

Frontera y Urbanismo: Spatial and Perceptual Constructs of the U.S.-Mexico Border

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The border is a stage for many actors; each person, whether established or in transition, holds an image made of memory and place. For those of us who have crossed it, the border remains a living entity. It is feared because the unknown and the past lie within its buildings and its landscape. For those who can freely cross it, for example the tourist, the border stands as a place of cheap authentic entertainment with the occasional fear of the unknown 'other.' But for those neither visiting nor crossing, the one hundred fifty miles inland which define the U.S. Border region is home.

This summer I returned to Del Rio, TX, a place where my holidays are spent with family. While out for an afternoon drive, I took a local road and headed south. I wanted to see where the road would lead; I had seen clearings between the river reed and I was curious. Along major highways there are signs that warn "last exit," but here, on a local road, there were no signs to give warning about leaving the First World and driving into the so called Third World.¹

My father-in-law warned me to be careful. Lately even he and his wife had been stopped by the border patrol while out for afternoon walks – high drug trafficking had everyone on alert. At first I passed the local high school, and then the newly constructed suburbs. Past that, the road kept winding to reveal a few homesteads here and there. The road remained surprisingly well-paved. The gas meter read low. Finally I reached what looked like another town. I looked left and saw a pond and a faded sign which read, "Los Patos."² A yellow "City of Del Rio" school bus

stopped at the intersection in front of me and I realized this was not another town; this was the slum my father-in-law had described when he spoke of where *los mojaditos*³ lived.

This place is identified by the pond but also by its edge position on a geopolitical map at three miles reach of the Rio Grande. It sits between Del Rio and the river that separates this northern city from the urban growth of Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila. In *Los Patos* I found a semi-established *colonia*.⁴ These communities exist on either side of the border, typified as squatter shanty towns or *favela*⁵-like settlements. *Los Patos*, although similar to its counterpart Mexican *colonia*, contrasts by adhering to a Cartesian grid of streets, complete with front yard fences and city school buses servicing households, but remains disdained by the city proper.

Characterized as low-income housing without proper infrastructure, *colonias* reflect the problematics of the city at a micro-level. Vendor next to residence, high art next to street art, dust clouds that rise from semi-paved streets, goods for sale from front and back porches, Domino's pizza next to an improvised tire replacement stop, a man charging ten *pesos* for a miracle massage out of an old seat-less Volkswagen van, piñatas hanging in the wind across from a massive H.E.B. grocery store, an eight foot image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on the front stoop – at the border past and present fuse into a heterotopic meld. This is a place of permanence and transition both nationally and locally. Migrant families travel between border

cities like Del Rio and the Mid-West, while at a local level they establish *colonias* which gradually grow from the informal to the formal. In this experience I find the complexity which comprises an understanding of the physical and conceptual border. This place is a source of diffusion, not simply in the form of exchanges of goods and people, but also in the flows of ideas, conflicts, and customs. While poverty is not something to be romanticized, *colonias* are a very real product of the border both in the spatial and perceptual constructs they produce. They are a tool that allows us to break down the relationship between what we have thus far categorized as First and Third worlds. *Colonias* ought not to be dismissed as simply shelter for poor in Texas. Rather, the cities of which they are informally included and formally excluded should view the *colonia* as an opportune moment of observation and intervention. I posit that *colonias* represent a richness of temporal development, potential for mixing of uses and density, and the ability to bridge across the economic gap that typically characterizes the disparities between the two sides of the border.

Frontera / Tercer Pais

Whether looking south or north, the U.S.-Mexico border remains an *open wound*⁶ of politics as it does a place where difference is accommodated. The moments when the two sides blur into one another are as bright as multilingual neon signs or as painful as the desperation of a family separated during a border crossing attempt. Before one begins to understand the formation of the *colonia*, one must first understand the border as a result of multiplicity of exchange. The border sits at the intersection of two-nation states, without constraint to the established binary. Its geography and land features are shared, and while physical fences are kept under production to divide one nation from the other, intangible forces create an undermining of the fiberglass Gulf War panels⁷ that safe-house fear. One has only to look at the signage down the streets of Tijuana or equally the streets of Del Rio's old downtown, to realize that in fact the border has been crossed both north and south (Fig.1).

Popular culture and local arts acknowledge the border's autonomy as a repository of networks that exist outside the nation-state's core.

Titled, *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana*, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art's 2006 exhibition was a joint effort to represent the complexity of life in the border city of Tijuana.



Fig.1. Top: Shop in Tijuana, Baja California, Bottom: Shop in Del Rio, Texas⁸

In the museum bookstore, as I reached for a t-shirt with the text "Keep on crossing" printed across the front, I became keenly aware of the ironies of the text and the grounding of my body in La Jolla, CA one of the riches cities in the U.S., thirty minutes from the border. Hence, from the onset, the border is experienced as a *Tercer Pais*⁹ or Third country. This new place, accordingly, does not belong to the center; rather it generates images that become distanced and hyperbolized. The perception is one of "the border [drowning] in the filth of a putrescent Rio Grande aglow with toxic waste; [terminally] ill with a rampant pox of poverty known as *colonias*..."¹⁰ Social and political exchanges that take place here cannot be viewed as a contemporary corruption of national patrimony.¹¹ Rather, the availability of a seemingly endless supply of cheap labor is re-enforced on the other side by the constant flow of people seeking higher wages - this forms the basic instrument through which this border is sustained. Hence, the *colonia* is a byproduct of this economic gap, an attempt to fill a housing need within the parameters of continually shifting socio-economics; but, it remains largely ignored because it exists in a perceptual third space, "down south" or "up north," not "here."

Hybrid Space

Studies which address the emerging urbanism manifested at the border are grounded in notions of hybridization¹², fluidity, and liminal zones of contact. The notion of the hybrid is indeed nothing novel to Mexico and Latin America. With José Vasconcelos' *La Raza Cósmica*¹³ the positive outcome of cultural and ethnic fusion was set forth as an intrinsic process in the creation of an American continent. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* Gloria Anzaldúa develops a *new mestiza* theory of the hybrid, influenced to some degree by the work of Vasconcelos. Anzaldúa surpasses a simple definition of the hybrid as a biological process of mixing Spanish and indigenous bloods by suggesting that attempts at working out a resolution to seemingly conflicted identities within the *borderland(s)* result in, "a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts."¹⁴ In this attempt to define the hybrid there exist two important aspects relative this discussion of border *colonias*. The first is a mode of interaction that allows for differing value systems to act within the border, that is, a kind of layering of social and economic conditions. The second aspect is the transformative power of the hybrid in which "the pain and isolation of 'in-between-ness' [results in] an empowering experience."¹⁵

The colonias which run adjacent to the man-made water channel of El Paso, Texas, are a marker for the city, as is the Chamizal National Memorial Park which flanks the modern-day International Bridge of the Americas. Up until the late 1960s, this present-day park was considered disputed land. Prior to the agreement, the demarcation of a national boundary was designated as the center point of the river.¹⁶ This in turn made seasonal change the generator of a constantly moving border. During these moments of transition, the third space created by multiple river banks became known as Cordova Island, a kind of no-mans island of silt that sat between both countries - where settlements were not completely static (Fig.2).

The Chamizal is illustrive of the hybrid to some extent, although limited in others. As it stood in the 1800s it was a dynamic play between the natural and the man-made. The movement of the river bed made it possible for U.S. and

Mexican residents to find themselves equally living on one another's territory. This kind of fluid movement created conflict, but it also created a consolidated space for both. I would concede however, that the resolution problem did not result in a wholly hybrid space. Although a sister park was built in Ciudad Juárez to commemorate the settlement, the outcome remains a binary product. It is only through the plasticity of a generic mural, the blank and empty expansiveness of its manicured lawns, and the colonias at the city's edge that one gets a sense of the contradictions that are negotiated in this city. When the park is empty, it recalls no memory of its own history; it is only when the park plays host to community events that the hybrid is animated and Vasconcelos' image of the cosmic race comes into focus.



Fig. 2. Map of disputed boundary at Chamizal National Memorial Park, El Paso, Texas.¹⁷

Colonias

It is difficult to compare the activity of one border city to the next without running the risk of compressing the border into a homogenized entity. This is especially true of comparisons between Mexican *colonias* and those on U.S. soil. However, one can not deny that *colonias* as a typology are a phenomenon particular to the border region, and one in which contradiction, problem and solution, coexist.¹⁸ In order to understand how the hybrid can be manifested within the spatial construct of the *colonia* it is first necessary to examine Mexican *colonias* as a point of departure for the formation of its U.S. counterpart.

Given the polemics of political policy between the U.S. and Mexico, it would be rather simple to assume that a solution to the complexity of the border would be resolved in the dissolution of the steel wall, or man-made channel, that separates the two. Unlike the Berlin wall, where Cold War fears were eroded over time, the U.S.-Mexico wall will remain so long as the two remain Western democracies. Mexico, as a 'healthy' democracy, provides stealthy and cheap labor - exportable from Mexico and deportable from the U.S. Hence in Mexico, for example, Tijuana, Baja California, the *colonias* arise as a result of unbalanced development, both within the city and between the two sides. The growth of "transient"¹⁹ and "insurgent urbanism"²⁰ in Tijuana's hillsides stand in visual starkness to San Diego's pristine waterfront properties. Thus, the hybrid is first introduced in the form of conflict and manifested in methods of appropriation which exist outside of a formalized system. The informal communities in Tijuana occur as spillage that spurs what architect Teddy Cruz terms as nomadic urbanism:

...these urban guerillas parachute into the hills of Tijuana's edges, they are organized and choreographed by what are commonly called 'urban pirates'...Garage doors are used to make walls; rubber tyres are cut and dismantled into folded loops, clipped in a figure eight, and interlocked, creating a system that threads a stable retaining wall, and wooden crates make the armature for other imported surfaces, such as recycled refrigerator doors (sic).²¹

This organic form is built from the ground up using what is codified as Third World strategies – temporal growth constantly shaped the coming and going of residents or external demolition by government. These settlements are an intertwining of street and building, with units depending on the adjacent units, that is, a wall for one unit can become a retaining wall for another. They are comprised of found material and improvised utilities, which while highly valued in an era where sustainability is all the rage, may prove to be precarious in the face of the natural elements of rain and wind. *Colonias* as alternative housing solutions are either viewed as an imposing illness or a hopeful self-help

intervention.²² Either position at these extremes is invalidated when the relationships established between *colonia* and city is examined.

The *colonia* contributes to the image of the city by generating visual links which anchor it to the larger whole. For example, in Tijuana, *La Mona*,²³ an 18-ton, 65-foot piece becomes a main marker for Colonia Aeropuerto and for the map of Tijuana (Fig.3). The cultural center, *Centro Cultural Tijuana (CEUT)*, built in the form of a large sphere, is informally named *La Bola*,²⁴ while Colonia Aeropuerto's permanence is established as it gains formality, *la casa de La Mona*.²⁵ Hence, the *colonia* exists on the fringe, but it is gradually acknowledged. Despite this recognition and its intense use of density at the local scale, a *colonia* also becomes sprawl at the larger scale in terms of land-use. Their placement, much like the placement of the 2,000 mile fence along the border, often has no regard for the natural features of the land. Therefore, a position must be mediated between *colonia* as virus and *colonia* as bright future. The hybrid of *colonia* implies an evolution; it cannot exist wholly within itself, or remain stagnant in the rhetoric of Third World perceptions. If the platform for the formation of a *colonia* within third space originates out of the activity and juxtaposition of an urban center which requires the *colonia* to be pushed towards the outer ring of the city, then it cannot remain as a *colonia*, and as such we must look back towards the city center.



Fig. 3. *La Mona*, Colonia Aeropuerto, Tijuana, Baja California.²⁶

Constructing Tejas

Colonias in the U.S represent the need to fill a lack of affordable housing while sustaining an

ideology of property ownership. The richness of temporal development in the Mexican *colonia* is greatly influenced by the improvised process of land acquisition but also by the tenuous economics of an individual's growth in income. In Texas, the *colonia* is the result of a singly drawn agreement. Hence, in an attempt to achieve the American Dream, families purchase land under a Contract for Deed arrangement in which land can be acquired without equity or finance. Since "the house in a colonia is always in a state of becoming,"²⁷ differences in socio-economics are allowed to coexist. For example, *Escondido*²⁸ Estates, a formally recognized colonia ten miles out from the city of Del Rio, consists of once singularly owned land divided into lots and sold for profit.

Both *Escondido* Estates and *Los Patos* are recognized by county officials as colonias because they stand outside official city limits, identified by simple signage. *Escondido* Estates, stands east of the railroad tracks, where the unfamiliar visitor can miss the turn



Fig. 4. *La Lomita*, Cienegas Terrace colonia, Del Rio, TX.²⁹

in the road if not for the neat row of mailboxes that flank the edge of Highway 90 East. While an estate implies grandeur, the mixture of housing types that lie within less than a square mile of its entry undermine the static image of a suburban estate with subtle irony. Variety of use is expressed in the form of building construction: pitched-roof, wood-framed, fiber-cement siding home can be found on the same block as cinder block and plywood houses, all the while sharing a simple wire fence and dirt access roads. In an effort to conserve, homes have been built with concrete block and pitched roofs, instead of the traditional adobe which is better suited for this region – the skeletons of which show through in the ruins of

Del Rio's old downtown (Fig.5). In contrast to Mexican *colonias*, these new elements remain organized around a subdivision grid. Building density here is very sparse because each lot typically hosts only one home. So although the *colonia* acts as stepping stone for the immigrant, migrant or low-income family, it remains dangerously close to sprawl because it is more akin to a subdivision.

The development is temporal in two manners: one, it is shaped by occupancy and vacancy, two, it is shaped by economics – as a family saves up or earns higher wages they begin to make improvements or additions over short or long periods of time. This process of constructing a *colonia* with the residents as self-builders leaves room for the possibilities of density at the scale of the lot or individual *colonia*, but falls short at the scale of the city; outside the city limits, codes need not apply, only personal needs as they arise, and additions as needed.



Fig.5. Adobe exposed structure, Del Rio, Texas.

Much like the international bridges that stitch both sides of the border, the *colonia* is also a permanent place of transition. In contrast to

the scarcity of *Escondido*, *Los Patos* has an intense use density reflective of its Mexican counterpart. Residential is intermixed with pockets of micro-economics: the adjacent lot first becomes an overflow garage, then becomes a material reuse shop, a corner lot porch begins as an extension of interior to exterior, then becomes *Chemas Tortillas*, *La Parilla Grill*, or *La Lomita* (Fig. 4). Subdivisions such as *Escondido* stand under the guise of a *colonia* - they lack the same sense of community that one would find in the dense and complicated mix of multiplicity versus that of a singular household occupying a five acre lot.

By looking at the older neighborhood of *San Felipe*, which has been central to the development of Del Rio since the city's inception, one can begin to legitimize the need for the *colonia* to return to the city core. In *San Felipe* older homes with varied manifestations of micro-economics are organized around several central elements. Among these types of commercial exchanges are my father-in-law's own electronics repair shop, his mother's backyard nursery, and a local *raspas*³⁰ shop, to name a few. Most prominent of among the defining features of the neighborhood is Brown Plaza, which was dedicated in 1908 and today serves as the front yard for *Casa de la Cultura*,³¹ a community arts center which holds binational music and art-related events. Some of the surrounding lots have been transformed into improvised communal spaces for movie showings, garage sales, and exhibit space, but many remain a void. Arguably, what creates a *colonia* as much as its spatial arrangement is its perceived sense of community. And although this exists when communal events take place, like the Chamizal it is still rooted in a language of murals and blank slates of asphalt lots. Although the liveliness of *San Felipe* remains a welcoming sight among the growth and expansion of the Pan-American Highway, it too remains tied to an image of degradation. The old downtown which sits south of this small neighborhood stands in disrepair as the core of the city moves further away in pursuit of the money that flows along the main arteries of transportation.

Although *Los Patos* stands in opposition to an established *San Felipe*, their histories are intertwined. My in-law-family who worked the

fields of the Mid-West until the late 1970s, was always on the move, but simultaneously building what was to become permanence: home is "here," at the border. Because colonias within the Southwest are less concentrated, especially near the smaller cities of the New Mexican and Texan borders, they are often left out of architectural discourse. Texas and New Mexico alone have 1700 colonias, with thirty-five percent of the Texan border population living at poverty level.³² At the Texan border, in particular the lower Rio Grande Valley, the tactics of appropriation are subversively incorporated. Because places like *Escondido* remain recognized as *colonias* and not subdivisions, they are allowed to continue growing without official oversight. The city stays out of a *colonia's* affairs, leaving its development to county or state-based organizations. Although U.S. *colonias* remain vaguely classified as semi-urban, the terminology becomes self dooming. Jane Jacobs discusses the complex processes of unslumming slums in an urban context, stating that, "A teeming, bustling slum [is] pinpointed at a moment in time, with the deeply erroneous implication that as a slum is, so it was - and as it is, so it shall be..."³³ The image of the *colonia* as a slum of the border will remain so long as misconceptions about what classifies north and south, Third and First World, remain in place. The phenomena of the *colonia* could be instead taken as an opportunity not simply for observation but also for intervention. The border demands of us, through its hybrid nature, cultural negotiation. In places such as San Diego / Tijuana, this negotiation is marked by stark contrasts and conflicts, but perhaps it is in the smaller, emerging cities of the Southwest that resolutions begin to emerge.

Examining Constructs

In lieu of the increasing uneasiness with which we as Americans approach the border, we begin to reinforce a wall while other forms begin to break it down in an importation and exportation of culture. In Tijuana, the American tourist who stands next to a painted donkey made to look like a zebra plays a conscious role in a complex game of simultaneous spectacle.³⁴ Meanwhile a Mexican society becomes apprehensive to this same permeability and pollution from the "other" - American tourism and American-owned

factories, *maquiladoras*. These ideologies of invasion are mutually dangerous because they deny the hybrid – if we are to examine the activity of the border as a positive model, then the dilution of one culture into the other, the merging of the third world into the first, can not be viewed as a cause of illness.

In the American states, colonias remain a virus, with limited acknowledgement as viable housing solutions to the lack of available affordable housing. Although recognized as communities in some states, they remain nonexistent in others because they lack an official definition. The intent of this paper has been to illustrate the multiple ways in which the U.S.-Mexico border is both perceived and constructed. Colonias, which spring from growing urbanization and informality, comprise the most visible of spatial constructs while the border region itself remains a perceptual construct of a frontier that presses its back against a line and a river. The designer embarks on a path that is no different than that of the social scientist – we observe and reinterpret processes of formulation. Our work must go beyond that of simple observation if the *colonia* is to surpass its own constant state of becoming and acquire autonomy. The lack of apparent structure in this space of transition is precisely what allows for rich opportunities for questioning the use and re-use of material, proximity between programme elements, and the interrelationship between individual to city and individual to 'other.'

Endnotes

¹ Claire F. Fox, like many other scholars of the U.S.-Mexico border, makes mention of this First and Third World collapse. Claire F. Fox, "Site-Specificity, Art, and the U.S.-Mexico Frontier," *Social Text* 41 (Winter 1994): 61.

² The Ducks, translation by author.

³ The wetbacks, translation by author.

⁴ The Office of the Secretary of State in Texas defines a colonia as, "a residential area along the Texas-Mexico border that may lack some of the most basic living necessities, such as potable water and sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing." (<http://www.sos.state.tx.us/border/colonias/>). In Del Rio, *Los Patos* is an unofficial name by which residents of identify this

part of the city; it isofficially identified by the Valverde County as *Cienegas Terrace*. In the state of Texas alone, there are six classifications for these low income settlements, illustrating the difficulty in establishing these settlements as formalized communities.

⁵ "The word favela designates the slum areas without basic sanitation and infrastructure that exist in almost all the cities of Brazil. The origins of the term favela began in the late nineteenth century when homeless soldiers returned from the backlands of Bahia after having exterminated the messianic rebel uprising of Canudos. While fighting in Canudos, the soldiers had camped on a hill covered by vegetation known as 'favela'." See Beatriz Jaguaribe, "Favelas and the Aesthetics of Realism: Representations in Film and Literature," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13: 3 (December 2004): 327-342.

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 24.

⁷ Patricia L. Price, *Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 114.

⁸ Photograph by author, Tijuana, Baja California and Del Rio, Texas, June 2006.

⁹ Alan D. Bersin, "El Tercer Pais: Reinventing the U.S./Mexico Border," *Stanford Law Review* 48 (May 1996): 1413.

¹⁰ Timothy C. Brown, "The Fourth Member of NAFTA: The U.S.-Mexico Border," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 550 (March 1997): 107.

¹¹ In response to global commerce backed by the North American Free Trade Agreement, Néstor García Canclini suggests that, "...what can no longer be said is that the tendency of modernization is simply to promote the disappearance of traditional cultures. The problem, then, cannot be reduced to one of conserving and rescuing supposedly unchanged traditions. It is a question of asking ourselves how they are being transformed and how they interact with the forces of modernity." Colonias can therefore be conceptualized as a questioning of these seemingly opposing cultures. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 155.

¹² Most notable among discourses of hybridity are the postcolonial writings of Homi Bhabaha within the context of identity formation. For a reflection on the

uses and limitations of this term in other academic genres, see work presented at a University of Texas at Austin conference: Debroah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112:445 (Summer 1999): 239-253.

¹³ José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica/The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, Translated by Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979).

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101-102.

¹⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 16.

¹⁶ Chamizal National Memorial Gallery, El Paso, TX July 2006: "1884 Convention...*touching the International Boundary Line where it follows the bed of the Rio Grande*...Principles adopted for international water law concerning boundary changes and water impact."

¹⁷ Map altered to highlight Cordova Island. Original map was photographed by author at Chamizal National Memorial Park, El Paso, TX, in June 2006.

¹⁸ Perter M. Ward, *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico: Urbanization by Stealth* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁹ Teddy Cruz, "Border Walls, Border Cities, and the Two-Headed Trojan Horse of Tijuana," *Thresholds* 20:1 (2000): 74.

²⁰ Ulisses Diaz and Gustavo Leclerc, "TJ: The Flexible Border," *Architectural Design* 69:7-8 (1999): 39.

²¹ Teddy Cruz, "Tijuana Case Study, Tactics of Invasion: Manufactured Sites," 32-37.

²² Peter M. Ward, *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico: Urbanization by Stealth*, 7.

²³ The Doll, translation by author.

²⁴ The Ball, translation by author.

²⁵ Home of the Doll, translation by author.

²⁶ Rachel Teagle, Ed., *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana*, (La Jolla: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2006), 46.

²⁷ David Baird and W. Eirik Heintz, "Bi-National Communities and the Unregulated Colonia," *Architectural Design* 69:7-8 (1999): 14-15.

²⁸ Hidden Estates, translation by author.

²⁹ Photograph courtesy of a resident of Del Rio, TX.

³⁰ Shaved ice, translation by author.

³¹ House of Cultures, translation by author.

³² David Baird and W. Eirik Heintz, "Bi-National Communities and the Unregulated Colonia," 14.

³³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 359.

³⁴ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 228-241.