

The U.S.-Mexico Transfrontier Metropolis

by Lawrence A. Herzog

*Modern border
towns are
international
creations,
impacted
by corporate
decisions, foreign
policy and
common
ecological
concerns.*

By the late 20th century it has become evident that cities cannot be understood solely as products of national culture; the city is profoundly entangled in the world system. Modern technology has transformed our notions of territory, space and nation. From labor migration to banking and corporate practice, social and economic forces operate increasingly at the transnational scale. Transnational forces have an impact on more than just the largest metropolitan centers; increasingly they shape regional systems of cities such as those along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Many scholars of global or "mega-cities" find it significant that the movement of population toward large cities is occurring mainly in Third World nations: demographic projections for the world's largest cities show that by the year 2010, nearly three-quarters of the 511 cities with populations exceeding one million will be located in the Third World. Third World underdevelopment and urbanization can be linked directly to the larger social and economic processes of the world economy.

One important phenomenon in the era of global cities is the movement of population, industry and capital to international boundary regions, and the subsequent evolution of transnational urbanized areas along some national borders. While many of the world's international boundary zones still remain sparsely populated, in some places -- notably the U.S.-Mexico border region -- rapid bound-

ary urbanization has occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The emergence of urban centers along international boundaries reflects a pattern of gradual integration of border territory into the financial and economic circuitry of the global political-economic system. Where once boundaries were seen as marginal spaces in a world that was largely organized around centrist nation-states, the late 20th century has seen the old system fade away: in the new global territorial order, boundary regions may become centers of production and urban life. Thus, a new form of city has evolved: the international border -- or transfrontier -- metropolis.

In both Western Europe and U.S.-Mexico border regions, medium-scale (above 100,000 population) and large-scale (above 1 million population) cities have grown along the international boundary. Typically, the transfrontier metropolis has evolved as two separate urban settlements on either side of an international border. But gradually these settlements have become integrated into functionally unified spaces, suggesting why the term 'transfrontier metropolis' may be the most appropriate way to describe urbanized border areas in the next century. In the transfrontier metropolis there is socio-economic and cultural exchange between settlements on either side of the border. More importantly, some cultural elements, such as language and architecture, are not only exchanged, but permanently transferred across the border.

Transfrontier urban zones are special-

ized regions created by transnational economic and social forces. The U.S.-Mexico transfrontier metropolis is a byproduct of First World-Third World economic integration, expressed within the physical space of a city. While U.S.-Mexico border cities are not large enough in scale to fit [some] definition[s] of world cities, they do possess two of the properties considered crucial: first, a growing concentration of international capital; and second, large volumes of international migrant workers. The increasing concentration of international capital in urbanized border areas is mainly a result of transnational corporate investments in export processing zone infrastructure but can also be traced to escalating volumes of cross-border commerce, both legal and illegal. Border zones have been the destination of large numbers of migrant workers, both domestic and international. More significantly, vast numbers of Mexican workers have long utilized the border

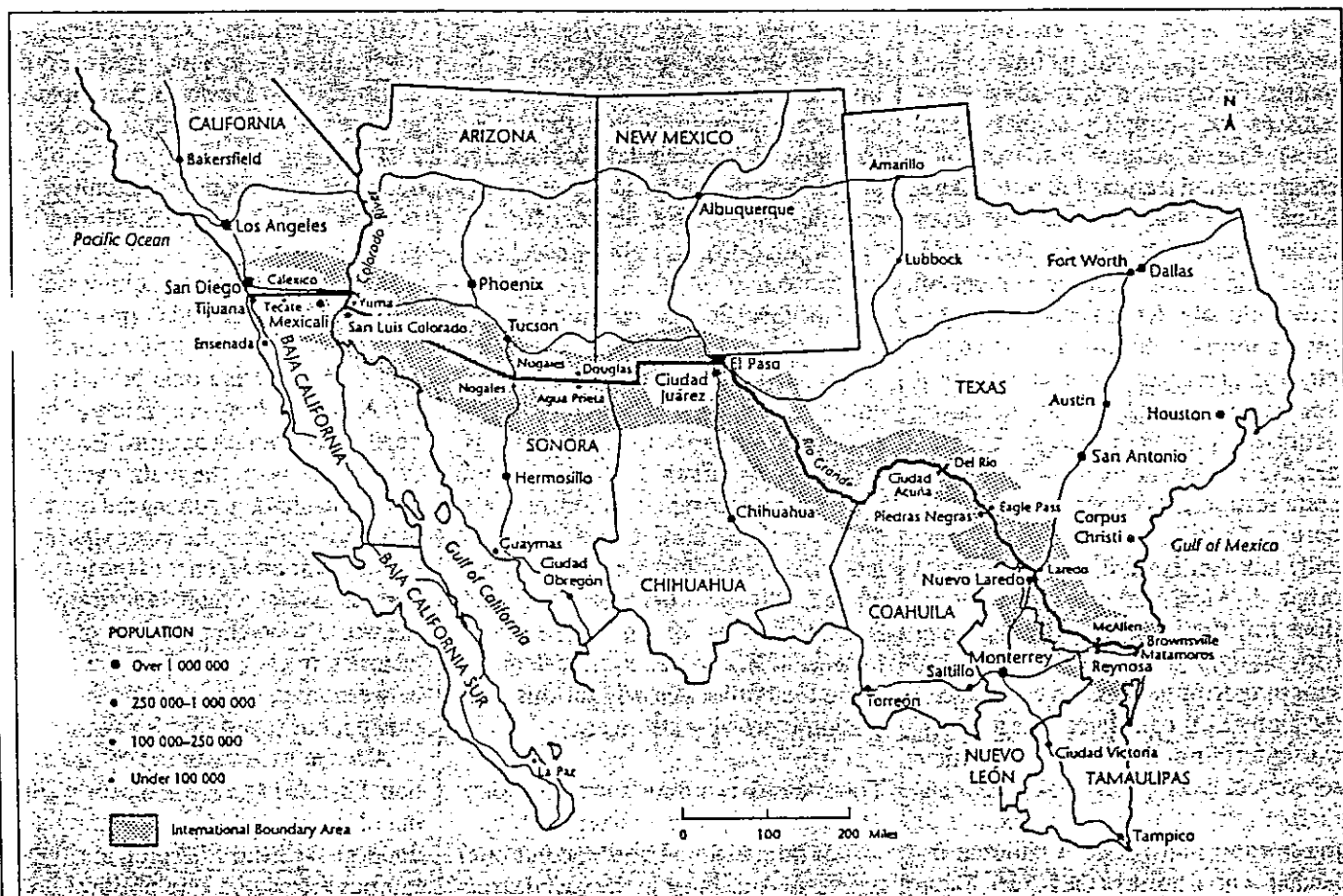
zone as a jumping-off point into the U.S., or as a home base for return by deportation, medical emergency or other hardship. The 'buffer function' of the U.S.-Mexico border zone partially explains the phenomenal urban growth patterns of the last four decades. Yet the U.S.-Mexico border has become more than simply a passageway for Mexican migrants to the U.S.; it has also become a medium for economic exchange between two nations, as capital, industry and service activities have begun to concentrate there.

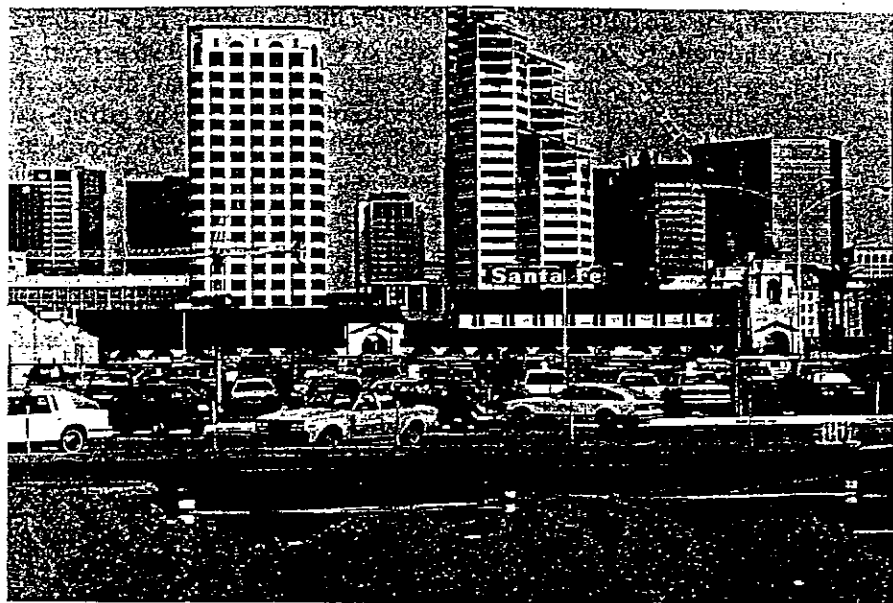
The transfrontier metropolis on the U.S.-Mexico border

During the period 1950-80, this region experienced profound demographic change. Following two decades of sustained urban expansion, by the 1970s seven U.S. metropolitan areas along the border had achieved growth rates ranging from three to five times the national rate of 11 percent; in Mexico,

border city populations grew at 10-year rates of between 67 and 96 percent, far exceeding the national average for Mexico of 37 percent. This growth pattern continued in the 1980s, though at a more moderate pace. By 1990, three of Mexico's 10 largest cities were located on the northern border with the U.S.

A pattern of evolving social and economic interdependence on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border made possible the transformation of the late 20th century transfrontier metropolis. For more than a century, a steady migration stream fed the population of northern Mexican border cities. Mexican immigrants established permanent communities north of the border. The interconnections between these two social worlds make up a unique regional "social system" which has fused family structures, culture, social interaction and factors of production over time and across the boundary. The growth of paired urban centers, or 'twin cities,' at the





Full parking lots and construction projects demonstrate the growth of San Diego, a transfrontier metropolis

U.S.-Mexico border is an outcome of the century-old social system that evolved in the borderlands.

The new transfrontier metropolis has a unique spatial and economic structure. Two traditional settlements have gradually fused into a transnational settlement space that is functionally unified by common daily activity systems (work, shopping, school, social trips) shared natural resources and environmental features (air water, flora, fauna, etc.) and product and labor markets that overlap the political boundary. While cities retain the elements of their nationally derived ecological structure in terms of density, social geography, road configurations, and physical design, they also display increasing patterns of connectivity across the border. Networks of activity systems integrate settlements on either side of the border. These include: legal and illegal daily labor migration from residential origins in Mexico to employment locations [in] the U.S.; Mexican shopping trips to U.S. commercial sites; U.S. shopping trips to Mexican commercial locations; U.S. consumer trips to Mexican entertainment, tourist and other service locations; social, family and other recreational trips north and south of the border; and Mexican children attending school north of the border. These

activity systems form part of a human spatial organization that transcends the political boundary.

There is also a transboundary natural ecosystem. Both the flow of water and air, and the bilateral arrangement of land uses impose a unifying effect on these settlements. Air and water pollution, as well as water supply management, are planning issues that affect both sides of the boundary, and need to be resolved mutually. The transborder environmental consequences of assembly plant location have become a growing concern.

Functional linkages between U.S. and Mexican border cities emerge as an outgrowth of economic interdependence, and are strengthened through environmental, social, cultural and historic ties. As urbanization continues, there is a greater tendency for freeways, sewer systems, mass transit projects, industrial developments and other man-made facilities to become integrated. Recent studies of interdependence between U.S. and Mexican settlements along the border [show] that this integration is growing stronger.

Transboundary urban social circuitry:
The commuter worker phenomenon

The international border commuter represents one layer in the social struc-

ture of the new transfrontier metropolis. Border commuters are a hybrid form of migrant worker. Migrants move across real geographic settings; along borders they are a distinct part of bicultural urban social formation.

Unlike international migrants, border commuters—workers who travel each day from place of residence in Mexico to a place of work in the U.S.—do not leave their country of origin, with or without their families, to live and work in a foreign country. They travel to work each day much like other intra-urban commuters, yet their journey to work involves the crossing of an international boundary line. This distinguishes them from national urban commuters.

The commuter worker [is] a vital part of the transborder social system. In the nine largest metropolitan areas along the U.S.-Mexico border, according to one estimate nearly 160,000 Mexican workers from the largest Mexican border cities commute to jobs on the U.S. side of the border each day. It would not be unrealistic to speculate that another 100,000 Mexicans commute illegally to jobs in the U.S., meaning that every day about 250,000 Mexicans participate in an 'international journey to work'.

Transnational economic circuitry:
Assembly plants and U.S.-Mexico border urban space

A second important dimension of the new U.S.-Mexico transfrontier metropolis is that settlements on either side of the international boundary are joined increasingly in a variety of transborder economic ventures. Economic growth has been the main catalyst for rapid urbanization. Among the economic activities perhaps the most significant has been the emergence of the maquiladora, or assembly plant industry, part of the world-wide phenomenon of 'global factories' or co-production relationships between multinational corporations and cheap labor regions of the world.

A wave of investment by multinational industries began in the early 1960s, mainly from the U.S., in 'offshore' production facilities. Despite the uncertainties associated with political insta-

bility in some nations, U.S. firms believed that cheap labor sources might keep them competitive with the rest of the world in certain product markets.

In 1965, recognizing that U.S. firms were relocating labor-intensive operations overseas, the Mexican government established the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), a policy aimed at attracting U.S. assembly plant operations. Mexican law allowed duty-free import of all necessary machinery, equipment and raw materials, as well as components needed to engage in 'offshore' production. All products had to be exported from Mexico, and 90 percent of the labor force had to be Mexican nationals. There were also provisions concerning minimum wages and conditions of work. Thus began the maquiladora program, the title derived from the Spanish term *maquila* which traditionally referred to the portion of flour retained by the miller as payment for grinding a client's grain.

Between 1969 and 1983, the maquiladora program began to dominate the overseas location decisions of U.S. firms. By the early 1980s the assembly plant program was earning about US\$500 million in annual foreign exchange for Mexico.

Of the nearly 1,500 foreign assembly plants built in Mexico since the mid-1960s, nearly 90 percent are located along the border adjacent to the U.S. Clearly, the border location is valued by U.S. interests. Here, they are able to take advantage of Mexico's cheap labor costs, but are also strategically situated within easy reach of U.S. highways, airports and banking and communication facilities. The interest in locating near the border can be linked to early use of the term 'twin plants' to describe the co-production system that was envisioned for assembly plants in the border zone. The idea was that a capital-intensive facility would locate north of the border, while its counterpart, a labor-intensive plant, would locate in the Mexican border city. Thus, a symbiotic relationship was envisioned for maquiladora complexes locating along the border. The U.S. plant would produce inputs

to be assembled across the border in Mexico. The finished products would then be shipped back to the U.S. side where distribution would take place. It was assumed that both countries would benefit and that there would be a natural transborder economic exchange process that would strengthen the border economy. Another attraction of the border location would be that assembly plant executives could work in Mexico, but reside in the U.S.

It is possible to describe the linkages created by the assembly plant industry in a typical transfrontier metropolis. One excellent example is found in the case of the Tijuana-San Diego region, the largest U.S.-Mexico transfrontier metropolis. In Tijuana, maquiladoras have become one of the centerpieces of the economy over the last two decades. By 1985, the twin plant program accounted for nearly 200 factories and 25,697 jobs. The manufacturing sector employed more than one-third of the city's total labor force; most of this employment was in assembly work.

There is further evidence of transnational connectivity in the assembly plant location and production process. Plant locations on the northern Mexican border normally lead to the location of special facilities on the U.S. side, to service the Mexican assembly plants. In addition, some maquiladora workers choose to live north of the border, and spend their income in the U.S. In the 1970s, it was estimated that 60-75 percent of all wages earned along the border were spent in the U.S. Many maquiladora operating expenses occur north of the border--including supplies, services and hosting business visitors. In California, this figure reached between US\$35 million and US\$50 million in 1985.

Conclusion

The U.S.-Mexico transfrontier metropolis has emerged as an important regional example of transnational urban growth, where global forces--immigration and transnational manufacturing--generate a common circuitry that allows urban structure to transcend inter-

national boundaries. It should be noted that the process of transfrontier urbanization along the U.S.-Mexico border has not been tension-free. For example, north of the border, urban interest groups have protested about the impact of Mexican workers on job opportunities for U.S. citizens; Mexican residents worry about increasing ownership of property and business enterprises by U.S. interests. The biggest source of tension is derived ultimately from the vast differences in levels of economic development between the U.S. and Mexico. Communities on both sides of the border also blame their neighbors for allowing noxious elements (polluted air, sewage or disease) to spill across the border.

The implications of transfrontier urbanization must now be confronted. Because problems spill across international borders, the authority to solve them is administratively transferred from local to national government. City planning in the U.S.-Mexico transfrontier metropolis becomes a matter of foreign policy.

The elevation of city planning problems to the arena of foreign policy is a byproduct of the era of global cities. This transfer of city planning authority out of the hands of local governments to federal agencies represents an emerging trend. On the U.S.-Mexico border, when local planning problems are transferred onto the agenda of bilateral relations, they enter a much more complex decision-making environment. Neither the U.S. nor Mexico wishes to slow down the economic or social forces--production and migration--that feed border urban growth. Thus, the border circuitry described in this article is likely to stay, and it is obvious that border cities will continue to grow. Less obvious are the transnational planning solutions needed to manage that growth.

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