Contested Surfaces. Aesthetics of Colonization for Urban Coexistence

Adriana Cuéllar*, Marcel Sanchez Prieto

*aUniversity of San Diego
*bWoodbury University
*acuellar@sandiego.edu

Abstract: This paper proposes to extract new foundations for designers to operate in an increasingly diverse and transformative urban landscape. It focuses on unpacking current design approaches in the epidermis of the border city of Tijuana: a palpable case of erosion and constant reinvention of the urban fabric challenged by temporality, legality and circumstance. Although it does not intend to predict the future image of the built environment, it does intend to expose designers, through the lens of Tijuana, to the evolving paradox of assertiveness and adaptability in environments of extreme contradictions and visual noise.

Keywords: Urban Textures, Coexistence, Epidermis, Everyday Living, Erosion.

1. Introduction: background textures and foreground questions

La ciudad, como la realidad histórica, no es nunca independiente de las etapas por las que pasó en su evolución: es actualización de ellas y su proyección hacia el porvenir (Chueca G., 1968, p.32).

Anticipated design solutions for responding to the accelerated growth of cities often flatten the complexities of everyday living, leaving behind the idiosyncratic conditions that transform every urban system. Despite this acceleration, the non-designed elements of the everyday continue to migrate into the foreground texture of the urban fabric. In Italo Calvino’s compilation of urban images in Invisible Cities, one could add that a city exists as an open book or canvas on which life is written on the surface of building textures. Each city reveals itself as a living manuscript; its walls, surfaces and edges are imprints of collective histories and stories of humanity that contain social values challenged by the passing of time, the sharing of space, nature, resources and the need to survive and progress. Similarly, the carved hieroglyphic inscriptions on walls in ancient Egypt were not only a form of communication, but also a tool for political power and a way to legitimize the values of its kingdoms. Throughout history, surfaces have continued to echo and construct culture; its designs, messages and registrations of time act as silent background layers that can inform and especially project the future design strategies of the built environment.
Time, circumstances, accidents, adaptations and transformations get registered on surfaces as mediators of urban form and culture. The emergence of the billboard in the city of Los Angeles is an example of an opportunistic transformation of the urban fabric conditioned by the speed and scale of highway infrastructures. The billboard acts as a venue to the euphoric necessity for public expression, a thirst for messages and social registrations to overcome the flatness of engineered aesthetics. Another form of mediation is graffiti: while planning design agencies strive to bring order to urban growth, graffiti explicitly intensifies unexpected alterations to the city canvas. Government
agencies such as the Office of Community Beautification in Los Angeles are symptomatic of a divided sense of urban aesthetics: on one side, civic culture resists the imprints of society and time, and on the other, life is engraved onto the surface of walls, particularly those in close proximity to social inequalities or civic interactions. While these examples are ubiquitous struggles of civic coexistence, their polemic proposes new foundations for designers to embrace the milieu of non-design social background as part of the foreground.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy in The City Faraway, we have lost sight of the comprehensible city as an entity and have moved into uncivilized conglomerations or urban configurations:

La ciudad se aleja de nosotros, deviene otra ciudad, otra cosa que una ciudad: aún buscamos su medida, y el saber que hace falta para pasar por ella y alejarse con ella (Nancy, 2013, p. 15).

Fragments as urban textures replace the disappearing image of the city. In particular, the case of Tijuana defies urban form due to an ongoing regeneration and transformation of a rich dense urban context. The city renders a palimpsest of precarious and ephemeral urban scenarios: recycled materials erode from informal urban interventions; human activity and marginalized social faces appear temporarily between roads and façades; walls of extreme control act in opposition for privatization and security; and ultimately, negotiated boundaries emerge, where aspects of design are altered by the pressing socio-cultural landscape. Voices between society, politics and nature get captured in the city’s canvas. Its ever-present graphic interventions, from art commissions to legal or illegal urban actions, propose to challenge the future of urban design as a series of epidermic projects. Surface boundaries at the architecture and urban scale could become mediators of contrasting environments, platforms for cultural, civic and social engagements that satisfy the plural needs of urban coexistence. Ultimately, unpacking the existing fabric exposes designers to an array of open-ended design approaches needed for the survival of urban projects over time.

2. Erosion

If design is constantly speaking about the future, then what do the non-design elements speak about? The urban texture of Tijuana augments this paradox. Plywood, corrugated sheet metals, tires, cardboard and plastic bottles are ubiquitous in the edges and interiors of canyons, hillsides and riverbanks. This current saturation of abandoned and recycled urban elements, while considered merely utilitarian or non-designed, constructs a landscape of uncertainty and hybridity. The vulnerability of these structures to change generates in them a palimpsest of reconstructions, a quilted urban fabric constantly eroding to dust, smog, sun, wind and water, not to mention the alterations created by its people.
History exposes decadence as an inevitable part of the future. However, it is not the intention to aestheticize this precarious condition, since buildings in decadence historically have been the result of violent urban acts or war (Finoki, 2009). Indeed, the rich densities of self-organized constructions are illegal appropriations of spaces; its vernacular flatness reflects the inequality and struggles of society to reach basic human resources. While ancient cities appreciate the long registration of history in material decadence, young cities try to resist the shortcomings of decay. Nevertheless, Tijuana’s abandoned and informal condition is unapologetic to the city fabric; 62 percent of the city was built originally as a slum (Alegría, 2005, p. 42). Although the richness in informal urban textures is no conscious decision, its presence has become engrained as the foreground image of the city. Those materials, recycled and left to erosion, become an incentive for designers and craftsmen to innovate. The deep relief façade “drift:dust” designed in our studio is intended to capture dust as ornamentation. It intersects traditional means of production with digital fabrication to calibrate patterns varying in depth that give a range of effects; ultimately, it intends to register onto the surface the passing of time. The non-design elements therefore speak about a radical pre-existing condition for the new, suggesting the possibility for new grounds for innovation (Aureli, 2011, pp. 92-93).

Tijuana has shifted how it builds, from progressive engineering materials by federal infrastructural projects in the 60’s to current impatient local projects that erase, mutate or interrupt the pre-existing canvas of the city. Tijuana’s short-term memory of the built environment prioritizes flatness over space, image over craft, the economy over the environment and the spontaneous over the legal. In addition, everyday life is displayed on building surfaces as a dense accumulation of making, seeing and saying (Rancière, 2009, p. 74). Graphism has become another tool to communicate the expressions of society: a sort of public thermometer that seeks to reconcile with the environment.
and its contradictions. To illustrate this, several colonias (term for low-income neighbourhoods) have welcomed programs from local artists and muralists to re-imagine and re-surface their uneven urban fabric. One example is Reacciona Tijuana in Camino Verde, where artists joined residents to help paint their homes with an array of themes, from portraits of local residents to graphic symbols. Surface narratives covered unfinished building façades and streets, objectifying and celebrating social relationships in the community. Large-scale human faces are captured unpredictably in the continuous yet uneven building façades, where high degrees of exposure to the dense urban form are mainly possible due to the view of the interior topography of the canyon. Appropriations on the surface of the city could also be understood as a mirror into the future; while they amplify social despair, they also challenge designers and architects to understand the cultural landscape and embrace the opportunities of losing control over open-ended design processes.

3. Control

In the rising tension between México and the United States, boundary walls are being developed more as monuments of power than real boundaries to separate. Advances in surveillance technology operate now independently from physical barriers, making the discussion of the need for tall and heavy walls obsolete. At the collision of unequal and contrasting realities, the border wall becomes the ultimate expression of control, and therefore a monumental canvas. Its south surface attracts the registration of the conditions it was intended to repel. Although the surface of control strives to speak about the future as a paternal and protective blanket, it is incapable of escaping the pressure of survival stories, images of struggle and the erosion of the built and natural environment.
While two parallel walls already separate the cities of Tijuana and San Diego, boundary edges in México are instead expedient mediums for expressions and art installations. The close proximity of the border wall to the dense fabric of the city has shifted the significance of a monument of exclusion into a collection of murals, civic gatherings and performances. In particular, the last section of the wall, which ends abruptly in the ocean, is in constant conversation with the public, from conceptual to figurative imagery, pop-up vegetable gardens, walkways and benches. This palpable civic space culminates in the recent mural installation by artist Ana Teresa Fernandez, the colours of which are carefully calibrated to meet the colours of the sky and the beach in the background, creating an illusion of erasure, a complete dematerialization of the wall. Even though artists persist in their desire to transgress and tear down the wall, the power of Fernandez's installation goes beyond the effectiveness of its implied erasure. The fact that it occupies a few linear feet strengthens the presence of the wall as a porous construction with the possibility to converse with its environment.

Surfaces of control are also opposite responses to the diverse and incoherent set of visuals of informal appropriations. Such is the example of the government’s surface beautification project in Guadalajara, México. The city commissioned several paintings to dress up the section travelers see between the airport and the city center; property walls were treated as building facades; fences, including those of private homes, were covered with paint to homogenize the city and bring clarity of elements through consistency and abstraction. Even though initiatives exist to project a sense of order to the uncontrollable urban collage of developing countries, a desire to control emerges when every boundary is vulnerable to the constant transformations by unregulated territories. Building façades become destined to resist the built environment in conflict with its surroundings by focusing on material flatness and erasures of diversity.
Boundary walls for housing projects also contribute to the landscape of city walls. From gated homes to gated communities, perimeter walls have been fragmenting the city of Tijuana into clusters of generic surfaces. Unlike the border wall, these surfaces are not confrontational; they stay calm and expressionless in an incredibly hybrid visual landscape (Song S., 2010). Through time, these surfaces build up tension to the adjacent and contrasting life around them, eventually provoking alterations. Residential streets are turned into active markets or civic spaces, façades are decorated with recycled materials, new programs get injected and houses expand. Although these interventions are still in unstable conditions, everyday life consumes the generic and transforms it into a dynamic reality that it is unable to preserve. The idiosyncratic needs of society are therefore exposed in these transformations. In essence, borders act as an antidote to its own bold image of control. Walls that speak about conflict can generate an advantageous situation: by uncovering the discrepancies associated with the territory, they unfold a series of radical transformations. Offensive walls are constantly turned into domestic ones, even illegally; this condition is historically engrained in Tijuana and continues to be unstoppable. This suggests a future in constant transformation, in this case, an optimistic erasure and reconstruction for a future of coexistence.

Figure 4. Transformations of low-income housing development in Tijuana, 2011. Photograph by Adriana Cuéllar.

4. Coexistence

In the evolution of cities and societies we continue to witness both political resistance and cultural expressions in the epidermis of the city as necessary balancing forces for urban coexistence. To speculate about the future of design in the image of the built environment is to accept and embrace
the surface paradox as opportunities that can shape material thinking. If permanency in evolution is indeterminacy, perhaps future cultures consciously begin to facilitate contextual negotiations, social adaptability and environmental transformations as intentional strategies in the construction of the new.
Figure 5. Mural in Tijuana México. Photograph by Enrique Herrera.
If design is a constant projection about the future, then the future of design needs to be more acute to the perceptions, critiques and the imaginary views of the surrounding culture. In Tijuana, where the city’s epidermis is in constant reconstruction and reinvention, neither pure aesthetics nor pure functionality can address the environment of the future. Design should transcend labels and contribute to the construction of environments as opposed to defining it. Projecting the background cultural environment into the foreground of the city through materials, images or programmatic elements suggests imagining cities in constant production of their own authentic condition. Rem Koolhaas’s theory of preservation is an example of a new type of urban production in which traditional conceptions of aesthetics and authenticity are challenged. Instead, preservation is proposed as a systematic condition in which everything is preserved to some degree and therefore allows for partial erasures of the city as a confrontational and complementary condition (Koolhaas, 2014). The ever-present contrasting environment of Tijuana teaches us that design can coexist in opposition to its environment when left to erosion; in that situation, it provokes conversations and negotiations of boundaries that bring together conflicting realities, from the function of dust, portraits on façades, murals over layered materials, aesthetics to functionalities, narratives to atmospheres, structure to nature. The surface of the built environment—as building façades, infrastructures and fences—can culturally participate as open books to inform and direct the evolution of societies.

Graphism at the architecture and urban scale could also become more visible than buildings themselves. To a certain extent, cities like Tijuana have replaced the gap of unskilled labour and limited building resources so that graphism becomes an economic response to the human need to participate in the built environment, inscribing traces of events in context and identifying potentials for civic spaces. Although architecture can tackle the spatial and functional needs of society, its façades become the most expedient medium of cultural expressions and reflections of the public; façades can embrace, reject or be oblivious to the background context and cultural participation of the built environment.

If urban graphics as super graphics were translated into future design strategies, how would building façades or site boundaries be configured? How would planners, architects and urban designers collaborate to bring an array of designed and non-designed backgrounds as part of the choreography of the immediate foreground? The extreme noise of everyday living, from illegal appropriations to cultural interventions, can continue to provide clues to the careful calibration of design elements and enrich adaptations as it writes uncensored about a future in constant evolution.
References

Aureli, Pier Vittorio (2011). The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture. Instauriato Urbis. The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, London England (pp. 85-97).

Alegria O., T. & Ordóñez B., G. (2005). Legalizando La Ciudad: Asentamientos informales y Procesos de Regularización en Tijuana. Localización, Dimensiones, Población y Valor de los Asentamientos Irregulares. El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, B.C. México (pp. 31-50).

Besler, Ian. Diagrams. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from http://www.ianbesler.com/diagrams/

Chueca Goitia, Fernando (1968). Breve historia del urbanismo. Lección 2: La ciudad, archivo de la historia. Alianza Editoria, S.A. Madrid, España (pp. 29-52). (Brief history of urbanism. Second lesson: The city, a historical archive.)

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2013). La Ciudad a lo lejos. Segunda parte (1999)—La ciudad a lo lejos (pp. 41-49). Traducción: Andrea Sosa Varrotti, 1a ed. Buenos Aires: Manantial. (The city, faraway. Second part (1999)—The city, faraway).

Félix Berumen, Humberto (2003). Tijuana la Horrible, entre la Historia y el Mito. Tablero de Definiciones (pp. 37-52). El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. (Tijuana the Ugly, Between History and Myth. Table of Definitions).

Finoki, Bryan (2009), The Ruin Machine. Retrieved from: http://archive.eyebeam.org/node/16297/revisions/51221/view

Hernández Galvez, Alejandro (2011). Harvard Design Magazine. Architectures of Latin America. Mexican Architecture must redeem poor construction (pp. 48-51).

Lopez-Hodoyan, Katia (2106). ‘Erasing’ the Border in Three cities. La Prensa, San Diego’s Original Latino Community Newspaper, April 8, 2016. Retrieved from: http://laprensa-sandiego.org/stories/erasing-the-border-in-three-cities/

Koolhaas, Rem (2014). Preservation is Over Taking Us. Rem Koolhaas Recent Work. Carver, J. (Volume Editor). Graham, James (Series Editor). GSAPP Books, The Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. Columbia University, New York. Retrieved from: https://www.arch.columbia.edu/books/reader/6-preservation-is-overtaking-us#reader-anchor-1

Rancière, Jacques (2009). The Surface of Design. In The Future of the Image. New York.

Scott Brown, Denise, “Learning From Pop,” Casabella no. 359, 1971, pp 1-4.

Song, S., Stamp, J., Park, Sun-Young, (2010). Learning from “Learning-from Las Vegas”—On Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and the Recent Yale Symposium on their Works and Writings. In Archinect articles. Retrieved December 26, 2016 from: http://archinect.com/features/article/96145/learning-from-learning-from-i-on-robert-venturi-and-denise-scott-brown-and-the-recent-yale-symposium-on-their-works-and-writings

Vinegar, Aron (2008). I am a Monument, on Learning from Las Vegas. Our City of Words. The MIT Press, Cambridge MA (pp. 33-48).
About the Authors

Adriana Cuéllar is a principal of CRO Studio and an adjunct assistant professor at University of San Diego. She has received the Rome Prize in 2006, and a Progressive Architecture Award with partner Marcel Sanchez for their design of the Modulo Prep Library in Tijuana.

Marcel Sanchez Prieto is a principal of CRO studio and an associate professor at Woodbury University. He has received the Progressive Architecture Award, the BIAU Bienal Iberoamericana de Arquitectura y Urbanismo Award, and other prestigious recognitions with partner Adriana Cuéllar for their projects in Tijuana.

Acknowledgments: Special thanks to our dear friend and colleague Julissa Lopez-Hodoyan for her insightful support and patience; to Juliana Maxim, Ph.D., Allison Wiese, MFA, and the University of San Diego for their grant support; to Enrique Herrera for sharing his views through his photography; and especially to our little loves, Luca and Bruno, for making this journey deeply fun and fulfilling.