

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Repositioning Practice: Teddy Cruz

Guest editor of RECORD's October 2008 issue, David Sokol, speaks with San Diego architect Teddy Cruz about form, politics, and "repositioning practice."

By David Sokol

David Sokol: In this October's "The Architect's Hand" column, RECORD published two of your works. Border Postcard was realized in 2000. This mosaic of photographic fragments collected between Tijuana and San Diego represents how the urban infrastructure of San Diego is recycled into the fabric of Tijuana. A more recent artwork installed at this year's Venice Biennale, Radicalizing the Local: 60 Miles of Trans-Border Urban Conflict, is a photographic cross-section of the border between these two cities highlighting these conflicting modes of development. How do these two images differ?



Image courtesy Estudio Teddy Cruz

Teddy Cruz with Ana Aleman, Border Postcard: The Tijuana Workshop, 2000.

Teddy Cruz: The value of an image is opened up here—what our tools of representation mean. We're trying to find our role as architects and retool ourselves to engage conflicts and crises, the conditions that are really reshaping the discourse. On one hand, our field has been burdened, as many

artistic fields, with the metaphorical. So we run the risk of images that are just images—they may just be emblematic.

Built into that comment is dissatisfaction with the way representation has produced levels of commentary without producing actual tactics for intervention. Knowing that, I would say these works are mini-manifestoes for my [architectural] work. We find the collisions between top-down and bottom-up development and between natural and artificial ecologies. The image suggests that it is in the midst of these conflicts that practice should reposition itself.

The first image is built of pieces, a kind of debris of all those environments. As I traveled with students from 1994 to 2000 and beyond, it was a way of engaging the territory, witnessing these environments of conflict. 60 Miles is more literal: Let's observe the conditions that shape the territory and the conditions from which architects have been distant, and let's negotiate those environments in learning what's behind them. Those conditions produce contemporary practice.

DS: Would you say there's also a greater political need to be literal than eight years ago?

TC: Yes. As much as I've been seduced by academia's excessive diagramming of conditions, I think the complexity of representation continues to hide conflicts and other issues on which economic and other policies are determined. At some point I decided I wanted to be literal, to make information that was extremely naïve, because I wanted my audience to be the general public.

As we speak about climate change, for example, we understand it as an environmental crisis. But it has to do with a cultural crisis and the definition of institutions. The telling of stories is important. Accessibility is important. As opposed to what architects do, which is to tell something incredibly simple in complex ways, a fake complexity.

DS: Does this move from abstraction to literalness represent some kind of personal change of perspective, too?

TC: Hopefully it's a coherent development. I don't want to reject the meaning of that abstraction, but I want to insert the meaning of that abstraction into a more political discourse. My education came out of phenomenology in the '80s, and it stressed that we all engage in the reality of the world through our perceptions and interpretations of that reality. At the same time I feel the poetics in architecture remain too isolated from the politics of the construction of the city. And somehow many of these images should be bridges to reconnect the poetic and the political.

DS: You stress this idea of “repositioning practice.” To inform a wider public, can you provide an example of how you envision repositioning practice?

TC: When architects intervene in a particular public or private territory, we are often very naïve. We don’t know what power is invisibly inscribed in the territory. Who owns the resources? Who are the political or economic stakeholders? What values exist? By inserting our practice and research and building to expose that composition of power, we are able to then rethink what our intervention may be.

In San Diego, many neighborhoods are depressed and disenfranchised. During the most successful construction boom in the city’s history not one affordable housing project was realized in these neighborhoods. The question for me is: why?

The reason is that there is a conflict between land use, zoning, and subsidies: For a developer to build an affordable housing project profitably, this developer would have to compete for tax credits or subsidies. And in order to be competitive, this project would have to have a density of 50 units or more, which is prohibited in many of these neighborhoods.

There is a Catch-22. So what do I do as an architect? Do I build a nice condominium project in San Diego, or do I choose to have my project to enter that conflict between subsidies and land use and try to redefine or reconfigure tax credits?

DS: Is this an approach that anyone can embrace? I’m thinking of the large number of architects who shoulder mostly single-family house commissions.

TC: I’m not denouncing the rest of my peers, I just decided at some point what I wanted to do. I remember Steven Holl told me that building a practice is selecting what you really want to do, it’s about saying no to certain things. This was an area I wanted to concentrate on, but it precisely grew out of a sense of dissatisfaction.

At a time when everybody is so obsessed with hyper-design and style and formalism, it’s almost like good taste is everywhere. There is so much more potential for experimentation in these marginal areas. Everybody chooses a practice. I decided that, at this moment when the world is burning, some of us in our profession need to look at other ways of doing things.

DS: How does inserting architecture at these margins manifest itself architecturally, or do you become a politician?

TC: That fear of politics and social engineering has generated debate. I think ultimately that’s counter-productive. I feel that the only terrain that can be fertile for experimental architecture needs to be a terrain that is composed of the right sociopolitical and economic conditions.

Teddy Cruz with Ana Aleman, Border Postcard: The Tijuana Workshop  
Image courtesy Estudio Teddy Cruz



Teddy Cruz with Ana Aleman, Border Postcard: The Tijuana Workshop, 2000.

I think we can contribute to the design of those conditions—we can not only design fantastic buildings, but also configure social, political, and economic agendas that can yield particular architectures and special configurations. I think the relationship between the two for me is incredibly exciting.

I don't know why there has to be a polarization. I think to be political is not to be a politician. For me all art is political, and all architecture must be political. There has to be a way for these categories to be redefined. That continues to be the issue out there in academia that architecture should just deal with itself. These people should understand the reality of this world in flux and equip architecture with more information, more engagement.

DS: Your dissatisfaction is palpable, and I get the sense that you believe a lot of the architecture that shows up in the media today lacks authenticity.

TC: Authenticity is a difficult word. All I know is I feel uneasy about the fact that the manifestoes that inspired me so much in the '70s and '80s have become trivialized. I don't want to sound awfully rhetorical about it.

There are hugely homogeneous projects all over the world. These contorted bodies and skins and hyper-formalist exercises are only dressing up the recipes of privatization. For me it's disappointing. The extent of experimentation ended there. I just want to ask more.

I think not only sites of economic power offer us formalist opportunities that excite us; we should also engage the sites of conflicts and the environments of

marginalization where the issues are incredibly volatile. The most radical avant-gardes emerged at moments when institutions shifted, at moments of crisis. And yet now we've become indulgent, thinking that experimentation can only be possible with huge money. We should be seduced and inspired by sites of conflict.

DS: How do you envision architectural expression at these sites of conflict? Is intervention about improving the quality of life at those sites?

TC: I'm not suggesting homogenization from the perspective of the social. This is about diversity. I think the socially based project and the hyper-stylized formalist object can coexist. Some interesting projects have occurred, on a larger scale, in Brazil, Bogota, India. And they're not just about social housing or barrios or making the whole world a shantytown.

DS: They're not about turning barrios into Levittowns, either.

TC: What we are responding to as architects has been determined by institutions and primarily from a Western perspective. I'm interested in looking for alternatives that would really examine density or economic development. In that sense there is an incredible power found in informal configurations of density and economy that could shape our ideal city. It's not about reproducing the shantytown, but to translate it.

The best architecture, at least the ideal in my mind, would be urbanisms and architectures that mediate between large and small, between rich and poor, between formal and informal. But most of the time, the best examples of architecture we see published benefit one of those extremes. In that sense most of the architecture that is emblematic of progress are top-down redevelopment projects that are built at the expense of many communities.

DS: Could today's hyper-design movement help reposition practice, by, say, introducing a technology that can be deployed far more widely?

TC: Basically the issue with that is that this architecture is extremely excessive and overindulgent. I don't see how it can trickle down to a more social application because it represents huge economic power. We continue to perpetrate notions that experimentation just means formal investigation. I think the gap between artistic experimentation and social responsibility continues to be huge.

DS: At a time in which rising food and fuel prices and global recession promises to push a significant number of people back into poverty and perhaps even slow or halt activity at the upper reaches of wealth, do you foresee this gap closing at all?

TC: I don't want to suggest that the gap will be closed only when the social and political are accepted as categories of the experimental. At this moment when

the culture is divided between Republicans and Democrats—and I'm just completely flabbergasted that after eight years of stupid government the polls are still tied—this gap between formalism and social responsibility becomes equally polarizing.

It's gotten to this, and I'm very emotional about it. I think this is a cultural war. What turns me on is mediation, but at this moment of emergency, we really need to call it: Experimentation has been at the service of a Republican view of the world.