



Interview

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Teddy Cruz



Estudio Teddy Cruz is a forward thinking architecture firm, more concerned with building communities than simply building. Teddy Cruz's practice is rooted in the social and economic conditions of the trans-border territory between San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico. Artkrush editor Paul Laster recently spoke to Cruz about his social concerns and his projects currently on view from New York to Venice.

AK: How do you define your architecture practice?

TC: I would define my practice as a hybrid between research and practice. Before we intervene or acknowledge that there is crisis around the world, or think of solving it, we need to prepare the terrain in the context of those issues. We need to be aware of the conditions that produce those crises in the first place. Many

architects talk about research and practice. I'm trying to problematize that relationship, as well. This not only means researching issues for the sake of researching, but also that architects must enter into certain institutions to actually see the way that they are operating, and to realize that they are sometimes operating in a very stupid way.

AK: Why did you choose the US-Mexican border zone as the site for exploring your design ideas? How can those concepts be utilized worldwide?

TC: At some point, I realized that this border territory is one of the most amazing laboratories from which to explore the redefinition of practice and relevant issues at stake, in our own discourse or in debate about territory, urbanism, and architecture. The tension between density and sprawl somehow mirrors the tensions between formal and informal urbanisms, and, ultimately, the relationship between the mega-wealth of redevelopment and the sectors of poverty that surround them. This proximity of wealth and poverty defines many cities around the world, from Dubai to China to New York.

Downtown San Diego is managed by a very powerful redevelopment agency that circulates tax revenues in certain areas, while ignoring the neighborhoods adjacent to them, separated by only a highway, for example. So, again, the border is not only an emblematic force and image, but it also lets us speculate on how we can address all the cities and all the territories around the world.

AK: What are the elements that went into the making of your *Border Postcard* collages, on view in the Museum of Modern Art group exhibition *Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling* and in your PARC Foundation solo show, *Practice of Encroachment: From the Global Border to the Border Neighborhood*? How are the works made and what do they signify?

TC: When I began to teach studio at the [Southern California Institute of Architecture](#) many years ago, one of my workshops, called LALA (Latin America Los Angeles), encouraged students to travel the territory between Tijuana and San Diego, documenting leftover pieces of infrastructure. Students learned how the two cities are defined by a variety of transferences or exchanges, invisible to these institutions themselves.

Tijuana imports the waste of San Diego — garage doors and other debris produced from the dismantling of suburban neighborhoods. All this waste is transferred to Tijuana to construct the city's new periphery. So the pieces themselves are made with photographs of leftover infrastructures and landscapes from these cities. They represent the ways in which trans-border urban flow defines this territory and inspires conversation about these issues. While these pieces ultimately express a kind of poetic image, they also serve as political tools and material for the architect. That, I think, is the most important aspect.

AK: Both exhibitions include references to your [Manufactured Sites \(Maquiladora\)](#) modular-framing system, which assists ad hoc construction from salvaged and recycled materials. How is this system used? How central is it to your vision of building?

TC: As architects, we can be more than just designers of buildings. Instead of being obsessed with hyper-style and formalist agendas, we could design political processes, economic frameworks, lending processes, and agency collaborations. These reflections precede the solution itself. That's what I began to realize.

There is an entire political economy behind the transfer of waste from San Diego to Tijuana. Older San Diego neighborhoods are demolished in order to construct larger McMansions, and the waste is sold to people in Tijuana. That's one aspect of the equation. The second is that many of these informal settlements are produced out of dire social situations, as migrants settle and search for jobs. My practice has been greatly inspired by this triangular relationship between factories, cheap labor, and emergency housing.

We went to a Spanish *maquiladora* that exports heavy-duty shelving systems all over the world — using cheap labor from many of these informal settlements — and asked them to give something in return to these communities. By slightly altering the factory's production with its own materials, we were able to assemble frames — paid for partly by government subsidies and partly by the *maquiladora* — that could be used in the construction of shantytowns, lending stability to an otherwise precarious situation.

AK: Another fascinating proposal in the PARC Foundation exhibition is [McMansion Retrofitted](#), a video-and-model installation examining people's suggestions for alternative uses of an 8,000-square-foot single-family house in San Diego. What are the questions you're raising in this research, and what can we learn from it? How far away are we from a time when suburban sprawl might be foreclosed?

TC: Much of our work in San Diego has been inspired by the wave of suburbanization in many American cities over the last 30 or 40 years. The projects of gentrification also attracted many Latin Americans, who settle nearby in order to conveniently serve the huge McMansions and luxury condos being built, but who do not conform to the culture. Can we speculate that in the next 60 years, the new McMansions on the periphery of these same cities will be retro-fitted to accommodate such difference? One large 8,000-square-foot McMansion will have to become three units. Personally, I'm convinced that the future of Southern California depends on what I call the pixilation of the large with the small. Rethinking the size and the composition of this large, wasteful, selfish infrastructure — this steroid urbanism — is unavoidable.

AK: What is your project for the [Into the Open: Positioning Practice](#) exhibition at the US Pavilion in the [2008 Venice Architecture Biennale](#)?

TC: The piece is called [60 Linear Miles of Local Conflict](#). It's basically a 15-foot-high by 90-foot-long billboard, made of a translucent material, that serves as the facade of the US pavilion itself. A painting of

the border wall separating Tijuana from San Diego stretches across the billboard's length, with a long horizon made of photographs taken of places in conflict. In the end, the wall finally sinks into the Pacific Ocean, after traveling miles through the Tijuana territory. First of all, it was a very interesting opportunity to install the whole facade of the US pavilion. It served as a dramatic image to frame the discussion taking place inside the pavilion, and reminded the public that, as architects, we begin with very local, real conditions. Conflicts between military bases and environmental zones, between formal and informal urbanisms, between political and natural conditions — that's where architectural practice should position itself.

AK: The design is very clever in the way it puts the exhibition visitor in the metaphorical role of someone crossing the US-Mexico border. Was this your way of hopefully opening up people's minds to what awaits them inside?

TC: Yes, well, that was very difficult to achieve in the pavilion. We wanted to convey that the media in our profession continues to celebrate the products of architecture. We need to also address the procedure. Certain architects build in a way that's appropriate to crises we are facing at this moment, and good practices set very good examples. For example, look at [Jamie Lerner](#), the ex-Mayor of Curitiba who invented new ways of negotiating between large-industry manufacturing and bottom-up, informal organizations. There are incredible ideas being developed in the global South, in poor countries, that are producing incredible possibilities that really have been built, and not necessarily out of economic power, but from clever reorganization of processes and resources. I'm interested in how we translate those processes into urban recipes that can be reproduced or replicated in other places.

We are inspired by the possibility that many projects in the US are trying to do the same, approaching these problems without the conventional tools. So I thought, "Why not invite these practices across the US to tell the stories of how they've been able to achieve levels of equity, of sustainability, of fairness?"

AK: A previous generation of experimental architects, such as [Zaha Hadid](#), [Steven Holl](#), and [Peter Eisenman](#), worked theoretically until developers eventually caught up to their innovative design ideas. Do you foresee the day when you and the other architects in the *Into the Open: Positioning Practice* exhibition will have projects realized around the world?

TC: Everybody's flocking to Dubai and China to build their dream castles, but in the meantime, we have places in the world like Latin America where they're reconfiguring themselves politically and trying to find alternative ways to produce development that don't rely on those recipes of American style globalization. But architects are not there. I hope that a lot of the speculations, theories, and observations that I've been developing — with the help of institutions like the PARC Foundation — can take place in fact in places like Latin America.

So,

I hope that much of the world that we are developing today will be picked up, and that we have the opportunity to operate in context, where new models and possibilities empower communities. People themselves can be the material to produce new architectures. It was amazing to come back to the US in the midst of the crisis of the banking industry, and, at the same time in London, Damien Hirst is selling work for \$200 million. The ironies of the world at this moment just speak to the huge gap that exists between the creative intelligentsia and the actual conditions that affect the Earth, now more than ever. But it's very evident and clear, right in front of us. Much needs to be done, I think.

Teddy Cruz's work is on view in the group exhibition Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling at New York's Museum of Modern Art through October 20; in his New York solo show Practice of Encroachment: From the Global Border to the Border Neighborhood at the PARC Foundation through October; and in group exhibition Into the Open: Positioning Practice in the US Pavilion of the 2008 Venice Biennale of Architecture through November 23.

