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Depth in Venice

Estudio Teddy Cruz, "60 linear mile section, San Diego/Tijuana" (2008)

By Pierre Alexandre de Looz
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The U.S. pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale takes on progressive issues.

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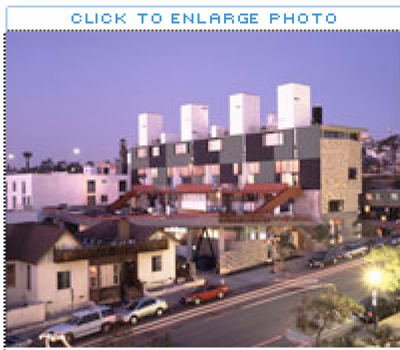

Courtesy Armistead Smith

Armistead (Ted) Smith and others, The Essex (2002), San Diego, California

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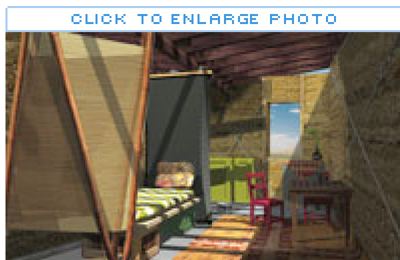

Courtesy Gans Studio

Gans Studio, House with Roll Out Core (2008)

VENICE—Even in trying times, an event like the Venice Biennale demands a good show, which for the art and film branches usually means celebrity power. This year, architecture has kept up, staging work by Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry, winner of the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement, the event's equivalent to the Oscar. Yet, certain exhibits at this 11th edition, which opened September 14 and runs through November 23, have taken a sharp turn from the usual lionizing. The U.S. pavilion in particular shifts attention with an exhibition of 16 lesser-known architects whose work is resourceful, engages communities, and reaches across institutions, taking on such progressive issues as socially responsible development, sustainable agriculture, and affordable housing. Many of the projects, like Alice Waters's "Edible School Yard," a California-based public school program where students learn to grow food they can later eat, seek institutional reform in new and creative ways. The pavilion's commissioner, William Menking, sums it up by imagining the U.S. pavilion as the first architectural endeavor of an Obama presidency.

To better understand this audaciously hopeful pavilion, ARTINFO spoke with Menking and fellow curators Andrew Sturm and Aaron Levy, who each discuss one

architect convinced of the combined power of design and public advocacy.

U.S. Commissioner William Menking on Deborah Gans's "Roll Out Houses"

Although enlightened patrons can sometimes shepherd architects to do their best work, according to Menking, the 2008 U.S. pavilion highlights architects who have actively sought meaningful clients and projects themselves, redefining the traditional dynamic of patronage. This model was also put into practice in the '60s and '70s, a period Menking has worked on extensively, when young designers swept up in a consumer boom reacted to a rigid professional establishment and an increasingly troubled world. But while the fruit of '60s and '70s idealism too often merely decorates museums, the products of this revival suggest that it may have a more practical legacy. Menking singles out architect Deborah Gans, who has focused on housing for victims of war and natural disaster, as an examplar: "She has created a prototype which is not an artwork but a project that could easily be built, a simple and brilliant solution."

Gans's "Roll Out Houses" were first developed with colleague Matt Jelacic for a landmark 1999 competition organized by Architecture for Humanity to create temporary relief housing in war-torn Kosovo. Having worked in New York since the '80s, Gans is familiar with the space and budgetary limitations that are emphasized in the biennale (she designed, for example, an affordable space-saver kitchen for the New York Times in 2000). "Roll Out Houses show architects designing with a very American approach for extreme degraded conditions," says Menking. The structure provides creature comforts including power and water in an easily assembled, lightweight construction: Two functional booths, for cooking, showering, and sanitary waste, bookend a bed and support a trough-like roof used for water and solar collection. With echoes of Joe Colombo's "Total Furnishing Unit of 1972" (on which Menking has written) as well as the feel of Ettore Sottsass's early assemblages, "Roll out Houses" is as much a flashback to utopian designs of the past as a harsh reminder of present-day realities.

Aaron Levy, executive director and senior curator at the Slought Foundation, on Teddy Cruz's "60 linear mile section, San Diego/Tijuana"

Last September, architect and urban planner Teddy Cruz served tacos of his own confection to a cheering public at an impromptu street stand he set up in New York. It was a reenactment of the sort of informal cultural practice that has, in his opinion, energized nondescript suburbs lining the U.S.-Mexico border between San Diego and Tijuana, his preferred design laboratory since he won the prestigious Rome Prize in the early '90s.

The miles of fencing separating the two countries have captured public attention as a symbol of America's amplified security concerns, and architects' attention as well, with the New York Times commissioning 13 architects to envision a new border design in 2006. Despite the fence, Tijuana, Mexico's fastest-growing city, segues into San Diego in an often discordant mélange where tidy track housing is repurposed for roadside businesses like taco stands, barber shops, or even houses of worship. On the Tijuana side, formulaic single-family homes are often turned into colorful communal dwellings or extended in resourceful ways — a key inspiration for Cruz. The Mexican city, he says, is where "the entire continent of Latin America washed up against a great big wall."

Cruz has applied lessons learned from the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the area to innovative community-based housing developments in California and New York. Curator Aaron Levy of the Slought Foundation, a promoter of social activism in the arts, says, "We feel Cruz's contribution to the design community in the United States is unique and more urgently needed than ever. His rigor and unceasing commitment to exploring new forms of sociability and community is empowering and inspiring."

In Venice, the architect has shrouded the front of the U.S. pavilion with a monumental photographic reproduction of the Tijuana-San Diego fence; the gateway is lined with snapshots of places within a 30-mile radius of the border crossing, offering glimpses of the affluence and neglect that characterize either side. Says Levy, “Visitors literally and metaphorically pass through this border to enter the exhibition.”

Andrew Sturm, director of architecture, PARC Foundation, on Ted Smith (and other)’s “Essex Development”

When the Venice Architectural Biennale debuted in 1980, its postmodernist displays marked the birth of architecture as international spectator sport. Two years later, architect Armistead (Ted) Smith developed and built the Carlsbad Condos, unusual loft housing in the San Diego neighborhood Del Mar that mixed a history book of styles and debuted the “go-home”—affordable housing with communal kitchens and easily divided spaces. Smith has since insisted on do-it-yourself, accessible real-estate development, as opposed to the pursuit of a signature style, a decision that has fanned his notoriety and attracted the attention of curator Andrew Sturm, who explains that when a name architect like Smith doubles as a housing developer, everyday buildings garner value beyond the bankable profit margin, becoming culturally and socially significant. “Ted believes this value is passed on to the end user and the passerby, because thoughtfully considered places lead to great neighborhoods which lead to better cities,” explains Sturm, who heads the PARC Foundation, an organizer of design-driven, community-geared development.

Although Smith exhibited early in his career alongside now internationally recognized giants like Frank Gehry and Tom Mayne, he has followed a locally grounded, small-scale design path. At the biennale, he presents artifacts from a recently built 49-unit row development in downtown San Diego, one of several developments he has brought to life since Carlsbad. The structure is named the Essex after a WWII aircraft carrier, and with a raised outdoor parking deck and tall stacks protruding from the roof, its profile successfully evokes its namesake. He also presents a documentary short and a scale model made of interlocking blocks in painted wood meant to represent individual living units. The latter may look like a Bauhaus-designed board game, but it is, in fact, a tool meant to illustrate design and planning dynamics in simple terms.