



AAG Newsletter

The California-Mexico Border: Dreams of a Transnational Metropolis

January 15, 2013

For more than half a century, visitors to southern California have been lured by the mystique of the Mexican border. Tijuana still evokes images of a roaring '20s "sin city"—wild nights in gambling casinos, prostitutes and opium dens in the *Zona Norte* red light district, or cruising down Revolution Avenue, the frontier version of the Las Vegas strip, with its zebra-striped donkey carts and scenographic cantinas.

If Tijuana is the city of night, its counterpart, San Diego, quietly plods on just north of the borderline as the city of daylight, sunshine and surfing, science parks and suburbs.

This makes for an exotic duality, often laced in myth, but nevertheless underscoring a basic truth about the cultural geography of the California border—two very different city-building traditions come crashing into each other at one of the most contentious international boundary lines on the planet. In this collision, in the shocking contrast of landscapes, lies one critical ingredient of the border's place identity.

Beginning in the 1980s, a growing number of writers and scholars (this author included) began to observe that the century-old urbanisms of Mexico and the United States that had produced such sharply varied border towns, were finally yielding to a new kind of global city—a "transfrontier metropolis."¹ The era of globalization was shining a light on the California border, where a New Age, transcultural urban life was emerging. From shopping and tourism, to film, technology, literature and architecture, the forces of cultural and economic integration were, ever so slowly, beginning to weave cities like Tijuana and San Diego into unified cross-border metropolitan living spaces.² New forms of music and art were emerging here.³ In the future, toll freeways, bus rapid transit, trolley lines, jitneys and taxis crisscrossing the border could shuttle doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers, construction workers, high school and college students to venues on both sides, while theater goers and artists gave regular bi-national performances, and restaurants catered to gourmet tastes that transcended the international boundary.

The Cross-border Metropolis in a Global Era

A few scattered nationalists, anti-Mexican interest groups and social scientists challenged that vision. But nearly everyone recognizes the borderlands as one of the great social and cultural laboratories of urban

globalization on the planet. Here, people of distinct ethnic and cultural backgrounds are exploring ways to craft daily lived spaces in a globalizing world. San Diego and Tijuana are the two largest urban frontier agglomerations in the western hemisphere, if not the world, crowded around an international boundary. More than ever, we need the robust global border discourse that has emerged to find meaning in this wild space where Latin and Anglo urban cultures meet.

But, like a bucket of cold water, optimism about this emerging transnational urban region has also had to collide full force with the darker side of 21st century globalization — terrorism, homeland security, illegal weapons, Operation Fast and Furious, drug cartels, narcotics smuggling, and an international recession. This has carved an opening for some politicians and anti-immigrant forces to espouse a return to old ideas— closing or sealing national borders, and rebuilding old fences and walls. Like ghosts of the nineteenth century, bigger walls along California’s southern boundary would be a giant step backward, a retreat from 21st century values of innovation and global unity

Three distinct phases have carved the landscape of the California-Mexico border zone: urbanization, NAFTA, and global interruptions.

Urbanization

Created in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the U.S.-Mexican War, for the remainder of the 19th century, the Mexican border was virtually invisible to Americans. Writer Charles Lummis called it the land of “sun, silence and adobe.”⁴ But that began to change early in the 20th century. The first hint of southern California’s Mexican future can literally be traced to a single Fourth of July holiday weekend in 1920. The U.S. Congress had just passed the Volstead Act, prohibiting the sale of alcohol. On July 4 of that year, a reported 65,000 southern California visitors in over 12,000 automobiles crossed the border into Tijuana in a festive mood. Over that weekend, Tijuana filling stations ran out of gas, and thousands of Americans were forced to stay in hotels on the Mexican side. They spent afternoons sipping tequila at Tijuana’s new racetrack, then went dancing in exotic night clubs, or gambling in sumptuous casinos like Agua Caliente, which boasted imported tiles, chandeliers and furniture from France, Italy, and Morocco. The border’s fame spread quickly. Soon Hollywood actors and other celebrities were frequenting Tijuana night spots and gambling palaces, where, according to Mexican historians, “movie stars gave such generous tips, their immense sums have entered the terrain of legend, on the lips of those who lived in that era.”⁵

Legend further has it that on a July Fourth holiday—just four years later—the Caesar Salad was invented in a downtown Tijuana restaurant owned by Caesar Cardini, an Italian immigrant. Overwhelmed by huge American crowds that weekend, the restaurant ran out of food. The owner improvised by serving salads with the few leftovers on hand — lettuce, eggs, bread, garlic, olive oil. The patrons loved it, and, as the world knows, the salad’s popularity soared.

The end of Prohibition and two world wars slowed down the California-Mexico border economy, but by the 1950s, the region’s population began an upward spiral of growth. From 1960 to 1980, Tijuana’s annual growth rate was over 6 percent, twice the national average for Mexico. San Diego grew at a whopping 3.7 percent per year, over three times the U.S. national rate. The urbanization of northern Mexico was driven by three global forces: first, the introduction of *maquiladoras*, or foreign owned,

assembly plant manufacturing (electronics, machinery, textiles, etc.) along the border, which eventually generated nearly a million jobs over three decades; second, the continued growth of U.S.-Mexican cross-border trade and tourism; and third, immigration from central Mexico, and the return of laborers via deportation, who eventually became part of a border commuter work force.

By 2010, the population of the San Diego metropolitan statistical area was about 3 million, while the population of the Tijuana-Tecate-Ensenada metropolitan region was 2.5 million. Taken together, this “transfrontier metropolis” of five and a half million inhabitants, projected to number over 7 million by 2020, represents one of the ten largest metropolitan regions in North America.

NAFTA



Playful architecture along Revolution Avenue in downtown Tijuana emerged during the NAFTA era of economic growth in the 1990s (photo by L. Herzog)

The 1980s was a period of accelerated economic integration. Population continued to expand, while the *maquila* program was unleashing hundreds of millions of dollars in cross-border trade. U.S. and Mexican officials began discussing formal treaties of cooperation. Just after the 1988 election, new Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced that his administration would restructure foreign investment rules to welcome global capital (especially U.S. capital), both by relaxing foreign business ownership laws, and doubling the period Americans could lease property in Mexico (from 30 to 60 years). FONATUR, Mexico’s national tourism agency, began courting U.S. investors for hotels, time-share condominiums and resorts. The historic 1992 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by the U.S., Mexico and Canada injected hundreds of millions of dollars into the cross-border economy. Seemingly overnight, shopping malls, big box retail, fast food outlets and industrial parks sprouted on the Mexican side of the border. Along Baja’s coast, golf resorts and time share condominiums were the rage. Even Donald Trump wanted to build condos there. Big money was flocking toward Mexico’s “new Hong Kong,” Tijuana.

In that decade prior to the Sept. 11 tragedy, southern California was poised to invest in highways, rail lines, bridges, and new border crossings to sustain the exploding transfrontier economy. The border was

a "win-win" proposition for business and government on both sides of the line. By the 2000s, San Diego-Tijuana alone had a \$100 billion annual market.

Shattered Dreams/ Global Interruptions/ Glimpse of Hope



This high tech "concrete bollard" fence built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers symbolizes the "Homeland Security" paradigm that emerged along the California border after 9/11. Note the older border fence in the background. (photo by L. Herzog)

Sept. 11 stopped almost all of this optimism in its tracks. Instead of sleek new highways and high tech border gates, Californians witnessed a new wall—Homeland Security—quickly wedge itself between them and Mexico. The region was hurled back in time to the late 19th century, when boundaries were built for military protection against foreign incursions.

The new wall meant waiting times for crossing the border doubled, tripled and even quadrupled over the average before Sept. 11. The region began losing billions of dollars, as companies, fretting over Homeland Security delays, stayed away.

The first decade of the 21st century was the decade of shattered dreams. First 9/11, then 40,000 deaths on the Mexican side of the border, as "cartels" fought it out for control of the drug trade. That violence spilled over to the northern border with California. In Tijuana alone, nearly 1,000 drug- and gang-related murders were reported every year during the 2000s. Then, in 2008, a global recession finally started to hit full force.

Excessive border waits, too many outbreaks of violence and a struggling California economy meant one thing on *la frontera*: Americans simply stopped crossing into Tijuana. From Revolution Avenue to the upscale River Zone, the "new Hong Kong" version has been placed on hold.



The 14-story Monumental Clock or Millennial Arch (built in 2001) on lower Revolution Ave. in Tijuana celebrated the city's optimism for its economic future on a globalizing border (photo by L. Herzog)

2012 has ushered in glimpses of hope, however. International conferences like *Tijuana Innovadora*, staged in the fall of 2012, brought a million visitors to the city over 11 days. Speakers included Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, Wired Magazine editor Chris Andersen, and other celebrities. Young designers and entrepreneurs are buying up old storefronts, putting in hip cafes and art galleries. Monthly street fairs, live music and open-air celebrations are starting up. The city's buzz is slowly returning. The dream of a transnational metropolis lives on.

—Lawrence A. Herzog
San Diego State University

Lawrence A. Herzog is Professor and Coordinator of the Masters in City Planning (MCP) program, School of Public Affairs, San Diego State University. He has authored many books and articles on the U.S.-Mexico border, including *Where North Meets South* (Texas, 1990), *From Aztec to High Tech* (Johns Hopkins, 1999), *Global Crossroads* (Trans-Border Institute, 2009) and the edited volume *Shared Space: Rethinking the U.S.-Mexico Border Environment* (Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 2000).

¹ Herzog, Lawrence. "The Transfrontier Metropolis," *Harvard Design Magazine*. Winter-Spring, 1997. 16-19.

² Herzog, Lawrence. *From Aztec to High Tech: Architecture and Landscape Across the Mexico-United States Border*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999; Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc, eds. *Postborder City*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

³ For example, "nortec" has become a globally popular music genre, a blend of traditional northern Mexico folk music, high tech electronics sounds, and other influences. See Josh Tyrangiel, "[La Nueva Frontera: The New Tijuana Brass.](#)" *Time Magazine*. 2001. Retrieved 12/10/2012.

⁴ Charles F. Lummis, *Land of Poco Tiempo*. New York: Scribner, 1897.

⁵ Conrado Acevedo Cárdenas, David Piñera and Jesús Ortiz, “Semblanza de Tijuana, 1915-30,” in David Pinera, ed. *Historia de Tijuana*. Tijuana: UNAM/UABC, 1985, p. 99.