Rituals of Passage

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Abstract

This project investigates the power of ritual and infrastructure at the US-Mexico border, where thousands of asylum seekers have overwhelmed an ill-equipped immigration system and are forced to wait in Mexico for months for the opportunity to present themselves at a port of entry.

Operating within the realities of sheltering and processing large volumes of people, the project navigates between several tensions: utopia and dystopia, tradition and modernity, human and machine, freedom and confinement.

Set in the bi-national conurbation of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, the project juggles the competing goals of the actors in the region to propose an infrastructure that facilitates rituals for the passage of time and rituals for the passage of people over the border.

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Part 1
Dynamic Apertures
Introduction

Along the border of the United States and Mexico is a series of apertures which facilitate exchange from one side to the other. These flows of people and capital create the border: the act of exchange is a constant disrupting and redefining of the existing power dynamic. The apertures take infrastructural form to suit the exchange they are facilitating. In this system, all three parts, power, exchange and infrastructure are locked in an interdependent system. If architecture would have plausible influence over one of these elements it would be infrastructure, the most physical and spatial of the three parts. Once the goals and implementation of infrastructure are in any way subverted, exchange would become exacerbated and power would shift accordingly – either in a way which would produce a more symmetrical cross border relationship, or one that could descend the continent into conflict.

These apertures debunk the American myth of the border as a battle between fortification and migration and their development has a huge impact on the urban environments of both sides of the most frequently crossed border in the world.¹

“...The physical border is a stark sequence of walls, fences, barbed wire, dogs, border patrol agents, checkpoints and searchlights. Its militaristic character projects an image of inevitable and uncompromising authority. Yet its location is arbitrary, the product of negotiation and war. Its function is to mark the perimeter of a jurisdiction, its fiction a narrative of security and sovereign power. At the border, physical constructs and social structures intertwine and materialize in space, combining into a single practice of power.”²

- Elisa Iturbe


Asymmetry

This project started with an observation about an asymmetry in how the urban environment interacted with the border line between the US and Mexico. On the US side, the vast majority of urban sprawl is hesitant to build near the actual border, instead utilizing parks, golf courses, or light industry to provide a buffer zone between residential and commercial areas and the border line. On the Mexican side however, border towns embrace the wall, with houses built right up to it. At the Friendship Park, a bi-national park that straddles the border between San Diego and Tijuana, people can walk right up to the border barrier on the Mexican side, which has been adorned with protest art. A playground and an outdoor gym sit right alongside the barrier, and shops, bars and restaurants are built up only a block away. On the US side, a second interior barrier has been erected to prevent access to the actual border barrier, creating a corridor used only by border patrol vehicles. Visits to the park are restricted to certain hours under the watchful eye of the US border patrol.

At first glance this asymmetry in how urban sprawl relates to the border could most easily be explained as the physical manifestation of an asymmetry in power dynamic. The Mexican border cities and towns have economic incentive to sit as close to the US border as possible. The US border towns, perceived as the “better” places have no incentive to sit too close to their “worse” neighbor. But this unilateral view of power and its effect on the border is missing part of the story. Rather than a consistent relationship of better vs worse, stronger vs weak or safer vs more dangerous, the dynamic of the relationship is more of a tug of war. It was the documentation of several unusual (as opposed to standard CBP vehicular ports of entry) apertures along the border that made this clear.

Apertures

Richard Sennett differentiates borders and boundaries in the following way: A boundary is the limit or edge which separate one territory from another and a border is a zone of interactive edge between territories. Even amidst the current rhetoric around his push for a wall, Donald Trump has stated of his main political project, “it’s going to have big beautiful doors in it.”

Apertures are an essential quality of a border. “You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this discursive construction.

There is nothing natural about the border; it’s a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing there is no border.\(^5\)

The most common apertures in public consciousness are official ports of entry, big infrastructural channels for vehicular traffic organized by the CBP on the US side and the NIM on the Mexican side. In these most official of apertures the power imbalance is obvious. To enter the United States, vehicular traffic passes bollards, gates, and speed bumps - all infrastructure which exerts tight control over how a vehicle or person moves through the space. Border crossers are subjected to random searches by heavily armed agents with dogs and lights and questioned intently once they pass the aforementioned infrastructure and reach an agent behind a bulletproof window who has the final say over if a person will be granted or denied entry. Driving across the border into Mexico cars are rarely stopped but simply drive past a small guardhouse or similar infrastructure meant to demonstrate entry and are waved on by a friendly guard. As the desired place to be, the US keeps tight control of who enters, while Mexico, its less desirable neighbor sees no benefit in restricting the flow of people entering from the north.

The apertures documented here challenge the perception of the US-Mexico border as government orchestrated infrastructure meant to stop the flow of migration, but rather, they create a narrative of the border as a conduit for impactful exchange for both countries. The CBX bridge which links the Tijuana International Airport with a parking lot in the United States was initiated by private citizens who saw an investment opportunity for themselves, a way to increase traffic to Tijuana’s airport, and a system which made traveling between San Diego and Tijuana for air travel significantly more efficient. Most of the benefits of this infrastructural intervention across the border falls on the Mexican side, yet the private interest was enough to procure an official CBP port of entry at the US mouth of the bridge. Other apertures like the Amstad Dam or the Boquillas Crossing in Big Bend National Park benefit both nations equally. Other apertures like the drug tunnel or Foxconn’s private border crossing re-emphasize existing asymmetry in power dynamic. All these apertures are what make the border between the US and Mexico a porous zone rather than a solid boundary; each puncture redefining the relationship between the two nations.


Actors

The apertures are initiated by a variety of actors for a variety of reasons, unified in narrative only by their desire to readjust the power dynamic at that single point along the border. Some of these infrastructural projects came top down: Amistad Dam was proposed by the US congress and agreed upon by its Mexican counterpart. Others are more bottom up. Originally an informal crossing point for tourists in Big Bend National Park, Border Patrol put an end to the row boat ferry crossings after 9/11. In 2010, however, pressure from both tourists who wanted to visit Mexico easily from the park and park rangers who wanted to create a more efficient working relationship with their counterparts in Parque Nacional Cañon de Santa Elena were able to procure the technology for an unstaffed official port of entry in 2010. The Boquillas rowboat ferryman was given a job again.

Actors like the Sonora Cartel go through less official channels to create apertures in the border, their infrastructure subverts the existing power dynamic above ground by pushing below. Despite this informal and illegal approach to building infrastructure, famed Sinaloa Cartel boss and possibly the inventor of the narcotunnel, El Chapo, had his own architect orchestrate the whole project, including above ground warehouses on both sides of the border, in a way that attracted no attention from law enforcement.\(^6\)

“You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border; it’s a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing there is no border”

- Ursula Biemann
International Friendship Park 1971

The western most corner of the US Mexico border is the site of an 1848 statue to mark the end of the Mexican-American War. In 1971 First Lady Pat Nixon inaugurated the park as a symbol of bi-national friendship and the statue became a national monument. For much of its history the park was a place where people on either side of the border could talk, touch, and pass objects through the barrier. In 2009 the US Department of Homeland Security added an extra layer of fencing to create an added buffer to keep people from passing objects across the border. Access to the border on the US side is allowed during limited hours and under close supervision by the US border patrol. The Mexican side is always accessible.

Cross Border Xpress 2015

The Cross Border Xpress is an airport terminal in Otay Mesa outside of San Diego that connects via pedestrian bridge to Tijuana’s International Airport which sits just south of the Mexico US border. The bridge is owned and operated by Otay-Tijuana Venture L.L.C., a Mexican US investment group. The original concept of a cross-border airport terminal was proposed in 1989 by Mexican-American businessman Ralph Nieders. For the next decade a series of proposals followed, coming from both the US and Mexican governments until the final proposal of a dedicated US terminal and a bridge connecting to the Tijuana Airport infrastructure was agreed on.
The Boquillas Crossing is a pedestrian crossing point between Big Bend National Park in Texas and the town of Boquillas del Carmen in Mexico. People take a rowboat operated by a Mexican citizen to cross the Rio Grande River. It is the only official border crossing point into the United States not staffed by CBP. Visitors clear customs and immigration at video inspection kiosks under the supervision of a park ranger. This is a state sanctioned aperture which facilitates the symbiotic relationship between American national park tourists and Mexican small business owners. It also is an example of a working partnership between large public actors like the CBP and the US National Park Service and individual private actors like the Mexican ferryman.

The Santa Teresa Cattle Union is the largest livestock facility on the US Mexico border, with the capacity to process and trade 5,000 heads of cattle across the border per day. Livestock raised in Chihuahua Mexico are inspected and sold to ranchers in New Mexico. Only livestock is permitted to cross the border at this gate. The facility works in partnership with both US and Mexican customs officers, the FDA, and the respective agriculture administrations of both countries, but is run on both sides of the border by the Union Ganadera Regional de Chihuahua - a union of Mexican livestock producers.
San Luis Colorado Drug Tunnel 2018

This 600 foot long tunnel runs from a private home in Mexico across the border and into a former KFC restaurant on the American side. Police were alerted to the presence of the tunnel after they pulled over the man who owned the building on the American side for a traffic violation and discovered more than $1 million worth of drugs in his vehicle. Tunneling has been used in many places along the border by drug and human trafficking organizations. They represent a complex logistical capability and financial commitment able to be pulled off by only the most established of drug trafficking organizations.
Due to its frequent floods and droughts, Mexico and the US have drafted a series of treaties regarding the shared use of water from the Rio Grande since 1944. Both governments realized the importance of creating a series of dams to better control the flow of water for irrigation purposes on both sides of the border. President Richard Nixon and President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz dedicated the dam when it opened in 1969. Costs of construction were split based on the division of water storage rights in the reservoir with the US covering 57% to Mexico’s 43%. The dam is staffed by both Mexican and American engineers, and tourists are able to cross on top of the dam as it is also an official port of entry.
Two Models

The border apertures are created when an individual or organization on either side of the border sees incentive to move something from one side to the other. The incentive is the result of an asymmetry in power, for example, causing labor to be cheaper on one side than the other, or having a greater consumer demand than the other. This incentivized exchange then necessitates an opening through the border to facilitate it. Once a new apertural piece of infrastructure is implemented across the border the power dynamic shifts.

Left alone, the system can largely design itself; as Keller Easterling would say, its architecture is a by-product of data and logistics.7

In the cycle, all three parts, power, exchange and infrastructure are locked in an interdependent system. If architecture would have a plausible influence over one of these elements it would be infrastructure, the most physical and spatial of the three parts. Once the goals and implementation of infrastructure are in any way subverted, exchange would become exacerbated and power would shift accordingly – either in a way which would produce a more symmetrical cross border relationship, or one that could descend the continent into conflict.

A Direction for Part 2

It is clear the effects of power, exchange and infrastructure on the border extend further than the symbolic geopolitical line that sits between the two nations. Huge urban areas sit on either side of the border, their built environment and the lives of their millions of residents are all tied intrinsically to this cycle.

The apertures along the border thus have enormous impact, a livestock gate or an international airport terminal bridge, no longer just conduits for flows of cattle and passengers, but key tools in a struggle to redefine the power dynamic of the region.

The border region is fraught with issues that designed apertures could address - worker oppression in maquiladoras along the border, high crime rates in border towns, the economic viability of the region once automation replaces manual labor, or the lack of locally grown produce in many of these regions.

Part 2 of this project will look at the way the system of power, exchange and infrastructure can be used to subvert existing dynamics at play.
Part 2

Rituals of Passage

Introduction

Regularly in the public discourse for decades and at a heightened level over the past few years, I was drawn to the border between the United States and Mexico as a place to explore the complexities of power dynamic and the ways it manifests itself in the infrastructure proposed by the various actors in the region. For a specific site I focused in on the El Paso Ciudad Juarez conurbation – the second largest bi-national urban area on the US’s southern border. These two cities sit on either side of the Rio Grande – their histories, cultures and the lives of their residents deeply intertwined.
Context

The Church

The first introduction of the western concept of borders was brought to the Rio Grande flood plain with the establishment of a number of catholic missions in the mid 1600s as part of Spain’s colonial strategy in Mexico. The area was noted by one of the first Spanish expeditions as “having very good land and climate, with buffalo herds nearby, abundant game and birds, mineral deposits, many forests and pasture lands, rich natural deposits of salt, and abundant water in large marshes and pools.”

The area was named Paso Del Norte as it was an ideal place for safe passage across the Rio Grande. Missions were built on both sides of the river.

These missions built rapport with the local population by providing them shelter and protection from raiding Apache groups. The indigenous people were converted to Catholicism and forced to provide the labour needed for the construction and maintenance of this colonial infrastructure.

This colonial legacy means that to this day the church holds significant cultural and political power in the region - 80% of the population of Ciudad Juarez and 91% of Mexico as a whole identify as catholic. The church’s power reaches across all levels of social infrastructure in Mexico - operating over 8,000 schools, 300 Hospitals, 1500 clinics, as well as hundreds of care facilities for the elderly, orphans, and people with disabilities.

The Border

In 1848 at the end of the Mexican American war, the Rio Grande River was decided as the border boundary between the United States and Mexico by the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

This proved to be a poor border marker as seasonal flooding would regularly shift the rivers course. Between El Paso and Juarez, one particular region was especially affected by this seasonal flooding: it was called the Chamizal.

The area was a contested no-mans- land for much of the early 1900s, becoming a haven for drug runners and illegal migration both taking advantage of the lack of jurisdiction from either side of the border.

In 1964 a deal was finally struck between Mexico and the United States which resulted in the building of a dam up river to divert much of the Rio Grande’s water supply and

the concreting of the dried up river bed to permanently demarcate the border.

Today it sits as an often empty concrete shell bisecting El Paso and Juarez – an infrastructure symbolizing both cross border cooperation and a deep geo-political divide.

The Asylum Seekers

With the proximity of a large American city right across the river, the unique history of border tensions in the region and a particularly lawless reputation - Juarez has long been a destination for migrants seeking both formal and informal paths into the United States. In recent years the numbers of migrants arriving at the US border has ballooned. Since 2012 the number of people applying for asylum from Latin American countries has increased by 800%.2

With the recent passing of the US government’s Migrant Protection Protocols also known as the “remain in Mexico act” thousands of asylum seekers have become stranded in Mexico waiting for limited spots to cross at a port of entry and formally apply for US asylum.

Currently there is an estimated 50,0003 people waiting along the US Mexico border, thousands of which are in Ciudad Juarez. Many of these migrants have made the journey to Juarez from central America, a dangerous trip often made entirely on foot or hidden in the back of a smuggler’s vehicle.

When an individual applies for asylum they must present themselves at an official US port of entry. However due to the huge volume of applications recently being made in Mexican border cities, US immigration has enacted a system called metering – where only a certain amount of asylum claims will be accepted per day. At some ports of entry this has meant that the number of cases being seen has dropped from 100 to only 20 each day.

Asylum seekers are left to self-organize a list of who’s turn it is to cross. The current “metering list” in Juarez has approximately 6000 names on it.4 Wait times to just submit an application for asylum are now are around 3 – 4 months. After their paperwork has been submitted Asylum seekers are then required to wait another couple months to present their case before a judge in an immigration court. People who are fleeing for their life are expected to wait as long as 6 months to be told whether or not they will be granted Asylum in the United States.

With the “Remain in Mexico act,” also came the outsourcing of much of the US’s processing work. Many applicants no longer even enter the United States for their court appointments - instead large tents have been set up in Mexico and court is held via video call with a Judge skyped in from somewhere in the United States.5

The Mexican military, catholic charities, and Mexico’s own immigration service have all deployed to the US border to try and maintain order, provide food and health care and information to the asylum seekers and to assist those whose applications to the United States are denied.

Asylum seekers in Juarez have filled catholic run shelters to capacity and now many are camping in the Chamizal on the side of the road close to US Ports of Entry as they wait for their turn to cross.

The migrants often face hostility from a local population worried about the influx of impoverished people competing for already limited resources. Many migrants have reported violence from local Juarez residents upset about the volume of people camping on their streets.

With this context in mind - The project juggles the competing goals of the actors in the region to investigate the power of ritual and infrastructure at the US-Mexico border. Operating within the realities of sheltering and processing large volumes of people, this project navigates between several tensions: utopia and dystopia, tradition and modernity, human and machine, freedom and confinement by connecting the region’s deep ties to the catholic church, a history of cooperation in bi-national infrastructure, and a site that was for much of its history a no-mans-land but now functions as an informal settlement for asylum seekers with nothing to do but wait.

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Proposal

In this liminal zone a structure emerges that is part refuge for pilgrims on their way to the promised land – part institution for the managing and processing of thousands of asylum seekers. The proposal is a 3.7 km structure composed of two thickened walls of accommodation that can hold over 7,500 persons situated in the empty concrete shell of the Rio Grande.

The Catholic Church builds and operates the project out of a moral obligation and a culture of being the provider of large scale social welfare.

The migrants who choose to enter must take part in a monastic life of rigor and simplicity. Daily life is overseen by Catholic priests and catholic volunteers and managed in a monastic tradition where its occupants adhere to a highly ritualized schedule of work and reflection while they wait for their asylum claims to be processed.

In exchange, the asylum seeker receives safety, shelter, and an orderly, systemized processing. They no longer have to wait in the danger of the street and the chaos of a handwritten list of names. They relinquish their freedom for the security of institutionalized order. Entry is by choice but once inside the asylum seeker does not leave until their case has been processed and they are either accepted or denied upon which they leave out into either the American side or the Mexican side respectively. In this way, the asylum seekers are no filling Juarez’s streets and parks with tents and the US only receives the asylum seekers that have been fully processed and their claims accepted.

On the Mexican side the structure rises 4 storeys above grade, the openings and colorful towers clearly visible. On the American side the project rises out of the river bed as a 7 storey wall, a Trumpian fantasy of protectionism and exclusion.

Figure 3: Migrants enter from the Mexican side of the border.

Figure 4: On the American side, the project is experienced as a blank wall.
Processing

Punctuating the otherwise featureless concrete exterior of the structure, spaced roughly one kilometer apart are three large glass gatehouses. Clothed in a bureaucratic skin which is often used to celebrate not religion but economy, management and governance, it is re-framed as a temple: a sacred space for the celebration of passage from one place to another.

Set within the enclosed glass space is a ring of processing spaces, a medical clinic, offices, an orientation room, video call court rooms, and private meeting rooms to receive legal advice.

Within this ring of processing, is the most sacred space – a stair that is a monument to the goal of the asylum seekers’ journey.

Upon the migrants first entrance into the building they see this stair which they will use at the end of their stay if their asylum case is accepted.
Figure 8: Section through the processing space.
Housing

Accommodation for migrants are in five by five meter rooms, each with its own bathroom. Some of the rooms have a conjoining door to better accommodate those traveling with children.

The asylum seekers often arrive with only a single backpack in which they carry all their earthly belongings. A nook has been carved for them to hang their backpacks and can also be used as a small alter space for the religious icons that they have brought along on their journey.

Outside each room is a corridor of equal proportions to the room. This space is for both circulation and a place to socialize with neighbours during free-time.
Figure 10: The corridor functions as both circulation and a social living space.

Figure 11: Room interior.
Figure 13: Section through the walls of housing.
Localized Hubs

To organize the daily lives of over 7,500 people, between each gatehouse the structure is broken into three sub sections.

Each 225 meter section can accommodate about 600 people. At the center of each section, a sculpted colorful tower bridges between the two sides of the river. Each tower has the same programming and layout but with a unique form and color to create a sense of identity and place-making for people as they move along the walls of the structure.

These localized hubs facilitate the day to day rituals of the occupants, from morning mass, to communal meals as well as places to work and places to learn. Rituals occur in shifts, with three groups of 200. There is no distinction of served versus serving as everyone performs as both. Instead the spaces are laid out by the ritual performed in them.

Figure 14: The Rio Grande is re-imagined as a working garden, tended by the asylum seekers, that connects the localized hubs.
Figure 15: Dining occurs in shifts with one group serving meals and the other eating.

Figure 16: Each day begins with morning mass.

Figure 17: Even doing the laundry becomes a sacred ritual.
Figure 18: Floor plan of local hub’s working level
Figure 19: Dining level plan

Figure 20: Chapel level plan

Figure 21: Roof garden level plan
Figure 22: Section through localized hub
In the absence of all else, mundane daily tasks become sacred rituals.

In the end this project proposes an infrastructure for processing but also for waiting – and the rituals and rhythms of daily life that make that waiting have a sense of passage. A passage of time and a passage of bodies over borders.
Additional Drawings
Bibliography


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Index of Terms

CBP United States Customs and Border Protection Agency

CBX Cross Border Xpress

DHS Department of Homeland Security

FTZ Free Trade Zone

NIM Mexican National Institute of Migration

USDA United States Department of Agriculture