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Tijuana: Border City

Introduction

Mexico is our quiet neighbor to the south. Largely invisible to Americans except in times of financial crisis or highly publicized drug interdiction campaigns, it has been neither a crucial player in the United States' Euro-centric foreign relations policy nor has Mexico's socialist revolutionary history constituted a threat to American capitalist stability. On the contrary, for more than a century Mexico has been feeding American industry's inexhaustible appetite for cheap labor -- a policy of concern only periodically but more so recently as major American cities sprout Latino barrios and neighborhood commercial signage routinely announces "se habla espanol."

The wave of immigration from Mexico, which only a few years ago inflamed nationalist sentiment and spurred English-language and punitive policy initiatives (to say nothing of actual fence building!), today portends a profound demographic shift with serious implications for the redistribution of political power in the United States. The Republican parties' reformed discourse on immigration (and, notably, the American labor movement's turnabout from decades of opposition to immigration to recently embrace low-wage undocumented immigrant workers) indeed stands as a tempered endorsement of inclusion.

In the American border states of California, New Mexico, Arizona and Texas, a coalescing Latino voting bloc influences policymaking on the state level while, more locally, a predominant Latino population thoroughly imprints its culture upon daily life in border cities. As an influx of European, Asian, and more recently Central-Americans has transformed urban neighborhoods throughout the United States, the cumulative effect of Mexican immigration has been to introduce Mexican culture into the workplace throughout the United States in communities large and small, from urban restaurant kitchens to rural slaughterhouses and factory farms.

The Latino labor presence and the community institutions, which support it, have become very visible. While politicians extol family values and hard work as traditional American virtues (often in the service of nationalist xenophobia) it is easily overlooked that both principles lay at the heart of Mexican culture. Even as immigrants from "south of the border" seeking employment are demonized as opportunists (or worse) in political advertisements, for many Americans the dislocation of manufacturing employment to Mexico remains an abstract concept even for those "downsized." The crucial difference is that the former wears a brown face while the latter represents the utterly faceless force of capitalism. Such subtleties become lost in the undercurrent of economic insecurity engendered by the reformation of the production process and the globalization of local economies.

And yet Mexico itself has remained an enigma. Americans are ignorant of Mexican holidays and cultural symbols; only peripherally are we aware of major political movements, which are

regarded with derision as the machinations of a third world nation only marginally more democratic than some "banana republic" farther south. Despite a potential market of many millions, Mexico is overlooked in favor of the distant markets of China, India, or Russia. For many, Mexico exists in the American consciousness as both the image of a sleepy hombre with tilted sombrero which symbolizes the benevolent, lazy culture of "manana," and as a nefarious netherworld of sin and vice of Tijuana folklore. In fact, these preconceptions will be amply validated for the tourist within the designated tourist space of the border city.

“El Otro Lado”

Common to both countries, the notion of "the other side" represents vastly different expectations for each country. For Americans it represents an economic threat to be kept at bay and an unfamiliar culture regarded with an ignorant wariness. It is this very perception, which maintains Mexico as an extra-moral "escape" from the strictures of American society, as a place to get loose and get lost. Tijuana embodies this myth and serves it to Americans every weekend on Avenida de la Revolucion. For the Mexican national it may mean economic opportunity or the possibility of joining family on *el otro lado* -- or may even represent a Sunday shopping experience in a San Diego mall for the middle-class family.

The inequities arising from the disparity in economic power between the United States and Mexico may be read in both the current patterns of land use and, more broadly, the patterns of development established in the border city over time. The historic core of the border city, *El Centro*, reflects the traditional centralization of retail services upon which the city was established. But it continues to reveal important information about the role of the border city within the region today: the urban fabric of *el centro* -- the signage, the commercial tenants and the buildings which contain them -- strongly indicate a local economy skewed to tourism and casual cross-border services provision. Mexican Americans travel south to get their hair styled in *esteticas*, shop for formal wear for traditional holidays and ceremonies, and eat in Mexican restaurants. Cross-border traffic is quite fluid: some 48 million cross annually at Tijuana's two crossings. These are not entirely tourists or employees.

Economic effects from the cross-border economy are reflected locally in the concentration of service providers on the Mexican side of the boundary and in the upscale retailers, banks, and automobile dealers (new and used) on the American side. For example, in Tijuana an agglomeration of medical services and its interlinked supplier network of laboratories, pharmacies and x-ray services reflects the traditional role of *el centro* as a place of local commerce but also as a cross-border *regional* economy: many signs are printed in English and the number of such businesses is disproportionate to the local population and indicates a cross-border demand for affordable health care and medical products (prostheses, herbal or non-traditional treatments, pharmaceuticals, etc.). In Mexicali or Juarez, designated *zonas de tolerancia* and their American patrons reflect a cross-border demand for the services of the sex trade.

Large-scale industrial development of Mexican border towns in the 1960s, and later the era of free trade codified by the North American Free Trade Agreement, has served to inexorably influence the process of urban development. Land use planning has accommodated the demands of industrialization by zoning large parcels as *la ciudad industrial* and implementing road building and utility infrastructure programs to facilitate (and subsidize) industrial development.

For example, Mexicali has constructed an impressive network of high-quality roads throughout its maquila corridor to service the extra-national industries, which transport materials and assembled products almost exclusively by truck. Infrastructure favors industry even as colonias persist without telephone service, water or sewage connections, or even electricity.

As offshore and American industrial plants located in the border cities attract labor migration from central and southern Mexico and Central America, there exists no advance planning (and hardly even reactionary planning) to support the labor inputs necessary to the maquila production process. Policymaking thus favors the corporate citizen and vastly under serves the human population. Maquila plant managers are eager to tour with a visitor vast factories located in American-style industrial parks air-conditioned to 68 degrees and equipped with thoroughly modern bathrooms while nearby colonias house their employees in relative squalor. This disconnect between aggressive industrial land use planning and near-absence of human or social services planning is but one aspect of a precarious developmental schism within the Mexican border city yet it speaks to a central issue of defining the border city.

Land Use in the Border City

Commercial corridors radiating out of *El Centro* reflect an early- to mid-century spatial expansion of the city. Automobile-scale shopping centers, motor hotels and enclosed malls funded by American investors pulled traditional centralization outward and toward a more spatially diffused American model of development. Today, these "strips" constitute important transportation arteries connecting relatively affluent suburban fraccionamientos and the urban center or tourist district. Agua Caliente (further east it becomes Bl. Diaz Ordaz) in Tijuana is an excellent example of this spatially transformative auto-age commercial corridor: it was the original automobile and railroad artery southeast from *el centro* around which light industry and entertainment venues coalesced. Sited among peripherally located industries, the Agua Caliente spa and Hippodromo, and later motels and restaurants, attracted tourists from *El Centro* early in the century. From the original narrow corridor of tourist shops of Avenida de la Revolucion past auto repair shops, today Agua Caliente yields to larger retailers, motels, and shopping centers farther from the city center.

A major spatial determinant of the border city has been the Border Industrialization Program. The policy of encouraging in-bond plants to locate in border regions as large operations for the assembly of imported primary and secondary inputs has had the effect of depriving Mexico of the opportunity to develop a meaningful program of local industrialization (limiting Mexico's share of the production process to modest value-added assembly). It has also encouraged the development of large expanses of land for American-style industrial parks -- a spatial hyper-extension of the city from its core, necessitating private automobile ownership (among those able to afford it) and an ever-extending network of improvised transportation (for others) in order to access from peripheral residential districts the social services and entertainment located in *el centro*.

The result has been a border city, which has fused the traditional Latin pattern of economically, undifferentiated urban settlements punctuated by small retail and service shops with a more diffused distribution of economically segregated residential neighborhoods and larger commercial centers. This is reflected in the relatively high statistics for automobile ownership in the typical Mexican border city. But while initial observation may indicate a

hybridization of American and Latin modes of development in the border city, I believe these will remain parallel, concurrent, yet oppositional forces conditioning urban development.

Tijuana: Border City Exemplar?

Tijuana itself embodies the contrasts between the luxury homes adjacent to the Pacific Ocean south of Playas region, affordable on American retirees' pensions, and the sprawling colonias only miles away in central Tijuana, improvised squatter settlements that absorb the incoming migration in search of employment in the north. Massive American-style hilltop homes above the Agua Caliente racetrack gaze upon the improvised shanties and rooming houses of Zona Norte crowded with migrants pressed hard against the international line. As Tijuana presses north towards employment and opportunity, San Diego shrinks away, a most reluctant host. Even the geography of the border itself in Tijuana serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the two nations, which has been described as the first world and the third world grating against one another.

But where Avenida Revolucion offers the tourist an "authentic" Mexican experience punctuated by striped burros, bars and begging children, hundreds of pharmacies, dentists, and doctors nearby in *el centro* service daily an American and Mexican-American clientele taking advantage of disequilibrium in the cross-border health care economy. Likewise, long before the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo fixed the international border, commerce had defined the region as one of "distinctive landscape anatomy and personality" characterized today as much by the cultural hybrid of customs, lifestyle, and language as by the development of an urban pattern characteristic of a border city. It follows that cross-border commerce would continue to exert an influence on the region. The Bracero program dating to the 1940s brought migrants north from central Mexico and changed significantly the towns on either side of the border, adding population and seeding a cross-border culture that connects twin border cities even today. Tijuana has become a workplace for American executives commuting from San Diego through the Garita de Otay to the placeless industrial parks buffered by the occasional, unfinished federal housing development.

Within border city, I believe, one finds the physical expression of the many forces, which shape La Frontera. The economic imperative of global investment in Mexico is manifest in the sprawling industrial parks of the border city. Concurrent impacts on the welfare of labor migration, which follows such investment raises important questions regarding public health and safety in the short term and the broader issue of sustainability over the longer term. Point-source pollution has become a significant health problem as maquilas discharge toxic air and effluent pollutants in volume sufficiently close to urban centers to aggravate all manner of respiratory illness and diseases, especially in children. But in the longer term, such challenges to sustainability will only increase exponentially in severity. As colonias develop farther from *El Centro*, automobile pollution must necessarily increase. Yet official responses to pressing social demands remain abbreviated if finite resources are to be directed elsewhere. In Tijuana, for example, private networks of gas-guzzling taxis -- the detritus of American industrialization, ironically -- exist in lieu of any meaningful municipal transit infrastructure.

From my experience in Tijuana, my impression is that the two modes of development occur within disparate spatial regions within the city *as well as* on completely different socio-economic planes. I do not believe these modes are easily reconcilable; nor do I believe that the American

model will necessarily predominate. I believe the border city will continue to develop in a fashion which is seemingly chaotic but is, in fact, a predictable and logical consequence of cross-border economic inequity and public policy which responds to it in an institutionally flawed yet predictable way.

Reading the Border City

I am interested in contrasting the American mode of postwar spatial expansion and real estate development with the mode of Latin city development characterized by informal economies, tacit urban policy tolerating unplanned squatter colonias, and the reactionary planning policies which fail to anticipate the (foreseeable) demand for social services. Such development has been labeled a hybrid; I believe this refers more accurately to an evident cultural symbiosis but which fails to account for the very real bifurcation of development in the border city along spatial and socio-economic lines. Using Tijuana as a point of departure, I want to examine the historic development of the border city as a crucible for understanding the borderland as a point of collision between the economic and social forces, which have determined its evolution as a "third country" between the United States and Mexico.

As Daniel Arreola and James Curtis assert in *Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality*, "the urban landscape can act as a mirror of the society as a whole, revealing signs and signatures that are held in common by a people." Such signs and signatures can be inferred from reading the city as text; indeed to the eye, the city itself resembles a narrative collage of commercial signage, which may offer insight into its history and contemporary condition. To an anthropologist aspiring to document the urban condition, the challenge exists to formulate a representation of the city as a repository of "lived experience." Perhaps the visual media of film, video, or photography may capitalize on the inherently visual nature of urban space in a fashion unique within anthropology.

From this perspective I have attempted to explore through photography Tijuana's twentieth-century spatial development. I believe Tijuana to be broadly representative of border cities despite its lack of a central plaza (though surrogates do exist). Additionally, in my preliminary photographic work over four weeks in Tijuana I have attempted to address the challenges to sustainability in contemporary development. I believe photography may have a significant impact on the debate both as an illustrative tool for articulating the argument for sustainable practices (or more accurately, implicitly acknowledge the consequences of non-sustainable development) but also as an anthropological research tool for understanding urban morphology within and the border city. Using large-format photography I have attempted to record the adaptation of existing urban forms to new uses within *El Centro*, identifying both traditional and contemporary building types as constituent elements in the continuing reformation of the urban fabric within the core of the city. Thus the focus of my work remained in *El Centro*, with significant explorations throughout Tijuana to document the extensive self-help housing initiatives of the colonias, the hyper spatiality of maquila zones, and the transitional development of Agua Caliente.

I have identified several study areas within Tijuana's *Zona Centro* for a methodical photographic recordation of the streetscape. The three study areas identified were the heart of *el centro*'s medical services community; a food warehouse district integrated into the urban establishments located between the traditional tourism-oriented *Zona Centro* and the tourist

space of *Zona Rio*, redeveloped very much in the American model. Using 35mm photography to document contiguous storefront elevations block-after-block, I hoped to assemble an extended narrative of ground-floor urban land use, which may reveal the agglomeration economies, but also the cross-border orientation of businesses located in El Centro. I hope that this technique may serve as a recordation tool suitable for comparing other border cities as my study broadens in the future.

Visual Anthropology as Urban Research Tool

Within traditional anthropology, cultural analysis delineated through prose and theory building is the objective. Unique to visual media, however, is the capacity for highly specific description and through it the development of a wholly new form of anthropological knowledge. The difficulty arises from a subjective bias (which written anthropology endeavors to excise), the consequence of the individual perspective inherent to the production of visual media. By the same token, within the viewer familiarity may undermine any such objectivity yet offer, on the other hand, an intuitive perspective on that which is documented. This highlights, perhaps, the unique power of the visual within the field of anthropology. It is the challenge to describe "the spatial nature of behavior" without becoming unnecessarily distracted by the "particularities of place" nor dissuaded from such examination by the pitfalls of familiarity which photography, as a medium, offers.

Thus it becomes necessary to develop an objective visual methodology, which can be applied universally (within reason) as a descriptive tool to understand urban space. This may take the form of a typological study of subjects excised from their context and examined within a context of typology alone, or it may be a spatial approach approximating the continuity of actual space using still or motion picture photography to reconstruct a simulated, pictorial space. Edward Ruscha's stylized studies of Los Angeles' gasoline stations would be an example of the former, while Robert Flick's more recent uninterrupted video profiles of commercial boulevard storefronts stretching for miles through Los Angeles is an example of the latter. Long on context but short on esthetic style, Flick's documentation, like Ruscha's, is a completely abstracted construction of urban space. Both artists, however, raise the important question of art versus documentation. I have attempted to inform my work from both sides of the art vs. documentation argument and found potential for both approaches to understanding Tijuana as a contemporary border city.