

A new Tijuana needs a new image

By Larry Herzog

When regional leaders read their invitation letters to a recent San Diego Dialogue forum on Mission Bay, some may have done a double take on the title of the meeting — "Tijuana Renaissance." For most of this century, mention of the words "Renaissance" and "Tijuana" in the same breath would not have seemed possible. Tijuana was a "border town," the place where drug smugglers congregated, illegals were ferried north in the dark of night, and tequila flowed on honky-tonk shopping streets. Even when the new transnational assembly plants began arriving in droves, Tijuana's image as a lightweight in the global economy endured.

But today there are those who think Tijuana could become the next Hong Kong. Call them 21st century NAFTA optimists if you will, but they will tell you that, in a free trade regional market, Tijuana and San Diego are strategically placed to become major players in the new global economy. To do this the region must transform its image and impress global investors that big time business can occur here.

San Diego needs Tijuana. As a solo act San Diego is doomed to remain in the shadow of its bigger neighbor, Los Angeles. But, together, Tijuana, San Diego and environs begin to look competitive in the global economy — a population (from Ocean-

Tijuana-San Diego, the television assembly capital of North America.

side to Ensenada) that will approach 5 million early in the next century, two deep water ports, a large and growing labor force. More than 600 international assembly plants provide jobs for one-third of Tijuana's workers. Other statistics for the region: Over \$6 billion in exports, and, according to speakers in the Tijuana Renaissance forum, a foreign trade balance of over \$1 billion in 1996, and a combined San Diego-Tijuana economic exchange of over \$8 billion.

But, if Tijuana is to be a catalyst for the emergence of the binational region, then it must first overcome its own negative image. The number of times Tijuana has appeared in international news reports in the 1990s can be counted on the fingers of one hand; sadly its entree into the global limelight has usually been driven by natural disasters (floods), Asian boat people landing on nearby beaches, or the assassination of high political officials, police chiefs, and journalists.

So, how to change Tijuana's image? Armed with videos, pamphlets, and a slick new CD called Tijuana Hoy, Mexican business promoters and political leaders make a strong case for a newly equipped corporate Tijuana.

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Projects under construction or waiting in the wings include a new trolley line (to link up at the border with the San Diego light rail system), highways, a bigger and better privately controlled port at Ensenada, regional rail systems, aqueducts, natural gas and hydroelectric plants, a Tijuana Exposition and Convention Center, low income housing projects, a children's museum, and mega-shopping centers. Already one of Hollywood's largest film-makers has built a sizable studio complex on the southern edge of the Tijuana metropolitan area.

But let us return to the problem of Tijuana's image. What do outsiders see when they travel across the landscape of this region? What images remain with them as they cross the boundary line — the vital membrane that defines the transfrontier San Diego-Tijuana metropolis, and could be the catalyst for Tijuana's emergence on the radar screens of the global marketplace?

Speaking of our largest border gate at San Ysidro, San Diego Planning Commission Chairman Mark Steele said recently, "The border entrance is a very seedy kind of place. There's no elegance to it. When you cross the border into Mexico, you feel like you're going into a second rate place. And it really shouldn't be."

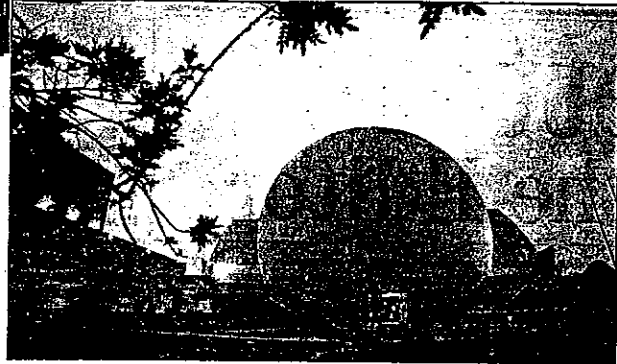
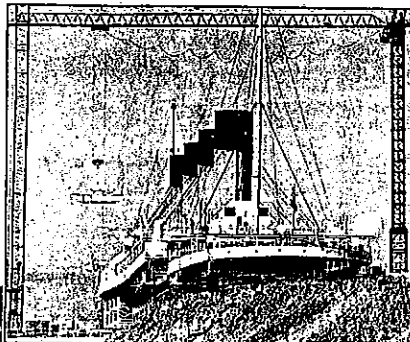
So how do we get from a border of patchwork landing mat fences punched full of holes, immigration detention centers, migrant footpaths, Border Patrol helicopters, parking lots, taxis and street vendors peddling ceramic hamburger sculptures to a 21st century global business center?

Perhaps, first, we need to return to the San Diego Dialogue's use of "Renaissance" to find our answer. Recall that the term Renaissance was originally employed to describe the rebirth of Europe from the 14th to the 16th centuries. The Renaissance city was distinguished by its celebration of open space and light, reaching beyond the cramped streets and walls of medieval towns. Art not only flourished inside studios, it expressed itself joyously on the physical landscape of the city in the form of elegantly designed squares and promenades, great domed-cathedrals, and ornate palaces.

If Tijuana is to have a renaissance, it must take its cue from history. There must be a significant physical transformation of the image, from border town to global metropolis. Tijuana must reinvent itself.

The place to begin Tijuana's face lift is at the boundary line. At San Ysidro the border looks like a cross between military encampment (old and new fences, barricades, helicopters; Border Patrol vehicles) and swap meet (parking lots, shopping areas, and warehouses strewn haphazardly across the zone). The message of the landscape seems to be: This is a pass-through space, so move on up the road to wherever you are going. One of my students, doing an observation

— Photos by John Gibbins, Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune



Centro Cultural continues to be a cultural landmark.

exercise near the border crossing, was told by a Customs official that she could not stand around and take notes. Waiting (loitering), she was informed, is not encouraged near the boundary.

This may not be the message that city officials on either side of the border want to convey to 21st century visitors or investors. Certainly the task of guarding the boundary needs to continue, but why not aim to allow the surrounding space to celebrate the new climate of binational cooperation and confidence in free trade and global business. Buildings, commercial developments, parks and other new projects should be permanent ones. Ample space should be allocated for safe walking. Well-designed transit connections are needed. Public art and landscaping would not only upgrade the image of the boundary zone, they also could be strategically used to screen some of the less pleasant, but necessary border monitoring activities.

Beyond the line itself, Tijuana must grapple with its identity vis-a-vis its connection with the United States. Case in point: In 1992, no sooner had the ink dried on the NAFTA agreement, than global fast food corporations like Foodmaker, Inc. (parent of Jack in the Box) came calling in Mexico. In the past the Mexican government had adamantly defended its "cultural patrimony" by banning such obvious American icons as fast food restaurants. But that same year, in his State of the Union Address, then president Carlos Salinas told the nation that "Our culture is not, cannot and should not be a dead catalogue of past triumphs. Nor can it be impermeable to interchange with other cultures."

This was interpreted by local officials as a carte blanche invitation to open the floodgates to U.S. corporate food vendors. Tijuana was at the forefront. Jack in the Box quickly opened its first border outlet on Revolution Avenue, an exact replica of Southern California stores, replete with the company logo — white lettering in a red box — sitting atop a tall pole. Pizza Hut, Carl's Jr., McDonald's and others soon followed. Said one Mexican architect in disgust, "These outlets distort our city. I don't think we should bring them in. But Mexico is trying to imitate the heavyweight, and the heavyweight is still the United States."

Will Tijuana begin to look like El Cajon? Or, with more tourists on the way, will it reinvent itself as a border Disneyland? In Anaheim, you park your car in a vast lot, walk through the turnstiles and enter the magical kingdom's fantasy promenade: Main Street. At San Ysidro,

you park in one of the many tourist lots, cross through the revolving border gates, and signs lead you to Revolution Avenue, the main street of a different kind of theme park. Revolution Avenue has the kind of cartoonish, carnivalesque quality that could have come off the drafting table of Walt Disney himself: buildings covered in zebra stripes, life-sized yellow school buses hanging off second floor cantinas, and discotheques shaped like byzantine Russian churches where punk rock

'Floating' the Titanic near Rosarito.

music plays till 4 in the morning. In Mexico, architects have called Revolution Avenue everything from "a joke," and "a stage set that shows how gringos came in and built this town," to "a much more vulgar architecture than what we have in the rest of Mexico."

The idea of remaking the city in the form of a spectacle is not unique to Tijuana.

Like many one-dimensional cities, border towns evolved to serve the needs of outsiders. The Tijuanas of the world were created to suit the whim of consumers. This has taken on new meaning in the last two decades. The "global factories" appeared in the form of poured concrete and steel shells, warehouses for footloose global assembly. If labor costs become significantly cheaper in Haiti or Thailand, then the warehouses can be packed up and moved. Near Rosarito, the much heralded Fox (Dreamworks) Film Studio, which produced the set for the film "Titanic," has added little more to the landscape than a collection of windowless sheds within a walled compound. Ironically, a company in the business of crafting scintillating visual images on celluloid has created a formless blot on the Baja coast, completely disconnected from the fishing villages, the hills and the emerald sea around it.

More revenue and jobs alone may not create a Tijuana Renaissance. Tijuana's new identity must be built around its image to outsiders. High officials and corporate leaders in emerging global city-regions from Barcelona to Berlin realize this. In Berlin, leaders have built a red observation platform called the Info-Box to allow visitors to view the reconstruction of one of Europe's greatest town squares, the Potsdamer Platz. In only two years, over 2 million people have used it. Barcelona's explosion as a business center was fueled by its incredible physical and architectural renovation.

It is time to put this approach to work in San Diego-Tijuana. Already there are steps in the right direction: international art festivals like InSite '97 that celebrate public art at the border (it would be nice if some of the InSite installations could be made permanent); a movement in Tijuana to upgrade the city's image, as for example, in painting colorful murals under bridges and freeway overpasses; well-designed buildings like the Centro Cultural de Tijuana, a globe-shaped, earth-touted architectural signature on Tijuana's landscape. San Diego can make an important contribution, too. Elevate "design" to a higher priority in planning along the boundary line, and in landmark public structures (like the downtown library) that will enhance the image of the region.



The giant flag at military's Cuartel General.