

The Malling of Tijuana

Story by Lawrence A. Herzog

Photographs by Dave Allen

The shopping mall was one of the grand American inventions of the postwar, baby-boom era. Mega-malls — a million square feet-plus of commercial space — became the icons of suburban America in the 1960s. Thirty years later, they're still the vital organs of the megalopolis. UTC. Fashion Valley Center. North County Fair. Safe, compact, self-contained villages tucked away in San Diego's freeway hyperspace.

The first shopping malls put a twinkle in the eyes of modern architects. In the newly created automobile-age city, malls offered a refuge within the sprawling, faceless checkerboards of suburbs stretching out into the farmland. In San Diego the malls and freeways and cookie-cutter tract homes were built where lemon groves and avocado farms once stood. The new San Diego was a city built for machines.

But across the border, Tijuana prided itself on being a different kind of city. "In Tijuana, you see people walking in the streets, meeting in cafés," says a Mexican architect. "I don't see people walking in San Diego."

Baja has since discovered freeways, and Tijuana has discovered the shopping mall. They call them *plazas* below the border. Tijuana is suddenly becoming a city of mini and mega *plazas* — Plaza Rio Tijuana, Plaza Fiesta, Plaza del Zapato, Pueblo

revolution. Great battles and hangings and the facing of firing squads. Fiery speeches from the likes of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. They all took place on the *plaza*.

But for Tijuana, a late bloomer on the stage of Mexican history, these great *plazas* never really existed. Tijuana missed the colonial era, missed the baroque churches, the palatial mansions, the town squares. Yes, there were town squares in the original plan of Tijuana in 1889, but by the 1920s, they had all but disappeared, obliterated by a euphoria of construction that molded Tijuana's image as a frontier town of casinos and saloons and beer factories.

Tijuana's fate now lies in the next century. "Tijuana was born with its roots in the American dollar," an official from the Mexican Ministry of Industry and Commerce said more than a decade ago. Its destiny lies in shopping, in a Mexico of superhighways and *plazas* — Mexican shopping malls.

This is a tale of two *plazas*: the Plaza Rio Tijuana and the Plaza Fiesta. They lie on either side of the Paseo de los Héroes, the main boulevard that slices through the glitzy, high-tech Zona del Rio, Tijuana's version of Mission Valley, about one mile east of the border crossing at San Ysidro.

The Plaza Rio Tijuana is TJ's largest mall. It's not exactly a mega-mall by U.S. standards; it has about 150,000 square feet of



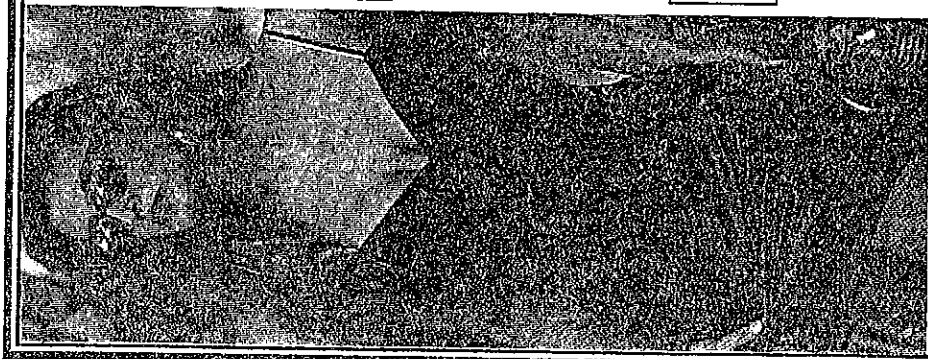
They come from the new suburbs east and west of town or from posh old neighborhoods of Chapultepec or Gacho in the hills above the old downtown.

Fashion Valley's 1.4 million square feet or Mission Valley's 1.3 million. In Tijuana, say mall administrators, a good shopping plaza can charge about \$4 or \$5 per square foot to

not be as large as the biggest San Diego malls, but they do manage to pack a lot of shoppers in. "On a good day, at any given time, some 2000 cars are parked in the Plaza's lots," says Diego Renteria Cuevas, director of administration for the Plaza. A big San Diego mall like University Towne Centre in La Jolla can accommodate 7000 cars. The Plaza Rio Tijuana has some 110 stores, comparable in size to Fashion Valley's 125 stores or UTC's 135 commercial tenants. Built in 1982, the Plaza Rio

Tijuana was the first outdoor mall in '71, your basic American-style shopping center. It boasts a Denny's, Sears, and Pizza Hut. Its travel agencies advertise package tours to Hawaii and Las Vegas. Its ice cream parlors sell milkshakes, and banana splits. Large posters of Magic Johnson hang in shoe stores.

At Sport Time, Juan and Carlos, two Mexican teenagers from a middle-class neighborhood a few miles away, are debating whether to buy Nike Airs at \$306.000 pesos (\$100) or LA Gear hightop



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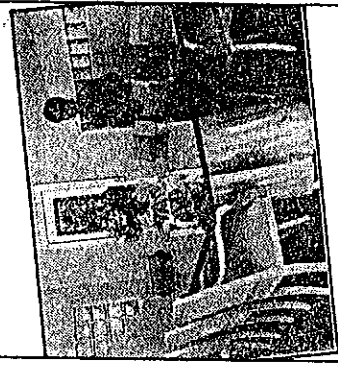
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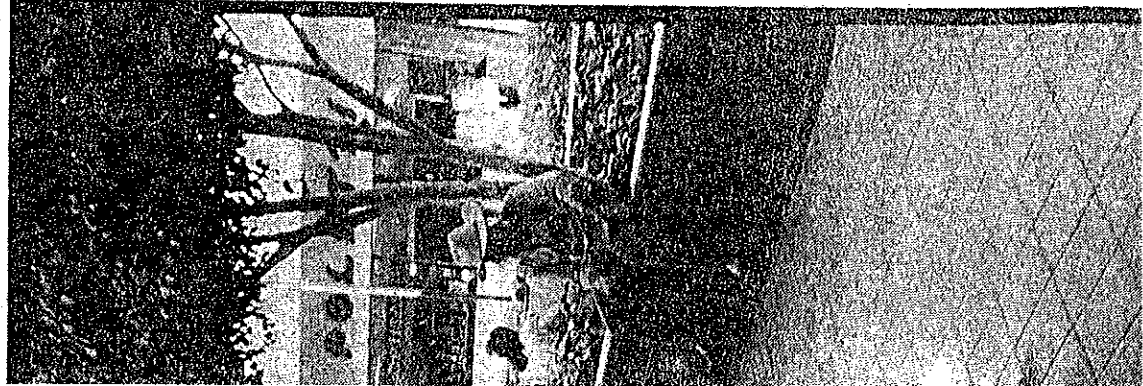
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Mexicana — the Mexican equivalent of a Von's and a Thrifty grafted into a single super-store — you can rent *Nacido del cuatro de julio* (Born on the 4th of July) or *Haz lo correcto* (Do the Right Thing) for 7000 pesos (\$2.30). You can buy Mexican greeting cards for \$1.00, a five-kilogram (11-pound) sack of detergent for \$5, light

It's supposed to look like a colonial Mexican town, like Guanajuato or Taxco, old silver mining towns. It looks like a Hollywood set.

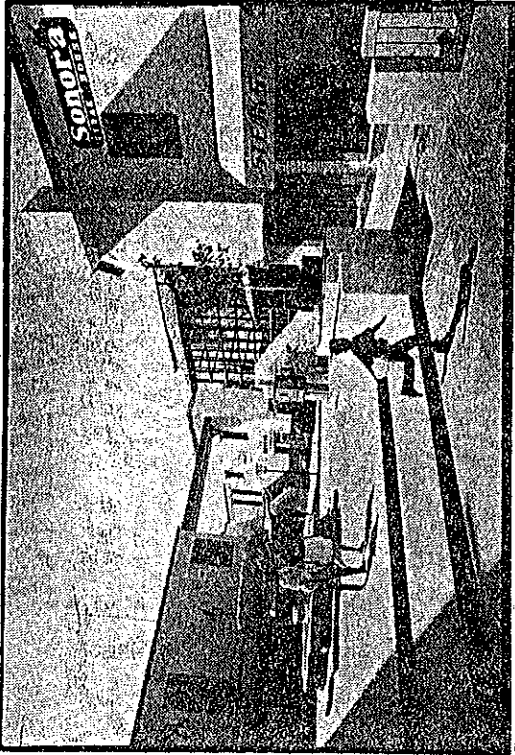
bulbs for 33 cents apiece, a real straw broom for \$5, or an M.C. Hammer CD for \$18. At *El Aguila* they sell shovels and hammers made in China for \$3 each.

The Dorians department store brings to mind Nordstrom. The main entrance is lined with painted salesgirls at perfume counters. Lancome. Cacharel. Montana. The ladies chat about vacations in Cancún and Puerto Vallarta. They look suspiciously at my notepad and frayed Birkenstocks.

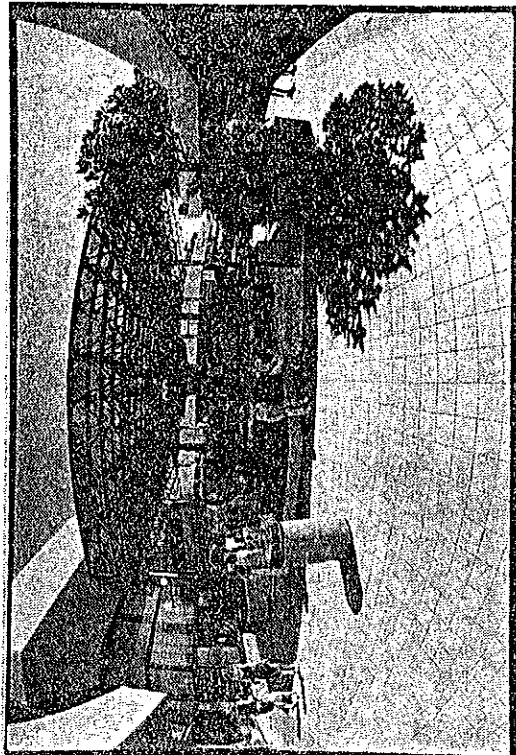
It costs \$2.30 to see a movie at the Tri-Plex Movie Theater. They're showing *Marea del fuego* (*Backdraft*) and two grade-B movies that didn't make it to San Diego.

Meanwhile, the *plaza* is overflowing with well-dressed

loud rock music echoes through space. *Tijuanaenses* seem to like this low-lying, sandstone-colored mall. In the past, studies have shown that Mexican shoppers favor malls that look like the ones in the United States. Plaza Rio Tijuana qualifies in that regard. It could be moved to Mission Valley.



Plaza Fiesta



Plaza Rio Tijuana

doors. It's supposed to look like a colonial Mexican town, like Guanajuato or Taxco, old silver mining towns. It looks like a Hollywood set.

Plaza Fiesta is dominated by restaurants and bars connected by mini-streets and alleyways. The restaurants are international: Yugoslavian, Argentine, Brazilian, Italian, Swiss, French, Greek.

whose nameplates — Supersnack, Riconcito Tapatio, Video and Piano Bar Karisma — are already beginning to fade.

Neighboring Plaza del Zapato consists of 25 shoe stores on two levels. The stores are all Mexican, with names like Moda Bella, Watanabe, Bianca, 3 Hermanos. A half dozen have gone out of business. The mall's one blue-tiled

and west of town or from posh old neighborhoods of Chapultepec or Cacho nestled in the hills above the old downtown. They mill about in stores or rest on brown tile benches, while children play tag nearby. The parents speak of the price of goods or some relative's upcoming operation. The children wonder if their parents will buy them ice cream cones or *churrros*, the sugary pastry spines sold at the nearby *panadería* (bakery). Public telephones seem to be continually in use. They are just across from the *Discoteca Alta Tension* (High Voltage Record Store), where *cumbias* or *música ranchera* or

sneakers for about \$60. Carlos is arguing over the virtues of the more expensive sneaker. Behind them, on two large-screen color TV monitors mounted on the ceiling, Michael Jordan slams a vicious dunk through the nets. He's wearing Nikes, of course. The pulsating video soundtrack is in English.

The Cristal Bookstore is pushing Stephen King, Mario Puzo, and Lee Iacocca in Spanish, or a "how to" book for women: *The Sensual Woman: Discover the Great Lover That You Are At the Commercial*

outdoor mall, and, at the south end, an attached indoor mall called the Plaza del Zapato. There is an empty, almost eerie feeling here. Not the eeriness of an abandoned Mayan city; more like a deserted circus or a relic amusement park.

The Plaza Fiesta, built in 1986, is smaller than the Plaza Rio Tijuana. The outdoor mall has some 45 stores and offices and 15 restaurants in a two-story village setting. The buildings are made of stucco, shaded in white or lime green or pink pastel. Iron grills cover second-floor windows. Lanterns hang above wooden

supplies at a travel agency near the entrance to the plaza. At the Café el Criego, on weekend nights, young girls gyrate their way through belly dances set to Greek music. A man balances a large wooden table in his mouth.

Two years ago, business was brisk here, and on weekends, Tijuana's young and restless packed the cafés and bars. Now the "village" has become a ghost town. The public fountains are dry. The cafés and outdoor seating areas are empty, even on a Friday night in midsummer. Many stores and restaurants are closing down. *Se Vende* signs are posted in the windows of abandoned businesses

jungle of terra cotta potted plants. The floors are red Mexican tile. Blue and white stained-glass skylights filter in a soothing, subdued light. Few people are here to enjoy all of this.

How is it that the Plaza Rio Tijuana, on one side of the boulevard, can be packed with shoppers, while on the other side the Plaza Fiesta and the Plaza del Zapato are almost empty? According to officials, the Plaza Fiesta has a commercial vacancy rate of 25 percent, while at the Plaza Rio Tijuana, it is only 1 percent vacant. When the Plaza del Rio has 2000 cars in its lot at

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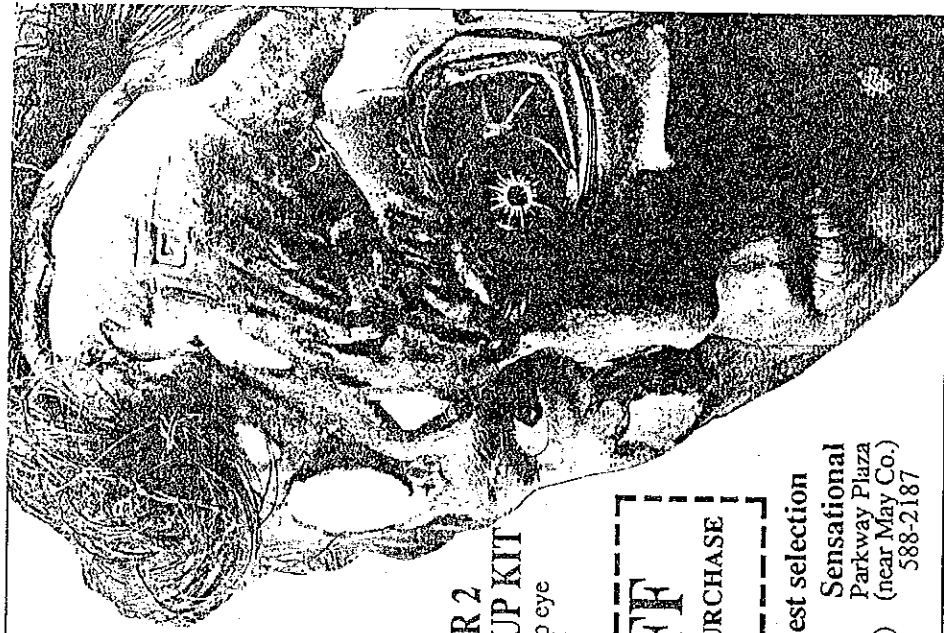
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Tijuana

Continued from page 11

peak consumer hours, the Plaza Fiesta might only have a few hundred.

Everyone seems to have a different idea about why the crowds stay away:

"It's the rains and the flooding," say some of the waiters in one restaurant, referring to heavy spring rains that flooded the area. But the rains ended months ago, and business still hasn't picked up. "It's the recession," say others. But restaurants and stores in other parts of town are still crowded.

"The rents are too high here," one store owner lamented. Can't they be lower?

Proprietors complain about parking. In a car-oriented town, parking is limited here. But Plaza Rio Tijuana across the street has thousands of spaces. If people wanted to come here, they'd find places to park.

"The Plaza Fiesta was never that attractive to Tijuana residents. But it was a good place for people to go to eat and get drunk, mainly because the bars and restaurants stayed open late," says Victor Castillo, a professor at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California in Tijuana.

The nightlife may explain why it went downhill. "Three years ago, Plaza Fiesta became saturated with restaurants," says Miguel Ravelo at the Chamber of Commerce in Tijuana's River Zone. "The restaurants attracted a lot of young people and created a clientele of diversion rather than of consumption. The place became chaotic and noisy with people drinking and partying until six in the morning. If I want to go to disorder, I don't bring my family, I go alone."

Ironically, the investors who built Plaza Fiesta had envisioned it

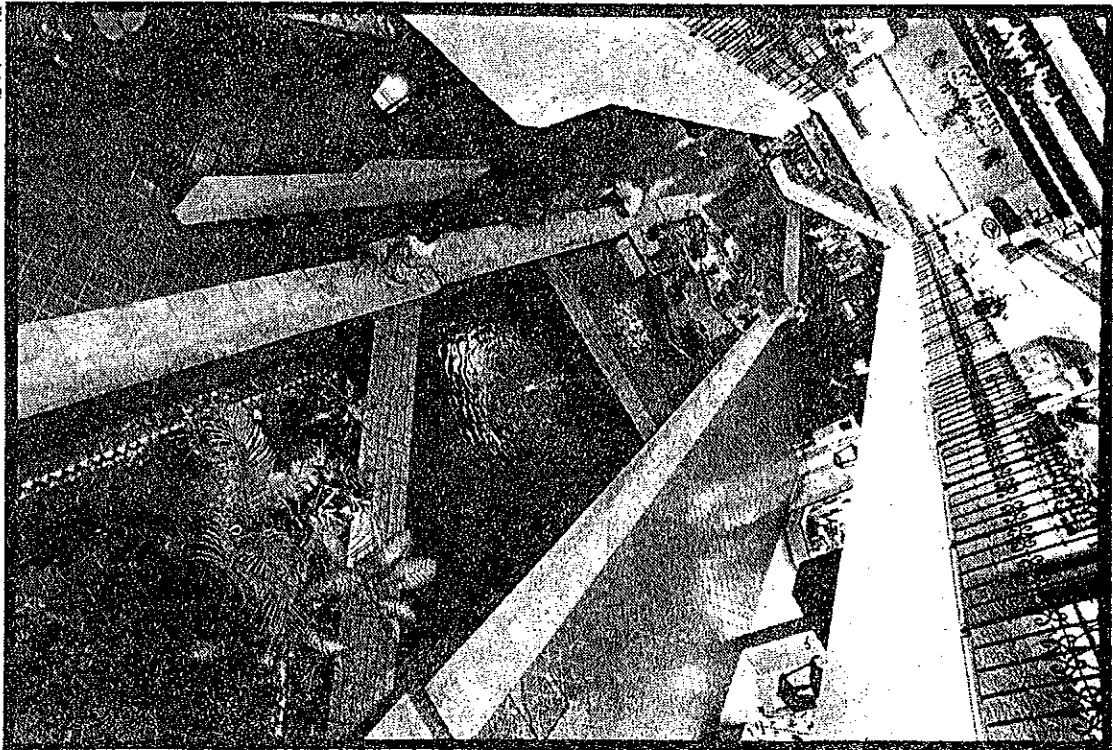
would attract American tourists. But Tijuana consumers supply more than 80 percent of its business.

In an optical store on the perimeter of Plaza Fiesta, one of the workers, Roberto Uribe, says, "I don't go into the plaza very often." His store faces out from the plaza onto the boulevard. If he doesn't walk the 20 yards into the center to look around, have a bite to eat or a beer after work, how can the plaza hope to stay in business? That would be like someone who works at Horton Plaza never shopping there.

By 1989, the nightly partying in the plaza had driven out a lot of other businesses. Apartments that were originally built on the second floor above the stores were now almost all vacant. Drug dealers were rumored to be regular customers in some of the bars. One night, an argument between two patrons — reportedly over a romantic triangle — got out of hand. Guns were pulled, and in the ensuing shootout, one person died. The bar where the incident occurred shut down. The plaza had reached its lowest point. "People were scared," says a bartender from one of the plaza's restaurants. "They didn't want to come because of the drug dealers and the shooting."

Since then, things have continued to go downhill. On a weekend evening in August, business is slow on the plaza. Music from one of the bars bounces across the empty cafés and off the stucco walls. A few Mexicans are drinking at one of the outdoor tables, and their laughter resounds in the otherwise silent space.

"Right now the plaza is bankrupt," says Javier Esponda, the owner of the Brazilian



Plaza del Zarpazo

restaurant Oba Oba and the new administrator of the shopping center. But Esponda believes that better advertising and maintenance can improve business. He's still hoping to tap the American market.

But you wonder if these shopping malls disguised as colonial towns really belong

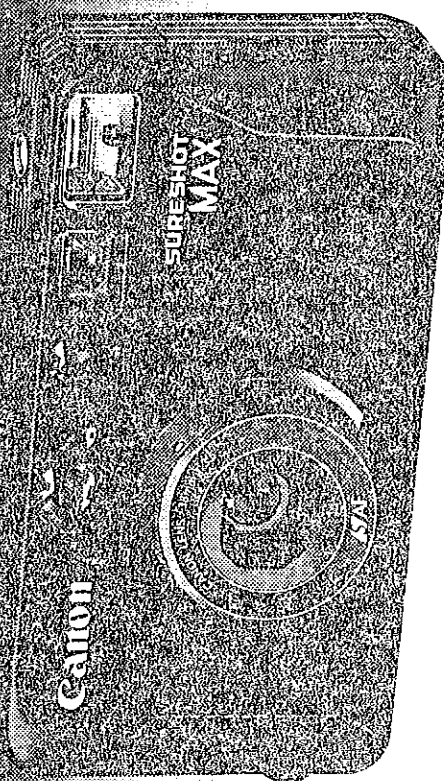
who come to the border from Mexico City think American tourists want to go to Mexico and see mariachis walking around in typical colonial scenes," says Mexican architect Manuel Rosen. "So they end up building mini-shopping centers that are poor imitations of small authentic towns. They end up creating a misery of space. And the tourists often don't even go to these places."

"Plaza Fiesta is so depressing," he continues. "It's a poor imitation of reality. There is no landscaping. In Tijuana, you need landscaping, you need trees and little plazas with trees around them that create shade. You don't see a tree in any of these mini-shopping centers. It's like going to the desert. Everything is dead. The buildings are like shacks. They have no dignity. The shacks you see in the colonias, the poor areas, are far more dignified. They have little pots filled with plants."

"Plaza Fiesta just doesn't work as a concept of space. They try to use every square inch. But the streets don't lead anywhere. In Tlaxco or Guanajuato, the streets are even narrower, but they open onto little plazas. There's mystery in real colonial towns and in their streets. When you walk around, you discover things. In Plaza Fiesta, there's nothing to discover. It's blasé. If small towns in Mexico were really like that, my God, the people in the towns would be dead by now." □

here — the fake kiosks and false arcades, the red-and-white checkered Italian tablecloths, the pink-dyed cement planters, the turquoise awnings. All very cheerful and not very Mexican. Some shopping developer's postmodern fantasy dropped onto Tijuana, like a UFO. "The architects and builders

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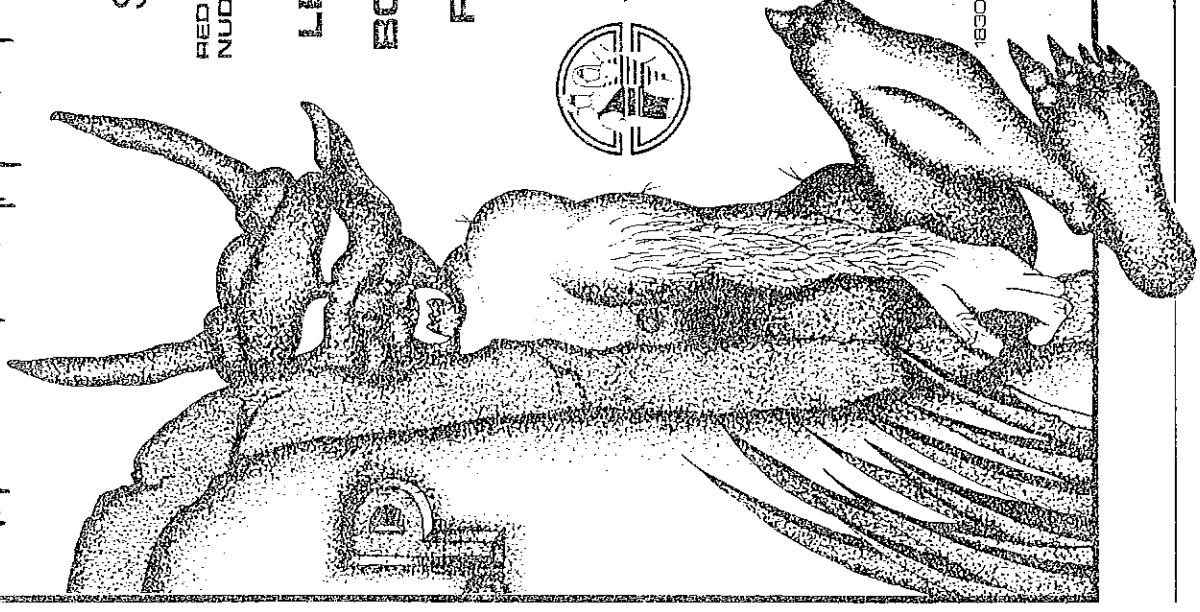
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