

It's midnight and the *Tonight Show* flickers across television screens in Tijuana. Jay Leno is telling a guest about the old days of stand-up comedy. One night, he recalls, he was bombing badly at a Las Vegas club; it was so bad that he found himself telling jokes about architecture.

¡Espera un momento! Wait a minute! Architecture south of the border is a revered profession. You don't joke around about great Mayan cities of stone. You don't trash the sacred art of Mesoamerica. No wonder they say, 'Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.'

'Poor Mexico' may suffer its proximity to Southern Californian freeway sprawl and cookie-cutter tract housing, but our neighbor to the north has also begun sending some of its best architects to the northern border. In Tijuana, talented young Mexican architects from the interior — Mexico City, Guadalajara — began arriving some years back, and more are coming.

Jorge Ozorno, an architect, lived in Mexico City all his life, but eight years ago he came to Tijuana. "When I first arrived and the taxi from the airport snaked through the streets of *Colonia Libertad* and downtown, I took one look and almost got on the next plane back to Mexico City," says Ozorno. "The city seemed chaotic and vulgar." But Ozorno chose to stay.

The new Tijuana architects bristle when they hear their city described as honky-tonk, a ticky-tack version of Hong Kong, the stepchild of Southern California. They grow tired of being told that their city has no architecture.

"The Mexican architect always incorporates the artistic," says Rodolfo Argote, a Tijuana architect who learned his craft in Guadalajara. "He tries to take into account the senses, feeling. In the United States, it's colder. In Mexico, many buildings don't work, but they're beautiful. We look for elements that counteract the chaos that people find on the street — the violence, the stress of work."

Mexico is discovered through its architecture. Even Tijuana. Mexican architecture is driven by national memory. Today, Argote and his colleagues are excited by a movement sweeping across their country — *la nueva arquitectura*. "The new architecture" is inspired by Luis Barragan, who rejected the massive, impersonal buildings of 1950s and '60s modernism, replacing them with blank walls painted in bright colors, cement-block partitions through which light can pass, austere patios, gardens, pools of water.

Mexican architects practicing along the border inevitably work in the shadow of the United States. Tijuana lies on the edge of a gigantic mass of land (the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas) that Mexico feels was unjustly stolen over a century ago. As if out of a combination of embarrassment, rage, and geography, Mexico forgot its border towns for nearly a century. It sent its workers across into U.S. territory, but beyond that it was hard to find Mexico in the border towns. When Americans came they encountered rampant commercialism.

"During the 1930s, the era of the recession, in Tijuana, in Mexico, it was a time we had to do things quickly, to renegotiate investments quickly, and people began to improvise," says Eugenio Velasquez, principal architect in the Tijuana firm Arte Proyecto. "We developed this bad habit on the border — designing something to make an impression, even though we don't feel it is ours. Revolution Avenue is filled with examples of this."

If you have to look hard to find Mexico in Tijuana, in its architecture, you have to search even harder to find the city's past.

"We have to invent a history for ourselves," says architect Jorge Ozorno. "It begins with the rock paintings in the caves of Baja California, the first murals of the border region. Then we have the portable architecture of Baja's first missionaries, from La Paz to San Luis Obispo. The first tall buildings were assembled in Europe in the 19th Century: the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Crystal Palace in London. Here in Baja, the church of Santa Rosalia was designed by Eiffel — it arrived in boxes by boat and was assembled, a graceful building on an inhospitable, uninhabited, arid land."

"We Mexican architects are looking to discover our roots," says Jaime Venguer, another Mexico City architect who now owns the architectural firm Venguer Associates in Tijuana. "We want an architecture that is Mexican but also that is sensitive to the border, to its materials and technological advantages. The border is like a zone of transition. Since we are in a transition space, from one (continued on page 24)



Our Designs Are More Human, Yours Are More Efficient

The New Tijuana Architects

By Lawrence A. Herzog
Photos by Sandy Huffaker, Jr.

Architects

(continued from page 23)

culture to another, we need an architecture of transition. The border should be like an Escher drawing where there are humans on one side and ducks on the other side, and in the middle humans turn into ducks. That's the border to me, when there's a mixture of both sides, and it produces a third thing."

THE NEW ARCHITECTS

RODOLFO ARGOTE:
"Memories of Old Tijuana"

Rodolfo is originally from Tijuana. In his mid-30s, he is a principal architect in the firm Arte Proyecto, with Eugenio Velasquez. He studied architecture at the Universidad Metropolitana in Mexico City. Before he returned to Tijuana in 1984, he spent several years working in cinematographic design for a film company in Mexico City.

"For those of us who come from Tijuana, when we were children, our parents took us to Disneyland, to shopping malls in California. We were dazzled by the contrasts, by the technology we saw over there. This became part of our formation, our historic standard.

"I went to high school from 1970 to '73 on the grounds of what had been the Agua Caliente resort. In those days, the thermal baths were still intact; the salons were intact, with their original decor — rugs, curtains, everything. Some of the old casino buildings had been converted into classrooms. This was before the fire that destroyed most of the buildings. The director of our school was convinced that the Agua Caliente casino was shameful and that all the casino buildings should be demolished and replaced with something modern. I was a young boy of 15 at the time, and I guess the director's attitude made sense to me. Casino Agua Caliente had been part of Tijuana's black history. When President Lazaro Cardenas closed the casinos and authorized



Rodolfo Argote

building the polytechnic high school on the site, he was trying to erase the black legend of Tijuana.

"While we were students there, the remains of the casino were in a state of chaos. There had been some smaller fires over the years; the big one that came a few years later destroyed the main salons. The school was in the hands of nationalists who held the attitude left over from the Cardenas period, the idea that the Casino should be destroyed, that it was a reminder of an unpleasant piece of Tijuana's history. What we didn't understand in that era was that the buildings weren't at fault for what had

taken place in Tijuana's past; they were simply works of art. But, back then it was easy to manipulate the students; they told us certain things and we believed them. They never told us the buildings were artistic treasures.

"In those days, stories and rumors circulated among the students. The salons with their original tapestries, curtains, furniture, were protected by security guards. But sometimes, students would play hooky; they would go and hide. There were tunnels underneath the resort complex that supposedly went all the way to the border. Some of us went into the tunnels or

the salons. There was talk among us about a dancer, a beautiful woman who had been killed back in the days of the casino but who would reappear as a ghost. Sometimes, when we skipped school, to prove that we were brave, we had to sneak into the main salon where it was very dark, and suddenly, we'd go running out screaming. The ballerina, the ballerina. We never saw her."

JORGE OZORNO:
"Emergency Architecture"

Jorge is in his mid-30s and grew up in Mexico City where he studied architecture. He came to Tijuana in 1984 and began designing what he calls "emergency architecture," buildings for moderate-income neighbor-

hoods. There was talk among us about a dancer, a beautiful woman who had been killed back in the days of the casino but who would reappear as a ghost. Sometimes, when we skipped school, to prove that we were brave, we had to sneak into the main salon where it was very dark, and suddenly, we'd go running out screaming. The ballerina, the ballerina. We never saw her."

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"When I arrived in Tijuana, two strong images influenced my designs: the land invasions in the Tijuana area and the earthquake I had lived through in Mexico City. When large portions of Mexico City collapsed, in a very short time, and with very little money, it was necessary to create new works of architecture and engineering. I realized that it was partly a question of will. When the catastrophe hit and there were urgent needs, it forced the imagination to develop solutions that, although they weren't always definitive, they served to propel architects to a higher level.

"In Tijuana, I saw a city whose

must be taken to address the urgent needs of the city. I've gone out on weekends to the poor colonias where people are just arriving to take possession of their land. They can build a house in a single weekend, with tires, wooden poles, plywood. They literally raise the main structure of the house in four hours.

"The imagination of the squatters is a maximum expression of creativity. With three pieces of plastic, they build an entire house. The government has not been sufficiently helpful. With a policy of emergency or transitional architecture, we would bring back the value of the *barrio* [the neighborhood] to the city. People would organize from within, with the support of the government, and be able to deal with the needs of their immediate environment.



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Jorge Ozario

Emergency architecture.

"We can't ignore the effect of the United States, though. My clients don't want to live in a house designed with recycled metal or junk parts, even if it is excellently designed. They want a California tract house, with a picture window and a garage. A lot of people can't afford to buy a house in the U.S., but they buy the magazines, and then they find a photograph they like, they bring it to the architect in Tijuana and say, 'I want a house like this.' But in Mexico, our lots are smaller and narrower. We don't have a lot of freedom to design houses with ideal lighting and ventilation. To conform to our clients' wishes, we have to design caricatures of American-style houses in miniature. The scale is changed, and the house is distorted and out of proportion."

JAIME VENGUER:
"Condos in Tijuana"

Jaime lives in La Jolla but is originally from Mexico City. He studied architecture at Cornell University and is the owner of Venguer Associates, an architectural design and building firm in Tijuana. Venguer commutes each day from La Jolla to his office in a modern tower adjacent to the Cultural Center in Tijuana's River Zone. He designed and built the luxury Ventura condominium complex, a 14-story concrete tower with a high-tech glass cube facade. Marketed as "la gran aventura" (the great adventure), it features two- and three-bedroom balconies with sweeping views of the region, Jacuzzis, spas, saunas, cable television, and a gymnasium.

"I started out doing luxury condominiums in Tijuana. We designed and built two luxury towers with ocean views and golf courses in Rosarito. We built the luxury Ventura Condominiums on the golf course in the Chapultepec area of Tijuana. These were designed with the idea of creating a super-building directed toward a special clientele in Tijuana: a lot of privacy, excellent views across the golf course, in the best neighborhood of



Guillermo Barrenechea

Tijuana, with the best services, luxury services. But we found that the market really isn't there yet. We weren't able to sell all the units in this building. We completed the project two years ago, and the building is only 50 percent occupied. Some people bought in as investors, others have rented their units. But it wasn't the business project we expected.

"We're just finishing the condominium towers on a peninsula south of Rosarito. The clientele was American. Our business fell off after some disputes about land ownership. The units go for \$125,000 to \$150,000 [U.S.] for about 1250 square feet. It's

a very special setting; the waves crash against the rocks down below; we built a pier and put in a Jacuzzi.

"We switched out of this luxury architecture because the market just isn't there right now. We had thought Tijuana was in a boom, as everyone expected. We thought we'd tap the maquiladora clientele, let's say. The clientele from the interior of the country. But they never materialized. In Tijuana, there was a change of governments, and then the U.S. economy went into a recession. All of this meant that the border economy weakened; it became static. And those of

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"In Tijuana, the housing initiatives already exist. What's missing are the resources the residents should be receiving: paved roads, schools, hospitals, etc. In Tijuana, the unemployment rate is low. Once people find a source of income, they buy a car, their house begins to grow. A system of emergency architecture would address the problem of providing public buildings. We architects have little to teach migrants about housing. They have shown they can build, even on steep embankments. We can guide them on how to maximize the use of plywood, or how to design a latrine, but they've demonstrated that they

have a capacity for the spontaneous construction of housing.

"What I'm talking about is designing schools, libraries, recreation centers, social service centers, fire stations, which is what the colonists don't have. They arrive and construct their houses — 20,000 or 50,000 people attach themselves to a parcel of land, but they don't have a medical facility, they don't have a child-care center, and in the end, they don't have control of their lives. We need to help these families feel rooted. We can do this by building rapid, ephemeral buildings. Low-cost, flexible structures that can be easily assembled and disassembled.

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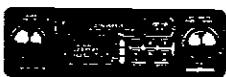
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Architects

(continued from page 25)

us with money tied up in property investments, we had to leave them, and I realized we could not continue to move our business in this direction.

"Today we're developing a lot of moderately priced housing for people who live here in Tijuana. For a long time, people here haven't had the chance to buy their own homes. We're building small individual homes for people in the La Mesa area, and we're helping the consumer get a loan and buy a house where the monthly payments on their mortgages are about the same as what you would pay to rent a house or apartment. It amounts to about \$400 a month with a 15-year mortgage and 20 percent down payment, paid in installments, for a 750-square-foot house with a small private patio and separate parking. The houses are very basic: two bedrooms, kitchen, dining area, bathroom, all made from cement block with plaster inside and tiled bathrooms. They are terraced one above the other for privacy. They're not architectural masterpieces, but they are dignified."

EUGENIO VELAZQUEZ:
"El Romanticismo"

Born in the United States but brought up in Mexico, Velazquez is in his 30s, and his ancestry is Spanish and Mexican. He studied architecture in Guadalajara and came to Tijuana in the early 1980s. Stylishly dressed on a cold evening in a short leather jacket with fur around the collar, Velazquez likes to frequent Tijuana's elegant discotheques. He could easily fit in any global metropolis: Mexico City, London, New York. Principal architect in the firm Arte Proyecto, Velazquez prefers to do his design sketches alone, finding inspiration in music and poetry. Echoing the spirit of Barragan, he speaks of the "fifth facade — the sky."

"In Tijuana, we're not in the best position. We're far from our roots; we're very close to a culture that isn't ours, that we don't understand, but that interests us. We know that in the north, they look toward the future,



Eugenio Velazquez

toward excellence, the perfection of things. The Latino carries in his heart *el romanticismo*, the romanticism of things. So, since we're neither from the north nor from the heartland of the south, things become difficult here in the hour of architecture. We're disoriented.

"As architects our Mexican designs are more human, but yours are more efficient. Our designs have flavor, sentiment, weaknesses. Some are ugly and some are beautiful. They incite passion, they attract interest. American designs are about perfection; they're cold, they lack feeling. In San Diego, I like Michael Graves's

Hyatt Hotel in La Jolla because, even though it's postmodern, it has an Italian touch, it has the romantic language, natural colors, the color of rocks; I feel that it is closer to us. I like the Salk Institute of Louis Kahn with its robust, brute materials, its meditative quality, its connection to the sea. I like the buildings of Balboa Park because they reflect part of our culture.

"No one in Tijuana has the confidence yet to say what the city's identity should be; we're growing so rapidly that we just improvise. The government could help more, but unfortunately, it's not like the United States

where laws are laws. Here the relative of someone can come in and build whatever he wants. If he wants to design a French provincial house or build Japanese style, he does it. And no one can say anything. We're not a city that has much culture to begin with. Eventually, it comes back to haunt us, through visual contamination. There are badly proportioned buildings constructed with inferior materials. We need to better maintain our buildings. Architecture is a discipline; what we're doing is not disciplined.

"There are 52 discotheques in Tijuana today. The most important ones are Marko Disco, Baby Rock, Oh, Flash, Viva Tijuana, News, Iguanas, Banana Rana, Señor Frogs. They can add to our urban architecture, but sometimes the opposite is true. Some

art and our culture. If you want to come here and do business, then you should have to conform to certain laws.

"If we put in our romanticism, our art, and we utilize what North Americans know, which is the perfection of things, we'll arrive at a new style of architecture that is unique, different. We want a situation where we can learn from you and you from us, only it's faster if we learn from you, then you from us, because you have the recipe, the practical side. Understanding of *romanticismo* of the Latino is more difficult.

"In Tijuana, we still have a lot of deprivation in our landscape. High in the hills, you see tires, cardboard, beer crates — all used to make architecture. But we also have all the materials from

Tijuana of the 21st Century
will be a linear city, with high-speed trolleys
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builders lack imagination. There's a lot of piracy. You design and build your business, and if it goes well, others begin copying it all around you. That's why you see so many discotheques near each other; they used to be farther apart, but over the years they moved closer. People would say, 'Where's the party?' It was easier to move them closer.

"The Free Trade Agreement is going to dramatically change our lives. I don't think we should bring in McDonald's and Jack In The Box, the way we did. The reason they came in and built exact replicas of their U.S. stores here in Tijuana is this: Mexico is still trying to imitate the heavyweights, and in this case, the heavy-weight is the U.S. We think that by imitating everything American we'll become successful too. But what it's doing is disorienting us more; these fast-food outlets, they distort our city. The government should protect our

the other side: cement block, brick, Spanish tile. If we combine both traditions — Mexican and American — we can have a better architecture."

GUILLERMO BARRENECHEA:
"The Future."

Guillermo has been practicing architecture in Tijuana for 30 years, yet he's lost neither exuberance nor vision nor a sense of humor. Originally from the state of Sonora, he studied architecture in Monterrey. He has designed restaurants, stores, parking garages, beachfront condos, and private homes in Tijuana, Mexicali, Ensenada, and Mazatlan. He is currently the principal architect on a large multimillion-dollar urban development project that proposes to create a new commercial and civic "downtown"

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east of the current city center in what is called the third phase of the River Zone.

Barrenechea thinks Tijuana's future lies in the purchasing power of its nearly two million inhabitants, a potential he believes has gone largely untapped. Using maps — hand drawn on the back of cafeteria placemats — he sketches giant concentric circles to plot the projected market areas for hundreds of thousands of consumers living in the eastern and southern outskirts of Tijuana. Tijuana's future, he notes, lies in a series of mega-shopping centers — not of the Southern California suburban mall type, but rather as a series of "new downtowns": high-density, pedestrian-oriented commercial districts, following the contour of the Tijuana river. The Tijuana of the 21st Century will be a linear city, with high-speed trolleys and computer-powered monorails moving people

between the downtown districts. To succeed, he thinks the new commercial and civic centers must recapture the spirit of old Mexican cities. The new eastern "downtown" will begin breaking ground in two years.

"The significance of Baja California lies in its indigenous cultures, but they are often forgotten. The descendants of Baja's native cultures are a beautiful people, tall with great big smiles. We worked together on a project in Ojos Negros. They would cook these dinners with clams, which they pried open first, poured in spices, then closed them again and cooked them on branches over an open fire. With mezcal or tequila and a guitar, we got blissfully lost out there in the hills. Magnificent. The nights in Ojos Negros.

"This city needs an identity. When you're in a city like Oaxaca or Puebla, walking through the

main square, there are vendors all over, selling chiles or tomatoes or whatever, on street corners. Walking through these spaces gets your blood flowing.

"That's the mood we want to create in our new project. Our project will be like a typical, modern Mexican city. It will be simple, modest. It doesn't have to be spectacular to attract the Mexican consumer. No glass towers. The Mexican consumer is scared off when it's too sophisticated. It's got to be simple. A plaza with streets leading into it. Horse and buggy. A kiosk with a band playing in it. A place where you can have a typical Mexican encounter, where someone will say, 'It's been a long time since I had a real Mexican conversation.' We're talking about Mexicans wearing white pants and big hats; a conversation over a bottle of tequila.

"The old Tijuana, with its

scenography, is vulgar. Vulgar. Some of the new glass buildings in the river zone? Scary. Badly thought out. One has little high-tech glass mirrors, another a hole in the concrete façade. Every imaginable element in the modern repertoire of commercial architecture seems thrown into one building. I think the designers need to lighten up, relax.

"The authentic American architect is designing beautiful things, while the Mexican architect in Tijuana has been sleeping. It's not that there isn't talent; there's talent. But the objectives here aren't always clearly defined. People get distracted. It's like a river; you have to channel its energy in the right direction.

"But, in a hundred years, Tijuana will be an interesting place. Most Mexican cities in the interior have always been beautiful. You go to Michoacán, all the towns are beau-

tiful. There isn't an ugly town in Michoacán. Here it seems that Tijuana has always been ugly. Here there is a temporary quality to everything. People come here and are constantly on the move. There's a sense of settling down, no sense of posterity.

"Zacatecas, an old silver mining city, is very poor. But it's a very beautiful place. We were sitting or night in a cafe and heard a pleasurable musical sound off in the distance; we went out to see what it was. There were 70 young girls, 12 to 1 years old, all playing the clarinet in the middle of a street near downtown Zacatecas. The music drifted through the streets of the old neighborhoods. Flowers were in bloom all around. There were arched doorways and cloisters, and even some of the modest houses, from colonial times, had silver handwork in their exterior walls."

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