory, the concrete disappears becoming the Tijuana River Estuary, a US ecological reserve, which frames the natural ecology of the river as it flows freely towards the Pacific Ocean. What dramatizes this *conflict between the natural and the political* is the fact that the border checkpoint is exactly at the intersection of both, punctuating the environmentally protected zone with a matrix of border patrol vehicles, helicopters, and electrified fences.



Radicalizing the Local: 60 linear miles of transborder conflict, 2008

-10 miles / Tijuana

Many of the sites of conflict found in San Diego are reproduced and amplified in Tijuana. As Tijuana grows eastward, for example, it is seduced by the style and glamour of the master-planned, gated communities of the US and builds its own version—miniaturized replicas of 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.



Radicalizing the Local: 60 linear miles of transborder conflict, 2008

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-15 miles

The *conflict between the formal and the informal* is reenacted here, as these mini-tract homes quickly submit to transformation by occupants who are little hindered by permissive zoning regulations. While the gated communities of Southern California remain closed systems due to stringent zoning that prohibits any kind of formal alteration or programmatic juxtaposition, these housing tracts in Tijuana are dramatically altered by their occupants—filling in setbacks, occupying front and back yards as well as garages with more construction to support mixed use and more usable space.

-20 miles

These American-style, mini-master-planned communities are intertwined with a series of informal communities or slums, and both surround Maquiladora (NAFTA assembly factories) enclaves. The *conflict between cheap labor and emergency housing* is produced here as these factories extract cheap labor from these slums without providing any support for dwelling. As these favela-like sectors grow out of proportion, they also encroach into the natural ecology of Tijuana's delicate topography, reenacting also the *conflict between the informal and the natural*.



Radicalizing the Local: 60 linear miles of transborder conflict, 2008

-30 miles

And then, as we reach the sea on the Mexican side, we witness the most dramatic of all territorial collisions across this 60 mile-section of local conflict. After traveling many miles across the border territory, the border metal fence finally sinks into the Pacific Ocean, producing a surreal sight that further amplifies the clash between the natural and the jurisdictional.

It is in the midst of many of these metropolitan and territorial sites of conflict where

contemporary architectural practice needs to reposition itself. In other words, no meaningful intervention can occur in the contemporary city without first exposing the conditions, political and economic forces (jurisdiction and ownership), that have produced these collisions in the first place.

Cross Border Suburbias: Urbanisms of Transgression

When Kevin Lynch was commissioned by a local environmental group to come up with a "regional vision plan" for the US-México border zone in 1974, he dreamed of a *Temporary Paradise*. Addressed to the City Planning Commission of San Diego, his bi-national planning strategy focused on the network of canyons and watersheds that traverse the landscape on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border. Lynch could never have predicted that neither the natural landscape *nor* city planners would define the real action plan for trans-border urbanism and that, instead, it would be an emergent network of underground tunnels masterminded by drug lords and "coyotes," who would quietly and invisibly efface the formidable barrier that separates the two cities. Now, 34 years later, at least 30 tunnels have been discovered—a vast "ant farm"-like maze of subterranean routes, all of which have been dug within the last eight years, criss-crosses the border from California to Arizona. At the very least, this creates a *permanent hell* for the US Department of Homeland Security.

An archaeological section map of the territory today would reveal an underground urbanism worming it's way into houses, churches, parking lots, warehouses, and streets. 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 transnational infrastructure, but most locals understand it as just another example of the vigorous Méxican-American economy at work.

Beyond the sensationalism that might accompany these images, the undeniable presence of an informal economy and the politics of density surround what is exposed here. As we actually insert the actual location of these illegal tunnels into an existing official border map, a different image of the borderline appears. The linear rigidity of the artificial geopolitical boundary, which has 'flat-lined' the pulsations of the living complexity of the natural, is transformed back into a complex set of porous lines perpendicular to the border, as if they were small leakages that began to percolate through a powerful dam. As these lines puncture the borderline in our

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fictional cartography; they almost restore the primacy of the network of existing canyons, juxtaposing the natural with the socio-economic flows that continue to be ‘under the radar’ in our official modes of urban planning representation.

By zooming further into the particularities of this volatile territory, traveling back and forth between these two border cities, we can expose many other landscapes of contradiction where conditions of difference and sameness collide and overlap. A series of ‘off the radar’ two-way border crossings—North-South and South-North across the border wall—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 seeks to preclude them. These illegal flows are physically manifested, in one direction, by the informal land use patterns and economies produced by migrant workers that flow from Tijuana and into San Diego, 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.

South to North: Suburbs made of Non-conformity Tijuana’s Encroachment into San Diego’s Sprawl



Manufactured Sites: A housing urbanism made of waste, 2005

Over the past decades, millions of migrants have flowed northward in pursuit of one of the strongest economies in the world, the state of California, with the assurance that such economic power still depends exclusively on their cheap labor—a demand and supply logic. As the Latin American diaspora travels northbound, it inevitably alters and transforms the fabric of San Diego’s sub-divisions. Immigrants bring with them diverse socio-cultural attitudes and sensibilities regarding the use of domestic and public space as well as the natural landscape. In these neighborhoods, multi-generational households of extended families shape their own programs of use, taking charge of their own micro-economies in order to maintain a standard for the household. These households generate non-conforming uses and high densities that reshape the fabric of the residential neighborhoods where they settle. Alternative social spaces begin to spring up in large parking lots, informal economies such as flea markets and street

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vendors appear in vacant properties, and housing additions in the shape of illegal companion units are plugged into existing suburban dwellings to provide affordable living.

The areas of San Diego that have been most impacted by this non-conforming urbanism are concentrated in its first ring of suburbanization. At this moment developers and city officials are still focusing on two main areas of development—on one end, the high-income gentrifying re-development of downtown, and on the other, the increasingly expansive project of sprawl made of an equally high-priced real estate project and supported by oil hungry infrastructure. It is the older neighborhoods of San Diego's mid-city which remain depressed and ignored. It is here, in the first ring of suburbanization, where immigrants have been settling in recent years, unable to afford the high rents of downtown's luxury condos and the expensive Mc Mansions of the new suburbs.

Conveniently, they have become the cheap-labor service providers to both. Fifty years ago, these older neighborhoods in the mid-city did not look that much different than the new rings of suburbanization of today. The older subdivisions were also following a Levittown recipe, made of homogeneity and standardization, similar to the master-planned gated communities being built today. But while the logic behind this urbanism of sameness continues to be reproduced today, it is the scale of the sprawl what has changed. In other words, as the new rings of suburbanization require a version of Levittown on steroids, the mid-city's small scale has made these older neighborhoods obsolete, as its post war bungalows are not able to accommodate the current super-size me housing market. This obsolescence has produced a void that has begun to be filled by the temporal, informal economies, and patterns of density promoted by immigrants, fundamentally altering the homogeneity of this first ring of Levittown-type suburbanization into a more complex network of socio-economic relationships.

The shifting of cultural demographics in the mid-city has transformed many of these neighborhoods into the site of investigation for my practice, as the main inspiration of our research has focused on the impact of immigration in the transformation of the American neighborhood. The critical observation of the mutation of these older bedroom communities—from rigid, mono-cultural, and one-dimensional environments into informal, multi-cultural, and cross-programmed communities—opens the question: how do we anticipate density? It might be that the future of Southern California urbanism will be determined by tactics of retrofit and adaptation, making the large small.

One of the most emblematic examples of the retrofitting of Levittown is the “*non-conforming Buddha*.” Incrementally, throughout the last twenty years, a tiny post-war bungalow in the mid-city neighborhood of City Heights in San Diego has been transformed from a single-family residence into a Buddhist temple. The small decorative lawn that filled the front yard has been hardened into a fake, shiny marble plinth that serves as altar for a huge, white statue of Buddha that encroaches illegally into the front set back. The driveway has become a

dining room leading into the main interior altar, meditation space and community room. The old set backs that define the separation of this house from its neighbor have now been filled with small sheds to accommodate other programs related to the temple. From far away, though, and framed by the small street it occupies, this small bungalow resembles another typical house. It is not the typological and spatial transformations of this small house what is really interesting here, but the fact that this house has now become a social agency inside the neighborhood, facilitating social relations, pedagogical programs, cultural support, and economic exchanges. The idea that one unit of dwelling has become a multi-faceted social agency suggest that our normative idea of density needs to be questioned.

Beyond Density (as an Amount of Units per Acre)

Our institutions of representation across government, academia, and development have been unable to critically observe and translate the logic of the informal socio-economic dynamics at play not only at the border itself, but within the city at large. The official documentation of land use at any city agency, whether in San Diego or Tijuana for example, has systematically ignored the non-conforming and self-organizing dynamics of these environments by continuing to advocate a false, bi-dimensional land-use convention based on abstract information rendered at the planners' table, whereby retail is represented with red and housing with yellow—each safely located adjacent to one another in the best of scenarios, since they are typically very far apart.

If, on the other hand, one were to map the *real* land use in some of the San Diego neighborhoods that have been impacted in the last decades by waves of immigration from Latin America, Africa, and Asia—examining them parcel by parcel, block by block—a land use map would emerge with at least ten or more ‘zone colors.’ These ‘zone colors’ would reflect the gradation of use and scale of the diverse social composition as well as non-conforming small businesses and social exchanges that characterizes such culturally intensive areas of the city. We would also find a three-dimensional zoning based not on adjacencies but on juxtapositions, as dormant infrastructures are transformed into usable semi-public spaces, and larger than ‘needed’ parcels are illegally subdivided to accommodate extra dwelling units. In other words, the appropriation and negotiation of public and private boundaries remains anathema for conventional code regulation, ignoring the potentialities that this stealth urbanism can open. How to alter our conventions of representation in order to absorb the ambiguity of these forces, remains the essential question in the negotiation between the formal and the informal city.

Similar to the cartography of cross-border illegal tunnels, then, an accurate bi-national land use map does not currently exist. If we were to ‘cut and paste’ the existing land use documents from Tijuana and San Diego, a borderline (without marking the border wall itself) would again ‘appear’ between the two cities as the larger land use ‘chunks’ of San Diego come side to side with the smaller pixilation of Tijuana’s Land Use map—two different ways of administering density and mixed uses, barely twenty minutes apart. A fictional Cartography of this ‘collision’

would invite one to speculate an alternative way of representing the transformation of some of the San Diego neighborhoods impacted by informal patterns of development: this new land use map would show the higher pixilation of Tijuana's three dimensional and multi-color zoning crossing the borderline and sipping into San Diego. The 'stains' of this higher pixilation are deposited in many of these older neighborhoods, beginning to form an archipelago of pockets of difference within the sea of the current homogeneous sprawl that defines this city.

What this phenomenon points out, then, is the fact that our institutions of representation are also unable to mediate the multiple forces that shape the politics of the territory and resolve the tensions between the top-down urban strategies of official development as well as the bottom-up tactics of community activism. The micro heterotopias that are emerging within small communities in the form of informal spatial and entrepreneurial practices are defining a different idea of density and land use. Making visible the invisibility of these non-conforming forces and their operational potential to bridge between the formal and the informal, the wealthy subdivisions and the enclaves of poverty (service communities) in the city would be the only point of departure to construct a different idea of density and sustainability. We need to engage new conceptual and representational tools that can allow us to transcend the reductive understanding of density as an abstract amount of units / inhabitants per acre, and, instead, reaffirm it as an amount of 'social interactions and economic exchanges' per acre.

North to South: Suburbs made of Waste San Diego's Levittown is Recycled into Tijuana's Slums



No stop sprawl: McMansion retrofitted, 2008

While migrants go north, the waste of San Diego flows southbound to construct an urbanism of emergency. This is how one of the most dramatic and 'unnoticed' urban flows across the Tijuana-San Diego border is comprised by the amount of urban waste that is transferred from San Diego into Tijuana. This phenomenon occurs as sections of San Diego's older suburbs begin to erode, so that developers can install a new recipe of development, while a few miles South, in Tijuana, new informal suburbs or slums spring up from one day to another.

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In addition to immigrants retrofitting a large section of San Diego's mid-city, other parts of San Diego's first ring of suburbanization have been replaced by larger versions of themselves. As new and large Mac-mansion sub-divisions update these older suburbs in San Diego, the first ring of suburbanization has been dismantled, piece-by-piece, in the last years (Small bungalows are being dismembered and their pieces given away to speculators). This is how Southern California Levittown's debris is recycled to build the new periphery of Tijuana.



No stop sprawl: McMansion retrofitted, 2008

The left over parts of San Diego's older sub-divisions, standard framing, joists, connectors, plywood, aluminum windows, and garage doors are being disassembled and recombined on the other side, across the border. Once in Tijuana edges, out of social and emergency and housing shortage, these parts are reassembled into fresh scenarios, creating a housing urbanism of waste. But not only small, scattered debris 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. 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, which will be filled, through time, with more houses, 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 and 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.

So, as one city recycles the 'left over' of the other into a sort of 'second hand' urbanism, Tijuana's informal settlements are shaped by these cross-border recycling dynamics and by

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organizational tactics of invasion, allowing settlers to claim underutilized territory. While San Diego's vast sprawl is incrementally made of gigantic infrastructure to support loosely scattered units of housing, dense inhabitation happens first in Tijuana's edges so that incremental small infrastructure can follow.

This temporal, nomadic urbanism is supported by a very sophisticated social choreography of neighborhood participation. Hundreds of dwellers called "paracaidistas" (parachuters) invade, en masse, large public (sometimes private) vacant properties. As these urban guerillas parachute into the hills of Tijuana's edges, they are organized and choreographed by what are commonly called "urban pirates." These characters, armed with cellular phones, are the community activists (or land speculators) who are in charge of organizing the first deployment of people at the sites as well as the community in an effort to begin the process of requesting services from the city. Through improvisational tactics of construction and distribution of goods and ad hoc services, a process of assembly begins by recycling the systems and materials from San Diego's urban debris. Garage doors are used to make walls (entire houses are made with garage doors as the main structural and exterior skin). Rubber tires are cut and dismantled into folded loops, clipped and interlocked, creating a system that threads a stable retaining wall. Wooden crates make the armature for other imported surfaces, such as recycled refrigerator doors, etc. After months of construction and community organization, the neighborhood begins to request municipal services. The city sends trucks to deliver water at certain locations and electricity follows as the city sends *one* official line, expecting the community to "steal" the rest via a series of illegal clippings called "*diablitos* (Little Devils)." These sites are threaded by the temporal stitching of these multiple situations, internal and external, simultaneously, making the interiors of these dwellings become their exteriors, expressive of the history of their pragmatic evolution. As one anonymous resident put it: "Not everything that we have is to our liking, but everything is useful."

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. As notions of the informal are brought back, recycled by the fields of architecture and urbanism in debating the growth of the contemporary city, let's hope that it is not only the figural 'image' of the ephemeral and nomadic that is once more seducing our imagination, but, the complex and temporal evolutionary processes beneath them, whose essences are grounded on socio-political and economic dynamics.

Epilogue: Returning Duchamp's Urinal to the Bathroom

1. One of the most important issues underlying my research has been to produce new conceptions and interpretations of the informal on both sides of the border. We continue to be

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seduced with the 'style' of the informal without translating its actual operative procedures. Instead of a fixed image, I see the informal as a functional set of urban operations that allow the transgression of imposed political boundaries and top down economic models. I see the informal not as a noun but as a verb, which detonates traditional notions of site specificity and context into a more complex system of hidden socio-economic exchanges. I see the informal as the urban unwanted, that which is left over after the pristine presence of architecture with capital 'A' has been usurped and transformed into the tenuous scaffold for social encounter. I see the informal as the site of a new interpretation of community, citizenship and praxis, where emergent urban configurations produced out of social emergency suggest the performatic role of individuals constructing their own spaces.



Neighborhood urbanism: The informal as a tool to transform policy, 2007

2. But the social capital and cultural economy embedded within these marginal communities and border neighborhoods, which have been the site of investigation for our practice, are never included in the 'official' process of urbanization and economic development. Community engagement in the theater of city re-development in the United States is always reduced to a symbolic gesture that transforms social participation into a 'multiple choice questionnaire' for community revitalization, a process that is ultimately co-opted by the politics of identity—In what style should we build? This is how at a time when the institutions of urban planning need to be re-defined, one particular topic that needs to be considered is the value of social capital (people's participation) in urban development, enhancing the role of communities in producing housing. What are needed are housing configurations that enable the development and emergence of local economies and new forms of sociability, allowing neighborhoods to generate new markets 'from the bottom up,' within the community (i.e., social and economic entrepreneurial efforts that are usually off the radar of conventional top down economic recipes), as well as to promote new models of financing to allow unconventional mixed uses. Another pressing challenge in our time, primarily when the paradigm of private property has become unsustainable in conditions of poverty, is the need to re-think existing conditions of property ownership. Re-defining affordability by amplifying the value of social participation: More than 'owning' units, dwellers, in collaboration with community based, non-profit agencies, can

also co-own the economic and social infrastructure around them.

3. But often, there is a gap between the institutions of community development and the actual lived reality of these entrepreneurial energies that are seldom mobilized by top down institutions of zoning and lending. In fact, these communities often lack the conceptual devices to understand their own every day procedures and how their neighborhood agency can trickle up to produce new institutional transformations, shaping alternative politics and economies at the scale of their own everyday needs.

4. It is here where a different notion of empowerment emerges, less to do with the symbolic representation of people by which architectural or artistic social practices only deploy the symbolic image of the community and not its operative dimension. Empowerment here signifies an act of translation and political representation at the scale of neighborhoods: The visualization of citizenship. These communities' invisible urban praxis needs interpretation and representation, and, as architects, this is the space of intervention that we are interested in occupying. We should seek to design the conditions that can mobilize this activism into new spatial and economic infrastructures that benefit these communities of practice in the long term, beyond the short-term problem solving of private developers or the charitable institutions. To act as facilitators of this bottom up intelligence means translating the ethical knowledge specific to a community into new communicational systems, radical urban pedagogy, and micro-political and economic armatures—in essence, an urbanism at the scale of the neighborhood, and a community as political and economic unit.



Neighborhood parcels: Micro social economic systems, 2007

5. Finally, in these times of crisis, empowerment also means the production of an expanded notion of practice, new ways of constructing information and conversation among ourselves, the so called 'experts.' It is our responsibility to problematize the debate, mediating across these stakeholders as well as the compartmentalization of our own fields and institutions of artistic display and production. We need a critical re-contextualizing of our different approaches and

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procedures. The trans-border urban flows that have been the laboratory for my practice are the backdrop for the need to transcend our reductive and limited ways of working, by which we continue to see the world as a tabula rasa on which to install the autonomy of architecture. Today, it is essential to reorient our gaze towards the drama embedded in the reality of the everyday and, in so doing, engage the shifting socio-political and economic domains that have been ungraspable by design. Or, as artist Tania Bruguera said to me recently: “It is time to restore Duchamp’s urinal back to the bathroom!” suggesting a more functional relationship between research, artistic intervention, and the production of the city.

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